

Understanding social acceptability in coastal wetland restoration. A socio-ecological perspective of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve

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ABSTRACT: In this study, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (DDBR) provides the geographical context for applying an interdisciplinary socio-ecological approach to the analysis of wetland restoration based on the analytical lens of social acceptability (SA). Especially in large-scale interventions, social acceptability emerges as an underrated multidimensional concept influencing both the viability and the success of the restoration. As the Horizon RESTORE4Cs project shows, social acceptability reflects how the local community perceives and supports the decision to restore. Even technically and ecologically sound actions may face resistance if local perceptions and expectations are neglected. However, these aspects are multifaceted, depending on place-specific factors. In this study, the socio-economic, cultural and environmental features of the DDBR are examined according to the eight components of SA, that include the territorial conditions of the local context and the presence of specific values and beliefs, environmental and societal impacts, risks, and local levels of knowledge, trust, and participation. The objective is to provide a novel, socio-ecological reading of the Danube Delta system, filtered through the factors that shape the local acceptance of wetland restoration and management. Via a mixed-method approach, the SA reading of the Danube Delta reserve confirms that, even in a mostly natural socio-ecological system, the factors influencing acceptability also include some relevant institutional and cultural aspects. The assessment of these aspects, however, remains ambiguous, since DDBR experts identify trust as the weakest cultural component that locally supports the acceptability of restoration. In RESTORE4Cs, this underestimation of the cultural determinants of SA is likewise confirmed by the views of local stakeholders. This result is taken as evidence of the validity of the SA lens as a filter for an ex-ante reading of the territorial aspects that characterize a wetland socio-ecological system and its restoration management.

KEYWORDS: Danube Delta, coastal wetlands, social acceptability, socio-ecological systems, nature restoration, transdisciplinary environmental management.

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