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A struggling collaborative process – revisiting the woodland key habitat concept in Swedish forests

Therese Bjärstig, Camilla Sandström, Jörgen Sjögren, Johan Soneson and Annika Nordin

Introduction

The concept of a woodland key habitat (WKH) was launched in Sweden in 1990 to help forest owners understand the biodiversity value of their forests (Nitare and Norén 1992). The Swedish Forest Agency (SFA) initially coined the term, and the current definition states "A woodland or forest of great importance to native flora and fauna, determined by an assessment of naturally occurring structures, presence of indicator and threatened species, and historical and environmental factors. Red-listed species can be found in these habitats." (SFA 2017a). The SFA performed nationwide inventories between 1993–1998 and 2001–2006 to map, delimit, and register Swedish WKHs. The resulting inventories serve as the foundation for setting aside forests for conservation and the formal protection of forest land, for which forest owners receive monetary compensation from the government. The WKH concept has also helped direct forest owners’ choices of voluntary set-asides. In addition, the concept was included in the first Swedish standard of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1998 (The Swedish FSC Council 2000). It is important to state that a WKH is not automatically protected by law; however, in practice, there is a harvest halt for forest owners who are certified, as the certification means that affiliated companies and landowners are not allowed to trade wood from WKH areas.

Despite the importance of the WKH concept and the fact that it has also been implemented in Finland, Norway and the Baltic countries (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania) (Timonen et al. 2010), along with adaptations of the concept over the years (Norén 1999; Ericsson et al. 2005; Roberge 2018), the methods for mapping, delimiting, and registering WKHs have recently turned into a major issue of debate in Sweden. In 2016, the SFA published a status report stating that the northwest part of the country, which includes mountainous forests, significantly differs from the rest of the country in several aspects related mainly to the delimitation of WKHs (SFA 2016). According to the report, the abundance of old forests and the proportion of both formal and voluntary set-aside were higher in the northwest than in other parts of Sweden. The proportion of forests with a high nature conservation value is claimed to be somewhere between four and 10 times higher in the northwest part of Sweden as compared to the rest of the country (SFA 2018). Furthermore, the SFA concluded that the current method for identifying WKHs is insufficient for forests in north-western Sweden due to delimitation difficulties (SFA 2018).

The national strategy for forest conservation was revised in 2017 by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and the SFA (SEPA and SFA 2017). Based on this revision and the status report in 2016 (SFA 2016, p. 101), the SFA initiated a collaborative process in 2017 aiming to reach greater consensus among the actors associated with the forest sector about how the WKH concept is an important component in the
Swedish forest conservation strategy. The purpose was to develop more transparent, objective, and predictable methods for WKH identification, with particular emphasis on the mountainous areas of north-western Sweden (SFA 2016). This process was in line with the national strategy, which advocated using collaborative processes to reach natural resource management goals.

Collaborative processes have been progressively developed, and there are several examples of successful processes that concern policy development in the forest sector, both nationally and internationally (e.g. Appelstrand 2012; Saarikoski et al. 2012; Mårald et al. 2015; Johansson 2018). Still, it has proven difficult to implement collaborative processes and even more difficult to achieve results when it comes to combining forestry and nature conservation (Borg and Paloniemi 2012; Primmer et al. 2014; Sarkki and Heikkinen 2015). Previous studies have mainly focused on prerequisites directly related to the endogenous factors related to the execution of the process (e.g. time, resources, framework of process management, etc.) and on conditions for participation in the process (e.g. representation, conflicts of value, willingness to cooperation and compromise), or on exogenous constraints (institutional, historical, political etc.) affecting the collaborative process. However, research have rarely studied the interplay between these types of endogenous and exogenous factors, and more concrete how they affect/shape collaborative processes and their outcomes. To be able to address this knowledge gap in the literature we turn to implementation theory and the work of Vedung (2016) when studying the WKH collaborative process. Vedung (2016) merge exogenous and endogenous factors into a framework, operationalized in this text as nine crucial factors affecting collaborative processes and their outcomes; i.e. abilities, willingness, understanding, history, parallel processes, degree of complexity, political support, social support and media attention (see Figure 1 and the more detailed presentation of the factors in the Materials and methods section).

Implementation theory states that investment in effective collaboration may not only contribute new knowledge to the implementation process, but also save considerable time and energy in policy implementation. However, the collaborative process set up by the SFA on WKH has faced a number of challenges, such as negative media attention, political discussions, and pressure from the parallel process of renewing the Swedish FSC standard. We assume that these challenges may have influenced the participants’ anticipations of the end results and, consequently, affected the implementation of new methods for defining WKHs.

Scientists agree that the ecological importance of WKHs can be demonstrated through a higher number of total species, red-listed species, and dead wood types – along with a higher volume of dead wood – in WKH areas in comparison to old production forests not classified as WKH (e.g. Gustafsson et al. 1999; Timonen et al. 2011; Mežaka et al. 2012; Ylisirniö et al. 2016). However, there are only a few studies that have covered the social aspects – such as forest owners’ and stakeholders’ perspectives – of the WKH concept (but see Lifvergren-Kaya 2003; Götmark 2009; Primmer and Karppinen 2010; Similä et al. 2014). Hence, this study aims to display the participants’ anticipations of how the collaborative process will affect future implementation of WKHs. More specifically, we will by identifying central game changers analyze the interplay between endogenous and exogenous process factors (following Vedung 2016) to explore potential anticipation effects and how these may influence the end results (see Figure 1).

**Materials and methods**

This paper builds on an on-going research-based evaluation of the SFA’s collaborative process on the WKH concept application, starting in the fall 2017 and ending in June 2019. The research team has had close and continuous contact with the responsible officer at SFA (i.e. the process leader) and made participatory observations at nine workgroup phone meetings in 2017, 2018 and 2019, as well as at one open meeting in Stockholm hosted by the SFA at the end of November 2017 (all meetings were documented in field notes). This meeting was an attempt to open up the process to a larger group of stakeholders, to inform them about current progress, and receive input regarding the ongoing work. Official documentation and internal notes from the collaborative process (both from the collaborative group and the five working groups, see Figure 2) have also been available to the research team. Interviews with participants of the process (including some who left) were conducted not only to gain personal views and impressions of the process, but to also triangulate the information received from the responsible officer at the SFA. By this triangulation of empirical materials the study’s reliability are strengthened, but also its configurability, i.e. a way to ensure that the findings are based on the participants’ narratives and words rather than reflecting potential researcher biases if only using our field notes and secondary materials.

**Endogenous factors**

We developed a semi-structured interview manual (see Appendix A) that included themes derived from the work of Vedung (2016) covering the background, process, participants’ perceptions of their own and other participants’ abilities, willingness and understanding regarding WKHs, and the outcome of the process so far. When we discuss (i) abilities, we refer to the different types of resources that participants require to be able to engage in the collaborative process (Lundquist 1992). These resources are primarily related to organizational aspects, i.e. format for collaboration, mandates, financial resources, administrative capacity, technical skills, along with the time frame and knowledge base needed to participate in the collaborative process (Allen et al. 2009). We asked the participants to reflect upon their abilities in terms of organizational aspects and practical requirements to identify how they perceive the available resource-base and how they think the collaborative process will affect the implementation of WKHs in the future.

Participants should also be (ii) willing to carry the implementation through. It is assumed that consistency
between the overarching goals of the new policy and the participants’ ethos is needed. This is equivalent to what Yaffee (2011) defines as attitudes and perceptions to the process per se, but also to other stakeholders and organizational norms and cultures. Decisions that contradict the participants’ interests and/or ideological beliefs may be discouraged. It is also assumed that if the participants perceive the decision as functional, just, and fair, then it will make them more eager to engage in the process (Bergseng and Vatn 2009). Moreover, instances in which the implementation is an integral part of the participant’s official duty or associated with their professional roles are also expected to readily facilitate the process (Lundquist 1987). These assumptions are the basis for the questionnaire we designed to capture the participants’ willingness and motivations to engage in the process.

Finally, the participants must (iii) understand what is expected of them. They must comprehend the meaning of rules and regulations. If they do not understand, or perceive WKH differently, it may hamper the implementation process. A clear set of “rules of the game” are necessary if the government’s objectives are to be met and if all of the participants are to perform their required tasks. In other words, well-
defined roles and responsibilities for participants are essential to long-term, sustainable results.

**Exogenous factors**

Following Vedung (2016), we also studied exogenous factors such as: (iv) history, i.e. how the WKH concept came about in the first place, and its application over time in terms of how the key participants perceived the development; (v) other parallel and related processes such as the negotiation on the new FSC standard, since participants engagement and experiences from these processes can be assumed to spill over and affect the WKH process (cf. Johansson 2016), (vi) the degree of complexity of the WKH concept expressed through for example disagreement in science about the concept as well as among the involved stakeholders (Gustafsson and Hannerz 2018), (vii) the political support of the concept, since it is assumed that reforms decided in political disagreement are more difficult to implement than those agreed in agreement. Since participants will act based on the future repercussions of their choices, political support for the concept may heavily influence how participants anticipate the outcomes of the collaborative process. Hence, the participants will act in accordance with assumptions that a certain decision will be made, or that a previous decision will be revoked if the political majority changes (Vedung 2016, p. 121). We also considered factors concerning (viii) support among key stakeholders and (ix) media attention.

The interview manual was tested in one pilot interview, after which nine telephone interviews were conducted in the fall of 2017. An additional five interviews were conducted in the spring of 2018 to follow the process over time (see Appendix B for respondents and the numbering of the interviews in the quotes). All 14 interviews where recorded, transcribed, and later validated by the respondents (Jacob and Furgerson 2012). See Table 1 for the stakeholder categories and the selection of respondents. We consciously choose not to interview all of the participants, since it soon became clear that they were quite aligned in their perceptions in the different stakeholder categories respectively. The large group of SFA officials had their official role to withhold, thus, we only interviewed one third of them. Interviews in combination with the working groups’ reports and our own observations and field notes gave a comprehensive understanding of the process. However, the interviews are the main material displayed in the result section, verified and backed by internal material, reports and field notes.

All of the information pertaining to the participants’ views on endogenous and exogenous factors (i.e. the nine factors presented in Figure 1) that affect the collaborative process was extracted from these interviews. The lead author read all transcript thoroughly several times before marking central themes, i.e. the factors, manually. The factors was then compiled and sorted by stakeholder category. To avoid potential subjectivity in the process of identifying and sorting the material, the co-authors had to validate and verify the identification and sorting before the final analysis was made. This also strengthen the study’s internal validity, i.e. sources of systematic errors or “bias” (Elo et al. 2014). Specific quotes that strengthen, clarify, or illustrate the themes covered in this research are displayed in the Result section. The original interview language was Swedish; as such, all of the presented interview excerpts are our translations into English.

**Results**

The results are presented in a narrative manner, with a focus on three events, i.e. game changers, that significantly affected the process. The following section will chronicle show how the interaction between exogenous and endogenous factors influenced the collaborative process, and how these dynamics translated into anticipation effects among participants.

The collaborative process was initiated in February 2017, and the first game changer already occurred in March 2017. At this time, the SFA temporarily paused the registration of new WKHs in northwestern Sweden. This decision, communicated via media by the director-general of SFA, disrupted the work of the newly formed collaborative process group as it affected the core objectives of the process and caused the nature conservation organizations (i.e. representatives of environmental NGOs) and scientists to drop out of the process. The second game changer occurred during the Government budget process in the fall of 2017. At this time, the SFA was commissioned to provide a large nationwide inventory of WKHs for the upcoming 10 years. Since the Government did not specify the formal instructions until 9 months later (May 17th 2018), the collaborative process was more or less put on hold during that period. These formal instructions to the SFA (provided in May 2018) can therefore be defined as the third game changer, particularly since additional organizations were invited to participate in the collaborative process and those who had left the process in 2017 decided to return.

**Background and set-up of the WKH collaborative process**

It was clear from the start of the process that the participants did not disagree about the definition of WKHs, i.e. they all had a common understanding of the concept (based on internal material, field notes and later verified by interviews). Several of the participants had already collaborated in the process...
of delivering a status report on WKHs in 2016 (SFA 2016). These participants, who represented stakeholders from the forestry sector – i.e. forestry companies and organizations, authorities, and a certification organization – thus shared the experience of being part of a successful process, which has been identified in the literature as an important success factor in establishing legitimate and effective collaborative processes (Ansell and Gash 2007). In addition, the collaborative process in this study was relatively well structured in terms of participant tasks, which, according to the endogenous factors, is also important. The participants were informed from the start that the definition of the WKH concept should remain unchanged during the collaborative process, that they will perform no operational inventory work during the process, and that the status and role of WKHs in the forest certification process, along with issues regarding formal protection, would not be considered (SFA 2017b, field notes). The primary goal of the collaborative process was thus to draft proposals that would develop the methods used to classify WKHs, identify important key areas of development, suggest actions that different parties could implement, communicate about the work methods and their implementation with various stakeholders, as well as co-ordinate, monitor, and evaluate the implementation of measures. Hence, even if the participants would have disagreed about the concept of WKHs, this structured process was specifically designed not to open up such a discussion.

During the course of the work in the larger collaborative group and the five smaller working groups (see Figure 2), it became apparent that although the participants agreed about the concept definition in theory, they did not agree about how the WKH concept was applied in practice. Before 1998, when the WKH concept was incorporated into the FSC standard, the WKH inventory was carried out with the aim of “gaining better knowledge of where biologically valuable areas are situated in the forest landscape” (SFA 2016, p. 10). However, the collaborative process revealed that the concept has, via its incorporation into forest certification standards, been endowed with additional properties that were not originally foreseen.

... the concept and purpose remains, but then there has been some kind of ... getting the certification, for example, using WKH as an element in the certification, which makes WKH, as a concept or phenomenon, a lot more important than it was in the beginning. (Interview 11, SFA)

I’d rather say that it’s the application [of the WKH], rather than the concept itself [that is the perceived problem]. This is pretty much a political question, or what to say, a kind of point of view. (Interview 6, CAB/SEPA)

The definition works. I think so. It is rather that the concept of a WKH has such negative connotations ... (Interview 12, SFA)

A clear dividing line appeared between the participants representing forestry group interests and those representing nature conservation group interests. While the former would like to see some regional adjustments of WKH application in northwestern Sweden, the latter opposed this with reference to, among other things, the national Red List of threatened species. Many participants also expressed a feeling that the WKH was originally intended to pinpoint “the pearls in the landscape”, but is now used to describe larger forest areas.1

There is a purpose, it is a biological quality concept. And you cannot change that, you cannot regionalize it for different areas, not as long as we have a national Red List. (Interview 14, Nature conservation)

... too low threshold in general, areas that previously were not classified as WKH, are now. (Interview 1, Land- and forest-owner association)

The area has increased over time, and the character, often entire stands. There is an inflation over time in the WKH. (Interview 2, Land- and forest-owner association)

Game-changer 1: WKH registration suspension in northwestern Sweden

Shortly after the collaborative process was initiated, the SFA’s director-general announced that ongoing WKH registration in northwestern Sweden would be paused to await the result of the collaborative process. The announcement was made in a rather unconventional format – as a debate article in one of Sweden’s largest newspapers (DN 2017-03-09) – and came as a surprise to most of the involved stakeholders. Several of the interviewed participants felt mistreated, angry, and even offended by the decision, and in particular by how the decision was communicated indirectly through the media. As a consequence, the nature conservation representatives and the scientists decided to drop out from the collaborative process, stating that they were not willing to carry on under these circumstances. Therefore, the SFA was forced to “re-start” the process and include additional participants (mostly officers from the SFA with ecological and/or biological educational backgrounds). According to both our field notes and interviews, this turn of events was not perceived as optimal for the collaborative process.

I was like most others, completely taken by surprise. I did not know anything before, and it felt very pompous I have to say, because we had just sat down to discuss how we would proceed in the collaborative process after this preliminary study [the status report on WKH]. And in the preliminary study there was a very strong consensus from all interest groups. A really good mood. And then, at the second collaboration group meeting, this message came, and it was immediately apparent that the nature conservation organizations would drop out and so forth, with the scientists also stepping down. No, it was incredibly bad timing, I felt that we had not needed the break because we had a very good mood and nice atmosphere and a basis to continue to build our work on. (Interview 9, SFA)

... at five o’clock in the afternoon before Herman’s [the director-general of SFA] gambit came, my phone started to ring. I was called by a large number of conservation-related officials who had just learned this themselves. And they were extremely upset and wanted me to know about this. So, that was a knockout blow. We [the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, SNF] were very quick with a reply, and then we went back to ... it was a meeting in the collaborative process just days after this gambit or it was a week after, and then we had talked a lot with WWF about this too. And they were equally provoked, it came like a lightning strike from a clear sky. (Interview 14, Nature conservation)
The interviews show that in addition to the differences in opinions on the application of the WKH concept, the temporary pause also opened up a new gap between stakeholders. The pause was welcomed by representatives of forestry interests, while nature conservation groups and scientists opposed the measure. Furthermore, a group of public officers at the SFA disagreed with the pause, and felt that it clashed with overarching forest policy objectives. One SNF representative explains:

Our departure was nothing we did out of the blue, we went back to the process we were quite … what to say, confused. We were like, yes, or … what should we do … no, we go back, we listen, what does this mean, and so on. But we realized that since the conditions had changed as drastically as they did overnight, we could not stay on those premises. Nevertheless, it was a matter of discussion between us, but we were very united in our decision. (Interview 14, Nature conservation)

The decision of nature conservation organizations to leave severely weakened the representativeness, and consequently, the legitimacy of the process. However, according to several representatives from land- and forest-owner associations and forest companies, this decision did not come as a surprise, but was rather expected since nature conservation organizations had acted in a similar way in previous processes:

And unfortunately, in these processes, they [the nature conservation organizations] have done it systematically, they did the same thing in / … / [other collaborative processes], that we have worked on, and unfortunately it has become much more efficient to leave than to stay, I experience. (Interview 1, Land- and forest-owner association)

That the nature conservation organizations left makes it possible to question whether the collaborative processes leads anywhere, we put in time and commitment, but those who have a strategy to leave get more impact. (Interview 3, Land- and forest-owner association)

In light of these comments, the fact that the scientists – who had been pivotal in providing evidence-based discussions to the collaborative process – also decided to leave was perceived as strange and regrettable by several of the interviewed participants. One of the scientists who dropped out of the process explained that his decision to leave was based on the perceived lack of legitimacy of the process after the nature conservation organizations left:

… I do not want to spend my time on it then, I can contribute in other ways, if they want / … / Yes, because I think that science of course should be part of this, but there is a limit, when it became so narrow, when only one group of stakeholders remains. (Interview 13, Science)

In addition to the identification of an attitudinal gap between stakeholder groups, the first game changer revealed that this particular process may have been more emotionally-charged and politicized than similar processes in forest management. The interviewed participants displayed both irritation and stress over what this would lead to:

… but I feel that the gap, if it can be expressed so, between nature conservation and forestry is considerably larger in WKH than in / … / [other collaborative processes]. I’ve been thinking a lot about it and I think that, basically, it’s a lot about forest policy, more related to WKHs than the / … / [other collaborative processes]. Because there is nothing that rules so clearly against property rights as WKH… … (Interview 11, SFA)

The scientists’ decision to leave the process was particularly problematic for representatives of forestry interests, as they felt that the scientists contributed knowledge that was important to the process. According to several of the interviewed participants there was, due to the complexity of the concept, a need to bring more scientific evidence into the discussions. Hence, the decision to integrate scientists into the process was – at least initially – perceived as a beneficial approach and something that should be applied to future collaborative processes as well. One example of how the introduction of scientists benefits a collaborative process is that this change disrupts the status quo in which most of the participants know each other – and their main arguments and objectives – well beforehand. One participant explained:

… this is close to an inbreeding effect in these processes, it is the same people who participate in each group. And it has been so since I started 20 years ago, [working] with these questions. Basically, it’s the same gang. Absolutely. / … / it’s a powerful representation from companies and landowners. (Interview 7, CAB/SEPA)

The nature conservation representatives, meanwhile, criticized the decision to include only a few of the environmental NGOs that are active in forest management and exclude those associated with reindeer husbandry, which has legal rights to the land:

… symptomatic of the SFA’s collaborative processes is that they usually only invite SNF and WWF, period. It is our great criticism that they need to bring in more environmental organizations because it is not very often we can put so many resources in the process that we can fill our positions in several working groups as well. It does not belong to the exceptions. But in this situation we thought this was such an important work, so we were prepared to do that. However, it would have been facilitated if other organizations were also invited. There are a number of environmental organizations that work with forests, which never receive invitations to these processes. Another major shortage is reindeer husbandry. They are basically never involved…. (Interview 14, Nature conservation)

**Game changer 2: the commissioning of a new WKH inventory**

In the fall of 2017, when participants were facing a lot of pressure to finish the designated tasks of their working groups, the government, a coalition between the Social Democrats and the Green party, announced that the SFA would be commissioned to conduct a new nationwide inventory of the WKHs during the upcoming 10 years. The announcement, which was made during the budget process, came as a surprise and was, according to several of the interviewed participants, perceived as premature or even provocative in relation to the ongoing work in the collaborative process. Many of the participants wished that the collaborative process would have been allowed to continue without any political interference and that the outcome would be the undertaking of new nationwide inventories. However, there were also stakeholder – in particular the nature conservation representatives – who welcomed the
assignment and considered that it should have been commissioned a long time ago.

I think that it was a little premature, simply. It's like a bit of a parallel to this inventory pause, perhaps, when the nature conservation organizations reacted strongly. That we are working on a collaborative process and talking quality issues and then hear this, a bit insensitive maybe. . . . It was wrong timing. And I think it was very provocative, that they pointed so clearly to SNF's direct power so to speak, where one did not struggle to talk and take this little more difficult responsibility so to say, to be part of the collaborative group. If it was their wish, that this should continue. At the same time, it's good that money is allocated, because you will need that to continue working with it [the WKH inventories]. (Interview 8, 'Other' interests)

Had it arrived earlier it would have been very good. Of course. But it was the result of a tattered collaborative process, so it is. But then it's like this to get a WKH inventory, which is something we as an environmental organization worked very long for, so there was nothing new. Then that Karolina Skog [the Swedish Minister of Environment at the time] went out saying that it was SNF's idea, I think that was really strange [since many other environmental NGOs also worked for this]. (Interview 14, Nature conservation)

This second game changer revealed an additional attitudinal gap between the participants. It became clear that the participants in the collaborative process had different views on the upcoming inventories and on what they felt would be a sufficient quantity of WKHs. Some of the participants requested that a scientifically-based threshold should be established in this respect. There was also a discussion on if and how new WKHs would be created. The forestry representatives argued that they could improve and generate new WKHs with management measures, and they saw a possibility to conduct adapted production forestry in connection to the WKHs, while other representatives were more cautious:

Definitely! There is virtually no [forests] that have never been managed, and it means that many natural assets are linked to or created by a specific use, a certain history. In fact, we can both manage and use the forest while preserving the key values that exist there. (Interview 2, Land- and forest-owner associations)

Yes, but not in all biotopes, of course. But those that are marked by disturbance will develop well with management . . . . (Interview 4, Large forest companies)

Yes, but as I said it depends on the type of the WKH. In many, you can probably, and maybe even should [manage the forest]. But in others, maybe it's not appropriate. So there's a whole scale there. (Interview 8, 'Other' interests)

In principle, no. (Interview 6, CAB/SEPA)

When considering the endogenous factors, this process made resources available, helped drive issues that were internal priorities at the SFA, and once again put the public spotlight on WKHs and inventories. This was, in principle, positively perceived by all of the interviewed participants. The responsible officer at the SFA was described as clear and distinct, a good communicator, and to have facilitated and coordinated the process in a structured manner despite the game changers and overall lack of political steering: “. . . it is still an example of very ambitious and good process management in some way, I think.” (Interview 3, Land- and forest-owner associations). Collaborative processes such as this one must be allowed some time. However, some of the participants felt that the WKH process was partially forced, or, in other words, influenced by external interests such as the commissioning of a new nationwide inventory or development of improved inventory methods for northwestern Sweden, which, according to some participants, must be dutifully tested and calibrated before large-scale application. Not all participants felt that they could engage as much as they wanted: “I would have liked a little more time . . . sometimes you have to prioritize . . .” (Interview 2, Land- and forest-owner associations). But most of the interviewed stakeholders (nine out of 14) who had decided to stay in the process concurred that they had prioritized the WKH collaborative process since it is an important issue for the interest groups they represent, this is also supported by field notes from several meetings.

Game-changer 3: formal instructions from the government

The SFA had to wait more than nine months to receive a formal assignment from the government for conducting new nationwide inventories. While waiting for the instructions from the government, the collaborative process was more or less put on hold. When the new instructions were finally published, they once again changed the conditions for the whole process. Initially, there were no regional differences in the application of the WKH concept, but the formal instructions now outlined that regional differences in WKH application should be developed. In addition, more stakeholders were invited to the re-introduction of the process, and, as a result, those who left in the spring of 2017 returned to the process. It was thus necessary to once again discuss and reflect over the aim, roles, and responsibilities of the participants. The appointed process leader performed this at regular intervals throughout the collaborative process (based on internal documentation and field notes).

All of the interviewed participants indicated that the SFA and the official in charge (i.e. the process leader) of the process had been very clear when communicating their mandates as well as the rules and format of the process, i.e. they felt that they understood their role and what was expected from them:

We help to make suggestions on how to change, but we have no right of decision to introduce changes. (Interview 4, Large forest companies)

I do not think we have any mandate at all. SFA has been very careful to point that out. But they want to have input, so I have interpreted them. (Interview 8, 'Other' interests)

When asked to specify the objective of the collaborative process, most of the interviewed participants described it as reaching a consensus and developing a more efficient inventory methodology for identifying WKHs. Several examples from the interviews include “. . . develop or improve the application so that it is a more appropriate tool” (Interview 4, Large forest companies), and “. . . help the WKH concept become more anchored, and increase the acceptance of the WKH concept as well.” (Interview 5, Large forest companies).
However, the participants were very cautious when stating whether or not they thought that the objective of the process would be fulfilled. The majority of the interviewed stakeholders clearly expressed anticipation effects, i.e. stating that they hoped so, or that the process will at least be a step forward, while a few participants actually stated that they did not think that the process would be fulfilled. The main reason behind this reluctance among participants could well be that Sweden is currently preparing for the general election in September 2018. The issue of WKHs had become part of the election debate, for example, the opposition parties had clearly stated that they would withdraw the funds for nationwide inventories which the incumbent government had allocated (Sveriges Natur 2018). Following unclear election results and political turbulence – including a historically long process of finding a new political majority for the upcoming four-year term – an agreement between the Centre Party and the Liberals lent support to a Social Democratic-led government. Among other things, the new government stated “the nationwide WKH inventory will not be resumed”, but the SFA remained undecided about the intent behind this statement. As a result of the agreement, the SFA stopped working on the nationwide WKH inventory (which it was assigned in May 2018). Still, the work of registering and communicating the inventories made during the previous year will be completed, and the SFA will also continue to identify and register WKHs in relation to various circumstances, for example, notifications of clear felling. In addition, the work on developing the inventory method, the collaborative process, and the SFA’s own investigation into how the WKH issue should be handled in the scope of supervisory activities continues. Therefore, discussions and collaborations on the WKH concept will undoubtedly be required in the future.

Concluding discussion

Previous studies of collaborative processes have primarily emphasized how endogenous process factors explain the outcomes (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015; Vedung 2016; Bjärstig 2017). As a consequence, less attention has been paid to studying exogenous factors and their interplay with endogenous factors, as well as how these dynamics may impact the results. The present study confirms that exogenous process factors may play an important, or even decisive, role in the outcome of collaborative processes (cf. Vedung 2016). A set of three major events (game changers) stemming from exogenous factors not only interrupted the process and caused uncertainty, but also affected endogenous factors, a phenomenon that manifested itself in the stakeholders’ understanding of, and willingness to participate in, the collaborative process.

Although the involved participants agreed on the definition of the WKH from the start and had a common understanding of the concept, they did not agree on its practical applications. In particular, there was disagreement regarding the appropriate threshold, as well as whether, and how, the application should be regionally adapted. Hence, the first game changer – the pause in WKH registration – suited the forestry interest groups since they were highly critical of the current situation. In contrast, the nature conservation interest groups were not at all satisfied with the decision and decided to leave the process (cf. Lindstad 2018). It is interesting that even though all of the participants stressed the importance of coming together to discuss the WKH concept and each other’s positions, acknowledging the role of the SFA as the provider of the arena for dialogue, and taking part in the working groups, none of these factors turned out to be meaningful when the rules of the game changed dramatically.

The initial positive atmosphere, the mutual respect and trust among participants, and a general willingness of stakeholders to engage were all severely undermined when the nature conservation organizations and scientists dropped out of the process. Most of the participants agreed that the recommendations and proposals would have been stronger and perceived as more legitimate if the environmental NGOs and the scientists had stayed in the process. The stakeholders who decided to continue in the collaborative process felt that the loss of the scientific experts was unfortunate for the process since the scientists’ backgrounds would have been beneficial when considering the overarching goal of the process – i.e. method development (cf. Kleinschmidt et al. 2018; Wallin et al. 2018). The scientific experts were replaced by experts from within the SFA, a decision that somewhat filled the knowledge gap that arose when the scientists left the process, as well as improved the participants’ abilities to continue the process (cf. Lundquist 1987).

In retrospect, the forestry interest groups were not particularly surprised by the strategies of the environmental NGOs. It has happened so many times before, that it is more or less regarded as the primary strategy of these organizations. The participants that had committed time and effort to the process felt that the strategy of the nature conservationists – to leave at an opportune time – had received an “unfair” amount of media coverage. While the forestry interest groups – who will be directly affected by the outcome – are essentially forced to commit to the process, the nature conservation organizations can stand on the sidelines and criticize the process without taking any responsibility for the outcome. The environmental NGOs, on the other hand, criticized the process of being too limited in terms of stakeholder inclusion, a factor that could have increased understanding between the participants.

Our study shows that all three game changers severely impacted the stakeholders’ abilities, understanding, and willingness to participate in the collaborative process. The second and the third game changers, which clearly involved external political decisions, also impacted the actors’ anticipation of the process outcome. When analyzing these events, it is possible that it became difficult for participants to distinguish between decisions that were motivated by politics and what could be accomplished within the framework of the collaborative process (i.e. proposals of more practical character and knowledge gathering). On the other hand, the issue became highly politicized as the general elections drew near. This revealed a need, and an explicit desire from the participants, to put the issue into a wider perspective with regard to questions of regionalization, thresholds, and certification.
schemes (along with ownership rights and financial compensation, among others).

Despite the outspoken political disagreement on the continuation of WKH inventories, the collaborative process will be completed. However, the result(s) of the process remain unclear. Although the outcome of the collaborative process on WKH may be considered good and accepted by those who have participated in the process, the identified anticipation effect among the participants may still contribute to the actors acting strategically and stalling the implementation, while waiting for the politicians to finally handle the issue.

As a next step, we will compare this collaborative process with other collaborative processes that SFA have initiated over the last years. By combine and synthesize research we will be able to make some generalizations of prerequisites with regard to both endogenous and exogenous factors with the aim to see how the conditions for managing through collaborative processes for policy development can be optimized in the future. Hence, the on-going research-based evaluation has an ambition to both be of practical use and at the same time contribute to a long-term theory development of current evaluation approaches.

Note
1. Our investigation of the SFA statistics for the period 1990–2018 indicates that WKH areas have become slightly larger over the years, from 3.0 ha (1990–99) to 4.8 ha (2010–18) on average in Sweden. In the southern parts of Norrland they have increased more, from 3.7 to 6.6 ha, while the increase has been much smaller in northern Norrland, from 6.3 to 7.5 ha. In southern Sweden, the WKHs are smaller and the increase in size, from 2.2 to 2.5 ha, has been rather minimal over time.

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