Environmental preservation when public policies are insufficient: an example of participatory protection of the Atlantic Forest in north-western Spain

Preservación medioambiental cuando las políticas públicas no son suficientes: un ejemplo de protección participativa del Bosque Atlántico en el noroeste de España

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Abstract. This article aims to explore the possibilities that exist for preserving natural spaces and their biodiversity in areas that are particularly complex due to population density, intensive monoculture agriculture, tourist pressure, or the high rate of forest fires exacerbated by the consequences of climate change, based on the design and implementation of a specific protection project in north-western Spain. It also transcends the usual coercive elements such as legislation, anticipating that political actors may not want to activate existing protection tools. Its methodology is based on the study of a successful case, public policy analysis techniques such as mapping key actors and interests, qualitative

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interviews, the study of the political, economic and social context, as well as the most relevant bibliography on the subject. The results show a field experience with a direct impact on land preservation and diversity in 16 hectares of 'frondosas' (broadleaf forest in the Atlantic forest), demonstrating that the legal or economic context is an ambivalent variable that can be used in favour of preservation. Thus, the conclusions align around the factor of feasibility, showing that elements of resistance such as economic performance, lax legislation, or the complexity of negotiating with highly diverse actors do not mean that preservation by local communities themselves is not possible.

Keywords. Communal forest; conservation; corporate social responsibility; land preservation; public policy; restoration

Resumen. Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar las posibilidades que existen para preservar los espacios naturales y su biodiversidad en zonas especialmente complejas debido a la densidad de población, la agricultura intensiva de monocultivo, la presión turística o la elevada tasa de incendios forestales agravada por las consecuencias del cambio climático, basándose en el diseño y la implementación de un proyecto de protección específico en el noroeste de España. También trasciende los elementos coercitivos habituales, como la legislación, previendo que los actores políticos puedan no querer activar las herramientas de protección existentes. Su metodología se basa en el estudio de un caso de éxito, técnicas de análisis de políticas públicas como el mapeo de actores e intereses clave, entrevistas cualitativas, el estudio del contexto político, económico y social, así como la bibliografía más relevante en la materia. Los resultados constatan una experiencia de campo con un impacto directo en la preservación del territorio y la diversidad en 16 hectáreas de frondosas (Bosque Atlántico), lo que demuestra que el contexto legal o económico es una variable ambivalente que puede utilizarse a favor de la preservación. Así, las conclusiones se alinean en torno al factor de factibilidad, evidenciando que los elementos de resistencia como el rendimiento económico, la legislación laxa o la complejidad de negociar con actores muy diversos no implican que la conservación por parte de las propias comunidades locales no sea posible.

Palabras clave. Comunidades de bosques; conservación; responsabilidad social corporativa; preservación de la tierra; política pública; restauración

1. Introduction and method

It is an undisputed fact (Soulé, 1985) that the planet's physical resources are being depleted by intensive human consumption and the effects of overpopulation (UN, 2024). In this regard, and regardless of the fact that a variety of solutions would be necessary at the global level, this article attempts to shed light on the possibility of contributing to the

global solution by defending and/or recovering natural spaces and protecting them from human pressure, while at the same time re-establishing the natural balance (Perino et al., 2023) and reorienting the very relationship between humanity and nature (UN, 2023). The aim is to take a micro approach, starting with small actions, usually at the local level, seeking a final multiplier effect of positive experiences through contagion.

The proposed action, which is the subject of research, aims to develop a strategy for preserving and halting the deterioration of the natural environment in privately owned natural areas, where other means such as legislation or public policy are not applied to the protection of natural spaces. This is in the specific context of a community in northern Spain (Galicia), but one that shares legal and economic characteristics that would make it applicable to many other parts of Spain and the world.

Galicia is one of the 17 autonomous regions that make up the Spanish territorial political model. It covers 29,575 square kilometers of Spain's total area of 505,990 square kilometers, occupying 5.84% of the total surface area (National Statistics Institute, 2024). However, Galicia's geographical location (north-west Spain) and climate (high humidity) give it a certain specificity, accounting for 1,045,376.74 of the 10,625,698 hectares of forest land in Spain, which represents 9.84% (National Forest Inventory, 2024). Therefore, the ratio of forested area in Galicia to Spain is almost double the ratio of this autonomous community to the Spanish total.

Thus, the study will focus on an Atlantic ecosystem characteristic of north-western Spain, which, despite having a climate that is a priori less favourable to the outbreak of forest fires than the Mediterranean climate of eastern Spain, accounts for a large part of the area burned in Spain, as evidenced by the fire crisis that occurred in August 2025. Nor should we forget, in order to properly assess the scale of this problem, that the hectares burned in Spain in 2022 accounted for 39% of the total area burned in the European Union that year (Santín et al., 2023).

For all these reasons, Galicia represents an excellent unit of analysis, given that the green areas in the north, with lower temperatures and greater vegetation, are beginning to attract tourists in the face of climate change and the harsh conditions that are becoming prevalent in the warmer areas of southern Spain. These contemporary movements, driven by climate change, give rise to the need for this research, which is nevertheless part of a more general reflection on the problem of the planet in terms of resource depletion and the destruction of nature.

At the same time, we would be investigating the extent to which society is truly interested in understanding ecology as an object of governance (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018) and prepared for a logic of preservation and recovery of integral spaces for nature.

In this sense, the justification for the research is based on the fact that there is a certain doctrinal and media consensus regarding the productive overexertion to which the planet has been subjected (Soulé & Noss, 1998), which may already be leading to progressive destruction due to extractive depletion and overpopulation. Alongside this reason, which

concerns us as a species seeking its own salvation, there are the 'pro-nature' arguments, which explore its defence, its intrinsic value as a common good (Ostrom, 2000), and in seeing nature, animals and biodiversity itself as a collective value to be protected, as stated in Article 45 of the Spanish Constitution, which grants an active role to the public authorities, responsible for ensuring the rational use of all natural resources, in order to protect and improve the quality of life and defend and restore the environment. Justification for the article can also be found in the fact that there is a space for public debate that is poorly covered by the search for scientific data and solutions, although it is rapidly expanding (Lorimer et al., 2015). We also ask ourselves about the origin and magnitude of the problem that we are trying to solve or at least balance (environmental deterioration). The ecological crisis, according to Matikainen (2019), is an expression of one of the main contradictions within today's society, which in turn is based on the destructive productivity of the system. Matikainen therefore proposes that a redefinition of productivity, both as a norm and as a practice, is a prerequisite for transformative change.

The methodology used, typical of exploratory research (as there are not many similar studies), is based on the study of a successful case, public policy analysis techniques such as the mapping of key actors and interests, qualitative interviews, the study of the political, economic and social context, as well as the most relevant bibliography on the subject, based on the bibliographic and documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources and intensive monitoring of the main authors and doctrinal lines on the subject, both nationally and internationally. This bibliographic analysis methodology is complemented by the more empirical practical analysis of the factors that promote and hinder the implementation of this type of preservation action on privately owned land, negotiation on the ground and dealing with key actors recommendations for mapping key actors (Reed, 2008). In this sense, the properties of qualitative methodology are especially appropriate for this study: it is based on induction (instead of deduction) to reach conclusions based on contrasting concrete information; it uses a holistic view that addresses the context and its history, with a dynamic nature; and it arrives at a relativistic approach (instead of universalism), since the proposals made in this work are based on a specific frame of reference (Zapata-Barrero & Sánchez-Montijano, 2011).

Accompanying the deployment of public policy analysis logic —even when applied in this study from a private property perspective— the search for feasible legal and economic solutions, and the social research announced, this work is supported at the political and legal level by the recent designation of the period 2021-2030 as the 'decade of ecosystem restoration' by the United Nations General Assembly. Social sciences and natural sciences (biology) thus merge in a necessary symbiosis established by Soulé (1985).

Therefore, this research has an eminently practical purpose (Redford and Richter, 1999), taking into account the social limits of the restoration of ecological processes. It provides reliable data on the feasibility of preservation using privately owned spaces, a strategy that is even more difficult than preservation promoted by public policies of any

level of government, which has the possibilities granted by the legislative circuit and the coercive tools of the public administration it directs.

In addition, the aim is to seek the benefits of a clearly 'participatory' approach, which is increasingly considered a democratic right as well as a means of promoting higher quality and more durable decisions by involving stakeholders (Beierle, 2002). The aim is to synthesise local and scientific knowledge to provide a more complete understanding of complex and dynamic socio-ecological systems and processes. This knowledge can also be used to assess the relevance of possible technical and local solutions to environmental problems. In this way, it is possible to draw conclusions that can be used for private preservation initiatives in a 'utilitarian' logic as a way of overcoming a model of socialisation in values or awareness that is too slow and of uncertain success, and in which concern for the environment continues to be very low on the public's agenda. In fact, in a specific study on the environment carried out by the Sociological Research Centre (CIS) in 2023, it still ranked fifth among the most important problems in Spain (only 5% considered it to be the main problem), although 53.1% responded that they were very concerned about environmental issues (CIS, 2023).

The article is not immune to the controversy generated by one of the financing solutions explored: preservation with funds from companies that may themselves have a polluting impact. However, we are also aware that other more idealistic positions would be difficult to implement in this unstable political, social and economic climate. With this logic, of analysing the possibility of preservation through private initiatives as a lesser evil and as a complement to public policies for the preservation of the natural environment, this research is approached.

In short, the ultimate goal is to explore and scientifically validate a management model based on private and participatory initiatives, with legal coverage, and as a transition to some form of permanent preservation, giving concrete form to the idea that humanity and nature can coexist more harmoniously, with nature having its own guaranteed space and, as far as possible, in its original natural state with natural self-balance.

The work is structured as follows: Section 2 provides the theoretical framework on the preservation and recovery of the natural environment, accompanied by the legal framework referenced in Section 3. Section 4 identifies, describes and justifies the selected project, which is part of the Galician network of ancient Atlantic forests, and Section 5 outlines the phases of the selected project, from its design and negotiation with the different stakeholders to its implementation. Once this has been done, Section 6 evaluates the results obtained and the factors that have influenced them. Finally, Section 7 presents a summary of the conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework on preservation and recovery of the natural environment

The need to preserve and restore the coexistence of humans with nature is an issue that has been present practically since the dawn of time in some cultures, which went so far as to deify nature and animals. However, according to the categorization of Meny and Thoening (1992), it did not appear as public policy until the end of the 20th century, although it is now firmly established as a public function demanded by citizens.

In this way, the preservation of the natural environment has managed to find its way onto almost all government agendas, albeit with enormous disparities in approach, and with some movements in the opposite direction in recent far-right governments that seek to renounce the public function of nature preservation. It is also true that in some cases, given the difficulty of the public problem to be solved – the relationship between the natural environment and economic development or urbanization – it could be understood that, in the absence of a clear solution and in the face of significant social controversy, as well as significant business lobbies, many countries have pursued a policy of non-intervention, or a public policy of 'doing nothing' (Dye, 2008).

However, on the environmental issue, it is particularly important to recognize multiple logics, environmental sensitivities and different intensities in conservationist logics. This offers a completely heterogeneous concept of what it means to preserve nature.

In its most conservationist version, we could begin by echoing the 'rewilding' movement or, using a similar word in Spanish, 'resilvestración' or 'renaturalización' (Ceausu et al., 2015), as a current of thought originating from conservationist groups. Although 'rewilding' is also understood (García-Ruíz et al., 2020) as the process of abandoning farmland and the consequent recovery of shrubs and forests, together with the arrival or expansion of flora and fauna species, it is also, as indicated, like preservation itself, a concept with multiple definitions.

Rewilding originally emerged as a response to the current state of environmental deterioration, and in fact, most authors —García-Ruíz et al., 2020; Ceausu et al., 2015; Galetti et al., 2017 or Root-Bernstein et al., 2018— argue that industrial, urban, agricultural and livestock activities have been responsible for the destruction of forests, landscape disturbance, soil erosion and the degradation of natural ecosystems (Galetti et al., 2017; Root-Bernstein et al., 2018).

The term 'rewilding' was first coined in 1992 by the prominent American environmental activist Dave Foreman, although it was consolidated in his 2004 work 'Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century'. It began to be taken into consideration for academic research in seminal works in the late 1990s.

However, the meaning of 'rewilding' is not unambiguous and generates enormous debate even in conservationist circles, given that, among other possible considerations, there is a form of 'rewilding' that considers it necessary to remove humans from the areas to be restored and reintroduce original species (as in the case of wolves in Yellowstone

Park), while there are other perspectives for the Mediterranean (García-Ruiz et al., 2020) or for the specific case of the Apennines (Haller & Bender, 2018), which keep alive the cultural and ancestral connections of land management (think of the Australian aborigines and the fertility they bring by setting fires to enrich the land). That is why, despite the fact that, as Soulé & Noss (1998) —considered the 'fathers' of the concept— indicate, these should be complementary and not conflicting approaches, we should not take their meaning as something peaceful, but rather recognise that there are different ways of approaching the concept, marked by the role given to humans in the process of reconstruction and reforestation of the areas.

It should be clarified, however, that the implementation of a selective rewilding policy would not imply a persecution of agricultural, livestock or residential uses, but rather their concentration in certain limited areas. In fact, various estimates indicate that European farmers will abandon between 70,000 and 290,000 km2 of marginal agricultural or grazing areas by 2030, which may give rise to the 'passive rewilding' introduced by Van der Zanden et al. (2017).

Despite this multitude of definitions and approaches, and following Lorimer et al. (2015) or popular sentiment through the media and the focus on wildlife, we can say that 'rewilding' is still a marginal activity with little empirical research. However it has been developing rapidly, especially since the beginning of the 21st century (Pettorelli et al., 2019).

At the opposite end of the spectrum from rewilding is the purely extractivist view characteristic of capitalist liberalism, which considers natural resources to be exclusively at the disposal of productive processes and which dominates the landscape (Soulé, 1985) as opposed to the concept of the common good coined by Ostrom (2000).

In between these two ideological poles are the public policies of most governments around the world, which understand that caring for the environment is a public function, although the productivist vision that gives the environment second or third priority on the scale of priorities continues to prevail. Furthermore, according to Lowi's (1972) foundational studies on public policy and the degree of coercion, protection policies are regulatory policies with a significant degree of coercive threat, as the recovery of spaces for nature often involves property interests, development or business projections, but also the imposition of rules (e.g. no building, no motor vehicle traffic, no mass tourism, etc.).

For their part, it must be recognized that the benefits of a public policy of recovery or 'rewilding' are diffuse from the outset (environmental conservation, quality of life, clean air, contact with nature) and a significant number of very specific people will bear the costs (of not being able to develop or rezone rural land or even losing it in the event of expropriation), which adds an important element of complexity.

From a practical, 'realpolitik' perspective (Redford & Richter, 1999), and once this theoretical framework of the environmental issue has been outlined from one extreme to the other, this article explores different preservation formulas, although throughout the article, local and private solutions that allow for the development of local economies are

shown to be more reliable and practical in small, highly pressured local territories than solutions via public policy.

This does not prevent the complete scheme from including major preservation policies, national or even supranational legislation, but also this type of solution at the local level and in smaller areas. Preservation formulas are described that go beyond the very powerful and now classic natural parks, which are optimal but limited in scope and difficult to apply in smaller areas with high human density.

3. Legal framework for preservation in Spain

As for the legal context in which these types of projects are developed, the initial coverage stems from the United Nations Conference on the Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, which adopted the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment, the first major milestone in the debate between economic growth, pollution and human well-being, which would also lead to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

From these early meetings on conservation, we can introduce the first layer of legislation on conservation in European law, notably the Habitats Directive (Council of the European Communities, 1992), which establishes the special areas of conservation that will form part of the Natura 2000 network, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) and the Directive 2009/147 as the European regulatory framework.

In 2011, the EU formalized a Biodiversity Strategy for 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2011) with objectives to halt biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation and restore 15% of degraded habitats, in line with the Aichi Targets (2010) of the Convention on Biological Diversity. This regulation is particularly important, as authors such as Obradovic and Voermans (2009) point out that 70% of national legislation stems from EU legislative initiatives. To conclude this section with a reference to current events, we should mention the European Union's biodiversity strategy for 2030 (European Commission, 2020) and the 'LIFE' programme for the environment and climate action (European Parliament and Council, 2021).

Within this EU legislative framework, national legislation on natural parks was developed, beginning in 1918 with the Covadonga Natural Park, and the designation by Member States of areas for environmental protection (Natura 2000 network). Legal development has come hand in hand with Law 42/2007 on Natural Heritage and Biodiversity, amended by Law 33/2015, which improves public participation mechanisms. To conclude the description of state-level legislation, it is necessary to mention Law 21/2013 on environmental assessment, which was developed by the Spanish state as a preventive tool against negative impacts on the natural environment.

The legislative framework is completed, with a significant impact on the Spanish multilevel system, by the presence of regional legislation which, in the case of Galicia, must also take into account the peculiar form of organization of the natural environment with a strong

presence of communally owned forests, a legal configuration typical of north-western Spain, although with similarities to the Portuguese 'baldíos' and some areas of Switzerland, among other notable territories. In this regard, based on the provisions of Article 27 of the Statute of Autonomy of Galicia —a quasi-constitutional norm in the Galician territory, although without contradicting the provisions of the Spanish Constitution—, Law 2/2016 on land in Galicia was approved at the regional level, developed by Regulation 143/2016 (Xunta de Galicia, 2016), highlighting the possibility of requesting the regional administration to declare an area a 'space of local public interest' (individuals can also request this) or to use urban planning instruments to intensively protect certain areas of landscape, social or natural expansion interest that may be relevant.

However, it should be made clear that this article is the result, as its title indicates, of a certain failure of public preservation policies and, by extension, of the legislation itself. Policies that are adequate in terms of legislative design, but with enormous shortcomings in terms of implementation and funding in practice.

In order not to give an overly negative description, it should be pointed out, strictly speaking, that Europe offers a certain track record in the positive direction of restoring coexistence between humans and nature, a positive aspect that is also analyzed in the audits of the Aichi targets (2010), where a recovery in the percentage of natural spaces can be seen, although few environmental targets are being met. It must therefore be emphasized that we are coming from a very high level of deterioration and that, in global terms, beyond Europe, the trends remain very negative.

The inclusion of environmental goals in the 2030 Agenda, creating a framework and approach and, specifically, the recovery of biodiversity as a specific goal ('Life on land' – SDG 15 (hereinafter SDG)), represents a certain push that should not be overlooked. It was born in the face of a context, going from the global to the local, in which more than 100 million hectares of healthy and productive land were degraded annually between 2015 and 2019, affecting the lives of 1.3 billion people, with agricultural expansion being the direct driver of almost 90% of global deforestation (UN, 2024). In fact, biodiversity is deteriorating at a faster rate than at any other time in human history (Soulé, 1985).

Goal 15 (SDG 15) of the 2030 Agenda establishes considerations that would serve to implement preservation policies, the basis of rewilding: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

To this end, what can be done at the local government level is particularly important, as it is often the case that the territories to be protected and restored are located within a single local entity. The powers of these governments in Spain and Galicia are limited, it is true, but they are not non-existent.

However, it cannot be ignored that the 2030 Agenda has and will continue to have its detractors, aligned with 'denialism' and an extremist and populist social and political discourse. In fact, some governments, such as Milei's Argentine executive, define themselves as clearly opposed to this type of policy.

Figure 1
Image of the Atlantic forest area of native broadleaf species —in lighter green— that was sought to be preserved within the framework provided by Spanish legislation.

Source:
Photograph by one of the authors of this article.

4. Itinerary of the 'Rede Galega de Bosques Atlánticos Antigos' [Galician Ancient Atlantic Forest Network] project: solutions explored

In order to clearly establish the objectives, as an essential element in this type of preservation project (Reed, 2008; Ostrom, 2000), two strategic approaches were established:

1.- Halting deterioration by protecting the territory and promoting the dissemination of the protection model, as opposed to purely extractivist visions (getting as much economic yield as possible from nature) or the widespread pessimistic view that this type of project is powerless against the production system and lobbies.

2.- Maintenance and restoration in search of the original Atlantic forest with a view to creating an 'old-growth forest', thus avoiding an extractive logic and recovering the historically natural characteristics of the area in line with Chazdon's (2008) recovery proposals.

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, several alternative solutions were sought, based on the classic assumption of Starling et al. (1988) of seeking those that are most viable technically, politically and socially. Various ways of protecting the territory and financing (included in Table 1) were thus evaluated, once the strategic values mentioned above had been agreed upon and given that the project is based on the premise of integrating local

communities (Redford & Richter, 1999); communities that must see economic development (Chazdon, 2008) in addition to the intrinsic value of protecting a common good such as a forest (Ostrom, 2000).

Table 1
Solutions explored and their limiting factor.

	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS	LIMITATIONS
1.	The search for greater legal protection (regional) for areas to be preserved.	Political will, complex and lengthy legislative procedure, political attrition by opposing actors, non-compliant political ideology.
2.	Legal protection (local) of areas to be preserved.	Political will, complex and lengthy legislative procedure, political attrition by opposing actors, non-compliant political ideology. Limited powers of local government, with very few legal instruments available. High public pressure.
3.	Direct monetary transfers from institutions, which were already being used, increasing amounts on condition of maintaining environmental uses.	Economic cost, political attrition due to the use of public funds.
4.	Direct and indefinite transfer of common land to the local authority.	Controversial and complex, potentially jeopardizing the project. Political risk.
5.	Leasing of use by the local authority for preservation.	Wear and tear on the use of public funds.
	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS	**LIMITATIONS**
6.	Use of public hectares to create an old-growth forest, which would generate 'public value' from the mere conservation of the reforested land. Promotion of biodiversity.	There are hardly any local authorities with their own natural spaces in which to experiment with these conservation solutions. Most are private or common spaces.
7.	Purchase of hectares for the creation of native forest in which the investment can be recovered through land conservation and the maintenance and promotion of biodiversity (through green economy carbon credits and other forms of green economy).	Solution is too expensive as the Atlantic area is an area of high tourist demand and population density. It is ruled out because it is not economically viable.
8.	Seek private capital support to agree on a lease for preservation purposes (preservation sponsorship) or a simple donation, avoiding non-environmental uses.	The need to find interested companies, for whom it is useful due to involvement, philanthropy, reputation or competitive advantage. Danger of the deterrent effect of the current political polarization.

Source:
Own elaboration.

Having explored these possibilities, and given the difficulties encountered at the institutional level —considered the most suitable due to the permanence of institutions over time and the necessary long-term viability (Soulé, 1985)— the decision was made to explore solution number 8, seeking the support of private capital in its corporate social responsibility policy, which is increasingly widespread in business logic (Carroll & Shabana, 2010), especially in Europe.

Although not seen as an ideal solution at all —due to the controversy generated by payments from companies that are themselves polluting (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010)— it appears to be the one with the fewest limitations in terms of implementation, while from the outset there was a special consideration, albeit selfish, for social reputation or competitive advantage, of the business world with the project (Carroll & Shabana, 2010).

The dangers were obvious, such as the loss of coherence of the project (it depends on the actions and area of activity of the sponsoring companies), excessive advertising 'self-promotion', the difficulty of generating trust among forest owners, or the politicization of the project according to the political lines of the companies themselves.

However, on balance, it seemed interesting to explore this avenue, even bearing in mind its temporary nature compared to the long-term viability required by environmental issues (Soulé, 1985, p. 727). In the search for possible solutions, numerous contacts were made between 2023 and 2025 in the Galician region and, in particular, in the Arousa area: at the institutional level with the municipalities of Vilagarcía, Cambados and Padrón; at the social level, relationships were established with community members in the municipalities of Lousame, Caldas, Cerdedo, Corcubión, Padrón, Vilagarcía and Vilanova de Arousa. Likewise, contact was made with various companies in the Arousa area, located in the Galician province of Pontevedra, obtaining some evidence that the facilities would come from private financing, with all the reservations and controversies that this form of financing may entail (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010).

5. Phases of the selected specific project: private financing as evidence of corporate environmental responsibility

Once this solution had been adopted from private financing, with the arguments set out above, it remained to develop the project, which began with improving the format and content of the project, as this document would be used as a kind of 'portfolio' or calling card for the key players in the process.

5.1. Project development and dissemination phase

The project was defined and formalized following the typical structure of environmental projects, but in the simplest way possible, given that many stakeholders may not know anything about environmental policies and often respond to business or rural logic that is unrelated to environmental conservation logic. Remember that sometimes they are simply neighbours of the communal forest with professions that have nothing to do with the rural or forestry world. However, it was considered necessary to develop the project as a way of anchoring the intended strategic objectives, thus establishing the key ideas that would also articulate public presentations and negotiations with key stakeholders.

The project, called 'Rede galega de bosques atlánticos antigos' (Galician Network of Ancient Atlantic Forests), which included the creation of a website for this purpose to improve its dissemination: https://redebosquesatlanticos.com/ , established the following objectives:

1.- To halt the accelerated environmental deterioration.

2.- Restoration, as far as possible, of the native broadleaf forest (Atlantic forest concept) particularly threatened in Galicia (Loidi et al., 2010).

3.- Seeking, as far as possible, natural self-balance in these areas, intensive promotion of biodiversity, and moving away from the extractivist view of nature (Perino et al., 2023).

Complementary to the technical solutions and the formal development of the project, a network of interviews with 'key actors' was activated following a participatory methodology (Reed, 2008) as befits the research body of the University of Vigo 'G3 Governance Observatory'. Thus, lines of action were opened with public institutions, forest owners or communities, companies and third sector entities, and the media, with the idea of incorporating communication and the active participation of local communities, which had already shown positive results (Peloquin & Berkes, 2009) and more informed and equitable decisions (Reed, 2008).

At the same time, a local media campaign was launched to publicize the project, with the aim of attracting the attention of both forest owners and businesses, and in turn generating a certain amount of 'favorable social momentum'. Special care was taken not to politicize the project, given the current political and media context and the high level of polarization in Spain. The aim was to ensure, as far as possible, that politicization did not discourage companies or forest communities from participating.

This timeline of media coverage and dissemination of the project is included in order to show the evolution of the media campaign and some of the milestones or strategic shifts in the approach taken. A 'strategic shift' can be observed from a focus on public institutions – which showed little receptivity – to private organizations, where better conditions for rapid and replicable agreements were identified, seeking the principle of social proof or the tendency to look at what others are doing (Thompson, 2004). All this was done in the knowledge that current organizational structures often do not support effective participatory processes, as Reed (2008) has shown. All this with a view to tackling a period of accelerated deforestation in the area of Galicia known as 'Rías Baixas', caused by the change in land use from forestry and environmental to agricultural (mainly monoculture of vines) as well as, in general, strong demographic and tourist pressure. The chronology ends with the signing of the agreement between the company and the forest community, with the research team as the promoting entity, formalising a three-way consensus that usually leads to improved decision-making (Beierle, 2002). At this point, one of the project's milestones is considered complete: having the first replicable practical experience, seeking scalability.

Table 2
Chronology of press releases to publicise the project and promote environmental debate.

Date	Highlights	Media
2024/04/04	A university professor opens the ecological restoration agenda in Galicia with rewilding	La Voz de Galicia
2024/04/24	A university professor's initiative to curb environmental degradation in Galicia	GCiencia
2024/04/28	A project to stop the deterioration of Vilagarcía's natural spaces	Diario de Arousa
2024/05/29	A Vilagarcía resident proposes carbon credits to curb environmental degradation	Faro de Vigo
2024/07/16	Interview on 'Hoy por hoy Arosa'	Cadena Ser
2024/07/28	Vilagarcía gives rewilding a chance	La Voz de Galicia
2025/02/10	Private funding to activate a network of ancient Atlantic forests in the Rías Baixas	La Voz de Galicia
2025/04/09	The Governance Observatory is promoting an agreement to sponsor a forest in Vilanova de Arousa	Diario de la Universidad de Vigo
2025/04/09	The András community and the University of Vigo join forces to preserve a broadleaf forest	Diario de Arousa
2025/04/09	Interview on Spanish National Radio	Radio Nacional
2025/04/09	András will host the first ancient forest to grow in the Rías Baixas	La Voz de Galicia
Date	**Highlights**	**Media**
2025/04/10	The University of Vigo is sponsoring a forest in Vilanova for its care and research	Faro de Vigo
2025/04/10	Interview on 'Hoy por hoy Arosa'	Cadena Ser

Source:
Own elaboration. The international standard for writing these dates has been used.

At the same time, work began on drafting and negotiating a model collaboration agreement, also known as a 'sponsorship agreement' or 'patronage agreement,' which would include the obligations of the financing company, the forest communities, and the role of the research team at the University of Vigo (G3 Governance Observatory), which would be the supervisory body for the obligations of the parties, as well as the promoting entity. A business consulting company would altruistically provide legal coverage to the research team to legally supervise the agreement to be formalized; and also from the air, the aerospace company ARS would monitor via satellite the forest management agreed between the parties and formalized in the agreement, following the recommendations for monitoring landscape renaturalization by Regos et al. (2016).

To provide an executive summary of the agreement that concludes the first experience covered by the project, it can be stated that:

1.- The company would pay a sum of money, via direct transfer, to the forest community, which would accept the guidelines for the preservation of vegetation and fauna in line with the idea of creating an old-growth forest; with no other economic exploitation —in principle— than the mere preservation of flora and biodiversity and the promotion of native natural elements.

2.- The University, through an agreement with the research team represented by its secretary, one of the authors of this paper, would set the guidelines for preserving the environment, with the ultimate goal of:

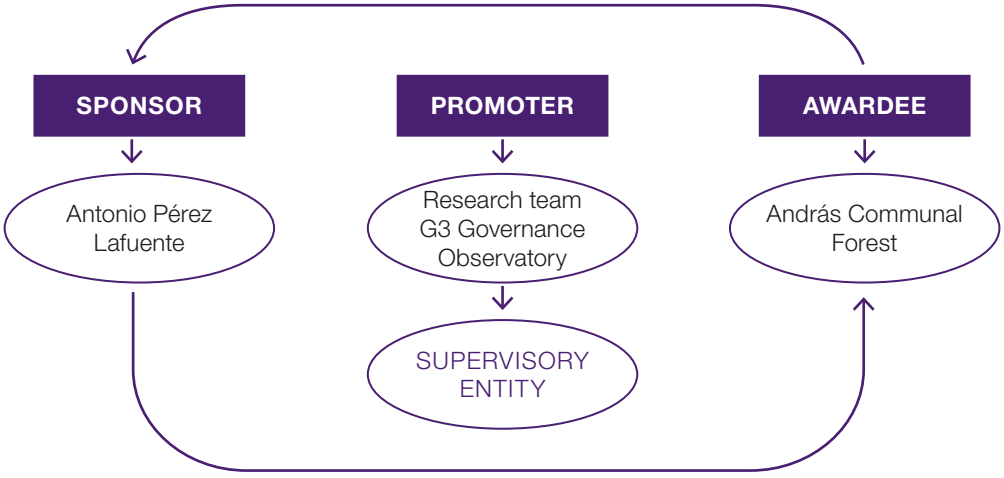
- Achieving the ecological conditions of a native, ancient forest.
- To help, through preservation, both the capture of CO_2 with the broadleaf forest and the promotion of the original biodiversity of the areas subject to preservation.
- To develop a new form of nature management understood as a common good and, in this case, with private funding.

3.- The successful bidder-awardee (András Communal Forest) would undertake to share or agree as far as possible with the technical guidelines of the University, continuing with the same maintenance work it had been carrying out, now linked to a firm and verifiable commitment to preservation. In addition, it would be obliged to report any forestry activities to be undertaken, such as planting, pruning, maintenance, etc.

4.- The agreement would be terminated in the event of breach of obligations by any of the three signatory entities.

In very simple terms, the negotiation procedure would be as follows:

Figure 2
Dynamic diagram of sponsorship for the preservation of the Atlantic Forest in András.



Source:
Own elaboration.

5.2. Contact and negotiation phase with potential key players

This phase consisted of mapping and contacting relevant players who might want to participate in the project. In this regard, various companies were contacted, broadening the range of business sectors, as corporate social responsibility is becoming a cross-cutting issue for all types of companies (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Some contacts were sought to obtain information for the preparation of the negotiation —trying to understand the benefits and limitations of the sector— and in other cases as possible direct sponsors of natural areas. In the case of both potential sponsoring companies and owners of natural areas —usually forest communities— negotiations were initiated using what is known as 'integrative and explicit negotiation' (Munduate & Martínez, 2003), therefore transparent and generating the idea that everyone had a common interest (Fisher et al., 2011), a win-win situation in preservation and renaturalization already noted by Carroll and Shabana (2010), although from different perspectives (Munduate & Medina, 2011), including economic, reputational and environmental.

In this sense, it had to be borne in mind that any integrative negotiation, in the classical sense outlined in the seminal work of Walton and McKersie (1965) and therefore in which all parties have a certain interest in the strategy to be implemented, can be achieved with different options:

1.- 'Expanding the pie'.

That is, incorporating new elements, adding economic, social, dissemination or reputational resources (Bazerman & Neale, 1993). Increasing the variables to be addressed in the negotiation was fundamental. For example, the variable of public exposure for those entities that collaborate as promoters of nature restoration proved to be a kind of 'magic variable': all parties want to appear publicly in the role of nature conservationists.

2.- Reducing costs.

Eliminating those elements that interfere with a satisfactory agreement. For example, all bureaucratic costs were eliminated, simplifying the agreement. The monetary amount for preservation would go from the company to the certified account of the forest community (4,000 euros per 16 hectares of preserved broadleaf forest per year, and that amount would be disbursed each year during the five years of the agreement), provided that the original idea of an ancient Atlantic forest (broadleaf and without extractive purposes) was maintained, with the first payment stipulated in the agreement having been made on the date of submission of this work. Simplifying the project as much as possible is presented as a key element, as many of the forest communities are facing problems of abandonment due to the lack of generational renewal and the advanced age of the community members. From this perspective, building trust by drawing up an agreement that is extremely easy to understand facilitates access from the outset of contacts (Reed, 2008).

Table 3
Some of the stakeholders contacted and their respective interests.

STAKEHOLDERS	SECTOR	INTEREST
Canned fish 'Pan do Mar'	Food industry	Corporate social responsibility
Conxemar	Trade fairs and events in the frozen food sector	Corporate social responsibility
Supernito	Food	Corporate social responsibility
Precón	Construction company	Corporate social responsibility
Leche Larsa	Food	Corporate social responsibility
Leche Clesa	Food	Corporate social responsibility
Monte Bandín	Communal Forest	Economic performance and environmental conservation
STAKEHOLDERS	**SECTOR**	**INTEREST**
Montes de Sobrán	Communal Forest	Economic performance and environmental conservation
Monte de András	Communal Forest	Economic performance and strong environmental focus
Monte Cambeiro	Municipality of Corcubión	Environmental conservation
Monte de Froxán	Communal Forest	Environmental conservation and environmental education
I.B. Association	Third sector	Environmental and social volunteering

Source:
Own elaboration.

The other key group of stakeholders with whom to negotiate, once the sponsorship or corporate social responsibility financing solution had been adopted, was the landowners, mainly communal owners who have the use and enjoyment of the land but not full ownership, or even private owners. After unsuccessful attempts, negotiations with public institutions were ruled out, as publicly owned woodland is very scarce in the legal configuration of Galician woodland.

The negotiation thus took an integrative approach (Munduate & Martínez, 2003), on the understanding that both companies and forest owners had much to gain from the project and little to lose, and even less to lose by sitting down to listen to financing proposals.

The logic of negotiation, careful planning of meetings, active listening techniques, the creation of trust in a positive environment (Colomer de Selva, 2020) and prior preparation by finding out about the situation of the actors (Thompson, 2004) were all employed. For example, a financially solvent mountain community is not the same as one that is financially needy or has poor relations between its members. In this sense, it is important to establish informal contacts that provide complementary information that is very valuable and difficult

to obtain otherwise. It should be remembered that proper preparation gives the negotiator a strategic advantage at the negotiating table. And although almost no one is aware of the importance of this phase, it should account for 80% of the time spent, compared to the remaining 20% spent on the actual negotiation.

The strategies and tactics to be deployed by the research team from the University of Vigo, G3 Governance Observatory'. The most relevant factor in terms of context was to consider the power dynamics (Reed, 2008), clearly observing that the parties did not have any power over each other, so that the negotiation was practically absent or balanced in terms of the limited power between the parties. Therefore, they only negotiate if it is in their interest to do so and if it generates benefits in terms that each party understands (economic, environmental, altruistic, media, etc.). In this negotiation, the coercive capacity that is usual when there are power relations between the parties was virtually non-existent. On the contrary, persuasion and rational arguments had to be used to convince those involved.

In any case, building trust (Thompson, 2004) and creating a relaxed atmosphere was key to the forest communities' perception that they are being paid to maintain what they already have – a complete paradigm shift – which has been the main focus throughout the project. It is true that the so-called 'green economy' is generating a kind of intermediary and speculative interests that fuel the mistrust or 'high guard' of the community members, which seems justified once projects of dubious environmental ethics are detected (Fairhead et al., 2012).

5.3. Implementation phase: the agreement promoted by the research team between András Communal Forest and Antonio Pérez Lafuente S. A canning factory

In this phase, as a result of the firm agreement by the company interested in financing the proposed preservation of the original forest, the aim is to delimit the territory to be protected, identifying its legal status and possible legal limitations, as well as physically demarcating the territory to be acted upon. The agreement was formalized through a sponsorship agreement (also known as a 'patronage agreement') in which the research team from the University of Vigo mediated between the parties: András Communal Forest and Antonio Pérez-Lafuente S. A. canning factory.

5.3.1.- Legal classification and property regime

In the case analysed, negotiations focused specifically on common land, a legal concept specific to Galician civil law, also found in north-western Spain, and similar to the concept of 'baldíos' in Portugal (Copena, 2018).

The common land property regime has the characteristic that it does not allow the private sale of the land. Therefore, there is no 'bare ownership', with available uses passing through usufruct, leasing or transfer of use. It is a very old legal concept, which allowed

the exploitation of the land as a way of helping the subsistence of families who had homes on communal land (Rodríguez Barreira, 2006; Fernández Leiceaga, 1996). In this sense, the project placed value on identifying local sensitivities in relation to natural spaces and traditional and ancestral forms of human management of the territories (Lorimer et al., 2015). Thus, it is framed as a step towards the complete management and protection of the territory, as the forest had often been considered of little value and low yield in economic terms.

However, in recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the economic importance of woodland in Galicia, both due to the change of use to agriculture (massive plantations of certain crops, especially vines) and the increase in the price of species useful for the cellulose industry, notably pine and eucalyptus, which is detrimental to the conservation of spaces in general, but even more detrimental to native forests that promote environmental balance and biodiversity. At the same time, it should be remembered that the original legal concept of common ownership was not intended for economic gain, but rather as a contribution to the survival of the families who occupied it. In the case analyzed, it was a communal forest, part of which was subject to a prior forestry exploitation plan, while the other part (a 16-hectare broadleaf forest) was subject to the sponsorship agreement.

5.3.2. Territorial Delimitation.

This was discussed with the community members leading the negotiation, with the idea that the territory under consideration would ideally be oriented toward gradually recovering the characteristics of the ancient Atlantic forest that had been native to the area.

Aerospace observation techniques are commonly used for monitoring, a function that in the proposed case fell technically to the aerospace company ARS-Galactica, which collaborated on the project without compensation, demonstrating the importance of involvement and a participatory perspective. This delimitation is essential for monitoring the natural area, ensuring compliance with the provisions of the agreement, and even conducting simulations of both past forest evolution and its projections for the future (Goetz et al., 2015).

In the proposed case, the data provided by the forestry technician, Carmen Rial, was particularly relevant, provided information on the area to be protected, as well as the CO_2 retention that is and will be obtained as the trees grow in the hectares covered by the sponsorship agreement.

Figure 3
Dominant species and reforested areas.

Dominant species		Reforested areas in hectares (ha)
	American red oak	5,29 ha
	Celtiberian white birch	0,93 ha
	Common ash	1,36 ha
Dominant species		**Reforested areas in hectares (ha)**
	Wild cherry	3,35 ha
	Hybrid chestnut	5,16 ha

Source:
Own elaboration based on data provided by the forestry technician of András Communal Forest.

For its part, the absorption calculator of the Ministry for Ecological Transition (MITERD, 2020) establishes for the aforementioned species the following estimated accumulated absorptions in t CO_2/P, that is, how many tons of CO_2 accumulated over time, each tree absorbs.

Table 4
Estimated cumulative absorptions per tree for each species.

Agew	American red oak	Celtiberian white birch	Common ash	Wild cherry	Hybrid chestnut
20	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.15	0.12
25	0.18	0.07	0.11	0.19	0.16
30	0.22	0.09	0.18	0.22	0.19
35	0.35	0.1	0.29	0.26	0.22
40	0.4	0.12	0.33	0.3	0.25

Source:
Own elaboration based on data provided by the forestry technician of András Communal Forest.

The same species that we have just analyzed represent a CO_2 retention for the surfaces occupied by each tree species listed in the table below. In this way, after performing the corresponding calculations, a total of 119.85 tons of CO_2 are retained by the forest under development and the subject of the sponsorship agreement.

Table 5
Estimated retention by species in the agreed territory called 'Chan das Rosas' by the Local Community.

Species	Surface ha	CO_2 (tons) / annual ha	CO_2 (tons) / annual
American red oak	5.29	13.75	72.74
Celtiberian white birch	0.93	1.25	1.16
Common ash	1.36	2.5	3.4
Wild cherry	3.35	5	16.75
Hybrid chestnut	5.16	5	25.8
Total CO_2 (tons) absorbed by each tree,over time			**119.85**

Source:
Own elaboration based on data provided by the forestry technician of András Communal Forest.

5.4. Implementation problems detected

Among the various implementation problems detected, the following can be highlighted, in order of importance and their potential as elements that could hinder the project:

1.- The different sensitivities existing throughout Communal Forests.

This situation means that, as can occur in a building's Neighborhood Association, the negotiation processes are extremely complex. This factor brings us back to the importance of mastering negotiation techniques, not relying entirely on intuition or personal trust; respecting the techniques, roles, and the negotiation ritual itself, in these hostile and highly heterogeneous environments.

2.- Forestry legislation and sector agreements.

Aspects such as whether forests may or may not have an agreement with regional governments for forestry exploitation, or the uses that regional legislation may or may not permit (such as the planting of eucalyptus) are regulatory derivatives that are less visible than the formal legislation that anyone can obtain in seconds on the internet.

3.- The presence of interested third parties.

Specifically, forestry companies, forestry professionals, and farm managers intervene in the processes, attempting to steer the negotiations based on their legitimate interests. The possibility that the land could be donated to an institution or the rationale for low maintenance work, with a predominance of plant species that reduce human maintenance labor, are not factors that satisfy all stakeholders, which is understandable and should be taken into account in the negotiation process.

For this purpose, a table with stakeholders and interests present in the negotiation process is included (Reed, 2008), following the stakeholder mapping technique, mapping the relevant stakeholders in the context of the research and their interests, whether these interests are explicit or hidden.

Table 6
Relevant stakeholders for the preservation project and present interests.

STAKEHOLDERS	INTEREST
Local administration (Mayors, councilors, technical staff, etc.)	Political / environmental
Media	Economic / Environmental
Communal Forests	Economic / Environmental
Companies-factories	Economic / Green economy / Social responsibility
Civil Society	Economic / Environmental
Private owners	Economic / Environmental
Non-governmental organizations	Environmental / organizational
Green economy operators	Economic / Environmental
University / Research teams	Environmental / Social presence / research

Source:
Own elaboration.

6. Discussion of results

In the proposed case, we have seen that in a specific political and social context, in this case an area of Galicia, Spain, with applicable characteristics to many other parts of Europe and the world, preservation through corporate social responsibility has worked.

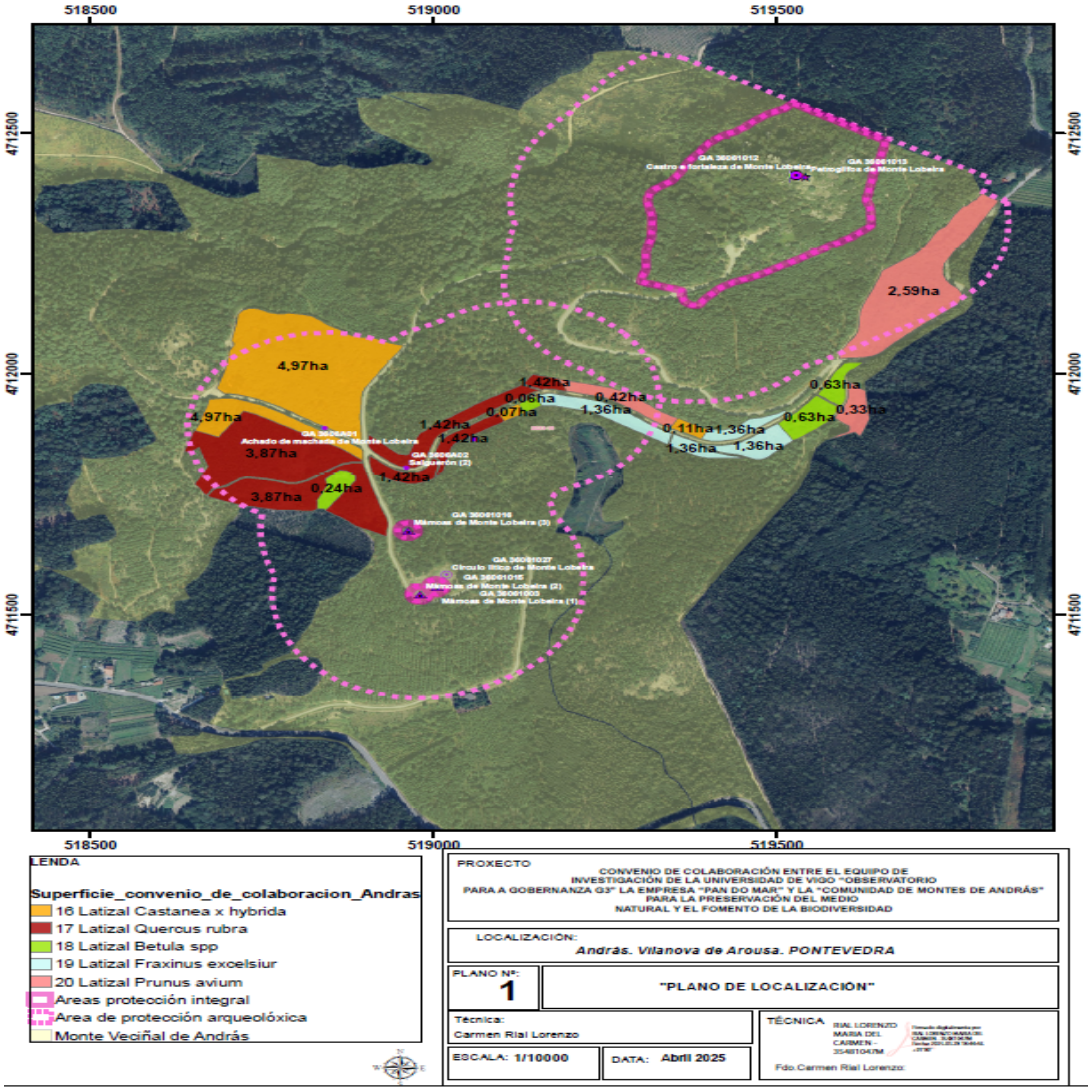
It has also been achieved by avoiding so-called green washing, and the company's commitment to preservation is tangible, in hectares of nature and facilitating the development of appropriate plant and animal species. This can be easily verified with geolocation tools used to monitor the territory designated for protection, which appear throughout this document.

It is necessary to point out, however, the implementation problems detected, which include environmental legislation that hinders initiatives rather than fostering them (due to excessive bureaucracy), excessive government control that attempts to negotiate and exploit nature's extractive capacity, and, finally, the 'natural' and almost 'recommended' distrust of local communities that own natural spaces, which hinders any negotiation of the kind demonstrated in this successful case. It goes without saying that the business sector is a determining factor, as its logic is usually exclusively business-oriented and the use of nature for extractive purposes and profit; but this is an independent variable that must be taken into account from the outset.

As a possible line of research and impact for the future, the possibility of investigating models without intermediaries and without regulated markets clearly opens up, allowing, in a mutually agreed-upon manner, the owners of natural spaces and companies interested in preserving them to reach agreements that can be recognized for the company's positioning in international markets. Like any market, the green market seeks to protect itself, and agreements like the one proposed in this study are often attacked for lack of formality, certification, etc., even when they are easily monitored and even certified as a public deed before a notary.

To illustrate the tangible nature of the agreement reached, a plan of the area reserved and financed by the sponsoring company is included:

Figure 4
Map of the agreement signed for the preservation of the András Atlantic Forest.



Source:
Provided by own work of the forestry technician of András Communal Forest.

7. Conclusions

The research undertaken shows the successful outcome, from its initial conception, of a sponsorship initiative —formalized in an agreement— for a natural space by a company, with coverage provided by corporate environmental social responsibility.

The main conclusion is that it is feasible, legal and plausible to achieve this type of agreement, including with private entities such as companies, thus transcending the usual paradigm of considering it a public action subject to the cycle of public policies, parliamentary procedures and the use of public money. Therefore, the overexploitation of resources is not an inevitable fate, and agreements such as the one described above can change the perspective, granting nature the status of a public good to be protected by society.

The 'public solution', understanding nature as a public good in Ostrom's original definition (2000), may be the ideal route, given the permanence of the public administration and its capacity to fulfil the importance of long-term conservation (Soulé, 1985); but even if only temporarily or in areas at particular risk of habitat destruction, the response formulated in the case under analysis, which is real and underway at the time of writing for the next five years, represents an option to be taken into serious consideration.

The culmination of this practical research, which has had an impact on the territory, is an example of management and preservation with private capital, as another tool that actors concerned with preserving natural spaces can now explore with greater discernment, knowing of a successful experience, an agreement, the problems of implementation and a context that can be replicated in many other places, perfecting the strategy to be followed.

Another clear conclusion is that nature protection is not as firmly established in the collective imagination as one might think, and both politicians in general and the majority of citizens continue to prioritize economic growth and constant prosperity over the common good that preservation represents.

Therefore, the most appropriate approach does not lie —at least exclusively— in the socialization of environmental values, which is undoubtedly a sound long-term strategy, but which has the problem of being slow and having a low success rate. In our view, the current media and political context, as well as the world exposed to 'fake news', requires preservation based on the rules of the economy itself, i.e. linking preservation with the development of local economies and human participation (Chazdon, 2008), in a certainly complex balance. Realpolitik also appears, as one would expect, in environmental issues.

About the Article:

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CRediT authorship contribution statement. Briones Gamarra, Óscar: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft. Martínez Arribas, Fernando: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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