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Empowering Communities on the Urban Coastline: Co-Creation and Conservation in Relational Landscapes

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Abstract

In a rapidly urbanized world, coastal cities are key arenas for the challenges encountered by coastal communities in the context of sustainable transformations. Among the landscapes most vulnerable to climate impacts and biodiversity loss, urbanized coastlines see heightened frictions between urban transformation, environmental (in)justice, and the unequal politics of coastal planning. Key habitats that could empower communities to better navigate these challenges—wetlands, lagoons, and coastal lakes—increasingly face threats such as land grabbing, overtourism, and ecosystem degradation. Conversely, practices that conserve these spaces have the potential to foreground blue justice and position urban coastlines as places human and nonhuman life can co-evolve through adaptive, caring, and regenerative relationships. Focusing on Burgas, Bulgaria, and drawing on insights from a series of NGO-led projects and initiatives over the last two decades, this article traces practical experiences with co-creative and empowerment practices from urban coastal wetland conservation. Based on this empirical context, the article argues for a more relational approach to advancing blue justice, empowerment, and co-creation in the urban coastal context.

Keywords

Black Sea; blue justice; co-creation; relational landscapes; urban coastline; urban transformation

1. Introduction

Urban coastlines—host to a rising majority of the world's population (Cosby et al., 2024)—are among the key arenas for climate change and biodiversity loss. In addition to facing increased vulnerability to climatic

impacts like sea level rise or storm events, urbanized coastlines also see heightened frictions between urban transformation, environmental (in)justice, and the unequal politics of coastal planning. These challenges have intensified through the advancement of blue growth and blue economy agendas, which call for increased productivity from maritime and coastal industries like transport, tourism, energy, fisheries, and aquaculture (Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, 2025). While such frameworks are often presented as balancing environmental, social, and economic objectives, they have been widely critiqued for reinforcing neoliberal logics that commodify coastal spaces and prioritize investment-driven development over local ecological relations and life worlds (Biesel, 2026; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020). In this context, critics have called for the better centering of coastal community concerns—including their ecological care practices—in a reformed blue economy (Antonova et al., 2025a; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Pafi et al., 2023). Such accounts have shown that sustainable transformation and transition processes must take communities' needs and practices more centrally into account and emphasize justice and empowerment (Antonova et al., 2025a; Bennett et al., 2021; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020). Yet discussions on empowerment and co-creation for blue transitions still engage only sparingly with the urban context.

In this article, we take a relational landscapes lens to explore the challenges and possibilities for community empowerment on the urban coastline. To do so, we present an empirical account drawing on several decades (1990–present) of co-creation and conservation efforts in and near the city of Burgas on the southern Black Sea coast in Bulgaria. We focus on the conservation and community activism of the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF), an environmental NGO, within the wetland complex of Burgas and especially in the Atanasovsko Lake. As we recount the ways in which BBF's practices have developed over the years, we trace how initiatives aimed at increasing public participation have evolved: from consultation to empowerment through co-creation, eventually considering not only humans but also other species sharing the urban coastline (Arnstein, 1969; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Through this case study, we argue that assemblages of human and nonhuman life should be considered more centrally in questions of blue justice, empowerment, and co-creation—at least in urban coastal contexts.

To signpost the development of co-creative practices in the Burgas context, we refer to different stages of public or community participation. These partially emerge from, but also go beyond, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. Arnstein's (1969) original intervention sought to theorize the gradient of public involvement in decision-making, from non-participation to degrees of citizen power. In recent years, the *how* of involving the public in deliberative governance has been increasingly debated across literatures associated with co-creation, co-production, and participatory action research, all of which have parallel yet separate research traditions (Asenbaum et al., 2025; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Sørensen et al., 2025; Turnhout et al., 2020). In coastal and environmental governance, such approaches have been framed as vital to the success of achieving sustainable and just futures (Biesel, 2026; Muhl et al., 2023). As a result, increased attention has been given to approaches such as community urban gardens (Jacobs & Wiens, 2024; Lin & Egerer, 2020), various forms of aquaculture as care (Uimonen, 2025), or rewilding of urban areas (Jacobs, 2019). In our article, we illustrate how such participatory engagements emerge and evolve, as well as how they can grow to involve both human communities and local species and landscapes.

To argue for the relevance of landscape relations for community empowerment, in this article we draw on urban political ecology and feminist ethics of care. Respectively, these approaches theorize the deeply political ways in which human and nonhuman lives are co-produced across different scales, especially if not

exclusively in the urban context (Acosta et al., 2023; Gandy, 2025); and place focus on the duty and burden of care unevenly placed on socially disadvantaged bodies and forms of life—including nonhuman ones (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). Together, as Sara Jacobs' (2019) work on novel and relational landscapes in the urban environment shows, these insights offer an approach to not only diagnose but also find new configurations for the intricate links between ecological, political, and material. Jacobs illustrates this through accounts of rewilded post-industrial landscapes, in which she demonstrates how human and nonhuman agencies intertwine. For this article, we similarly draw on theories of novel and relational landscapes to show how a range of conservation practices to preserve a coastal wetland and mobilizing a series of co-creative societal approaches to do so can ultimately reframe an urban coastline—in this case Burgas—as a potential source of empowerment for its citizens.

While urban political ecology and feminist ethics of care have only rarely been brought to bear on discussions of the blue economy in the past (see Antonova et al., 2025a; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Uimonen, 2025), we argue that these approaches are uniquely placed to highlight the importance of co-creation and empowerment in these discussions. Especially on the urban coastline, the blue economy agenda's focus on extracting further profitability from maritime and coastal industries can intensify already-present pressures like land grabbing and displacement, overtourism, and ecosystem and landscape degradation (Bennett et al., 2021; Hadjimichael, 2018; Ounanian & Howells, 2024). These dynamics are closely tied to persistent power asymmetries in coastal governance, where dominant institutional and technical forms of knowledge tend to marginalize local, experiential, and relational ways of knowing. In this context, recent calls for more transformative or "deep" forms of knowledge co-production emphasize the need to explicitly address such power relations and to embed diverse, place-based knowledges within decision-making processes (Biesel, 2026; Muhl et al., 2023). These factors are exacerbated by, and in turn themselves exacerbate, the negative impacts of climate change on the urban waterfront.

In this vein, we argue that a more relational look at the blue economy is needed. Urban political ecology has already engaged with issues of green grabbing via urban and tourist development projects advanced by the sustainability agenda (García-Lamarca et al., 2022)—a lens that can usefully inform patterns of coastal displacement (Ounanian & Howells, 2024). Similarly, literature on feminist ethics of care has already done much to position landscapes as sites of relation in which social power must be taken into equal consideration (Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). These insights dovetail well with calls to embed co-creation and justice perspectives more centrally into not only blue governance but also conservation practices (Bennett et al., 2021; Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022). In this article, as we trace efforts to foreground community-based pathways to conservation, inclusive governance, and co-creation in the urban context of Burgas and its surrounding coastal wetlands, we weave together these strands. We show how these activities have framed Burgas as a relational landscape in which the urban–rural–coastal and human and more-than-human life can coexist—offering an alternative, thriving, and just blue economy.

Our article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we briefly outline our methods, materials, and positionality. In Section 3, we introduce the empirical context of Burgas' urban coastline and its wetland complex, alongside the ecological and societal challenges faced by this landscape in a time of blue growth. We then trace BBF's conservation efforts in this context, especially with respect to Atanasovsko Lake (Section 4). Over the years, as we will show, BBF's conservation-related activities gradually introduced ever-more advanced modes of citizen participation and deliberation. To better illustrate this, we review BBF's activities

across several different themes: the promotion of civic stewardship through public councils (Subsection 4.1), the strengthening of local ecological and environmental knowledge through a variety of public-facing initiatives (Subsection 4.2), and finally, BBF's most recent efforts to grapple with empowerment and co-creation (Subsection 4.3). Both conceptually and temporally, these themes build on each other, although many activities also overlap in time. In Section 5, we relate these experiences to political ecology and feminist ethics of care literature, discuss the lessons learned, and conclude by arguing that experimental landscape practices can emerge from conservation efforts that help advance a relational understanding in the urban fabric.

2. Methods, Materials, and Positionality

For this article, we draw predominantly on a broad-ranging document analysis featuring BBF's own archive, municipal and regional policy documents, media reports, and white papers published about the Burgas region. Our interpretation is further informed by semi-structured interviews, Q-sorts, and participant observation conducted in Burgas by Antonova over three years, between 2022 and 2025, as part of a joint Horizon Europe project in which both authors participated (Flannery et al., 2023). Finally, our analysis also draws on previous research in the Burgas context from 2015 onward (Antonova, 2021).

As co-authors, we represent, respectively, an expert employed by BBF and a researcher who has collaborated closely with BBF from a joint 2022–2025 project onward. Both of us, however, have joined or started collaborating with the NGO no earlier than 2019. In this sense, we inhabit a dual insider–outsider perspective with respect to BBF's activities in the Burgas region over the previous decades. Our positionality inevitably informs our analysis. At the same time, it also enables us to report and reflect on perspectives that would not otherwise be evident. In this sense, we see our analysis for this article as a reflective practice that follows ideas of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

3. The Context: Burgas and the Coastal Lakes

Located on the westernmost shore of the Black Sea, Burgas is Bulgaria's fourth-largest city and the country's second-largest seaport. The city occupies a distinctive coastal landscape shaped by the presence of three major wetlands that frame its urban territory: Atanasovsko Lake to the north, Lake Vaya to the west, and Mandra Lake to the south (Figure 1). Together with Pomoriisko Lake further to the north they form the Burgas wetland complex—a significant ecological zone. The lakes serve as critical stopover sites along the *Via Pontica* bird migratory corridor—Europe's second-largest bird migration route—making the area a biodiversity hotspot of continental importance. Atanasovsko Lake, in particular, hosts a wealth of migratory and resident bird species (334 registered species) while also sustaining the historically significant salt extraction that continues to operate as the last active sea–salt production site along the Bulgarian seashore.

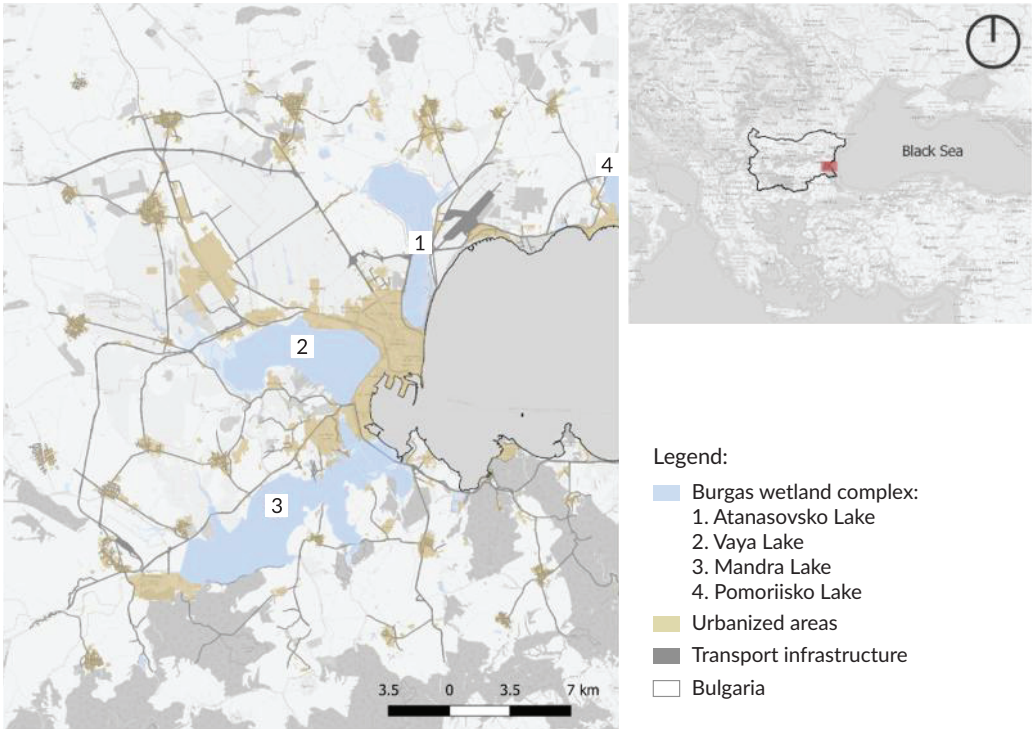

Figure 1. Map of Burgas and the lakes.

Yet the significant ecosystems of the Burgas lakes face pressures from urban transformation. Over the past decades, urban expansion has progressively approached the boundaries of these wetlands, generating tensions between development imperatives and environmental protection. In the case of Atanasovsko Lake (Figure 2), expanding residential and infrastructural development has altered hydrological dynamics through

Figure 2. Aerial view over the Atanasovsko Lake (front) and the Black Sea (back) toward Burgas. Source: Uzunov (2021).

increased runoff from surrounding buildings and road infrastructure, placing additional strain on both the wetland ecosystem and the viability of traditional salt-production practices (BBF, 2018b). With tourism rising to become the coastline's leading industry, frontline land has become increasingly valuable (Antonova, 2025), raising further concerns about land grabbing around the Atanasovsko Lake. At the same time, the lake's broader ecological functions—such as buffering storm surges, mitigating flood risks, and regulating microclimatic conditions—remain insufficiently recognized in public discourse and urban planning narratives.

The governance of the Burgas coastal landscape reflects these tensions. As the fourth-largest city in Bulgaria and a rapidly developing industrial and tourism center, Burgas has experienced sustained economic growth and infrastructural expansion. Over the past 15 years, the municipality's administrative territory has expanded through the incorporation of nearby villages as satellite districts. These administrative transitions have been accompanied by visible landscape transformations, including the construction of new transport infrastructure, residential zones, and industrial developments (Burgas Municipality, 2011). From the perspective of local governance, the vast coastal wetlands have often been perceived as spatial constraints that limit opportunities for economic growth and urban expansion. Many recent urban planning initiatives have treated Burgas' protected areas (particularly those designated under the Natura 2000 framework) as sites for further urban expansion rather than as integral components of a broader resilient landscape system. This dynamic has been exacerbated by recently introduced ambitions to transform the city into a "blue growth center" (Burgas Municipality, 2021) and a tourism hub. In pursuit of these goals, the municipality plans various infrastructure that either bridges or presses against the lakes. For example, a high-traffic Black Sea highway is planned to cross over Vaya Lake and skirt Atanasovsko Lake (Burgas Municipality, 2022); similarly, an old utility train line running between Atanasovsko Lake and the Black Sea is projected for an upgrade to a high-speed railway between Burgas and its airport (Tzanova, 2024). Such infrastructural projects form an integral part of the city's blue growth vision but will put further pressure on the lake ecosystems.

Scholars have characterized this trajectory of urban development in Burgas as indicative of a fragmented planning process dominated by investment-driven logics and a lack of long-term ecological vision (Directorate-General for the Environment, 2017; Simeonova & van der Valk, 2016). These developmental patterns have been largely influenced by the changing regimes of economic, political, and socio-ecological thought on the Bulgarian coastline (Antonova, 2025). As a result, local planning practices in recent decades have often insufficiently integrated ecological expertise, resulting in governance approaches that struggle to address the interconnected dynamics of urbanization, biodiversity conservation, and landscape resilience (Simeonova & van der Valk, 2016).

Within this context, the Burgas wetland complex emerges as a critical site where competing imaginaries of urban development, conservation, and community engagement intersect. This is particularly evident in the Atanasovsko Lake, where ongoing salt production creates a series of benefits for both the ecosystem (multiple microenvironments and thus increased biodiversity and nesting habitat enabled by the dyke systems; BBF, 2018b) and the city (salt extraction in the lake was originally advanced in the 20th century as a form of malaria control; Antonova, 2025). These dynamics provide a revealing entry point for examining how coastal urban environments can be re-imagined through participatory conservation practices and locally grounded experiments in blue justice.

4. Participatory Conservation: From Public Councils to Empowerment and Co-Creation

Over the past three decades, conservation initiatives led by the NGO sector (including BBF) have gradually transformed the relationship between the city of Burgas and its surrounding wetlands. Rather than treating the wetland complex solely as a protected ecological site and an obstruction to development, these initiatives have increasingly foregrounded the role of communities in shaping conservation outcomes and sought to advance community participation in wetland conservation. This marked a significant difference from environmental governance pre-1989, which was overwhelmingly top-down and opaque (Baumgartl, 1993). Indeed, as the democratization of environmental management on a state level remained flawed throughout the 1990s (Cellarius & Staddon, 2002; Georgieva, 1993), with public hearings the most common approach for stakeholder engagement applied by formal institutions (Almer & Koontz, 2004, as cited in Simeonova & van der Valk, 2016), these NGO-led efforts in Burgas were innovative and advanced for their time and context. Seen in Arnstein's (1969, p. 217) terms and in the light of Sørensen et al.'s (2025, p. 4) stepping stones framework, BBF's efforts sequentially advanced ideas of public consultation, participation, and ultimately empowerment and co-creation. As we will show, these efforts did not always result in lasting governance outcomes. However, as we will also demonstrate, there emerged a gradually growing understanding of landscape relations as a function of care—a perspective that eventually helped ground co-creation for the coastal wetlands better into local governance.

4.1. Civic Environmental Stewardship

From the late 1990s onward, a key mechanism BBF used to facilitate civil participation in the Atanasovsko Lake's conservation was its establishment of public councils as consultative platforms for stakeholder dialogue. These councils bring together actors with diverse expertise, institutional roles, and interested perspectives in the management and use of the wetland landscape, thereby creating an interface between formal governance structures and civic actors.

The first of these platforms focused predominantly on cross-institutional dialogue. The so-called Regional Forum "The Bourgas Wetlands—Protection and Reasonable Use," introduced by BBF through a project (1998–2003) funded under the Bulgarian–Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme, was established with the aim to enhance cooperation and dialogue among institutions and organizations involved in the Burgas region's wetland management (Tzenova, 2010). Through the involvement of environmental NGOs alongside the formal government institutions, this first iteration elevated conservation governance from the "nonparticipation" status quo evident during socialism and the early 1990s to a stage of consultation—but not yet active citizen participation in a structural way (Arnstein, 1969).

At the same time, more active forms of participation occurred informally, largely motivated by practices of care for the environment. During the same period—the late 1990s through early 2000s—ornithological and conservation experts often worked pro bono to record and supply ecological information about sensitive species to the institutions participating in the Regional Forum (interviews with Antonova, 2023). Similarly, much of the collaborative work between the institutions sitting on the Forum relied on the invisible and frequently largely informal and extracurricular work of individuals within them (Antonova, 2024). These kinds of informal practices, and their exclusion from the formal Forum, illustrate feminist ethics of care analyses in two directions. On the one hand, they emphasize how environmental care often relies on

practices rendered invisible to formal structures (de la Bellacasa, 2017)—including ones intended to elevate participation. On the other hand, they demonstrate the vital function of care work as a form of maintenance for the relations between humans and nonhumans (de la Bellacasa, 2017)—even given an existing management arrangement.

Some of these less formal constituents were included in the second iteration of the public consultation mechanism developed by BBF: the Public Council for Atanasovsko Lake, which was formally established in 2013 with the support of several conservation projects funded by the EU's LIFE Programme (BBF, 2018a, 2018b; BBF, 2024a, 2024b). Unlike the Regional Forum that preceded it, the Public Council systemically invited a wider range of stakeholders: not only experts from local and national institutions, but also researchers, protected area managers, representatives of sectoral associations such as farmers, hunters, teachers, entrepreneurs, and business owners, as well as community leaders and active citizens. The precise composition of the council has been flexible and can be adapted depending on the specific issue under discussion, allowing relevant stakeholders to participate when particular management or development questions arise. Overall, this second iteration of the council operates as an advisory body, facilitating dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the articulation of stakeholder perspectives on management issues related to the Atanasovsko Lake protected area.

Although the Public Council for Atanasovsko Lake has gradually evolved into an important discussion platform for problem-framing and building shared understanding and responsibility for the wetland landscape, it still faces significant institutional limitations. Most notably, whether the deliberative outcomes emerging from the Public Council translate into action or remain aspirational depends on the willingness of formal decision-making bodies to incorporate them. This highlights the council's dual role as both an enabling infrastructure for civic environmental stewardship and a constrained mechanism within established governance hierarchies.

One example that illustrates this tension comes from 2019, when the Public Council hosted a series of structured participatory activities aimed at developing a shared vision of the broader area (BBF, 2019). Through focus groups and participatory mapping, stakeholders explored spatial relations between the lake, its watershed, and surrounding urban and peri-urban areas. In this way, they moved towards building a common understanding for an integrated territorial perspective. This process extended beyond consultation, testing new ways of producing spatial knowledge collectively and linking it to possible governance visions. The outcome of the process, combined with phenomenological study and design iteration, led to an alternative landscape vision of Atanasovsko Lake as a blue–green corridor—informed by ideas of blue–green infrastructure (Ghofrani et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2024)—which was presented to the Council for refinement in 2021 (BBF, 2024b).

However, despite the excitement of many on the Council, the visions for establishing green-blue corridors around Atanasovsko Lake remain unrealized. A possible explanation for this may lie in the timing and structure of participant involvement across the process. While stakeholders were engaged at the outset (through participatory mapping during the research phase) and again at the conclusion (during refinement/feedback), they were not consistently involved during the development phase in between. This discontinuity may have reduced ownership of the outcomes and contributed to limited uptake by both local institutions (such as the municipality) and the wider community. Whereas the original discussions envisioned

including the principles of blue–green infrastructure into the Integrated Development of Burgas Municipality (BBF, 2024b), in the final version of the latter, these ideas were not taken up in a systematic way (Burgas Municipality, 2021), although the municipality itself regularly participates in the Public Council for Atanasovsko Lake.

From a political ecology perspective, this example demonstrates the distance that sometimes exists between the intention behind participatory or at least consultative approaches like the Public Council and the actual functioning of both relational and institutional power when it comes to environmental governance (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018). Relational power, in which individuals and informal patterns of communication influence each other, clearly exists through the Council—as evidenced by the adoption of some blue–green infrastructure principles in the Sarafovo park despite their absence from the municipality's overarching structural development guidelines. Yet overall, although the Public Council has introduced and championed various participatory practices for conservation management over the years, its power to influence *institutional power* directly remains limited.

4.2. Building Ecological Knowledge

From the 2010s onward, strengthening ecological knowledge and encouraging active public participation in the care of the wetland landscape gained an increasingly central place in BBF's conservation work for the Atanasovsko Lake. A wide range of interpretative, educational, and community-based initiatives were designed to connect citizens more closely with the Burgas area's ecological and cultural values. Aligned with theorizations that knowledge is vital to community empowerment in marine governance (McAteer & Flannery, 2022), BBF sought to use educational activities as a means of increasing community participation in the Burgas lake(s) management over time. Crucially, however, these efforts also deliberately sought to foreground the lake's role in social life. Echoing the ecological understanding of novel landscapes as products of human intervention (Jacobs, 2019), BBF's various activities in this category emphasized the Atanasovsko Lake's very human history and the social health, economic, and ecosystemic benefits produced by the lake's early 1900s conversion into a salt-producing basin.

Between 2012 and 2023, the annual Salt Festival emerged as a prominent forum for this engagement (BBF, 2018a, 2024a). Dedicated to the ecosystem services provided by Atanasovsko Lake and the cultural heritage of traditional salt production, the festival served as a meeting point for artists, scientists, conservation practitioners, and residents, bringing visitors closer to the salt pans and the distinctive pink waters of the lagoon. Through creative workshops, demonstrations, storytelling, artistic performances, and guided activities, the festival gave a platform for local creatives and visitors to explore and recreate the relationships between nature, culture, and community.

Interpretation and alternative education practices have also formed a core component of these efforts. The interactive exhibition symBiotic (2017) introduced new ways of experiencing the wetland landscape through its shapes, colors, and materials (BBF, 2018a; Figure 3). Initially conceived as a travelling exhibition, it later settled in one of the restored salt workers' barracks on the shore of the lake, where it functioned as a creative interpretation space hosting events and educational activities until the structure was destroyed by a storm in 2024. By engaging multiple senses—allowing visitors to see, hear, touch, and even taste elements of the salt ecosystem—the exhibition presented the story of Atanasovsko Lake and its salt production traditions

in an accessible and immersive way. Through this focus, symBiotic also exemplified how the lake can be presented as a relational landscape (Jacobs, 2019), in which the local community and the wetland continuously shape(d) each other over time.

Figure 3. Fragments of the symBiotic exhibition. Source: Pavlova (2017).

Alongside symBiotic, BBF unfolded a series of environmental education activities that, through weaving together creative, cultural, and ecological elements, further used knowledge to advance a relational landscape perspective. This has been particularly evident when it comes to younger audiences. Outdoor educational programmes along the Avocet Trail—an interpretive route developed around the lake in 2015 (BBF, 2018a)—combine guided birdwatching, storytelling, and a learning-through-play approach to introduce children to the ecological processes of the salt lagoon ecosystem. Complementary initiatives include interactive guided tours such as the Pelican Walk (Figure 4), where a life-sized pelican puppet created and performed by a local artist accompanies children along the lake dikes while introducing them to wetland

Figure 4. The Pelican Walk, performed in 2022 by a local puppeteer and master puppet artisan. Source: Tzenova (2021).

habitats and species. BBF also pioneered narrative-based conservation through the children's play *Protecting the Burgas Lakes* (BBF, 2023), performed by local students since 2013, which uses storytelling to highlight what threats wetland species face, as well as the role of volunteers in conservation. Similarly, the annual Biodiversity Carnival engages children from Burgas kindergartens in costume-making workshops and parades celebrating native plants and animals, transforming conservation messages into a playful and visible public event.

These kinds of activities for children particularly showcase how relational perspectives, a focus on landscape care (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024), and advancing community participation can come together through the advancement of educational knowledge. Most of BBF's educational activities aimed at helping local communities understand their own links to the Atanasovsko and other lakes as a "stepping stone" (Sørensen et al., 2025) towards taking a more active role in their conservation. These efforts were not constrained to children. Educational initiatives have also targeted university students and future environmental professionals. A dedicated wetland management curriculum developed within these projects has been integrated into courses at the Burgas State University and the University of Plovdiv, combining theoretical training with practical field modules focused on the management of coastal wetlands (BBF, 2024a). Finally, these educational and cultural initiatives have also been complemented by volunteer actions. Regular clean-up actions along the Avocet Trail bring together residents and nature enthusiasts to maintain the visitor infrastructure and surrounding habitats, often combined with birdwatching sessions and informal social gatherings. Aiming to generate a sense of community and care capacity, these activities have created many opportunities for repeated encounters with the wetland ecosystem, gradually transforming environmental awareness into practices of informal stewardship.

In different ways, all these various educational activities worked toward increasing citizen participation and power in conservation via ecological knowledge (McAteer & Flannery, 2022). However, as in the case of the Public Council described in the previous subsection, from a critical political ecology lens, their overall success in impacting institutional rather than relational power (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018) can be questioned. Activities like the salt festival, the symBiotic interactive exhibition, or the Pelican Walk were all implemented via contemporaneous funding initiatives. Once each respective project ended, BBF faced challenges with sustaining these initiatives in the long-term, particularly after the storm surge flooding destroyed the salt workers' barracks where many of these activities had been hosted. As others have argued (Solnør et al., 2025), the time-limited, project-based funding model on which many NGO organizations are reliant works against efforts to maintain long-term co-productive practices. Thus, efforts to sustain such practices often fall back onto undervalued work of care (de la Bellacasa, 2017). Nevertheless, over time—as the next subsection will demonstrate—these ideas can influence more genuinely sustainable forms of inclusive governance.

4.3. Experimental Landscapes as Emergent Relational Practices

Many of the initiatives described above were initially developed as educational, cultural, or conservation-oriented. However, several of them gradually evolved into more open-ended and explorative practices. Rather than emerging from a predefined strategy, endeavors like symBiotic interpretation space or the Avocet Trail educational programs in many cases developed organically, in response to opportunities and collaborations with diverse actors, in turn enabled through the creative reinterpretation of the wetland landscape. Thus, the

landscape experimentation and relational perspective that feminist ethics of care promote (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024) appeared in BBF's conservation practices not as a distinct phase, but rather as an extension of earlier engagement activities through which the NGO sought to find new ways of relating to, representing, and intervening in the wetland landscape.

Taking up BBF's pre-established co-creational conservation practices, the three-year Horizon Europe-funded project EmpowerUs (2022–2025) focused on building further towards "empowerment": building on Avelino's (2017) work on power in transition processes, and defined further as the desire to "better position local communities to exercise greater control over their natural, social and economic development" (Flannery et al., 2023, p. 3). With Burgas forming one of six so-called transition coastal labs, for which BBF served as the host, the project explicitly sought to shift the focus from conservation as a separate activity to a focal point for overarching social and ecological transitions in the Burgas context. Whereas BBF's preceding activities had helped citizens *experience*, *build awareness*, and *care for* the wetland environment, these new efforts tested whether centering community-led environmental practices could enable a more sustainable and socially just transition (Antonova et al., 2025a; Sørensen et al., 2025). Unlike BBF's preceding (more targeted) interventions, this process was deliberately intended as an experimental and exploratory exercise in co-creation (see Bjørkan et al., in press, for further details on the overarching project).

Several factors enabled better success for BBF's co-creative practices at this stage. The focus on empowerment for just transition helped BBF reach out to a wider range of stakeholders, debate both societal and environmental challenges, and address the wider Burgas Bay coastline as opposed to only the Atanasovsko Lake. This, in turn, enabled a wider relational lens on Burgas, its lakes, and the sea. Finally, municipal representatives were actively involved as participants alongside other active stakeholders from the beginning. Thus, unlike the earlier Public Council process and the green–blue corridor initiative, which faced limited institutional uptake, the EmpowerUs process succeeded in initiating two initiatives that were adopted more directly by the municipality. First, BBF co-created a strategic vision with community stakeholders entitled Burgas on Three Lakes and One Sea (Antonova et al., 2025b), intended as an evolving multi-layered framework for building stronger links between Burgas and its lakes. This vision was taken up in the municipality's bid for European City of Culture in 2032, helping to embed the lakes as a cultural asset for the city rather than "only" an ecological one. Second, as part of this wider vision, BBF connected with cycling activists eager to advance sustainable mobility and recreational opportunities in and around Burgas and its lakes. This initiative, too, was adopted by the municipality through the creation of a dedicated cycling working group at the municipal level.

Scholars working with feminist ethics of care theorize the nestling scales of care in a landscape: from individual action and embodied care to community practice to institutional or politically organized care (Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). BBF's experience with the EmpowerUs project provides an empirical illustration of how environmental care can in some cases scale up through these nestled levels. In the cycling example, individual activist efforts became embedded in community-level discussions of care for the wider Burgas Bay, anchored in concern with better connecting the city with its lakes and coastal environment. These community-level discussions then led to practices—cycling events, demonstrations, and educational gatherings—that were in turn adopted at least partially by the municipality via the working group. Similarly, the adoption of the Burgas on Three Lakes and One Sea concept for the Burgas European City of Culture 2032 bid demonstrates how individual and community practices of care can eventually scale up—at least partially—to the local governance level.

Moreover, these experiences contribute an important perspective to discussions on co-creation on the coast—namely, the key role and agency of the landscape itself. Whereas the contemporary scholarly debates increasingly recognize the significance of participatory and deliberative governance for sustainable and just futures (Biesel, 2026; Muhl et al., 2023), they often focus predominantly on human activity and agency (Lin & Egerer, 2020; Uimonen, 2025). As the Burgas context demonstrates, however, the specificity of the local landscape and its needs suggest the need to consider co-creation as a process *involving*, rather than just *occurring on* the coastline. Here, the lakes surrounding Burgas hold an active role. Beyond geography, the lakes constitute an active heritage that informs and shapes cultural practices that enable the scaling up of co-creation and care. Burgas' key wetland habitats like lagoons, coastal lakes, and marshes can hence be framed as assets to both societal transformations and urban development. Thus, where novel and relational landscape theory highlights the significance of intertwined human and nonhuman agency (Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024), our example shows how these links can potentially strengthen co-creation and thus inclusive governance.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we traced BBF's experiences in Burgas as a case study for how co-creation, conservation, and relational practices of landscape care can intertwine on an urban coastline. Examples like the NGO's community-engaging, collaborative educational activities (symBiotic, the Pelikan Walk, the children's play, etc.) illustrate that participation can evolve over time and shift towards more active forms of reimagining and reconfiguring the landscape. From the introduction of the Public Council to the strategic use of ecological knowledge to spur community stewardship to co-created strategic visions like Burgas on Three Lakes and One Sea, Burgas' case suggests that inclusive experimentation in the landscape can emerge gradually, reflecting the evolving relationships between communities, institutions, and coastal ecosystems. In this sense, BBF's activities over time can be mapped at least partially along both Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation and Sørensen et al.'s (2025) "stepping stones" model of building partnership in community-led governance transitions.

As we have demonstrated, the extent to which such practices successfully advance inclusion varies. Especially in its earlier efforts with the Public Council or with advancing ecological knowledge, BBF did not always manage to scale its activities up to the governance level. From an urban political ecology and relational landscape perspective, these failures to scale up reiterate how care work frequently remains outside of institutional arrangements—and the inclusive potential of relational practices remains at the level of individual or community-level effort (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024). This experience therefore speaks to the limitations of co-creative efforts when they come from the civil sector.

Nevertheless, BBF's experience also demonstrates how, over time, such efforts can grow into iterative knowledge sharing and trust-building with the local community (Sørensen et al., 2025), which in turn can translate to more genuine forms of inclusive governance. In the example of Burgas, the lakes and especially Atanasovsko Lake played an important anchoring role that enabled this transition. When framed as matters of environmental and societal justice, BBF's efforts to conserve the Atanasovsko Lake enabled a more explicitly relational and situated form of engagement. As environmental justice, lived experience, and place-based knowledge came further to the forefront, a wider network of constituents, including the local municipality, showed interest in BBF's conservation activities. In short, BBF's wetland conservation in

Burgas underwent a conceptual transformation: from a practice initially apart from urban and social life (and indeed often seen in opposition to it) to a foundational engagement through which more structured, inclusive, and future-oriented forms of coastal governance could begin to take shape. These findings resonate with calls for more transformative or "deep" forms of knowledge co-production, which emphasize iterative learning, the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing, and the need to address power asymmetries in governance processes (Muhl et al., 2023).

It is important to observe the limitation that BBF's activities remain relatively small-scale, especially in the context of a rapidly changing coastline placed under ongoing blue growth pressures (Antonova, 2025). Nevertheless, BBF's experience in Burgas also reflects the evolving global understanding of the importance of community involvement in biodiversity conservation from the 1990s onward (Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022). As an organization whose work in the Burgas region was initially established through Bulgarian-Swiss developmental funding and later supported by a series of EU environmental and research grants, BBF has always been in dialogue with the modes and expectations of nature conservation advanced at a supranational level. Still, as in other cases where community practices are framed as potentially central to a more sustainable blue economy (Antonova et al., 2025a; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Uimonen, 2025), scaling up such practices beyond the local context to a regional, national, or supranational scale remains challenging.

Even so, the case we have illustrated offers some insights into the advancement of inclusive governance through relational and care practices beyond the specific Burgas landscape. From a governance perspective, BBF's conservation activities illustrate some of the challenges and successes with advancing co-creation over time—without the pitfalls of the legitimacy paradox often faced by conservation initiatives (Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022). Moreover, the Burgas case demonstrates that relatively experimental and creative practices that center the landscape *can* eventually be taken up as strategic assets by local governance actors—as in the case of the Burgas on Three Lakes and One Sea vision and its adoption by the local municipality.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Burgas case study shows that the relational landscape and care literature emerging from urban political ecology (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Jacobs, 2019; Jacobs & Wiens, 2024) can help mobilize "empowerment" also as a relationship between human and nonhuman actors—an important and often overlooked aspect of the blue justice dimension. In a range of blue economy and blue growth discourses—including in the wider Burgas context—the environment and the local community's relation and care towards it are often left behind (Antonova et al., 2025a; Bennett et al., 2021). As scholars, practitioners, and policymakers become more aware of blue justice perspectives and turn more of their attention to co-creative and inclusive practices of coastal governance, these perspectives will become ever more important. The politics of who gets involved, whose care gets considered, and whose relations to the landscape matter are at the heart of blue justice. Taking seriously existing examples of productive and co-creative urban conservation practices can only aid these discourses in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

Gloriya Marinova is employed by BBF. Both Anna Antonova and Gloriya Marinova have been involved in some of the activities described in this article as part of the EmpowerUs project. However, these connections inform their positionality as outlined above and do not constitute a conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data on BBF's activities is available via reports on its website, https://biodiversity.bg/en, and the website of its Burgas activities, Lagoon of Life: https://lagoon.biodiversity.bg

LLMs Disclosure

Limited LLM assistance (ChatGPT) was utilized in early drafts of some sections in this article for grammar checks and wording. The authors have critically evaluated and revised all text after LLM use.

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