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“It Is a Total Drama”: Land Use Conflicts in Local Land Use Actors’ Experience

Meike Fienitz * and Rosemarie Siebert

Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research, Eberswalder Straße 84, 15374 Müncheberg, Germany; rsiebert@zalf.de

* Correspondence: meike.fienitz@zalf.de

Abstract: As land is limited, conflicts between land uses, and, consequently, conflicts between land users about land use inevitably arise. However, how these land use conflicts affect local land use actors has remained underexplored. The objective of this paper is to provide a broad, cross-sectoral overview of land use conflicts as perceived by local land use actors and to explore the actors’ experiences with these conflicts. We conducted 32 semistructured interviews with key land use actors (mayors, local agencies, interest groups, local boards, businesses) in the urban-rural fringe region of Schwerin, Germany. We then applied a qualitative text analysis to identify the region’s most relevant conflicts across all land use sectors (agriculture, settlement, infrastructure, forestry, conservation, tourism, industry, etc.) and their impacts on local actors’ daily experiences. The results show that local actors are aware of many diverse land use conflicts, most frequently regarding land uses for housing, environmental/species conservation, and traffic. Moreover, local actors report these conflicts as relevant to their daily work, and many perceive the conflicts as a strain. Conflicts impede land management processes; they tie up resources, are often perceived as complex, and can be experienced as highly stressful—as summed up in an interviewee’s conclusion: “It is a total drama”. Thus, land use conflicts play an important and mostly negative role in the experiences of land use actors. These findings fill current gaps in the literature on land use conflicts regarding the types of conflicts about which actors are aware and the consequences of these conflicts. The results also underline the relevance of addressing conflicts in land use planning and governance, the need for appropriate conflict management, and the necessity of providing local actors with sufficient resources to deal with land use conflicts. The paper further identifies some starting points so conflicts can enhance rather than impede communal life in rural areas.

Keywords: conflict issues; conflict perception; land use dispute; stakeholder perspective; practice actors; conflict management



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1. Introduction

In a world where land is limited, yet land use demands are diverse and often contradictory [1–4], conflicts between land uses, and, consequently, conflicts between land users about land use will inevitably arise. These conflicts are usually referred to as land use conflicts [5]. Land use conflicts impact how people in rural areas live and work with each other; they have been identified as a major issue in land use planning [1,6], and their successful management has been called “crucial” [7]. Monitoring and better understanding land use conflicts are therefore relevant issues in rural development, and consequently, a comprehensive research field has developed.

However, despite their widely recognized relevance, research has only recently started to explore the consequences of land use conflicts, and the corresponding body of literature is still relatively small. While some authors analysed the environmental impacts of land use conflicts (i.e., [8–10]), others addressed their socioeconomic effects. In this endeavour, Peerzado et al. found that land use conflicts can cause social, cultural, and economic

instability [11]. Abegunde et al., Sabir and Torre and, as an early example, Schueler et al. discovered significant negative consequences for local livelihoods [12–14]. Magsi et al. additionally found displacement of local populations [15]. Interestingly, Ooi et al. revealed a positive effect of land use conflicts, finding that they can boost the development of social capital [16].

The perspective of local actors on land use conflicts, and thus of those who are most immediately affected, has, however, rarely been included in studies of the consequences of land use conflicts. Thus, the role that land use conflicts play in the daily experience of local land use actors (understood as any actors involved in land use, thus land users and land use decision-makers) needs to be further explored. Are they aware of land use conflicts or is the topic mainly academic? Do they perceive land use conflicts as a strain that impedes their work, or are such conflicts seen as a routine part of land use activities? More knowledge regarding these issues can better inform conflict management, which could provide support for local actors to handle conflicts if needed. Within the general conflict research, authors have emphasized that, despite the positive social functions of conflicts [17], they often have a negative effect on the involved individuals. Conflicts can reduce work performance [18] and cause delays [19]. Moreover, conflicts place considerable strain on the involved individuals and can cause reduced satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, low motivation, tension, and negative physical reactions [20–22]. Lai et al. provide pioneering work in the land use conflict research field, demonstrating that conflicts about unconventional gas development have led to processes of psychological stress among residents of rural areas in Australia [23]. Similarly, Yasmi et al. report that forest conflicts in Southeast Asia caused fear and anxiety, created distrust and social division, and induced high costs on local community members, although occasionally such conflicts also had a positive effect through their strengthening of collective action [24]. Nevertheless, affected actors' perception of land use conflicts across land use sectors and the sum effect of these conflicts on their daily experience remain underexplored.

Moreover, few broad, cross-sectoral accounts of land use conflicts exist. Most studies report on conflicts within one land use sector (i.e., Darly and Torre on conflicts over farmland uses [25], Kienast et al. on conflicts around renewable energy production [26], Hjalager on conflicts in coastal tourism [27]) or between a limited set of actors (i.e., Farstad and Rye on conflicts between second-home owners and local populations [28]). While providing valuable insights, these approaches do not allow us to compare conflicts across sectors. Despite some notable exceptions [5,29], we still have few indications of which land use sectors are most commonly subject to conflicts or which kinds of conflicts are particularly frequent. Since local land use actors are those who are immediately affected by land use conflicts, understanding which conflicts they frequently encounter is of special importance. Such knowledge could help to adequately allocate scarce resources for conflict management and to prioritize future research efforts.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to provide a cross-sectoral overview of land use conflicts as reported by local land use actors and to explore the actors' experience with these conflicts. The following research questions are raised:

- (1) Which land use conflicts do local land use actors report?
- (2) What role do these conflicts play in local land use actors' experience?

To answer these questions, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of land use conflicts across all land use sectors (agriculture, settlement, infrastructure, forestry, conservation, tourism, industry, etc.) from land use actors' perceptions in the region surrounding the city of Schwerin in Northern Germany. We first present the land use conflicts in the study region that were reported by the land use actors, elaborating on their characteristics, and then analyse the actors' experience with these conflicts, also discussing the implications for land use planning and governance.

2. Materials and Methods

This section describes the study region and the methods of data collection and analysis. It provides details about the stakeholder analysis that served to identify relevant land use actors of the study region and about the interviews that were conducted with these actors. A qualitative text analysis was used to analyse the data, which is also presented in detail in this section. For an overview of the methods, see Figure 1.

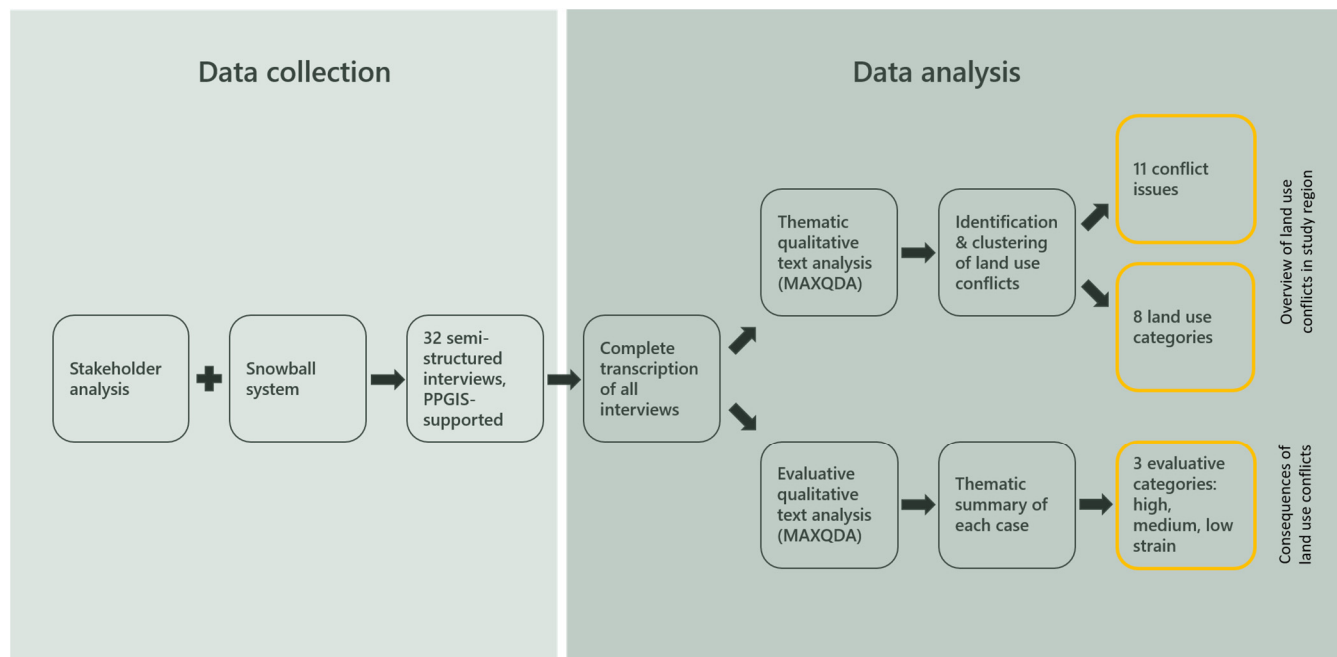


Figure 1. Methodology overview. The diagram displays the steps in the methodology.

2.1. Study Region

Schwerin is a medium-sized city of roughly 95,000 inhabitants in Northern Germany [30]. It is located in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the least-densely populated state of Germany with 69 inhabitants per square kilometre [31]. In terms of the natural environment, the city of Schwerin is located in the Schwerin Lakeland area, which was shaped during the ice age and comprises numerous lakes, the largest of which is Schwerin Lake with a surface of 63 km². The region north of the city is predominantly used for arable farming, while the region to the south, with its less fertile soils, features forests and military land uses. The region around Schwerin also comprises several wetlands, which mostly serve as pastures [32]. The study region comprised the city of Schwerin, its direct fringe, and the surrounding area of a strong rural character, with a focus on the fringe (see Figure 2: Location of the study region and Figure 3: Study region). Urban-rural fringes are a specific type of rural area because their spatial proximity to a city causes them to combine land uses and features that are often seen as typically rural—such as agriculture, forestry, and a village structure—with land uses that are perceived as urban, such as a high density of infrastructure and housing demand. Due to the resulting multifunctionality and complex actor constellations, urban-rural fringes have been shown to be especially prone to land use conflicts and are therefore ideal study areas for the topic [5,33,34]. The region was deemed particularly suitable because the transition from urban to rural areas occurs within a relatively compact area, intensifying multifunctionality and, thus, conflict potential.

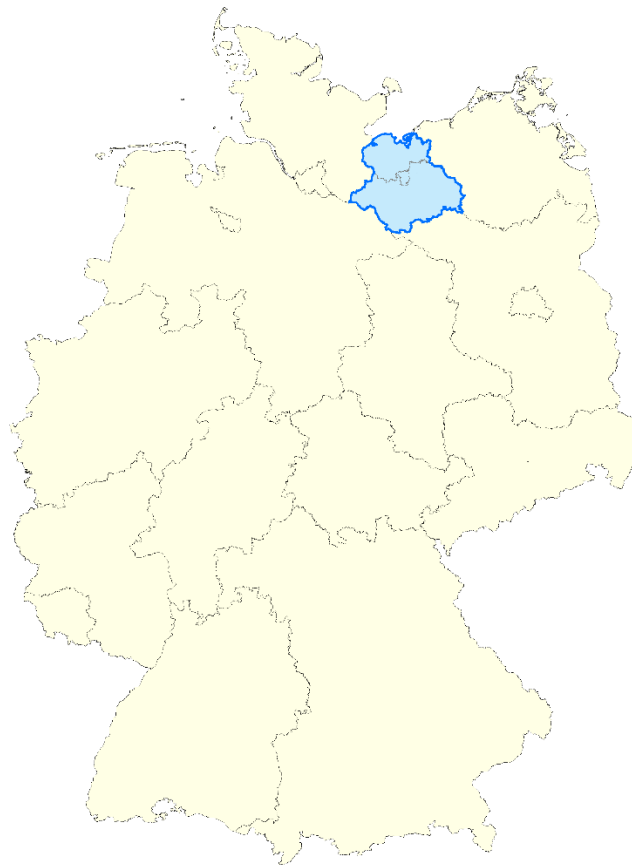


Figure 2. Location of the study region. The location of the study region within Germany is marked by the blue area. Copyright by Amt für Raumordnung und Landesplanung Westmecklenburg.

After the German reunification, the city of Schwerin experienced a pronounced loss of inhabitants, while communities in its fringe region rapidly grew. Although the city is once again growing in numbers, new housing developments in the fringe remain controversial, not least because of the implied consumption of agricultural land. Finding ecological compensation areas for construction projects (necessary due to German planning law regulations, see also [35]), ideally in proximity to the city, has become an additional problem that regularly causes land use conflicts. Since Schwerin is located next to several lakes, outdoor recreation and tourism are important for the region, but are frequently in conflict with environmental conservation interests. Furthermore, the construction of wind turbines or agricultural facilities is repeatedly met with resistance from the local population in communities in the fringe and beyond. Thus, local land use actors operate in a system of manifold and often contradictory land use interests.

These diverging land use interests cause spatial conflicts between land uses because land is limited [36,37], land uses are often mutually exclusive [38], and therefore compete with each other for land [39]. Another common cause for spatial conflicts is that neighbouring land uses negatively impact each other due to spill-over effects [40]. Especially in multifunctional regions this is a frequent issue when, for example, animal farming causes odour that diminishes the quality of life in nearby residential areas. As a consequence of such spatial conflicts between land uses, social conflicts can occur between land users because they have diverging land use preferences [41,42]. The main reasons for diverging land use preferences have been identified in the literature as different roles of actors (i.e., when actors represent different land use sectors) and differences in values, but also power differences, past events and grievances, deprivation, and culture/personality play a role [43–45]. Thus, the principal reasons for the birth of land use conflicts can be summa-

rized as limited availability of land, negative spill-over effects, and incompatible goals of land use actors.



Figure 3. Study region. City of Schwerin (grey), its direct fringe (marked by blue line) and surrounding rural area (the two administrative districts Nordwestmecklenburg and Ludwigslust-Parchim). Copyright by Amt für Raumordnung und Landesplanung Westmecklenburg.

In the study region, several planning tools are in place to reduce conflicts between land uses, such as landscape plans, development plans, and zoning law. Legal rules play an important role in regulating conflicts between land use actors. However, legal processes can be expensive and time-consuming, they can deteriorate the relationship of the involved actors, and their results are not always in line with actors' needs. Within some land use topics, local actors are developing new tools to manage conflicts. Notably, regarding housing development, the mayors of Schwerin and its fringe communities signed a new agreement in 2021 ("Residential Land Development Concept") following a moderated negotiation process that lasted for several years [46]. Nevertheless, in most cases it remains the actors' responsibility to find a suitable way of addressing conflicts.

2.2. Methods of Data Collection

2.2.1. Identification of Relevant Actors

To learn about land use conflicts from the perspective of local land use actors, relevant actors had to be identified. This was accomplished through a stakeholder analysis [47]. In the first step, desk research was conducted to compile a list of actors involved in land use and land use decision making in the study region, comprising, for example, mayors, local agencies, farmers, foresters, businesses, interest groups, and local residents. This list was presented to project partners from local land use practice for rectification and completion and to identify the actors that they deemed to be key for land use in the region. These actors were selected as the initial interview partners. Some of these actors either could not be reached or declined the interview, but since at least one other actor representing similar

land use interests always took part (i.e., from another environmental interest group), this did not create major gaps.

To ensure that all relevant actors were covered, the stakeholder analysis was supplemented by a snowball system. Every interviewee was asked to name any other actors whom they thought were important in local land use. It was then assessed whether interviewing these additional actors could generate new insights; when this was the case, they were also contacted. Thus, a total of 32 interviews were conducted with actors from agriculture, water management, environmental conservation, forestry, and industry, but mostly with cross-sectoral actors such as mayors. An overview of the interviewed actors is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewed actors by actor type.

Actor Type	Interviews
Mayors and political actors	11
Local agencies	9
Interest groups, NGOs	6
Local boards	4
Businesses	2

2.2.2. Semistructured Interviews

With each selected actor, a semistructured, problem-focussed interview [48] was conducted. These interviews were held in person between June and November 2019, and most took approximately 45 min to an hour. The interview guideline is provided in Document S1 in the Supplementary Materials. The interviewees were first asked whether land use conflicts played a role in their daily work and then to name any land use conflicts in the urban-rural fringe region of Schwerin about which they were aware. The Public Participation Geographic Information System (PPGIS) tool Maptionnaire was used to support the data collection with spatially explicit information, and each interviewee was asked to mark the location of the conflicts they reported on a map. This was followed by further questions to gain a deeper understanding of these conflicts, including how the interviewees experienced them. Importantly, the interviewees were never directly asked whether they perceived conflicts as a strain or even how conflicts impacted their daily experience, but such information emerged as interviewees were asked to talk about the conflicts.

2.3. Methods of Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed completely. The following data analysis consisted of two steps. A first analysis was conducted to identify, cluster, and categorize the land use conflicts that were mentioned in the interviews. Thus, a comprehensive overview of land use conflicts in the study region was created. Then, a second analysis was conducted to answer the research question regarding local land use actors' experience with these conflicts.

2.3.1. Identification and Categorization of Land Use Conflicts

To create an overview of the land use conflicts of the study region as perceived by local land use actors, a thematic qualitative text analysis [49] was conducted using MAXQDA software. This method ensured that the data were systematically analysed, and all relevant information was included. All land use conflicts that the interview partners had mentioned were highlighted, along with any passages that contained further information about the conflicts. Then, categories were created to cluster the conflicts first according to the land uses that were disputed and then according to the issues at stake. The categories for the disputed land uses were inductively created, initially using the wording of the interview partners as codes and subsequently clustering similar land uses into broader categories. This process resulted in eight land use categories. Then, a deductive-inductive coding process was applied to categorize the conflict issues. The category system of conflict issues that von

der Dunk et al. [5] developed in their study of peri-urban land use conflicts in Switzerland provided the initial categories for this second coding process. It was subsequently adapted since some of the initial categories were not found in the data from Schwerin and new categories were created for issues that did not previously emerge in Switzerland. For improved clarity, we further clustered the conflict issues to obtain 11 broad categories of conflict issues.

2.3.2. Analysis of Local Land Use Actors' Experience with the Conflicts

To answer the second research question, an evaluative qualitative text analysis [49] was conducted that collected information regarding the role that conflicts play in land use actors' daily work. In particular, information was collected on the number of different conflicts that an actor reported, whether they explicitly stated that conflicts played a role in their work, and on their description of how straining they perceived these conflicts to be. (The term "strain" that is used throughout this paper is a translation from the German "Belastung", a term that was repeatedly used by the interviewed actors. According to Langenscheidt dictionary, "Belastung" can be translated as load, weight, burden, stress, or strain, among others [50]. The term "strain" was chosen because it best conveys the different aspects of the original German term, which includes the *psychological stress* that the conflicts and their management place on the involved actors, the *social tensions* resulting from conflicts that impact actors' relationships and their collaboration, and the *burden* that the conflicts place to land management processes.) The interview transcripts were re-examined, and any passages with relevant information were highlighted, again using MAXQDA software. Then, a thematic summary was created for each interviewee, which collected all relevant information. Arranging these summaries in one document produced an overview table that could be read both horizontally by respondent and vertically by topic (as suggested by Kuckartz [49]). Through a comparison of the cases in the overview table, three evaluative categories were created to describe the strain that actors perceived from the land use conflicts: high, medium, or low. Thus, actors were grouped according to the highest level of strain they perceived in any conflict. To determine this level, the interviewees' replies to a question asking them to rate the conflicts on a scale from one ("hardly noticeable") to 10 ("worst conflict imaginable") were used. If no other passages in the interview contradicted this, a rating of seven or higher was interpreted as a high level of strain, four to six as medium strain, and three or lower as low strain. To supplement this, the way interviewees spoke about the conflicts was also analysed. Importantly, the land use actors remained the unit of analysis: it was analysed as how straining an interviewee perceived land use conflicts in total, not how straining each individual conflict was perceived. Each case was assigned to these categories. Table 2 lists the evaluative categories, the conditions for assigning the cases to them, and some illustrative examples.

Table 2. Evaluative categories. Evaluative categories for the second research question with the conditions to assign them and examples. Quotes from the interviews are our own translations.

Evaluative Categories	Condition	Examples
High level of strain	The actor perceives at least one conflict as highly straining: - Rating on scale of 7 or higher - Respondent expresses a high level of strain	"The air burnt, literally". "[...] this is very, very frustrating [...]"
Medium level of strain	The actor perceives at least one conflict of medium strain, but none of high strain: - Rating on scale from 4–6 - Interviewee mentions some strain caused by the conflict but does not emphasize an exceptional burden	"Here where we are it is bearable, it is still below the threshold of pain. [...] We are angry, but we don't shoot each other because of that".
Low level of strain	The actor only perceives conflicts of low strain: - Rating on scale from 1–3 - Respondent relativizes conflicts' impact	"[Conflicts play] a very small role, I would say". "This is not a major conflict [...]"

3. Results

This chapter first provides an overview of the land use conflicts in the study region as reported by the interviewed actors. The results regarding actors' experience with these conflicts are subsequently presented. A shortened version of the overview table of the thematic summaries of all cases is provided in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials.

3.1. Overview of Land Use Conflicts in the Urban-Rural Fringe Region of Schwerin

The interviewed actors reported 124 different land use conflicts. The spatial distribution of these conflicts is shown in Figure 4. The assumption was that multifunctionality increased conflict potential; consistently, most conflicts were located on the more densely populated and the more developed tourist areas of the western and southern shores of the Schwerin lakes. The predominantly agricultural areas east and north of the lakes displayed fewer conflicts. Land uses for housing, environmental or species conservation, and traffic were those most frequently reported as contested. Recreational or touristic land uses, energy infrastructures and agricultural land uses also often triggered land use conflicts. Industry/retail and forestry caused a small number of conflicts (see Table 3). Within the city, traffic and housing were the most contested land uses. On and around the Schwerin lakes, recreation and touristic land uses were most often the causes. In the fringe communities, housing and environmental/species conservation were particularly relevant, while in the rural areas beyond the fringe, energy infrastructures and traffic were often contested. Interestingly, conflicts about energy infrastructures were reported only in rural areas (fringe and beyond) but never within the city.

Table 3. Number of conflicts in which each land use is contested. More than one land use can be contested in a conflict.

Contested Land Uses	Number of Conflicts
Housing	28
Environmental/species conservation	24
Traffic	23
Recreational/touristic land uses	20
Energy infrastructures	16
Agricultural land uses	15
Industry/retail	7
Forestry	4
Other	10

Regarding conflict issues, land use competition was by far the most common trigger of conflicts in the study region (see Table 4). In particular, the loss of agricultural land due to new housing areas, environmental conservation efforts, or renewable energy expansion was frequently lamented; this issue emerged in 20 conflicts. A negative impact of land use activities on nature conservation was also a common concern, most often in the shape of loss or disturbance of habitats. For example, these issues arise when recreationists drive boats or bikes, have parties, or bathe in ecologically sensitive areas. Another common issue was the distribution of costs and benefits of land use-related activities. For example, German planning law requires that ecological compensation areas be developed to offset the negative ecological consequences of construction projects [35]. However, compensation measures restrict other land uses, such as agriculture or housing, and land users often complain about reduced profit or income due to compensation areas. A negative impact on the quality of life caused criticism in 23 conflicts, and a negative visual impact was the most frequent issue in this category. This complaint was expressed regarding wind turbines, but also emerged in the context of environmental degradation, such as littering or removal of landscape elements. Lacking infrastructure/housing differed from other categories because instead of an existing or planned land use, the lack of one gave rise to concerns. For example, land use actors protested against a lack of bike lanes. Other less

frequent conflict issues included damage to land, private property, or public infrastructures, the violation of rules and laws, or the impairment of other land users. The latter occurred among others when maintenance measures had to be performed along lake shores or rivers, which disturbed agricultural activities on adjacent fields. Social issues never occurred by themselves but sometimes grew to the point that the perceived lack of recognition or the rough tone applied by an actor could become even more important than the land use issue that triggered the conflict.

In summary, local land use actors report numerous land use conflicts in the urban-rural fringe region of Schwerin. These conflicts involve all major land uses of the region, although housing is a particularly frequent cause of conflicts. Competition between land uses is the most common issue in these conflicts, but the negative impacts on the environment or on the quality of life and the distribution of costs and benefits are also frequently lamented. For a further analysis of these conflicts, including the spatial patterns of conflict lines between opposing actors, see Fienitz and Siebert [51]. The following section builds on this overview to report how the interviewed land use actors experience these conflicts.

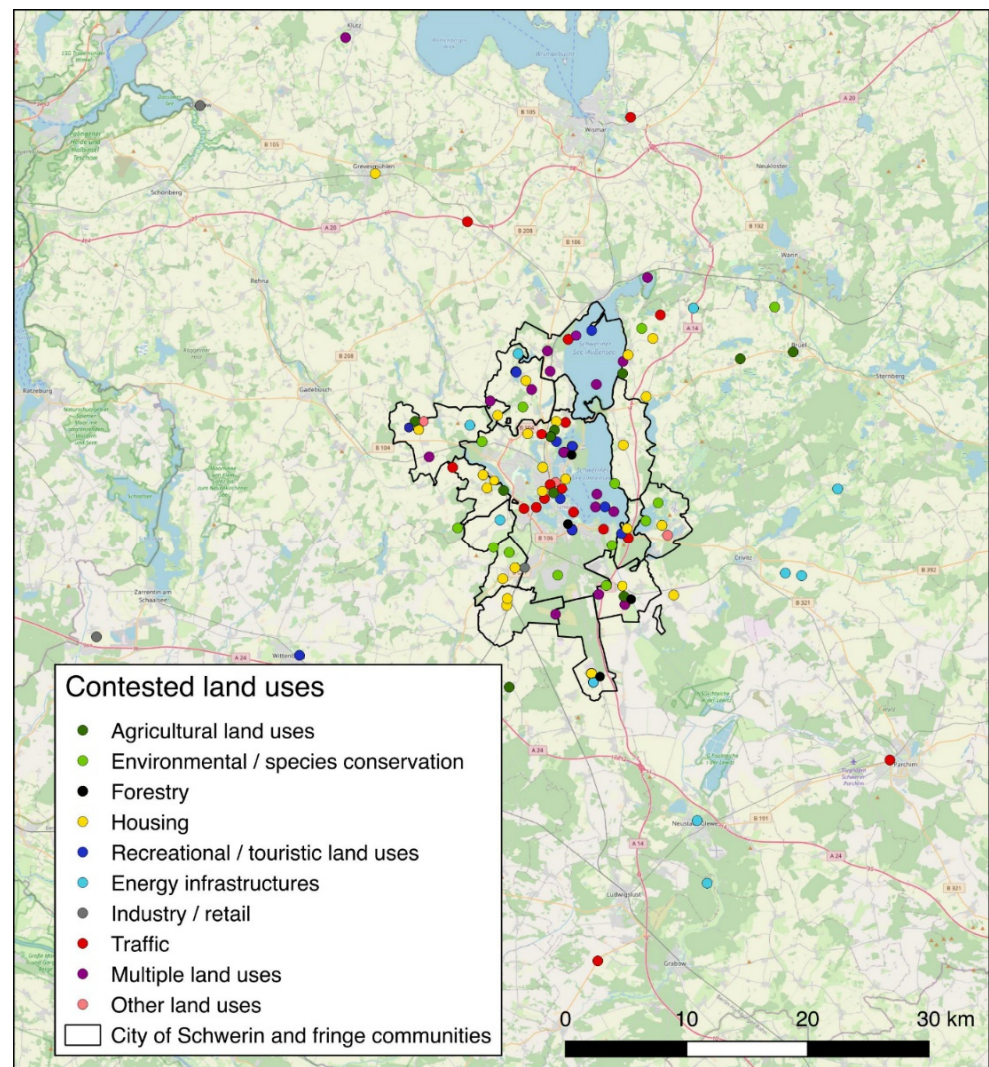


Figure 4. Spatial distribution of the land use conflicts. Sixteen conflicts could not be spatially located (i.e., to retain anonymity), while other conflicts emerged in multiple locations and therefore appear more than once on the map.

Table 4. Number of conflicts in which each conflict issue is involved. More than one issue can be involved in a conflict.

Conflict Issue	Number of Conflicts
Land use competition	52
<i>Including:</i>	
- No/insufficient land available for new/potential land uses	33
- Cutbacks on/derogation of/reduced access to existing land uses	26
Negative impact on nature conservation	31
<i>Including:</i>	
- Disturbance of habitat	13
- Loss of habitat	11
- Pollution	5
- Changes to natural environment	3
- Killing of animals	2
Costs/benefits not distributed as desired	26
<i>Including:</i>	
- Foregone/reduced income	9
- Perceived unfair distribution of costs/benefits	7
- High costs/expensive	4
Negative impact on quality of life	23
<i>Including:</i>	
- Negative visual impact	10
- Noise nuisance	6
- Odour	4
- Dust	2
- Health concerns	2
- Fly plague	1
Lack of infrastructure/housing	13
Issue unclear	12
Damage to land/property/infrastructure	7
Violation of rules/laws	7
Impairment of other land users	6
Social issues	6
<i>Including:</i>	
- Rough tone of communication	3
- Little recognition	3
Restrictions on/no sovereignty over land management	5

3.2. Local Land Use Actors' Experience with Land Use Conflicts

Analysing local land use actors' experience with these conflicts revealed that land use conflicts play an important and mostly negative role in the daily experience of most actors. Every interviewed actor reported at least one conflict; on average, each actor reported between four and five conflicts, and the highest number was 15 different land use conflicts mentioned in an interview with a local agency that operated in the highly multifunctional region west of the Schwerin lakes. Most actors (22 out of 32) explicitly said that conflicts played a role or even a major role in their daily work. Of course, the fact that local actors frequently encounter land use conflicts is not problematic in itself. However, the majority of actors reported at least one conflict that they perceived as a strain; almost half of all actors even reported experiencing a high level of strain from land use conflicts. In the following, the effect that land use conflicts have on local actors' experience is described in detail, presented according to the three levels of perceived strain that were determined during the evaluative text analysis.

3.2.1. Perception of High Strain

Fifteen actors, or almost half of all interviewees, experienced a high level of strain from at least one conflict. They described the land use conflicts in a language that made it clear that they perceived them as severe and straining. The statement that is cited in the title of this paper was made by an agency employee who summed up his experience with conflicts about the construction of jetties, but also serves well to describe the experience of actors in this group more generally: “It is a total drama”. Actors in this group put much energy into handling land use conflicts; for example, a mayor recalled she and her team “fought like crazy” in a conflict about housing development. Similarly, an agency employee reported trying to handle environmental conservation conflicts with “struggle and strain” and “out of desperation”. Actors in this group also mentioned the difficulty of finding solutions, recognizing that conflicts are often “very complex”; “very, very difficult” (an interest group); or “highly complicated” (a local agency). At times, conflicts even led to failed projects, as in the case of a project to improve the recreation potential of Schwerin’s lakes that an agency employee reported. Often, the issues at stake were of high relevance to the interviewed actors in this group. For example, an interest group representative who reported conflicts concerning the loss of agricultural land spoke of a “terrifying” situation and possible “grave consequences” of these conflicts: “your subsistence is pulled out from under your feet”. Another interest group employee confirmed regarding a conflict about bike lanes: “From the view of the association I would say the relevance of the topic is unbelievably high”. One local agency representative additionally emphasized the strain on other involved actors, stating that conflicts can be “very, very frustrating” for local politicians and “a true burden” for residents. Generally, actors in this group frequently perceived injustices and were upset about the behaviour of other conflict parties. They felt that their points of view were ignored, as one mayor recalled: “And you could drive there [to the responsible office], walk there, no one was interested. You would not have gotten an appointment [. . .]. I would try to convince the other parties. I would stand there and buy them Bratwurst and everything, to say this plainly. Yet [the issue] never even ends up [on their tables]. And that is [swears]”. Moreover, actors in this group felt that they were treated unfairly: a speaker of a local business called the salami tactics of his opponents in a housing development conflict a “provocation” and expressed discontent with the way land use decisions are generally made. Actors also reported that conflicts troubled their relationship with other actors, and some felt these conflicts even endangered democracy.

Although the respondents in this group mostly described conflicts in very negative terms, the two interviewed representatives of one interest group also mentioned some positive aspects of land use conflicts. They reported a conflict about a new tourist attraction that had raised concerns about a fair distribution of costs and benefits, which they saw as an overall positive case. They approved of the way in which it was handled and called it “a big opportunity” for improved cooperation, although the road to success remained “a little rocky”.

All four actors that represented the agricultural sector reported a high level of strain from land use conflicts, while all other sectors were also represented in the groups of actors who experienced lower levels of strain. Agriculture also stood out in the conflict overview as frequently suffering from land use competition. Because access to land is a crucial factor in agriculture, it appears logical that agricultural actors perceive such conflicts as very severe.

To illustrate, an interviewee from the agricultural sector reported six different land use conflicts, most of which he perceived as severe and straining. Mostly, he mentioned conflicts about land use competition, especially the loss of agricultural land due to housing and infrastructure development. He referred to these conflicts as “a big problem”, “more than troublesome”, “a burden, definitely”, and “a drastic experience”. These conflicts are particularly straining because so much is at stake, as he further explained:

That is a strain, definitely. [. . .] At the time, we had built up the business for 20 years or had been building up the business for 15, 20 years. And when then someone comes

around and says, well I will just take 20 hectares of arable land from you, and you have, at the time we had 220 hectares of arable land, that's 10% of the total area. And you don't know how to handle it or whether this will come to a good end for you, then you're not having a good time.

He further mentioned the trouble of finding solutions: "So this problem [land use competition] has become truly difficult" and repeatedly expressed the wish to receive more support from local agencies and the government: "The point is that agricultural actors cannot solve this problem on their own. [...] Only when we [agricultural actors, ministries, agencies] all work together can this be accomplished. However, currently agricultural actors are left too much alone with this".

However, the conflicts that he described as the most straining were residents and visitors who criticized agricultural practices and their impact on nature conservation and quality of life. For example, he recalled how local residents called the police because they felt accosted by a farmer who applied manure on a field next to their house. Although the fertilization had been conducted in accordance with legal requirements, the incident interrupted agricultural work for hours, causing significant financial losses. The interviewee ascribed the particularly high strain to these conflicts' tendency to involve emotions: "It potentiates and increases, and there is no upper limit. The conflict becomes more and more severe; that's the way it is. And also on the farmer's side, well, how should I say this: it eventually begins to accumulate, and when you are frowned at or attacked in an adverse moment, then you explode without wanting it". He also stressed the energy that agricultural actors have to put into handling these conflicts, stating they are an issue with which farmers "struggle a lot".

The experience of one mayor was also very drastic. He only reported one recently concluded conflict about an infrastructure project that his community had unsuccessfully opposed due to its negative impacts on the local quality of life. The conflict had placed a very high level of strain on him, as he reported. He called the conflict's outcome a "dire" burden for his community and repeatedly emphasized the energy he had put into trying to handle the conflict, recalling how he "fought". However, the most straining part of this conflict was, to him, the social aspects. He felt treated unjustly, that everything had already been decided without him, and that no one even tried to accommodate the preferences of his community: "We are usually rather cooperative. Because I always believe when you sit at the negotiation table you also have to think about the other side. However, this is rather one-sided [the other side does not seem to share this view]". He also complained about a lack of communication and the other party's attitude: "This inability to talk to each other, or the arrogance of the [other conflict party], is something that I felt strongly". The behaviour of the responsible political actors likewise left a "lasting" and "sad" impression on him and others in his community; they were "disappointed" and "startled". In fact, the social aspects of the conflict had become worse than the physical land use aspect: "The attitude, that is the crucial point, the attitude of those who work for the [other conflict party]". He further stressed that such conflicts could endanger democracy: "The way I see it, [this way of handling conflicts] has led to the whole political situation that we have now. You feel that they will not take you seriously anyway, [...] like we are the idiots and they are the smart ones. [...] And then you think, how dare they treat us like that". He was worried that such episodes might cause residents to vote for extremist parties: "I can imagine that some who previously did not hold right-wing extremist views vote in such a way afterwards". He added that the conflict also had a severe impact on his health and mentioned his personality as a reason why the conflict was particularly straining to him: "I have to say, I have suffered also in terms of my health from that issue [...], so that I said from the very beginning [...] I will not be able to do that again, in terms of my health, to commit like that. Because when I do something, I do it with all my body and soul, and the more disappointed you are when you are then treated like that". He rated the conflict's severity as "15" on a scale from one to ten and again emphasized, "Yes, that has truly, I do not say this lightly, that has very much harmed me physically".

3.2.2. Perception of Medium Strain

Although a perception of high strain from land use conflicts was widespread among the interviewed actors, not all were affected so severely. Six actors perceived at least one conflict as of medium strain but none as highly straining. Respondents in this group also used negative terms to describe their perception of conflicts, but usually relativized their complaints quickly, emphasizing that things could be much worse. Thus, an employee of a local agency called a conflict about logging “pretty fierce” and reported he had been “scolded massively” but acknowledged that it could have been worse as it “passed without involving the police”. These actors likewise complained that conflicts can tie up resources but reported a more differentiated picture: a local board member mentioned that conflicts caused by agriculture impairing water body maintenance measures were “very time-consuming”, involved “much paperwork” and caused “additional costs”. However, she added that some conflicts were less straining than others, as finding compromises was “sometimes very difficult and time-consuming, sometimes it works very well”.

An illustrative example from this group is the case of a representative from an interest group who reported conflicts about recreational forest uses, such as walking unleashed dogs, horseback riding, or driving motocross bikes, which raised conservation concerns. He said that conflicts played a role in his work and called these conflicts “trouble”. Like others in the medium strain group, however, he relativized his complaints, stating that he was “mad” about some things but that overall, the conflicts were “not grave”, “bearable”, and “below the pain barrier”. He was aware that the situation was much worse near major cities such as Berlin, where he called conflicts “massive”. In comparison, he found local conflicts mild and concluded that “We do not shoot each other because of that”.

Likewise, in the medium strain group, a local board member mentioned conflicts about waterfront bike lanes and crops grown at the waterside that impaired maintenance measures along water bodies. He said that such conflicts appeared “constantly and always” in his daily work and impacted his ability to conduct this work. Nevertheless, he rated them as “Five, I would say” on a severity scale from one to ten because he had always been able to have a sensible conversation with the conflicting parties.

3.2.3. Perception of Low Strain

Eleven actors were only aware of conflicts that caused little to no strain. Although five of these actors explicitly said that land use conflicts played a role in their work, they downplayed them, referring to conflicts as “trivialities” and “gimmickry” (a mayor) or “somewhat of a conflict point” (a local agency employee). An employee of an interest group emphasized that the conflicts known to her were “not on such a pronounced level” and “in the lower area [of severity]”, and another mayor claimed that conflicts caused “no major problems”. These actors sometimes expressed conflicts in more positive terms, such as a mayor speaking of “potential to optimize” or local agency staff reporting questions of “cooperation”. Furthermore, these actors were usually able to find solutions that were acceptable to them, as stated by a local board member who had been able to “jiggle into place and arrange” with potential opponents in a conflict about agriculture impairing other land users. In sum, although they were aware of land use conflicts, these actors were hardly impacted in their ability to conduct their work and did not have to invest significant resources to handle them. Two of the actors in this group, a mayor and an interest group representative, explicitly mentioned positive aspects of land use conflicts: Both claimed that they believed in the productive function of conflicts for society, which might be part of the reason why they perceived conflicts as less of a strain.

To further illustrate, the mayor was aware of some conflicts among the region’s communities with regard to housing development and traffic. However, he did not perceive them as a strain, mostly because he was content with how the situation was playing out. He referred to his personality as a reason for his low perception of strain, saying he was generally willing to bear negative side effects from overall positive developments and had a positive attitude towards conflicts: “Conflicts exist so that we can solve them”.

Another mayor who mentioned a conflict about the unfair distribution of costs and benefits of wind farms and a second about the loss of agricultural land caused by forestry also perceived a low strain from conflicts. Mostly, this seemed to be because the issues in the conflicts he encountered were not essential, and he was able to be generous towards his opponents: He said he did not want to put obstacles in the way of others and perceived low pressure to act. Moreover, he felt that he was able to have sensible conversations with his opponents. He also attributed his low strain from conflicts to his personality, recalling that he took things more to heart in his early days but developed a thick skin over time, knowing that he could not satisfy everyone.

4. Discussion

By consulting local key actors, this study created a cross-sectoral overview of land use conflicts in an urban-rural fringe region that highlights the most frequently perceived kinds of conflicts. Land use conflicts can be identified through various methods, including media analyses, litigation court data, or geographic information system (GIS) analyses, each with their own strengths and weaknesses [52]. Interviews with key actors can detect conflicts that have not been subject to scrutiny in courts or the media [52], and they provide the perspective of those who are immediately involved. As land use conflicts significantly impact the interactions of people in rural areas, monitoring these conflicts is an important component of regional development. While all major land uses of the region were subject to land use conflicts, housing proved to be the most common trigger of conflicts, followed by environmental or species conservation and traffic. Conflict issues were also diverse, but most often involved competition between land uses, negative impacts on the environment or quality of life, and the distribution of costs and benefits.

These results largely confirm and further substantiate previous findings by Steinhäuser et al., who provided a description of land use conflicts in Germany in the sectors settlements/transportation, agriculture, forestry, and conservation, as reported by actors on the national and regional (Altmark and Rhine regions) levels [29]. They also found land use competition to be the most important conflict issue, with farming as the sector that most frequently suffers from it. In a similar way to our findings, land use competition was commonly caused by the consumption of land for settlements, transportation, and nature conservation purposes. Further important issues were the impact of tourism and recreation on agriculture, forestry, and nature conservation, the impact of intensive livestock farming on quality of life, and water management conflicts—again, widely in line with our findings.

Our paper also adds to previous work by von der Dunk et al. [5], applying their category system for conflict issues to a new study region and to conflicts that were gathered through interviews with local actors instead of media content analysis. Although the study regions are relatively similar—both are peri-urban, multifunctional regions in affluent countries in central Europe—significant changes had to be made to von der Dunk et al.'s category system. Twenty-six of von der Dunk et al.'s 45 conflict issues were not found in the data from Schwerin; instead, many new categories had to be added. Some issues appeared in both studies, but their significance differed: loss of agricultural land only emerged three times in Switzerland, but 20 times around Schwerin. In contrast, a negative visual impact from buildings was an issue in 21 conflicts in Switzerland but only once around Schwerin. This distinction might be due to the different methods of conflict identification, but it is more likely that conflict issues are diverse, at least when broken down to their details (“negative visual impact from buildings”), even between relatively similar regions. The simplified category system created here provides less detail than von der Dunk et al.'s, but might be more broadly applicable.

Moreover, the results presented above demonstrate that land use conflicts play an important but mostly negative role in the experience of local land use actors. Actors are aware of a large number of highly diverse land use conflicts; these conflicts play an important role in their work, and most perceive at least some conflicts as a strain. Considering that the interviewees were never explicitly asked about the impact of conflicts on their daily

experience, but the reports of strain emerged incidentally as actors spoke about the conflicts, these findings become even more relevant. Conflicts can impact local actors' ability to conduct their work, as conflicts can cause projects to fail, and handling them can cost much energy and tie up resources. This matches findings from research on workplace-related conflicts that conflict can reduce work performance and cause delays [18,19] and those from Yasmi et al.'s study on forest conflicts in Southeast Asia that conflicts can be costly in terms of money and time [24]. Moreover, many actors find it difficult to find solutions; they often perceive conflicts as complex, and some explicitly express the wish to receive more support. Scholars have previously noted that intractable conflicts are a challenge to natural resource management [53] and that land use conflicts tend to be particularly complex [54]. Land use conflicts can also complicate actors' relationships with other actors, a finding that again aligns with the results by Yasmi et al. [24], and several actors felt that these conflicts could endanger democracy. This is in line with previous findings from the environmental peacebuilding literature, which points out that land use conflicts can spill over into wider social conflicts [55,56]. Finally, land use conflicts can be perceived as highly stressful and can even impact the involved actors' health, a finding that aligns with the results from conflict research in psychology [20–22] as well as with those from Lai et al.'s study on conflicts around unconventional gas development in Australia [23].

Some possible explanatory factors were also identified. As multifunctionality was found to increase the likelihood of conflicts, the impact on actors' experiences is likely especially relevant in highly multifunctional regions. Moreover, agricultural actors appeared particularly affected by strain. This finding is comprehensible as agriculture is subject to a particularly large set of diverging pressures and demands, most importantly the need to improve the sustainability of agricultural land uses while maintaining production levels [57]. In general, land use conflicts seem to be perceived as especially straining when the issues at stake are of high relevance to the involved actors, when actors perceive injustices, when they are upset about other actors' behaviour, and when conflicts involve a high level of emotions. Furthermore, the actors' personalities also seem to play a role in how they experience conflicts. Actors experienced less strain from conflicts when they could have sensible conversations with the conflicting side, when acceptable solutions were found, and when they were aware of the positive functions of conflicts and saw them as an opportunity for cooperation. Authors have previously observed that land use conflicts are not exclusively negative, but fulfil important social functions (i.e., [58–61]); thus, local land use actors may be aware of these positive effects and may value conflicts for them.

4.1. Implications for Land Use Planning and Governance

The findings of this paper have several implications for land use planning and governance. By revealing the most frequently perceived types of conflicts, the overview of land use conflicts indicates some promising starting points for conflict reduction or management. Thus, land use planning and governance could work to reduce land use competition; planners and governance actors could pay special attention to the negative impacts of land use on nature conservation and quality of life and to the distribution of costs and benefits (regarding the latter, see also [62,63]), as these were found to be particularly frequent issues in the land use conflicts that actors reported. It might also be worthwhile to direct conflict management resources specifically to the housing sector, as this was the most contested land use sector.

Additionally, the finding that conflicts are frequently perceived as a strain and obstruct land management processes underlines the need to address land use conflicts through proper conflict management [64–66]. The results of this paper also demonstrate the need to provide local land use actors with the necessary resources and support to handle conflicts, especially in conflict-prone areas such as highly multifunctional regions. This could involve, among others, increased financial or staff resources, support from professional conflict managers, or training in conflict management. The results further show that the perceived strain from land use conflicts is not evenly distributed among local actors. Thus, conflict

management should specifically target those actors who experience high levels of strain. Agricultural actors were particularly affected by strain; hence, directing more attention to land use conflicts that involve agriculture may be another worthwhile starting point.

4.2. Limits and Implications for Future Research

As the unit of analysis was the land use actors, not the conflicts, which conflicts caused the most strain could not be analysed. To answer this question, interviews with all (main) actors involved in a conflict are required, as the same conflict could be perceived differently by different actors. However, the approach taken here allowed us to determine the perception of land use conflicts by local land use actors across sectors and across a large number of conflicts, and thus the overall effect that land use conflicts have on land use actors in the study region. Moreover, the factors that might influence the different perceptions of strain have not been collected deliberately and need to be further substantiated. When more information is available on this topic, conflict management measures could be adapted to predominantly address those situations that are likely to cause the most strain, and support could be provided specifically to those actor groups that need it most. Additionally, the usual limits of qualitative, case study-based research apply. In particular, the frequencies of different conflict types should not be over-interpreted; this study reports conflict frequencies as perceived by the interviewed actors. However, these actors were carefully selected experts and increasing saturation emerged towards the end of the data collection, with the last interviewees mostly reporting conflicts that were mentioned in previous interviews. Therefore, the region's most relevant conflicts seem to have been identified relatively completely. Moreover, as the case study region was carefully selected to display the typical features of urban-rural fringes and the findings were widely in line with previous studies from other regions or on other types of conflicts, a high level of transferability, at least to other urban-rural fringe regions, is expected. Nevertheless, further case studies in other regions or quantitative work could corroborate the findings of this study.

Follow-up research using conflicts as the unit of analysis would be desirable. Such an approach could determine the extent to which the same conflicts are perceived differently by different actors and which conflicts cause the most strain. Previous studies have occasionally detected positive impacts of land use conflicts on local actors [16,24] and on rural development [61]. The results of this paper also indicate that conflicts can be perceived positively by local land use actors. Future research could explore the causes of such positive effects and ways that negative effects can be avoided. Finally, more research that gathers land use conflicts across sectors in different regions would complete our knowledge of the types of conflicts that occur and their frequency.

5. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to provide a cross-sectoral overview of land use conflicts as perceived by local land use actors and to explore the actors' experience with these conflicts. Using the example of land use conflicts in the urban-rural fringe region of Schwerin, the study identified the most relevant kinds of conflicts as reported by local actors and demonstrated that land use conflicts play an important and mostly negative role for actors in the study region. Actors are aware of many and diverse land use conflicts, most frequently about housing, environmental/species conservation, and traffic, with competition between land uses as the most common issue. These conflicts are significant in actors' daily work, and many perceive them as a strain. Land use conflicts can obstruct local land management processes; they tie up resources, are often perceived as complex and difficult to handle, and can be experienced as highly stressful—summed up in a local agency employee's bottom line: "It is a total drama". Permanent processes of negotiation are inherent to land systems, and they impact how people in rural areas interact, live and work with each other. With this in mind, the findings of this paper underline the importance of appropriate conflict management. They provide some promising starting points for land use planning and governance to address conflicts by focussing on those topics and issues

that emerge frequently and by working to reduce the strain on the involved actors. This paper further indicates the relevance of providing local actors with the necessary resources to deal with land use conflicts and of learning how to handle land use conflicts to avoid high levels of strain among local land use actors.

Some first attempts in this direction are currently under way in the study region. After many complaints from actors in the particularly conflict-prone housing sector, a moderated negotiation process has established constructive collaboration between fringe communities and the city of Schwerin and recently resulted in a new agreement on housing development [46]. Likewise, in the study region, the implementation is currently being discussed of strategic land provisioning as another tool to reduce land use conflicts. Developing similar or further approaches in other land use sectors will be an important future task, so conflicts can enhance rather than impede land management processes.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/land11050602/s1>. Document S1: Interview guideline, Table S1: Overview table of thematic summaries of all cases.

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