

Recreation Interests and Participation in River Restoration Projects

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Introduction

Rivers and river spaces have become landscape elements with an ever widening spectrum of functions. They do not only fulfil drainage and ecological functions, but are also of high meaning for people as economical, social and recreational resources, i.e. as general living spaces.

Since 1991 the Swiss Federal Law on Hydraulic Engineering explicitly calls for combining all flood security measures with ecological revalorisations, i.e. restorations of the river spaces. Of such restoration projects large and numerous ones are currently carried out or are planned for the near future throughout Switzerland and Europe. But as experience has proven, they are often highly conflictual. The loss of economically used land accompanied by such restorations, the threatened status quo in the aesthetic and ecological quality of the locals' recreational and overall living space and the prevalent top-down planning in this field often arouse resistance. Therefore, suitable participation and communication strategies are key elements for the successful realization of restoration projects.

Methods

This study presents the main results of two case studies on river restoration projects at the Swiss rivers Thur and Flaz. Both of these studies implemented a method triangulation including:

- a) qualitative interviews with the local population/recreational users, representatives of organised stakeholders groups as well as decision makers;
- b) standardised questionnaire surveys among the

local public and stakeholder groups and
c) direct observation of the consensus-finding processes.

These two case studies served also as base for the subsequent design of a representative Swisswide survey by means of a standardised questionnaire. The survey included visualisations of differing states of river spaces varying in the depicted naturalness and usability for recreation/accessibility. The survey included also questions on the use of river spaces, on their meaning for the public, and on general attitudes of the Swiss population/recreational users towards river restorations.

Results

The two case studies (Thur, Canton Thurgau, between Weinfelden and Bürglen; Rivers Flaz/Inn, Canton Grisons, project Samedan) showed that the public/recreational users primarily perceive attributes of rivers that characterise them as part of the local living space (recreation, nature experience, part of home). They perceive only marginally functional aspects of river uses (economic use, danger, channel).

A comparison between surveys of the general public/recreational users and representatives of stakeholder groups directly involved in the decision-making process at the River Thur project showed differing profiles of claims. In general, recreational users of both case studies regions had a more positive attitude towards restoration projects than the stakeholder groups directly involved in the decision-making process. Correspondingly, the stronger involvement of the public/recreational users

ers in the restoration project Flaz/Inn had the effect that essentially less resistance was raised against the project than against the restoration of the River Thur (Junker & Buchecker 2006). The public at the River Thur expressed in the survey the desire to become involved in the planning and decision making process. The majority would be ready to become active mainly by shipping in ideas and choosing from proposed project alternatives.

The Swiss-wide survey confirmed that the attitudes of the public as indicated in the case studies highly correspond with those of the Swiss public. An assessment of scenarios depicting different degrees of restoration showed that the Swiss public prefers the most restored scenario in regard to the river space (vegetation) as well as in regard to the river morphology (more space for the river, meandering, with gravel banks and creeks, etc.). Correspondingly, the public clearly supports river restorations in combination with flood protection measures. The desire of the Swiss public to participate in the restoration process is even greater than in the case study regions. Unexpectedly was also the result that the public perceives it as important to have a say in river restorations as in local land use planning (Junker & Buchecker, *subm.*).

A stronger consideration of the broader public and recreational users in the planning of river restoration projects would be favourable on the basis of these results.

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