

Integrating local community interests in large protected area management – challenges and opportunities

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Introduction

The designation of protected areas (e.g. national parks) and their management often leads to conflicts between local communities and the park's administration, which is being regarded as a global phenomenon (Pretty and Pimbert 1995). These conflicts commonly affect both the management of protected areas and the local communities as strained relations bear the danger of gridlock on park planning, conservation objectives or regional economic development (Jarvis 2000). National parks in Germany seem specifically vulnerable to such conflicts for a number of reasons: German landscape has been altered throughout many centuries, hence creating cultural landscapes rather than unimpaired wilderness. Thus, the management of stakeholder issues in order to increase support among local communities remains one of the most important modern day sociological challenges for German park managers.

This paper presents the results from a field study carried out in Harz National Park. The scope of the study was to identify and analyze existing and potential conflicts between park management and the local population. Based on the results, measures to improve local support for the park were proposed. A specific focus was put on known and hidden communication channels between stakeholders and the park's administration in order to develop a strategy that makes outreach more efficient (v. Ruschkowski 2010).

Study area and methods

Harz National Park encompasses about 247 km² of colin and montane habitat zones and is located in the German states of Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. A quantitative survey was chosen as method. The sample size was set to be at least 200 households, taken as a stratified random sample from selected communities in the Harz region that directly lie on, or at, the park's boundaries. The questionnaire contained a mixture of closed and open questions that ranged from nominal to interval scale. The survey was carried out in February and March 2005. The data was coded and analyzed, using SPSS. Results were compared to a previous study carried out in the region in 1995 (Job 1996).

Results

Survey results from the Harz region indicated a positive trend towards the national park with a 2:1 ratio between positive and negative attitudes across the sample. However, a significant portion of the respondents showed a neutral attitude towards the park. Given a worst-case scenario, this group would be large enough to turn the overall attitude to the negative end of the scale and thus should be a main focus of future outreach activities. Traditional measures did not seem sufficient though as 80% of the respondents had not changed their attitude towards the park at all since its establishment in the early 1990s.

The park's designation led to the prohibition of some conventional uses in the region. While most laws in effect today were widely accepted by the respondents, the ban on picking berries and mushrooms (an activity carried out by many locals) was unacceptable for 56.5% of the respondents and thus contained huge conflict potential. Similar results were reported from a study at Eifel National Park in Western Germany (Sieberath 2007).

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The study also found that two print publications that included a four-page extra section on Harz National Park reached only 3.9% of the respondents, most of them reading these publications rather irregularly. Also, the park's website was used by only 2.4% of the respondents. Overall, those outreach efforts that are tailored towards national park issues did not even reach 5% of the respondents. One important finding to the contrary was that 51.2% of the respondents knew at least one national park employee personally. This fact could play an important role in future outreach activities, especially since park employees were affiliated with positive impressions.

Discussion

A number of factors contributed to a positive or negative attitude towards the park, with many of them rooted in communication processes. Overall survey results indicated that an integrated approach is required to address the existing communication deficit. This would include strengthening communication on a personal level. The fundamentals are already present as park employees play a significant role as communicators and are mostly well-respected in the communities. As most of the surveyed communities are rather small and found in rural settings, a key aspect of this strategy is to address and involve local decision makers. Another worthwhile tool could be to provide hands-on opportunities for locals to learn the basics of park management. Experience from other protected areas show that such events help local people to make a personal connection to the park and understand the complexity of management decisions. Different stakeholders certainly require different approaches, thus the park management should develop new initiatives tailored towards all stakeholder groups.

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