

New Parks of National Importance in Switzerland

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Introduction

This year, the MMV3 conference takes place in a special context here in Switzerland. Due to the revision of the Law on the protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage, some new parks of different categories are already planned. Therefore we hope to learn from different countries' experience and know-how in the field of Park and Visitor Management.

Current situation „Parks in Switzerland“

The Swiss National Park, situated in the Canton of Graubünden, was established in 1914, and was the first in Central Europe and in the area of the Alps. At that time, Switzerland had a pioneering role, but since then various parks have been created throughout Europe. Up until now, there has been a lack of legislative basis to enable new parks to be created and financed.

Revision of the Law on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage

Switzerland should soon have new parks of national importance: national parks, regional nature parks and nature experience parks. On 23 February 2005, the Federal Council passed the relevant partial revision of the Law on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage. This had been specifically requested by the parliament after the topic of parks was deleted from the legislative plan for a year, on financial grounds. Since then, the parliament has incorporated the results of consultations on the draft legislation. After the referendum, the revised Law on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage and the Ordinance on Parks could come into force in summer 2007, at the earliest.

Parks of national importance help to protect and to increase the value of exceptional natural habitats and landscapes of particular beauty. They also encourage the economic development of a region, providing incentives for tourism, creating employment and enabling visitors to experience nature. The creation of parks makes sense economically. This can be seen from many years of experience in other countries, and with the Swiss National Park in the Canton of Graubünden, where the direct net added value of the park through tourism averages 10 million Swiss Francs per year, whereas indirect employment and income provide a further 7 million Swiss Francs.

Parks for different needs and uses

Based on experience in other countries, in the future there should be three categories of parks in Switzerland: national parks, regional nature parks and nature experience parks.

National parks: large, protected natural landscapes

National parks provide undisturbed habitats for the indigenous flora and fauna and for internal development of the natural landscape. They also act as recreational areas and provide possibilities for environmental education and research. They are divided into a central core zone and the surrounding zone. The area of the core zone is to be at least 100 square kilometres in the Pre-alps and the Alps, at least 75 square kilometres in the Jura and at least 50 square kilometres on the Central Plateau. Within the core zone, nature is protected from all human intervention.

The surrounding zone is normally between three quarters and one and a half times the size of the core zone. It includes existing small villages that have protected their rural character. The landscape of the surrounding zone is not impaired by major

technical infrastructure, and its ecosystems have not suffered any important losses. The main objective is to encourage sustainable use of the land and of natural resources. Tourism and recreational use are also oriented towards sustainability.

Regional nature parks: near natural cultural landscapes

Regional nature parks are larger, partially populated rural areas, which are particularly distinctive within Switzerland for the quality of their natural and cultural landscapes and cover at least 100 square kilometres. They contribute to making the most of the natural and culture heritage of the region, to invigorating the network of communities, thereby strengthening the regional identity. Therefore, they contribute to the prerequisites for sustainable development in the region and to environmental education, and they promote innovative and environmentally-friendly technologies. This means that ecologically valuable and particularly beautiful landscapes are maintained. Regional nature parks create and ensure employment, with business activities particularly geared to the sustainable utilisation of local resources.

Nature experience parks: near natural compensation areas in urban regions

Like national parks, nature experience parks consist of a core zone and a transition zone. The total area is at least six square kilometres, of which at least four square kilometres are in the core zone. Nature experience parks are near natural compensation areas close to densely-populated regions. In the core zone the same rules apply as for national parks. While nature can develop unhindered, in the transition zone the main focus is on experience of nature. Therefore nature experience parks should be easily accessible by public transport.

How does a park come into being in Switzerland?

About 30 park projects have now been launched, in all parts of Switzerland, and they have reached different stages of achievement ranging from the project idea to measures that have already been carried out. The area of a park must have high natural and landscape value. The federal government only acknowledges a park if it is based on voluntary regional initiatives, supported by the local population

and linked into a cantonal programme. The cantons have an important role to play in creating parks of national importance, and subsequently managing them, by supporting regional initiatives.

Based on the park projects known today, it can be assumed that about two new national parks, ten regional nature parks and three nature experience parks will be created within the next ten years. The number of future parks in Switzerland will depend on the quality of the nature and landscape values of a region, the initiative of the local population, the financial resources available and the distribution of projects throughout Switzerland.

Visitor management begins as soon as a park is planned

During the phase of planning a park, detailed consideration must be given to issues such as where visitor flows will come from, how great these are likely to be, how people will reach the park and what bottlenecks or problems might arise.

A new park can only be planned if there is sufficient information on expected visitor flows. This enables to design infrastructure of the correct dimension in the right place, and furthermore this is the essential information needed for good planning to manage visitors within the park.

Conclusion

As new parks of national importance are being created in Switzerland, the management of visitor flows will be an important aspect so “best practice” experience from other countries will be very welcome.

Therefore, Switzerland is happy to host the Third International Conference on Monitoring and Management of Visitor Flows in Recreational and Protected Areas.