

How to rejuvenate nature parks in southern Westfalia, Germany? Challenges, methods and proposed solutions

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Introduction

The purpose of a nature park is to maintain attractive landscapes, which are frequently of a cultivated nature, as unique features. Nature parks provide areas for recreation and regeneration, but also environmental education and nature-based tourism. Their protected status should ensure the maintenance of unique landscapes shaped by sustainable, often traditional land use and local culture (Pröbstl 2004). Nature parks are the only category of protected area that targets recreation and tourism explicitly. Recreation and physical regeneration are supported by outstanding landscape beauty, and by the desired infrastructure and related facilities.

This “social category“ of parks has been developed across Europe since the 1960s. A closer look on park development in Europe generally - including the new development in Switzerland - shows that the idea of model landscapes for outdoor recreation and tourism is shifting more towards a tool for sustainable destination management (Pröbstl 2008, Pröbstl 2010). Since nature parks offer excellent conditions for nature based tourism and ecotourism, their potential for regional development in rural areas is now widely discussed and explored (Job et al. 2005, Pröbstl et al. 2010). Besides the income from recreation and nature-based tourism, a nature park also offers additional opportunities for regional development, based on sustainable forms of land use, the marketing of specific local products, and cultural traditions. Many nature parks have now successfully developed local labels and brands promoting their traditional land use and its contribution to species conservation. It is crucial, therefore, to consider the interests of agriculture, regional economic development and social aspects, and to combine them into one integrated framework (Pröbstl-Haider 2013).

However, not all nature parks were able to seize these opportunities. The German Association for Nature Parks is quite aware of these discrepancies and desires to alleviate the situation by starting a quality improvement campaign and rewarding best performing parks. But what should be done if a park fails the assessment, as its quality is no longer state-of-the-art? This presentation describes the planning process, the methodological framework and the applied planning tools used in southern Westfalia, Germany, where three parks failed the assessment and attempted a joint rejuvenation.

Methods

The methodological approach was divided into two main planning processes. First local stakeholders, park managers and regional administration needed to decide whether to attempt a rejuvenation of the parks, or to abandon the title of ‘Nature Park’. For this internal assessment a new methodological approach was developed. For the comparative analysis between the three parks I adapted the Herrmann Dominance Instrument (Herrmann (1989), which is used in human resources management and training to evaluate the strengths of individuals or teams. The “Park-Dominance Profile” consists of four segments: (A) legal tasks of the nature parks and its landscape setting; (B) organisation, budgetary situation, quality insurance and controlling; (C) provided image, recognition in the public, communication, and identification by the local population with the park; and (D) its creativity, innovation and diversity in outdoor recreation and tourism offers.

The second planning process focused on the development of a new park structure in a cooperative planning process. Since nature parks ought to be developed by a bottom-up approach, we based this planning task on the application of participatory-GIS, a moderated planning process with five

thematic stakeholder groups and several public meetings (Brown, 2014). Furthermore for the development of new ideas for the enlarged park we used the meta-plan technique. Each meeting was based on a discussion of recent trends and ended with development guidelines and proposals for new projects.

Results

Evaluation of existing parks

The application of the Park Dominance Profile to the three parks revealed significant differences and threats. Deficiencies were mainly discovered in section B (organisation and finances) and D (the creativity and product development). Only one park showed overall positive trends. Given these findings the question emerged if one single new park would provide better opportunities to achieve the goals in the four segments. The majority of the local working group agreed that one single larger park would enhance the creativity, improve the tourism and outdoor recreation offers and facilitate the creation and implementation of innovative projects. Based on the findings in phase 1 the participatory planning process was started to define the new park, its territory and its new profile.

A new park planning process

Each of the thematic meetings on management and organisation, nature conservation, outdoor recreation and sustainable tourism, environmental education and communication and sustainable regional development consisted of 15 to 20 stakeholders and experts. First, maps of possible new boundaries of the future park were drawn. The consolidated GIS-map revealed significant overlaps, making it easy for communities and regions to agree to a new spatial concept.

In a second step each thematic group had to provide spatial information in their respective field of expertise. This input, again summarized using participatory GIS, illustrated the potential of the future park, but also identified areas, which currently offer fewer infrastructures. These data were combined with existing spatial information in the respective field. The most significant discrepancies emerged in the group meeting on regional development. For example, many interesting structures such as local farmer markets have not been considered in the past.

The final step of the planning process provided the region with the concept for new park borders which were very acceptable to most participants, new thematic guidelines, and a project database with new ideas, possible project partners and funding opportunities. The entire planning process, which included a few new methodological tools, proved to be highly valuable and enhanced the required participatory process and bottom up planning process.

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