

What Does Sustainable Development Look Like? Visions of Two Swiss Unesco Regions

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Introduction

The establishment of a nature reserve usually means a change of access to the area and its resources. Therefore, anticipated constraints for the use of resources can lead to opposition against nature conservation projects. Hence, bottom up initiated and broadly accepted conservation areas are rare, because different actors have different mental images about what their region should look like. Such images are expressed in written texts and visual publications (i.e. information brochures, newspaper articles). Visual images that have an influence on “images in the head” play an important role for the structuration of landscape and the potential of appropriation of space. This includes the landscape’s potential for tourism and formation as living space.

People’s actions are grounded in the meanings they attribute to things. These meanings are constructions and elements of social structures that are widely shared. The knowledge that these structures represent leaves its mark on all individual actions. This incorporated knowledge then shapes the way people comport themselves and how they interact with their environment. If a tourist finds out from a guide-book what the recognised sights in a region are, he or she can or will look out for these sights in a way that a tourist lacking the same knowledge would not think of doing (cf. Culler, 1988: 166). Knowledge feeds on experiences, especially on recurrent or intense ones. However, these experiences

are not simply stored away mentally but are actively absorbed on the basis of pre-existing mental images.

Objective

In our research we analysed how images influence sustainable regional development, using two case studies in Switzerland: The Entlebuch (UBE) and the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn (JAB) regions that became, of their own initiative, so-called model regions for sustainable development. We learn much about how “image producers” imagine their regions’ sustainable development through the way they presented their region during the application process (viz. a UNESCO biosphere reserve or a UNESCO world heritage site). We subsequently asked “How did the project leaders present the concept of sustainability to the public?”, and “What potential appropriations of space are suggested by the images?”

Choosing a human geographical perspective we are particularly interested in how visual representations suggest certain interactions with space, i.e. how the space in each region can or should be appropriated during the process of becoming a biosphere reserve or a world heritage site and how its resources can be used. The published images convey notions about potential spatial relations that they can have within the predefined regions. They show the current land-use activities and those that are possible and desirable.

Behind this approach lies the notion that different social groups can imagine different kinds of spatial appropriation, and that these can result in diverging notions about their region's development and even to conflicts. If differing ideas of the same region develop further, into visions for its future development, conflicts are to be expected. These conflicts can be a consequence of unreflected reproductions of the social images inherent to each group. Therefore, it is an important precondition for sustainable development to take place that unquestioned social images be dealt with on a discursive level.

Methods

The coverage of the process of becoming UNESCO-label regions in local and national newspapers, magazines and information brochures was analysed for the period of several years before the crucial polls and some time after it. We concentrated on the images and their surrounding text and made a quantitative content analysis. Despite the actual hype about "visual culture" and the "icon-

ic turn" (cf. Müller 2006a,b), there are only few studies that tackle a large number of pictures such as more than 500 like we did. Hence we had to develop a set of categories of potential spatial appropriations. We started with the rough division between "natural environment" and "cultural space" and further sub-divided these categories taking the size of images into account. Thus, we were able to produce condensed overviews of individual publications that could be compared with each other. A few selected images were analysed more thoroughly with a semiotic-hermeneutic approach (Müller-Doohm 1997). Moreover, the image producers were interviewed about their intentions regarding their selection of images for their publications.

Results

Results show that the representations of the conservation areas are different depending on the "view" adopted in the publications and the audience that was addressed (inside-outside, before the poll and after etc.) as well as on the context in which they were produced. The analysed publications (see fig-

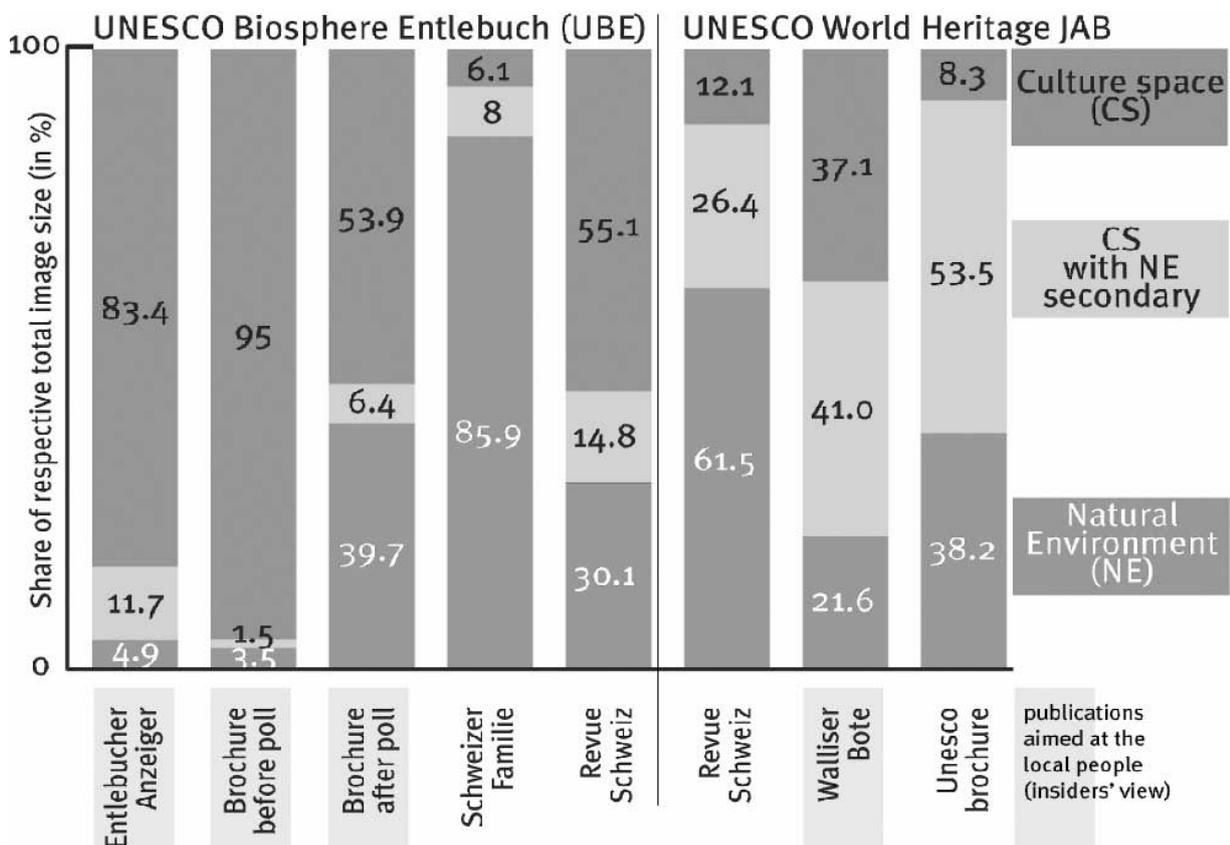


Figure 1: Proportions of culture space and natural environment (in%) of UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch (UBE) and UNESCO World Heritage Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn (JAB).

ure 1 for a selection) differed quite much according to these views. In the UBE the difference between inside and outside view was striking. While outsiders depicted UBE mainly as a nature space with little human presence (mostly in the form of traditional agriculture), the promoters of the UBE avoided to portray it that way and drew a contrasting image of a modern and diverse living space with a growing economy based on high-tech firms and many role models who stand for sustainable development. In the JAB this inside outside difference is not seen, in fact the region was also portrayed in the same way for the people living in the area as it was for (potential) tourists.

Conclusions

The results have to be regarded in the light of the context of the case study areas. For instance, the avoidance of the UBE promoters of showing much natural environment is a result of a national protection scheme (regarding moors) that was opposed by the local people. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the image of a multioptional area with an emphasis on living space, that was created by the UBE promoters (and others such as the local paper) with their use of different image types, contributed positively to a participatory process that is still ongoing. In the JAB, where this was not done in the same way, this participatory process took not place and had to be initiated later with much difficulty. Thus, the choice of images that are published during a process involving sustainable development can have a furthering or hindering influence on participatory processes.

On first glance this has not much to do with visitor flows into and within regions. However, if the mental images of visitors (that are influenced by material images published in newspapers and magazines) differ greatly from those of the local people and if that difference is not acknowledged and discussed by the regions managers and to a certain extent by the local people, misinterpretations, misunderstandings and even conflicts can arise that are detrimental to a sustainable development and tourism in a protected area. Therefore, our recommendations – in a nutshell – of reflecting on ones routines when selecting images, using a multifaceted

range of images, asking role models to partake, not avoiding opposing images etc. lead to a more transparent (visual) communication that enhances participatory processes that includes the needs and wishes of visitors and at the same time is able to clarify impossible or unappropriate desires and notions.

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