

Protected areas as opportunities for recreation and tourism planning – The challenge to create synergies between nature protection and tourism development as a basis for regional development. Experiences from Switzerland.

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Tourism planning is at odds with the development of protected areas. This finding is not new and has been confirmed since 2001 by the experiences with the development of protected areas in Switzerland. But the conflict lines are not as clear as generally assumed. Even the local tourism stakeholders do not agree whether the establishment of managed protected areas is positive or negative for the regional economic development. However, in Switzerland managed protected areas are installed when local politicians and local populations expect profits for tourism.

In 2007, Switzerland adopted a national law for the recognition and promotion of parks of national importance. The legal national guidelines for these parks are, given the expectations of the local population, surprisingly defensive in the fields of recreation and tourism:

In national parks, “the touristic use and the recreational use are to be arranged in an ecological manner”: This means that recreation and tourism is permitted and can even be supported. But the priority is given to make sure that touristic and recreational use harmonise in an ecological way (in the zones where they are allowed).

In regional nature parks, “nature based tourism services and environmental education-oriented services are to be promoted”. This means: offers should be promoted, but only the services (and not the infrastructure). Regional nature parks are generally located in rural-peripheral regions with mostly inadequate, outdated infrastructure. Given the lack of necessary infrastructure the question arises, how these regions can promote nature based tourism and environmental education. In nature adventure parks (which must be located near cities) “measures to promote environmental education are to be taken”. This means that they have to promote only environmental education, but not recreation and tourism in an ecologically manner.

Furthermore, particular restrictions and prohibitions concerning recreation and tourism are formulated in the legal foundation of the parks of national importance. For example, making core zones accessible is prohibited.

For every park, the funding body and the affected communities have to adopt a Charter. Yet even in that central document it remains voluntary to elaborate on recreation and tourism.

All in all, legal requirements for parks of national importance do not emphasise recreation and tourism as welcome opportunities for the development of the park. Statements about tourism are lacking, even though tourism is, or could offer, an important economic basis to the local population. Experiences from the Swiss nature park UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch and in the Swiss nature park Gruyère-Pays d'en Haut show that actors in tourism are important driving forces, because they expect an important publicity for their region. However this publicity usually refers neither to environmental education nor to nature based services. Instead, references are made to an increased use of touristic infrastructures, which produce a high level of economic value added. Thus, the legal requirements and the interests of local actors to create a park of national importance differ in a quite obvious way.

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What could be done about this difficult situation concerning opposite demands? The legal framework concerning parks of national importance should include guidelines on how to achieve a balance between tourism and nature protection. Several projects in Swiss parks demonstrate exemplarily the feasibility of cooperation among actors in tourism and actors in nature protection. However, examples of where local strategies and politics integrate park development and tourism planning are currently lacking in Switzerland. It is exactly here, where the challenge for park development in Switzerland lies: How can strategies and policies be conceived, such that tourism is united with nature protection in a way that creates mutually beneficial synergies? Once this challenge is resolved, tourism planning can become an instrument for park development and vice versa.

References

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