

Nature Park Project "Toggenburg-Werdenberg" in Eastern Switzerland – Common Chance for a Regional Sustainable Development

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Abstract: In the context of the current discussion about the protection of nature, government as well as non-governmental-organisations (NGO) consider introducing a new system of protected areas in Switzerland. New National Parks, Regional Nature Parks and Nature Experience Parks shall complete the Swiss nature and landscape protection management. Depending on local initiatives there should arise one or two new national parks, about ten nature parks and three to five nature experience parks in Switzerland. Different types of park examples of the neighbouring countries as Germany, Austria, Italy and France are holded up as a model. The experience within these areas shows that parks are an important force in sustainable regional development. The process and first results of the actual regional nature park project Toggenburg - Werdenberg (Switzerland) will be discussed in the following paragraphs. A feasibility study has been carried out and several projects could be implemented.

Introduction

Regional nature parks are areas of high value in nature, landscape and culture, where a lot of efforts were made to protect those throughout the years. With the help of the regional nature park the attractive landscape shall be embedded in the regional economic cycle and of use for the inhabitants and tourism. At the same time it should facilitate an added value for nature and landscape and therefore support initiatives for example in forestry, agriculture or tourism. Existing deficits could be leveled out, landscape preserved and culture as well as tradition supported. The label is a chance for a better marketing and a positive image - for the region itself and its products. In the end the sensibilisation of the population for a sustainable way of using environment and the preservation of landscape should be managed.

At the moment more than 30 projects are in process to fulfill the Swiss national standards and to enjoy the label and the financial assistance by the state. With the help of this instrument the Government wants to sustain rural areas and nature protection at the same time.

One of these projects is the regional nature park Toggenburg - Werdenberg. By the help of Regio Plus (comparable to Leader+) both regions started a developing process in the year 2001 and 2002. As soon as the government of the departement of St. Gallen declared to support only one regional nature park in their area of responsibility, both projects started to work together. The organisation is built up in the way of a private association with a committee, working groups and members out of different interests as for example administration, forestry, agriculture, tourism, economy, education, policy, nature protection etc.



Figure 1: Lovely landscape and vivid tradition in Toggenburg.

The Situation

The project area is situated in the north eastern part of Switzerland next to the border of Liechtenstein and Austria. The two regions are very heterogenous. Nature and landscape are affected by a mild climate in the Rhine valley with an altitude of about 450 m up to the typical conditions of a mountainous valley with an altitude of about 1'000 m in the Toggenburg valley surrounded by mountains up to 2'500 m.



Figure 2: View from Werdenberg up to the Kreuzberge.

The region of Toggenburg is confronted with a typical scenario of a rural area: jobs in agriculture get lost, a lot of companies fight to survive and the booking of overnight accommodations in tourism decrease. Therefore most of the young people migrate from the region into the big cities. To put up resistance to this development, region, community and economy want to improve the regional value added. In doing so resources such as intact nature and landscape are very important.

In the region of Werdenberg nature and landscape have a high potential too. In contrast to Toggenburg one can find an increasing population growth and an economic strength in trade and service. The situation in agriculture is getting worse too. The more competition the more extensively gainless land is used and the more intensive production on the remaining agricultural land becomes. Because of recreation and tourism the pressure on nature and landscape increase at the same time. The utilization of land rise and the high biodiversity is threatened.

That is the reason why both regions started to build up a nature park. For a start different projects have been realised. For example the “Klangwelt” - a world of culture, tradition and natural music, the “sagenhafte Familienland” - a special offer for family holidays, the “Werdenberger Apéro” - a catering service of local products by farmer women, the education of park rangers, the construction of several nature trails etc.

Besides the realisation of several projects we needed detailed information about the possible park-perimeter. Therefore a feasibility study was worked out.

Methods

The study was worked out by the University of Applied Sciences in Rapperswil in co-operation with the local project leaders and working groups. The objective of the feasibility study is to show the chances for a realisation of the nature park. That means in detail: Does the area fulfill the standards? What is the park contribution to the local economical, ecological and social development? What are the strengths, weaknesses, options and threats? What about the participation and the acceptance of the inhabitants? Are there any additional limitations for forestry, agriculture, economy or tourism? How much will it cost?

Working steps

1. Definition of a maximum area of exploration.
2. Accumulation and evaluation of the natural, cultural and economical values, for example high-moor, areas of high landscape and natural monuments, floodplains, game reserve, forest reserve, protected view of place, preserved castle and ruins, inhabitants, demographical aspects,
3. Combination of the different information in a plan and classification of the whole perimeter into different areas – natural, cultural and settlement.
4. SWOT-Analysis of both regions
5. Analysis of the acceptance and participation of inhabitants via interview of stakeholder and feedback of the steering committee
6. Work out of different scenarios and perimeter alternatives

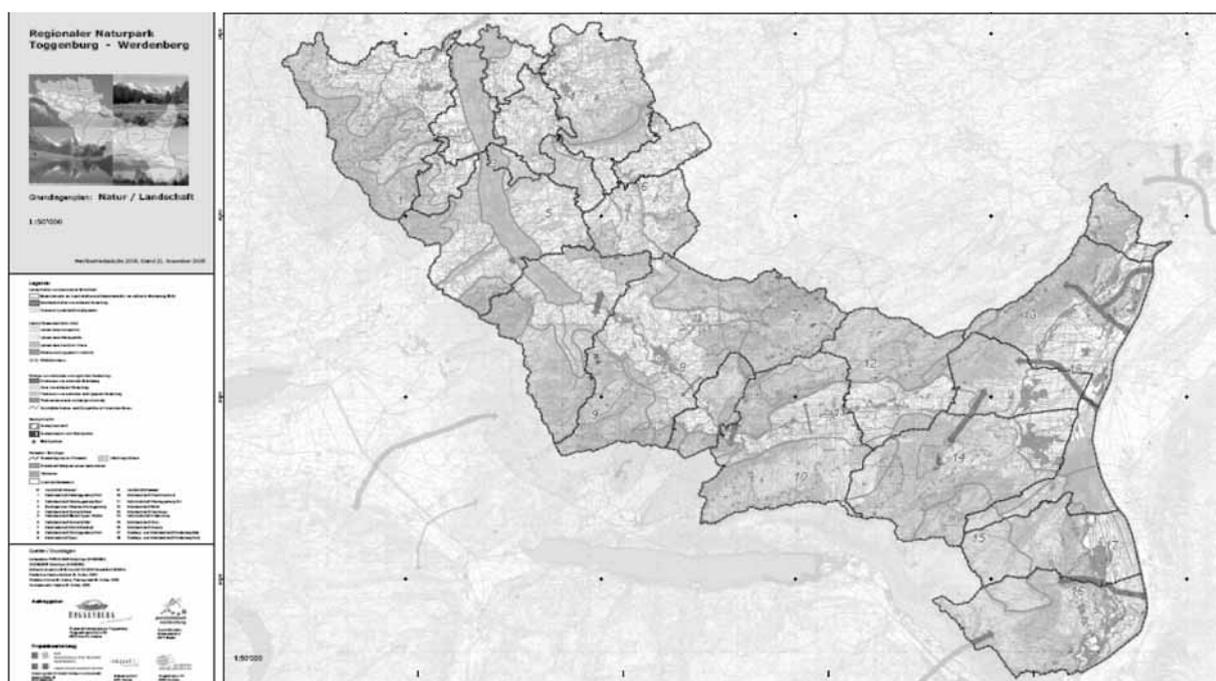


Figure 3: Map of natural and landscape values.

7. Evaluation of the financial facilities and need of resources

Results

Value of nature and landscape

Both regions have a high level of nature and landscape value and biodiversity. You will find several protected areas of national, cantonal and regional interest as well as important bird areas, which will be accommodated by the European Emerald network. The actual study of the WWF concerning the priority conservation areas of the Alps mentions this area as very important too. Nearly 2/3 of the region is part of a landscape inventory or protection area.

Chances and risks

The most important thing is that the regional nature park is a possibility for the region to both plan and develop the future together with the communities, the different stakeholders and the population. Special chances are:

- sustainable regional development with at the same time increasing value added
- possibility to reach a better position in the market with the help of the label, for example agrotourism and regional products

- cooperation between the two regions, communities, private companies and producer may offer new perspectives and products
- information and communication platform as well as regional, national and international network
- strengthening of the regional identification

Typical further nature park products could be offers in natural experience, culture and music, environmental education and excursions, nature park information center, new products in the field of wood and woodenergy, new products in the field of agrotourism, new products around typical cultivation as for example goats, ecological network projects, etc.

Risks could be

- overestimation of the benefits of the park
- need of professional, efficient and locally accepted park management
- impairment of nature and landscape without effective monitoring systems
- fears of further limitations

Participation and acceptance

Interviews of key personalities and workshops with stakeholders show a high interest in the nature park. The acceptance in the population is difficult

to estimate. There are only little public relations yet. A wide information campaign about the issues of a regional nature park is missing. Nevertheless it would be very important to erase false ideas and fears. An intensive participation and information is necessary to sustain the bottom up process.

The right dimension of the nature park area

To discuss the right dimension of the regional nature park a kind of evaluation of the different aspects and landforms is necessary. So quality and quantity of nature and landscape, man-made environment, villages and potential conflicts were evaluated. Basic requirements are the land use planning of the departement St. Gallen and the minimum standards for regional nature parks:

- minimum area of 100 km²
- extraordinary value of nature and landscape
- high ecological and sustainable standards in cultivation and economy
- preservation of cultural buildings and a vivid tradition
- natural and socio-economical basis of the region

The evaluation forms five models of different extension and content. Besides the different nature values one can say that the bigger the park the more coordination and costs, and the smaller the park the less marketing and label effect it causes. The outcome of the poll at the com-

munities is a perimeter, which is in accordance to the most probable variant of the feasibility studie

15 villages out of 23 want to be part of the regional nature park. That means a perimeter about 510 km² and 58000 inhabitants, a great variety of landscape and nature protection areas, a high economical capability, important cultural and touristic values and an acceptable balance between effort and gain. Furthermore the existing infrastructure can be easily complemented by additional touristic offers and various regional products.

Special situation

As the national standard specifies not to dissect the area of a village, it should be provided to factor out special sectors - as far as reasonable and possible. In the following three topics special solutions must be found.

Agglomeration area

Buchs is the biggest village in the perimeter with about 10000 inhabitants. With all of the industrial establishments and the growing housing estates it is declared as an agglomeration area. The typical rural and traditional architecture and even structure of the village is missing. The space between Ebnat-Kappel and Bütschwil has more or less the same problem. By the demand of the state the majority of the villages have to be outside from agglomeration areas to guarantee the rural character of a regional nature park. On the other hand even the bigger villages try to develop in a sustainable way. Buchs for example has got the label of "Energistadt Schweiz" since 2001, has got a high engagement on ecological architecture and realise ecological revaluation projects in the town every year. Together with community, government and state a special solution should be found.

Intensive cultivation of the Rhine valley

The land of the Rhine valley is highly productive, which is caused by land improvement, intensive dewatering and drainage in the last 50 years. The value of nature and landscape in that area is very small as a lot of natural structure got lost. The potential of revaluation is very high. A few proj-

Projekt Regionaler Naturpark Toggenburg, Perimeter (Stand: 7. April 2006)

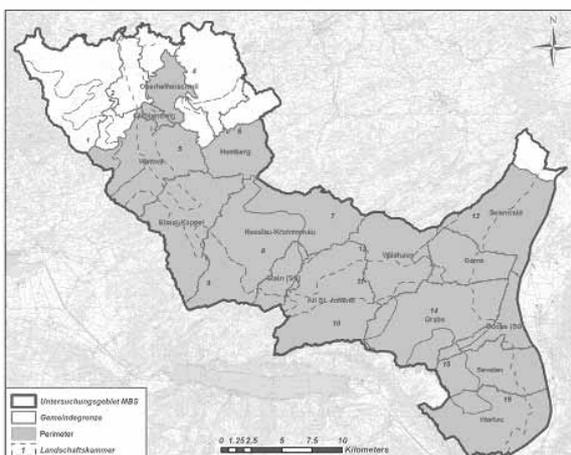


Figure 4: Actual map of the nature park-perimeter.

ects, for example renaturation of turf moor, creation of wetland, extensive grazing with Scottish highland cattle or the construction of dry stone walls, were started with great results. Threatened species found a new habitat or could enlarge their incidence. The nature park represents in cooperation with the agriculture a chance to carry on and to net these revaluation projects.

Ski-tourism in the upper Toggenburg

The mountain railways are the engine for the Toggenburg and an important partner for the nature park. Especially the winter tourism attracts a lot of daytourists within a radius of about 150 km (Zürich, Bodensee, Süddeutschland, Vorarlberg). Beside ski-runs, ski lifts and other infrastructure one can find high natural values as moor, dryland and dolines.

A regional nature park doesn't forbid ski tourism and necessary infrastructures in general. The capacity of the skiarea should fit to impacts on the nature area. In this context the state excludes international well known skiareas as Davos, Arosa or St. Moritz. The approval for new projects of the mountain railways are still based on the existing federal laws. One should be aware of that in the future renewing or extension of infrastructure has to be embedded in the landscape. For the ongoing process it is very important to work out the goals and aims of the nature park together with representatives of the mountain railways and to define it in the park charta. An exclusion of the ski area should be avoided, as that would mean a division of the park into two parts and a lost of a main force in the region who wouldn't participate in the sustainable developing process of the region.

Financial situation

The amount of cost depends mainly on the size and the scope of projects. According to the regional experience and a perimeter of about 400 - 500 km² the expenses for the set-up of the park can be estimated at more or less the same level as the actual regio plus projects. Taking into account that the state is going to pay half of the costs it would mean about five CHF/inhabitant/year. Participation by the departement would reduce the regional financial investment too. The

running of the park may cause additional costs. The state calculates with a total amount of 1.5 Mio CHF/year/park.

Conclusion - A Regional Nature Park is Possible in the Area of Toggenburg Werdenberg

The result of the feasibility study is positive. The project meets with general approval by the interview partners and stakeholders of the region. The acceptance in the wide population depends on a transparent communication and information. The question of the perimeter and the solution for the difficult areas has to be answered during the process.

Added value for the region: the regional nature park can make a contribution to the strengthening process of both regions as natural relaxing areas and attractive settlements. Further effects of value added can be expected by the local economy, agriculture, forestry and tourism. That could be more than the grant which has to be invested. This aspect is proven by new value added studies in national and nature park areas of Switzerland and neighbouring countries.

Contribution to nature and landscape: many objects with considerable natural and cultural value exist in both regions. There are several nature protection areas of national interest as for example moor, dryland, flood plain forests or river breeding areas of greyling (*Salmo thymallus*) and nase (*Chondrostoma nasus*). The riverside and banks of gravel of the Rhine are eminent as breeding areas for rare birds. The upper Toggenburg and the Säntis is part of the European network for important bird areas (Emerald Network). International studies for example the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) point out that the region of Werdenberg and Toggenburg is one of the priority areas in the alpine space of very high biodiversity, which could be preserved and supported with the help of a nature park. Renaturation especially of the canalised streams and brooks means a high potential for nature revaluation. The wildlife conservation programme for the capercaillie (*Tetrao urugallus*) or the resettlement programme of the lynx (*Lynx lynx*) could be assisted.

Organisation and management: the existing organisation in the way of a private association is suitable to the regional nature park too. Representatives of the different interest groups as well as inhabitants should be members. The steering committee will be dominated by the communities, as they have to agree with the regional development and the payment of the region. The main interest groups may be engaged too. Professional management and execution has to be developed.

Next Steps

Based on the results of the feasibility study 15 communities have decided to follow up the project. Therefore a public workshop was organised in May 2006 where stakeholders and citizens were invited, the results presented and new working group for the different topics founded. At the moment more than 100 people work out the goals, contents, projects, organisation and management, which should be build up in the following three years. In the beginning of 2007 the motion for financial support has to be finished and should be delivered to the state.

The important part of the project and the management plan is the charter. This charter is an official agreement about the objectives of the park, which is ratified by the communities and the main interest groups. Provided that state, government and region agree to the nature park it is the aim to get the official label of a regional nature park of national interest in 2010. This label is available for 10 years. Afterwards the project will be reevaluated by the state and the park organisation has to point out if and how the intentions of the park and the charter are fulfilled. In case of non achievement of the objectives the state has the possibility to remove the label.

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