

The Role of Regional Identity in Protected Areas: the Biosphere Reserve Rhön (Germany) as Benchmark

Tobias Behnen

Summary

The historical landscape of the sparsely wooded central German upland Rhön has been protected as biosphere reserve since 1991. It has induced a positive change by adapted landscape protection and support of endogenous economic processes. The region has various functions like as a rural habitat with a high number of outgoing commuters, as an area for transit traffic and as a mountainous tourism destination which induce many difficulties and conflicts. Interviews with residents were carried out to find out about the identification with the region which is important for further regional development and about the relationship of the inhabitants to the landscape. One important result is that the regional identity is partially split up caused by the boundaries of the federal states. The influence of the biosphere reserve on the sense of togetherness was seen as mainly positive as well as for the process of cultural landscape change.

Keywords

Regional Identity, Central German Upland, Biosphere Reserve Rhön

The central German upland Rhön (up to 950 m a.s.l.) is situated in the middle of Germany. The federal states Bavaria, Hesse and Thuringia have a share of this manifold volcanic landscape and the same-named biosphere reserve. The Rhön is a typical historic cultural landscape (Fig. 1). Therefore it includes several anthropogenous biotopes like mountainous grazing grounds (esp. *Nardetum strictae*), hedges or meadow orchards. After several changes during the last centuries today the Rhön contains approximately 40% forests, 30% grassland, 20% arable farm land and 5% settlements. Only within the core zone of the biosphere reserve (2%) no use takes place. Many rounded summits are not tree-covered and allow enormous ranges of vision, but most of the slopes or plateaus are wooded with beeches (*Fagus sylvatica*) as potential natural vegetation or with common spruces (*Picea abies*) as atypical monoculture.

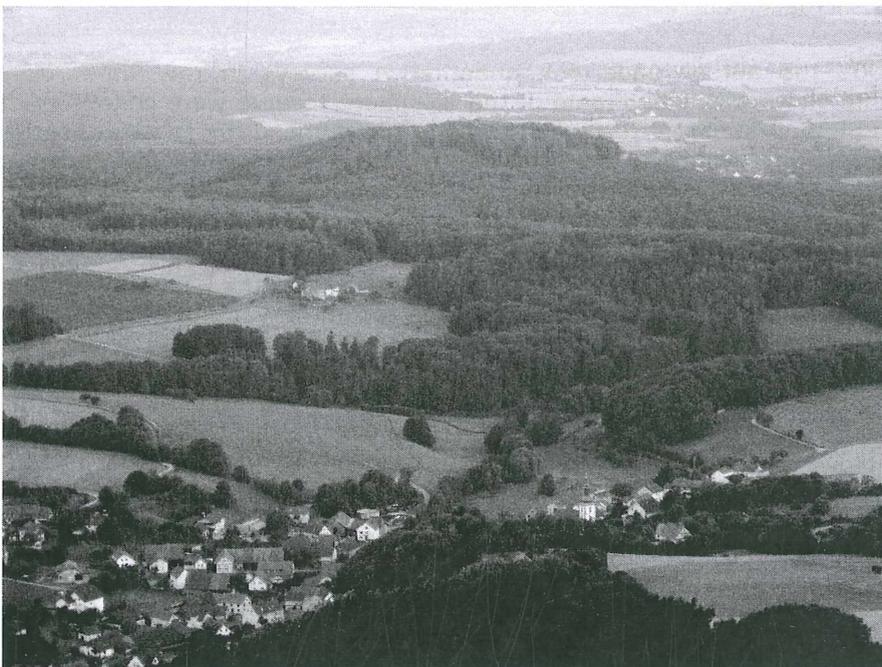


Figure 1: Typical part of the Rhön (Photo: T. Behnen)

Today the inhabitants and tourists perceive the Rhön positively as an original European agricultural landscape a "dreamscape". But it should not be forgotten that in the past the region was characterised by poverty, famine, immobility and social inequity (Dix 2003, 13). However, the Rhön has currently shown a significant intraregional socio-economic heterogeneity and attributes of rural deprivation. Since 1991 large parts of the Rhön have been protected by the biosphere reserve (Fig. 2). It contains 185.000 ha and has 122.000 residents (65 per km²).

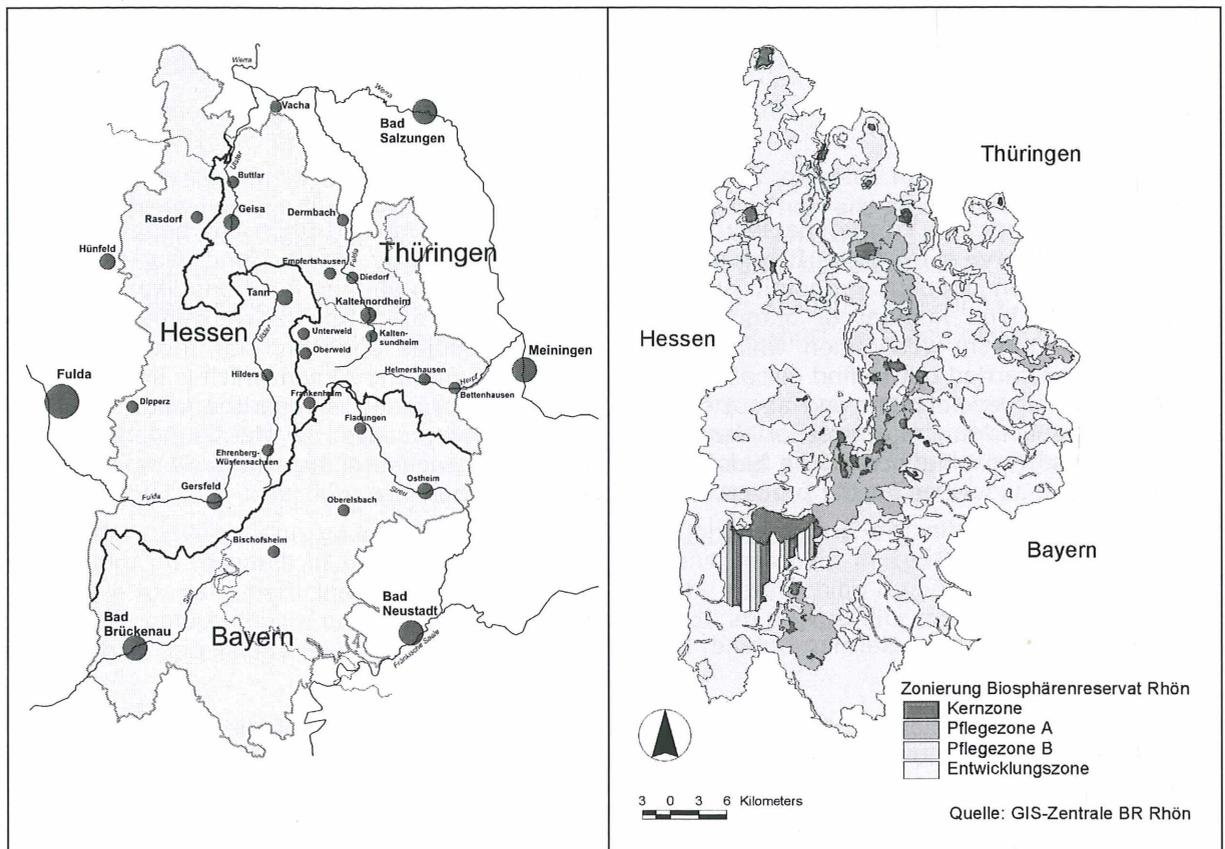


Figure 2: Biosphere Reserve Rhön (Source: BR Rhön)

Livestock plays an important role concerning preservation of the countryside in the biosphere reserve. Meanwhile the regional sheep breed *Rhönschaf* has been re-established as the multifunctional grazer. It supplies wool and meat but also preserves the cultural landscape by reducing scrub encroachment.

From 2005-2008 the author undertook quantitative surveys in the Rhön. More than 2.000 standardised interviews with inhabitants of the biosphere reserve were conducted. The data were evaluated with SPSS. The aim of the project was to comprehend the (positive) reciprocal influence of regional identity, environmental behaviour, social integration and the perception and acceptance of protected areas against the background of an accelerated cultural landscape change.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the acceptance for the biosphere reserve is high. About 75% of the people thought that it achieves the goal to protect the landscape as well as to enable human use. The other main question was "In which region do you live?". 40% of the sample said "Rhön", but the percentage of people which answered "Bavarian, Hessian or Thuringian Rhön" was nearly equal in size. The bare majority believed that the biosphere reserve strengthens the sense of togetherness in the Rhön. Especially in Thuringia which was situated behind the Iron Curtain until 1989 the people agreed with this statement. This also applied to the farmers which on the one hand have to follow the rules within the biosphere reserve but on the other hand could profit by filling orders for measures to preserve the anthropogenous landscape. The vast majority of the interviewees (89%) gave their consent to these payments. The results to an open question showed that it is not only the whole aesthetic landscape which supports the regional identity but especially unique mountains (Wasserkuppe or Kreuzberg), plants (Rhön thistle/*Carlina acaulis*) or animals (*Rhönschaf*). 93% of the interviewees said that the landscape is important or very important for their quality of life. The basis of this close relation of many Rhön residents to the landscape is their frequent recreational use of the landscape (94%). The dominating activity was hiking (83%), which is not only environmentally-friendly but also pushes the ecological awareness of the person in

general (BRÄMER 1998, 53). However, the survey could not confirm a direct influence of the biosphere reserve on the environmental behaviour (19%). Nevertheless the preference of regional food (69%) which is promoted by the biosphere reserve could be an indirect consequence.

The Rhön is a positive example for protecting and developing historic cultural landscapes. The results show the correlation between the landscape, the residents and their acceptance of the protection goals. Due to the responsibility of there federal states the biosphere reserve is divided into three parts. This is not only an administrative problem, but for the majority of the population the biosphere reserve is furthering the regional identity within the whole region. In summary it could also be said that the management of the protected area achieves public acclaim. For these reasons the Rhön could be a benchmark for developing protected areas.

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Contact

Dr. Tobias Behnen
t.behnen@kusogeog.uni-hannover.de

Leibniz Universität Hannover
Institut für Wirtschafts- und Kulturgeographie
Schneiderberg 50
D-30167 Hannover
Germany

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Zeitschrift/Journal: [Nationalpark Hohe Tauern - Conference Volume](#)

Jahr/Year: 2009

Band/Volume: [4](#)

Autor(en)/Author(s): Behnen Tobias

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