

Education for sustainable development in protected areas in Europe - Evaluation of educational concepts -

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Abstract

This research project focuses on education for sustainable development, a concept fundamental to the realization of sustainable development. It analyses educational approaches taken by large protected areas in view of their potential contribution to sustainable development. As a theoretical framework, the project uses a specific educational theory. The advantage of this theory is that it allows concrete criteria to be established for assessing educational concepts in the protected areas. It includes two dimensions. The first is based on the definition of sustainable development set out in the "Brundtland Report" (WCED 1987). The second describes ways to engender active participation in sustainable development and stresses various fundamental competencies. This study combines both dimensions and sets out concrete competencies necessary for implementing sustainable development.

The study focuses on 24 large protected areas, comprising 8 National Parks, 8 Natural Parks and 8 Biosphere Reserves. The main geographical focus is on the alpine region and covers the four European countries Switzerland, Austria, Germany and France. The study is based on qualitative assessments and relies on interviews and data gathered in the protected areas. As a substantial result of the study, a kind of "manual" or "guide" will be developed which should enable protected areas to evaluate and build or extend their educational concepts with a view to education for sustainable development.

Keywords

Sustainable development, education for sustainable development, protected areas

Project aims and duration

Agenda 21 states that all institutions engaged in the field of education should make a contribution to sustainable development, irrespective of whether they form part of the formal or informal educational sector. In contrast to formal education, which has already been analyzed by numerous studies, little research has been done on informal educational concepts and initiatives (i.e. education outside the classroom). This is especially true for education in large protected areas.

As set out in their objectives, education forms a central task for National Parks, Natural Parks and Biosphere Reserves. At the same time, Parks and Biosphere Reserves increasingly state their intention to actively contribute to sustainable development. But the three categories of protected areas still lack a normative standard for the realization of education *for sustainable development*. The question therefore arises whether the different objectives of protected areas are really compatible with this intention or whether they need to be adapted to more explicitly support educational aims. Here the study wants to make an essential contribution.

As a substantial result of the study, a kind of "manual" or "guide" will be developed which should enable protected areas to evaluate and build or extend their educational concepts with a view to education for sustainable development.

Work on the project started in January 2004 and will probably be completed by the end of 2006.

Study area

The study focuses on 24 large protected areas, comprising 8 National Parks, 8 Natural Parks and 8 Biosphere Reserves. Since these categories conform to international standards set out by the IUCN and EUROPARC, international comparison is simplified. The main geographical focus is on the alpine region and covers the four European countries Switzerland, Austria, Germany and France.

The study is based on qualitative assessments and relies on interviews and data gathered in the protected areas. The survey is carried out in two stages. The first is a content analysis of documents relevant in the educational context of the park. The second is personal interviews with experts and actors engaged in education in the protected areas.

For analysis, categories are required to measure the implementation of education for sustainable development. A first set of categories is established on the basis of the theoretical framework concept. During the course of the survey these are modified and fine-tuned in response to the data gathered.

Results

The following hypotheses reflect the actual state of the study and the tendencies that have so far become apparent. They will have to be verified by the data.

Independent of the category of protected area (National Park, Natural Park and Biosphere Reserve), all protected areas have a clear intention to contribute to sustainable development. However, there is considerable variety in their definition of sustainable development, ranging from an exclusively ecological point of view to a more comprehensive idea that focuses on the interdependencies of the ecological, socio-cultural and economic dimensions. The contribution a protected area perceives to sustainable development is often influenced by the circumstances that led to its foundation. Even if global aspects of sustainable development do not feature amongst the specific aims of a protected area, they nevertheless include these global aspects as an implicit part of their vision. Their understanding of sustainable development is really that of sustainable regional development. According to this, the global aspect is not an explicit topic within the educational aims of the parks.

Generally, understanding the concept of sustainable development is of fundamental importance for understanding and implementing education for sustainable development. But the general aims of protected areas to contribute to sustainable development and to provide education still lack a close connection. Instead of referring to one another, the different aims seem to be pursued independently, which means that potential synergies are lost. Protected areas are often very good at initiating and managing innovative projects that can be judged as important steps towards sustainable development in the regional context. As examples of guiding principles of sustainable development, these should be integrated much more in the educational field in future.

Discussion

In addition to scientific research that is done *on* protected areas, research initiated *by* the protected areas themselves should receive much more recognition as a relevant contribution to future environmental science.

Research is one of the most important potentials of protected areas. Protected areas – especially Biosphere Reserves – are regarded as privileged places of research in the environmental field. Results of research obtained in such small areas can be regarded as models for a wider geographical context.

For the local and regional population, research in protected areas can be a starting point for actively shaping their future. It contributes to a better understanding of the natural and socio-cultural environment and produces and pushes innovative processes. If possible, research should therefore be included more prominently in the planning and management of protected areas.

Communication of results is a key condition of socially relevant research in protected areas. Results should be communicated on two levels: firstly, within the protected areas themselves in order to initiate further innovation, and secondly on a national and international level to support networking with other protected areas.

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