

The Implementation of the National Park Idea in Society – The Role of Agenda 21 Processes

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Abstract

Due to continuous debate, a significant paradigm shift in protected areas research and implementation can be observed, being characterized by a shift from the dominance of protection to an integration of protection and development. As a result, the idea of area protection has been extended to the idea of general protection of nature and the environment. This approach requires a continuous participation of inhabitants and civil society at large. If protection should take place *with* people and not *against* them, it is necessary to promote acceptance, initiate continuous discussion and reflection about the functions of protected areas and organize active participation in their development. Especially during the implementation of protected areas there is a high need of explanation for the necessity of borders and zones to meet the aims of nature protection. Many different models and examples of participatory processes of protected areas, especially national parks, show how successful the integration of regional actors can be. To reach a continuous discussion and contribution of the population, it is necessary to examine the meaning of borders and develop a new understanding of their functions between protected and non-protected areas. Although the border has the role to delimitate, it should contribute to overcome itself and finally make itself unnecessary. Decoding borders of protected areas as restrictions, impulses and measures for man-biosphere-relations, can only happen throughout dialogue. Not simply teaching and studying, but common experiencing and understanding offers a chance for an area protection, that goes beyond national parks and other protected areas and makes room for sustainable development of regions. Local and regional Agenda 21 processes offer an appropriate political and organizational framework to cope with this challenge. By several examples of national parks in Europe the authors will illustrate experiences, possibilities and limitations linked with Agenda 21 models of regional learning processes under the umbrella of nature protection. Their fruitful implementation has only just begun.

Keywords

Participation; Borders; National Park Idea; Implementation Process; Agenda21;

Goals of the presentation

This presentation describes the possible and necessary conditions for continuous examination and discussion of protected areas, especially national parks, by regional actors and their active participation in the development. Its main focus is on local-regional Agenda 21 processes in national park regions.

The necessity of continuous participation

The systematic participation of inhabitants and representatives of civil society, economy and local politics has turned out as an absolute prerequisite for the establishment of protected areas (BARBER 2004, p. 117). Similar to other fields of planning, participatory elements are being institutionalized as parts of the implementation process of protected areas. Many examples underline the importance and value of participation processes for establishing national parks and creating the necessary acceptance.

It also has become clear, that models of participation are required, that go beyond the creation of pure acceptance for conserving biodiversity among landowners, adjoining owners or local decision makers/politicians. If a broad participation takes place continuously, not only identification with the idea, acceptance and respect of the protected area will be established. At the same time, also an important contribution to the idea of general protection of nature and the environment can be made. Protected areas "can serve as a model of comprehensive, integrated land management, aimed at serving a variety of human purposes within the context of ecological sustainability" (MUNRO 1995). General protection of nature and the environment are realized, when this idea is embodied in people and sustainable acting has become part of their daily lives.

The borders of protected areas are a necessity, but they are also a handicap. As a matter of fact, the design of protected areas is based on special characteristics and qualities, which are not present or visible outside the protected area. At the same time borders can lead to the perception, that the idea of protection is primarily or even exclusively limited to the park itself. This goes along with another paradox: On the one hand the border is necessary to protect nature from human activities, on the other hand it should be overcome, to allow for a general protection of nature and the environment. What is made visible and can be realized inside the border should be applied beyond the border, too. This requires acceptance and crossing of the border at the same time. The border is creating a tension that can lead to conflicts but also to examinations and therefore create confidence at the same time (WEIZSÄCKER 1997). To experience and understand this differentiated meaning of borders, it is necessary to establish appropriate spaces for dialogues.

Dialogue-framework

Forms of participation in national park development processes can differ significantly, depending on the phase of implementation. Different levels and methods of participation (from passive forms of participation to interactive forms) are appropriate for different situations and aims (BARBER 2004, p. 117ff). During the initial establishment phase it is usual, that participation possibilities are offered by the representatives of the national parks top down (ministry, administration). Information is offered from above, workshops held – structured, organized and thematically designed by the representatives of the park. For continuous development and implementation of the national park, it is necessary to develop forms of participation that are characterized by openness, self-determination and flexibility. These participation models do not necessarily have to be implemented by the representatives of the park. If the framework is created bottom up by inhabitants of a national park region as a self-initiated mobilization, a more open process of examination and dialogue may be possible. It requires a vision for partnership of representatives of protected areas and the openness to accept and follow dialogues on subjects others introduce.

Local Agenda 21

The local Agenda 21 (proposed at the Conference of Rio de Janeiro 1992) was established in many municipalities and regions as a framework for the implementation of sustainable development aims on local level, during the last years (for Austrian Agenda 21 processes see: www.nachhaltigkeit.at). Local/regional Agenda 21 processes are open development processes being based on the understanding that autonomous and self-responsible citizens can contribute to the improvement of local/regional living conditions, according to their actual understanding and perception of reality. 'Openness' is given in a thematic sense as well as in a participatory sense. An Agenda 21 process does not have to be founded or installed formally. Therefore there can be more liberty in thinking-, discussing- and learning-processes. Agenda 21 processes are primarily self-organized, but frequently moderated by external persons.

Examples

Actual examples of local/regional Agenda 21 processes show that this model of self-organization of citizens and participation of civil society is appropriate to deal with various subjects of interest. Therefore they can also form a useful discussion platform between national park administrations and the interested public. This presentation will refer to two European case studies showing possibilities and limitations of Agenda 21 processes in national park areas: the 'Peak National Park' region, Great Britain (see MOSE, WEIXLBAUMER 2003) and the 'Kalkalpen National Park' region, Austria.

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