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Potential and limits of science and research in protected areas

With 1.800 km², the Hohe Tauern National Park is the biggest national park of the entire alpine space. In line with the global concept of national parks and with international standards, science and research are core tasks at Hohe Tauern NP, along with managing natural space and environmental education. The NP administration in Mittersill thus readily and happily agreed to host the 4th pan-alpine research symposium and to bring together the scientific community from all alpine states for an exchange of opinions and practical insights based on research within the alpine space.

The alpine arc as an area of great natural as well as anthropogenous dynamics offers an enormous and diverse field for research activity. For many (especially natural) scientists, large alpine protected areas such as national parks act as open-air laboratories that answer the most stringend demands in terms of securing undisturbed trial areas in the longer term and of maintaining them in a sustainable manner. From very early on, scientists have recognized this as a challenge and an opportunity for answering - particularly long-term - research questions. For the NP administration, this offers ways of securing a solid scientific base for their work, especially for their management of natural spaces – a classic win-win situation among professional partners.

There are, however, clear limits for the involvement of an NP administration in the area of science and research. We need to distinguish between what is interesting in scientific terms and what is important and necessary for protected area management. National parks make use of scientific methods and insights, here, science is not only tested for plausibility but also for applicability. It is not within the scope of national parks to finance and promote science and research outside this field of application. There, other political areas than the national and international conservation interests manifested in the national parks will have to take over.

I am confident that the 4th pan-alpine research symposium in Kaprun, in the Hohe Tauern National Park, will not only succeed in reflecting the broad research area of alpine space, but also in clearly positioning the significance of research in and for protected areas.

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