

A Commonwealth of Alpine Nature: The Swiss National Park

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In an article published in 1923 in the renowned British journal *Nature* Carl Schröter portrayed the Swiss National Park as "a commonwealth in which alpine Nature can recover and develop undisturbed: a refuge, a sanctuary for plant and animal life. It is an island of primeval Nature, unaffected by the devastating waves of human civilization which break about its shores."¹⁷ Schröter, who was a professor of special botany at the ETH Zurich (the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology), co-founder of the Swiss National Park and head of its Scientific Park Committee, had several reasons to call the park a commonwealth. First, he considered the park a "unique laboratory", where "the naturalists of Switzerland will find themselves united in a common work." Schröter himself had been pivotal in designing the long-term research program for the park, whose cornerstones read as follows: "The initial task is the preparation of complete lists of species inhabiting the reserve. Further, by means of exact surveys of selected areas, repeated from time to time, it is hoped to study – as the previous influence of man and his domestic animals becomes more remote – the gradual restoration of the original flora and fauna, the re-conquest of pasture by forest, and so on. By the work of successive generations of investigators, it will be possible to follow the truly natural successions and changes occurring within the area, and to study in detail the natural relations between soil, climate, and organisms." Second, the costs of park management (e.g. the wages of the park wardens and the maintenance of roads and huts) as well as the costs of the scientific investigations were provided by a non-governmental organization, the *Swiss League for Nature Protection*, which had been founded in 1909 to back the establishment of the park both financially and politically. At the time of Schröter's writing the League's more than 30,000 members were a telling evidence of the popularity of nature protection. Third, in 1914, the Swiss parliament had authorized the federal state to take charge of the park and to use public money to grant compensations to the local owners of parkland. This gave Schröter the content "feeling of patriotic pride that a whole nation is pledged to preserve this fragment of primitive Helvetia, unexploited for purposes of material gain, as a heritage for generations yet unborn." Finally, the biogeographical location of the park in the Lower Engadine turned it into a kind of commonwealth of Alpine nature as the „dividing line between the floras of the western and eastern alps passes through the region“, providing for "a mingling of eastern and western forms". Furthermore, forests and animal life were described as extensive and abundant.

The area of approximately 140 square kilometers in the Ofenpass district, which was set apart by a commission of the *Swiss Society of Natural Sciences* as a national park between 1909 and 1914, Schröter declared as "peculiarly suitable": "In wildness and naturalness, as in loneliness and seclusion, it is scarcely surpassed anywhere in Switzerland". Unlike the existing American National Parks, whose regulations were qualified by the mentioned commission as being insufficiently protective, the Swiss national park was meant to be a "Complete Nature Reserve": "Human interference is absolutely excluded from the whole region. Hunting, fishing, manuring, grazing, mowing and wood-cutting are entirely prohibited. No flower or twig may be plucked, no animal killed and no stone removed; even the fallen trees must remain untouched. In this way absolute protection is secured for scenery, plants, and animals; Nature alone is dominant". The motivation for these strict rules was partly moral, but mainly scientific. The national park should serve as a large outdoor laboratory where natural processes could be observed undisturbed by human interference. Schröter and his colleagues spoke of "a grandiose experiment to create a wilderness". In the park they hoped to witness a process of "retrograde succession" leading gradually to the reestablishment of "the old primitive biocenose", as it existed before civilized man set foot in the Alps and disrupted the natural equilibrium.¹⁸ Spectacular sights and exceptional phenomena were of

¹⁷ Carl Schröter, The Swiss National Park, in: *Nature*, 112 (29 September 1923), 478-481. All quotes from this article if not referenced separately. I like to thank Sabine Hühler for her comments and suggestions.

¹⁸ These goals were first publicly stated by the *Commission for Nature Protection* in its annual report 1908/09, 52-57.

less importance. Unlike in the US, Switzerland's national parks were not meant to attract large-scale tourism. On the contrary, tourism was to be highly restricted in the parks. Indeed, the need for large Alpine nature reserves was accentuated by the rapid development of the Alpine regions by mass tourism and the opening up of more and more mountain tops by cog railways.¹⁹ In addition, the remoteness of the area entailed another practical advantage: "It [the Ofenpass district] is very sparsely populated, so that the prohibition of forestry and grazing operations involve but little hardship for its human inhabitants." In other words, the land leased for the park was to a large extent economically worthless. Hence the compensations paid to the land owning local communes were relatively low. Suitability and practicability went hand in hand.²⁰

The Swiss National Park was simultaneously promoted as a national and an international endeavor. Its safeguarding meant to preserve a piece of both "primitive Helvetia" and the "European Alps". Furthermore, it was seen as a contribution to the worldwide protection of nature. While lobbying for the creation of a Swiss national park, the leader of the Swiss nature protection movement, Paul Sarasin, campaigned for the establishment of a "Weltnaturschutz" on the international level. The Swiss park was his model for what should be achieved in every nation and lead to a world-wide web of nature reserves. A network of contacts with German conservationists was built up and, in 1909, Sarasin became a founding member of the German "Verein Naturschutzpark". Of the other neighboring countries Italy was closest. The creation of the Italian *Lega Nazionale per la Protezione dei monumenti naturali* in 1913 was inspired by the corresponding Swiss League. Moreover, it was hoped in Switzerland that Italy would assign a protected area to the Italian valleys adjoining the Swiss National Park and thus prevent poachers to enter the park via the national border. However, the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914 set an end to these plans as well as to Sarasin's vision of "Weltnaturschutz". The Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio was not established until 1935, and World War II had to pass before Sarasin's legacy was resumed by the creation of IUCN in 1948. Four years later an additional framework for the collaboration among the Alpine countries was created, the *Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes* (CIPRA). Scientific research was the hallmark of the Swiss National Park and made it an important model for the establishment of protected areas elsewhere. It provided an alternative prototype to the dominant American national park concept, one that allowed putting emphasis on the scientific rather than on the recreational dimension of parks.²¹

However, not only humans and ideas but also nature travelled through the Alps. When the Swiss National Park was created the region was only sparsely populated by ungulates. Solely the chamois was present in significant number. The red deer had just started to re-immigrate from the east after having been eradicated from the region in the 19th century. The Alpine ibex, the heraldic animal of the canton Grison, was extinct since the 16th century. It was reintroduced into the park in several releases from 1920 onwards. The animals were delivered by two Swiss zoos which had succeeded in raising ibex in captivity. The zoo animals stemmed from the Italian royal hunting estate of Gran Paradiso, the last resort of the Alpine ibex, and were, after the refusal of Italian king Victor Emmanuel III to sell some species to Switzerland, obtained from poachers.²² The reintroduction of the ibex was somewhat at odds with the park philosophy of non-intervention. However, the issue had already been raised along with the national park idea and was legitimized by the former existence of the species in the region. Old documents and later on also a skull found in the park substantiated this claim.²³ The reintroduction of the ibex was not only celebrated as an achievement in species conservation but also as a highly popular public event. Bear, wolf and lynx, who had also formerly lived in the area (a last bear was shot near the future park in 1904), could not count on a similar social prestige. While the park advocates rejected the common contemporary partition in useful and harmful animals and, at least in theory, appreciated the free

¹⁹ Patrick Kupper. Science and the National Parks: A Transatlantic Perspective on the Interwar Years, in: *Environmental History*, 14 (1/2009), 58-81.

²⁰ "Worthless land" was an important factor in national park creation worldwide. Cf. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Warwick Frost and Colin Michael Hall (ed.), *Tourism and National Parks: International Perspectives on Development, Histories, and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

²¹ Cf. Bernhard Gissibl; Sabine Höhler and Patrick Kupper (ed.), *Civilizing Nature: Towards a Global History of National Parks* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010).

²² See Marco Giacometti (ed.), *Von Königen und Wilderern: Die Rettung und Wiederansiedlung des Alpensteinbocks* (Wohlen/Bern: Salm, 2006).

²³ Ferdinand Rudio and Carl Schröter. "Naturschutz" in der Schweiz, Notizen zur schweizerischen Kulturgeschichte, 19, in: *Vierteljahrsschrift der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Zürich*, Jg. 54 (1906), 502-508, 505. Carl Schröter. Hooker lecture: The Swiss National Park, in: *Journal of the Linnean Society of London, Botany*, 47 (318/1927), 637-643, 640.

roaming of predators in the park, they were not so bold to repopulate the park with these species. In the 1960s, the park board considered to reintroduce the bear to control the soaring population of red deer in a “natural” way, but eventually dismissed this thought. Thus, the bearded vulture was the second animal to be actively reintroduced into the park in the 1990s, whereas the bears and lynxes which were sporadically observed in the park in the last years appeared without human assistance.

This review of wildlife management shows that the practice in the park never fully complied with the scientifically underpinned philosophy of non-intervention and was open to social influences. The national park never became Schröter’s “island of primeval Nature” unaffected by human civilization. This is less surprising if one takes into account that the park was itself a social product and as such kept being molded by social aims, wishes, and fears. The Alps provided a transnational space for the transfer of both human and natural elements. Some of these movements were encouraged by human actors, others just happened.

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