

Swiss Parks of National Importance: Potential Topics and Research Perspectives

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Abstract

In Switzerland, legislation enabling the creation of parks of national importance has been in force since 1 December 2007. Within only five years, 15 new parks have been established and two more regions carry the label “park candidate”.

From a scientific point of view this boom of new protected areas within a short time presents a unique opportunity to study the development of these diverse regions in comparative studies. At the same time, the parks depend on scientific results in order to take adequate measures for valorisation and development of their areas. Therefore, this presents an excellent starting point to encourage the dialogue between science and practice. The Swiss Research Commission on Parks of National Importance (Parkforschung Schweiz) developed for this reason a catalogue of potential research topics.

Keywords

Switzerland, parks, comparative research topics, transdisciplinarity

Introduction

Until 2007 the list of protected areas in Switzerland encompassed one national park. A partial revision of the Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural was necessary in order to create the legal basis enabling the creation of further parks of national importance.

With 15 new parks in operation and two more park projects in the phase of establishment within only five years after the new legislation has come into force, the question regarding research perspectives of the concerned parks and potential research topics arises.

From a scientific point of view this boom in the establishment of parks of national importance within a short time presents a unique opportunity to accompany these parks and to establish a long-term evaluation in order to assess the changes in and the impact of these areas. From a management point of view, parks depend on scientific results in order to take adequate measures for valorisation and development of their areas. Taken together these are exceptional prerequisites for enhancing the dialogue between science and practice.

In order to promote the dialogue and to concurrently coordinate research related to more than one park, the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) facilitated the appointment of a coordinating office for research on parks. The office is supported by a group of experts. This Research Commission on Parks drew up a thematic catalogue of relevant research topics for comparative research on Swiss parks. Thereby, the focus is on a transdisciplinary research approach based on the exchange between science and society and supports the quest for science-based answers to questions regarding the impact, aims and governance of Swiss parks. Thus, research on parks contributes essentially to the sustainable development of park regions and the enhancement of a Swiss parks politics.

Potential Research Topics

To identify potential research topics we consulted park managers of the concerned parks and developed a short description of topics, which could be of interest for comparative research on several parks. These were discussed in a wider circle of the research community and park managers as well as representatives from governmental agencies.

The discussions showed that the focus on research on parks covers the following three areas:

- establishment of parks;
- operation of parks;
- impact of parks inside and outside of the park region.

Based on these results we further developed the proposed research topics and came up with seven topics. These fall within the classical sustainability triangle of ecology, economics and society (see Figure 1).

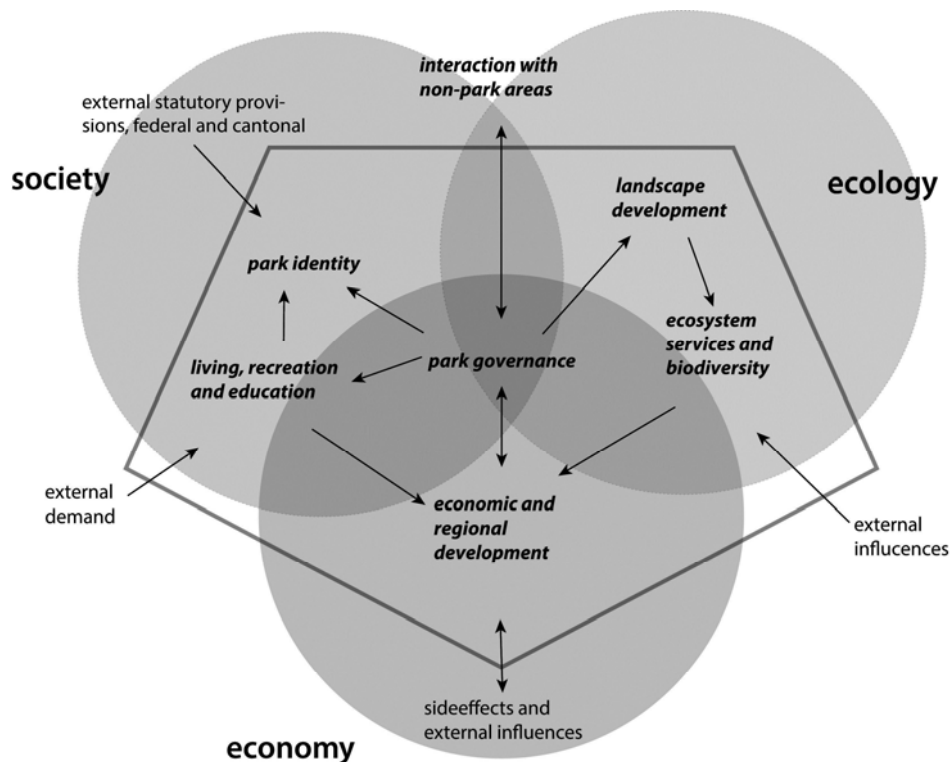


Figure 1: Potential research topics for parks of national importance (within the grey line) situated within the sustainability triangle.

Park identity

Parks of national importance in Switzerland are based on regional initiatives. They are the result of democratic, participatory processes that take several years and involve a number of stages. As such parks are established not on the drawing boards of administrators, but in the hearts and minds of the local people. The latter must give the impetus for the creation of a park. Only then will the federal government support a park project and award it the park label – provided all requirements are fulfilled. The local communes play a considerable role in the park authority, making strategically important decisions about the park. In this sense, the creation of a park is a political as well as societal process. This is the basis for various research questions regarding issues such as motivation, acceptance and regional identity.

Park governance

The park is a new actor in an already complex environment. Local and regional institutions and structures as well as national regulations form the framework within which the park has to function. At the same time, the local population has great expectations of the park administration. However, the park as such usually does not form a political or regional or administrative unit and therefore has no official legal mandate. In this realm research can contribute by analysing the opportunities of park administrations to influence political sectors such as agricultural policy and transport policy.

Economic and regional development

The establishment of a park is seen by many as an opportunity to encourage regional economic development. Opportunities mentioned include promoting local products, creating added value by supporting local resource cycles, encouraging new choices for tourists. However, the impact of any action on nature and landscape has to be observed, since the protection and enhancement of exceptional natural habitats or landscapes of outstanding beauty is the main goal of the Swiss parks' politics. Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate for example into the question, how parks promote synergies between different economic sectors such as tourism, agriculture and trade.

Landscape development

In recent decades, political awareness has turned towards the topic landscape development. Landscape can be considered as a collective resource with the characteristics of a public good instead of an individually usable good. In this way landscape becomes the central issue of a democratic process. Since preserving and enhancing the natural values of the landscape is the highest priority of the parks in Switzerland, it is logical to apply this concept of landscape also to parks. Research studies could investigate for example whether the acceptance of a park does imply a change in the appreciation of nature and landscape.

Ecosystem services and biodiversity

The various parks of national importance present a great variety of landscapes. These landscapes not only provide an important basis for different recreational activities and regional value creation. They also offer essential services such as air quality, water purification and flood prevention.

Parks also play an important role in biodiversity conservation since they include numerous areas under cantonal or national protection. The relationship between biodiversity and ecosystem services is undisputed. However, research results could be used for displaying the services of biodiversity and ecosystems and to implement them in the long run as quality criteria in land use planning.

Living, recreation and education

Many rural areas are affected by emigration and decline. Areas carrying the label 'park of national importance' commit themselves to encouraging sustainable regional development and see the park as an instrument to counteract migration losses. Outside their area, such regions promote the special quality of living that comes from handling natural resources and from the landscape. Overall, this is a transformation process, which depends on local knowledge and includes a re-orientation within the local population. Educating local people and visitors and making them aware of this special quality are vital in this process. Comparative studies can focus on local and expert knowledge of specific natural and cultural places and on how they can be integrated into educational programmes.

Interaction with non-park areas

A park interacts continuously with its surrounding region, with positive and negative mutual influences. For example, the creation of new visitor attractions in the park can lead to an increase in overnight stays outside the park. Or, as a negative example, intensification of land use in the vicinity of a park might impact on the ecological and landscape qualities of the park. Research can analyse these interactions and evaluate the effect of protected areas on their surroundings.

Research Perspectives

This catalogue of potential research topics is an essential step for enhancing the dialogue between science and practice regarding protected areas. So far, the topics have not been prioritized. At the moment it is important that parks authorities formulate their own research needs based on their experiences and the proposed topics.

Studies on parks are essential for identifying changes in protected areas over the time and to predict the impact of the parks. While certain studies related to the establishment and the operation of parks already exist, studies related to the impact of parks will only be possible once the parks have been in operation for several years. Comparative studies further support the analyses of the question whether it is actually the park itself that has led to the changes observed.

Future predictions on the development and impact of protected areas depend on long-term studies. These must be factored in already at the beginning of a comparative research approach and will be of great importance for carrying out a long-term impact assessment.

The full catalogue of research topics is available in German and French at: www.parkforschung.ch

Reference

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