

Educational opportunities of Austrian National Parks as a sustainability-oriented adult education – comparative analysis of the “Nationalpark Gesäuse” and “Nationalpark Kalkalpen”

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Abstract

This present thesis examines – in terms of a comparative analysis – the educational offers of two Austrian national parks regarding their contribution towards a sustainability-oriented adult education.

Besides the core tasks of national parks, such as conservation and exploration of nature, national parks also fulfill an extraordinary educational function. Parts of this educational initiative are directed towards adults.

The idea originated due to personal interest but also because of the fact that we're presently situated within the UN-decade of education for sustainable development (2005 to 2014). Therefore this thesis wants to examine the results of the interaction between adult education and sustainability-oriented learning. Representing the educational efforts of the Austrian national parks, the relevant educational opportunities of the Nationalpark Gesäuse and those of the Nationalpark Oberösterreichische Kalkalpen were investigated applying different methods (participating observation, analysis of programs and written questioning of the service providers).

For this investigation particularly developed categories (values / attitudes, aspects of implementation, ethic principles, pedagogic principles, way of learning, results of learning and inner systematic) and indicators of analysis were applied. The results of the analysis show that within the educational opportunities for adults in question many elements have already been fulfilled, respectively are to some extent available, so that you can already talk about a sustainability orientation of both educational programs. The instruments developed in this thesis should enable both objects to orientate themselves even more clearly towards a sustainability-oriented adult learner in the future. This perspective of sustainability orientation and adult education as well as the developed and applied model of analysis could also be put into use by comparable educational institutions.

Keywords

Nationalpark Gesäuse, Nationalpark Oberösterreichische Kalkalpen, sustainability, education for sustainable development, sustainable learning, sustainable education, adult education, lifelong-learning, sustainability-oriented adult education

Introduction, Research Question

The aim of the author was to surpass the sheer benefit of classification by answering the research question.

With the help of the core question of concrete research “Where do we find educational opportunities for adults within the programs of the Nationalpark Gesäuse and Kalkalpen that are oriented towards sustainability and how could this complex concern be strengthened?” an instrument of planning, designing and evaluation should be created which could also be utilized by initiators of comparable institutions.

Possibly the especially for this investigation developed concept of “sustainability-oriented adult education” establishes a further development and enforcement of the concerns of the present UN decade of education for sustainable development.

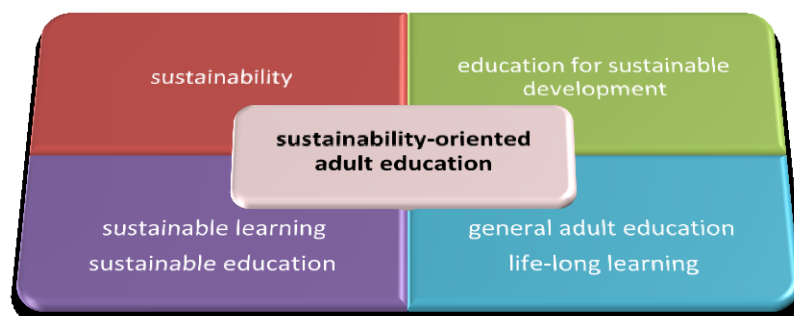


Figure 1: sustainability-oriented adult education and its concepts (Ref.: own representation)

Methods

In order to answer the research question several methods of research were chosen in terms of a “triangulation” (cf. FLICK 2009).

The basis is constituted by an extensive description of the main concepts of this thesis and their connections. Furthermore the concept of sustainability-oriented adult education was created.

Already before and during the comparative description of both objects to be investigated and the analysis of the relevant educational opportunities for adults of both national parks (legal year of 2010) regarding the sustainability orientation, three participating observations of selected educational opportunities were executed within both national parks.

With the help of standardized questionnaires the self-image of altogether 83 service providers and at the same time their self-evaluation were explored concerning the aspect of sustainability within their offers.

In order to contextualize the results of the program analysis and the questioning even more, selected educational opportunities were observed from a participant’s point of view during the entire research process. *“Sustainable learning, exclusive of observing the setting of foreign monitoring, involves the danger of searching for requirements and causalities, assuming that from the learner’s acting independent ideal conditions for “right” and “successful” learning existed.”* (SCHÜBLER 2007)



Figure 2: research situation, participating observation (Ref.: private picture (C. Habersack 2013))

The applied research methods and their interaction are shown by the ensuing graphic.

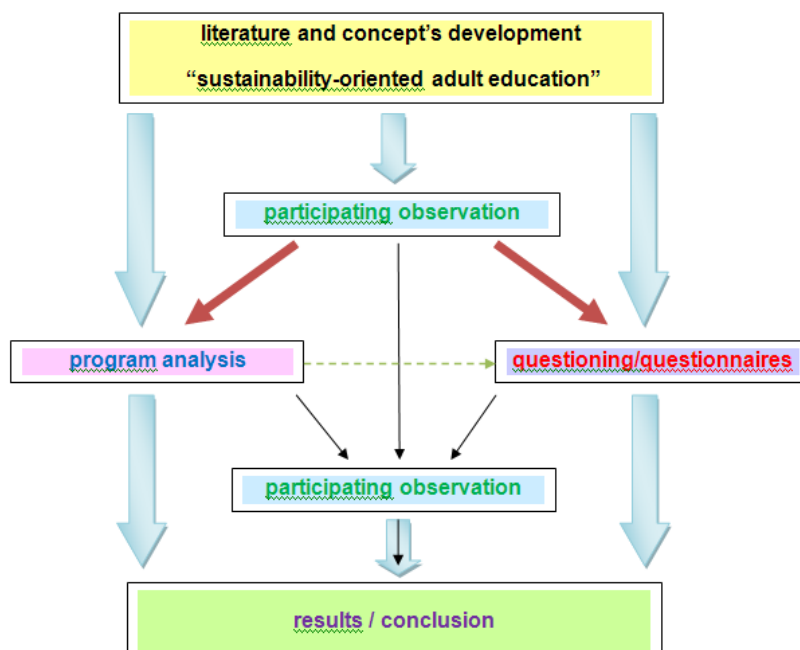


Figure 3: research approach (Ref.: own representation)

Conclusion

The results of this multi-staged investigation show to a great extent a concurring image of both national parks regarding their sustainability orientation as far as adult education is concerned. Since it has never been the aim of this thesis to establish a winner, the results hereinafter will not be displayed according to the national park (a concrete and differentiated analysis can be found in the full version of this thesis):

- The investigated educational opportunities don't represent fixed programs, but are designed as a supporting program bearing in mind the participants' requests concerning content and organization. At the same time participants are invited to take the initiative themselves.
- The educational opportunities show in their concepts a clear orientation towards their target group of adults and are therefore "real" adult educational opportunities.
- Within the educational opportunities action-oriented way of learning and lively and activating methods of learning are applied in different places. Participants therefore can get active themselves to a large extent.
- The service providers don't emphasize the value of entertainment, but emphasize the values of education and adventure. It is to assume that the offers in question provide more than just "having a good time" and that the participants can help shaping their learning processes.
- Several educational opportunities fulfill both ethic principles of "respect for future generations" and "respect for the natural resources of our planet".
- The service providers themselves estimate the value of education and sustainability of their programs as quite high.
- In more the 50% of the educational opportunities multiple perspectives can be communicated and passed on.
- In almost all educational opportunities the service providers expect different background knowledge and enable discussions and tests of the learning revenue.
- At least 10% of all educational opportunities contain future-oriented educational issues.
- In about 90% of the educational opportunities the service providers try hard to establish a positive learning atmosphere and regard themselves as member of the group.
- At the same time almost all educational opportunities create a sense of belonging.
- Virtually all educational opportunities aim at a permanent effect for the participants. As far as this effect is concerned, about half of the service providers are skeptical.
- Almost all educational opportunities provide "a constant benefit in terms of an enhancement of the participants' knowledge of orientation and appliance, values and attitudes".
- All service providers think about "personal ideas whether the educational opportunities have an effect and benefit on the participants". Unconsciously (?) a sustainability-oriented principle of inner systematic of sustainability has already been applied: the orientation towards constant benefit and permanent effect of the educational action itself.
- As expected ecological aspects are treated within all educational opportunities.
- Social, economic and those integrated aspects are not really seen by the service providers themselves in their self-evaluation.
- Almost all educational opportunities "support the creation or development of a ecologic consciousness".
- The issues of "protection of nature and environment" as well as "sustainability" are seen as requests by service providers. A bit more discriminately seen is the concept of "protection of the creation", although it isn't clearly textually present within any of the programs.
- The service providers agree to a great extent with the idea that their educational opportunities contribute to a life-long learning of the participants.
- The service providers also have a high opinion of their own professional skills, nevertheless they also agree that their offers "live on the questions and different approaches of the participants".
- A significant part of the service providers has already "participated in general adult educational opportunities within the last two years" and has already "participated in educational opportunities of the national parks themselves".
- To a high extent the service providers share the opinion that they "contribute with their educational opportunities to a fairer, and more environmentally compatible world development that also includes a more considerate management of natural resources".
- According to program analysis and participating observation the investigated educational opportunities are of a high local relevance.
- Almost all educational opportunities point out – apart from primarily ecological issues – the aspects and requests of the national park.

Results

As a result of the research one can claim that both Nationalpark Gesäuse and Nationalpark Oberösterreichische Kalkalpen apply several categories and indicators of sustainability-oriented adult education.

Within some areas both investigated national parks are "on the right track": the concept of educational opportunities as real educational opportunities for adults, local relevance, the combination of theoretical and

practical perspectives and contents, action-oriented ways of learning, the value of sustainability and education within the events (self-evaluation of service providers), the contribution towards a fair and environmentally compatible world development that also includes a considerate management of natural resources.

Concerning other areas, both investigated national parks are “on their way”: a constant benefit and a permanent effect of the educational opportunities, a psychological profit of the educational opportunities.

A potential in development can be seen within the areas of gender equality in the proposal management, registration of learning revenue of the participants, economic and social aspects as well as linking them with ecological aspects in the educational opportunities.

All in all one can – after the three-part investigation of both national parks – discern an image that shows and proves that many elements of the educational opportunities have already been compiled and designed in a sustainability-oriented way of thinking. Here one can see the products of a professional approach towards the issue of education, especially adult education, an inspiration for nature and environmental aspects and a system-immanent orientation towards issues of sustainability by both national parks.

Furthermore the concrete way of research enables profit regarding an actual and far-reaching way of “sustainability training” and at the same time of up-to-date adult education.

In conclusion, it needs to be recorded that by using the concept of “sustainability orientation” the complex issue of sustainability, especially within the context of educational subjects and processes, becomes more comprehensible and the people responsible for education in national parks and similar institutions can be encouraged to realize the principle of sustainability along with its three referring areas (ecology, economy and social affairs) more clearly.

Further Perspectives

The results of this thesis enable both investigated objects and also similar educational institutions to consider their adult educational opportunities from the perspective of sustainability orientation (we’re presently located within the UN decade (2005 to 2014) of education for sustainable development!) and if demanded, design new educational opportunities on the basis of the within this thesis developed indicators of a sustainability-oriented adult education.

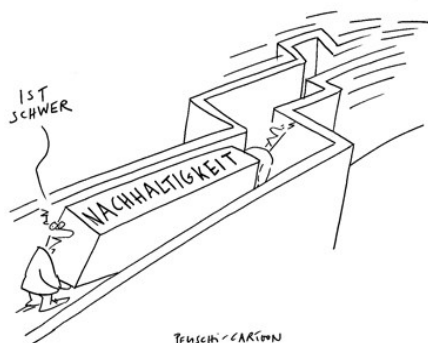
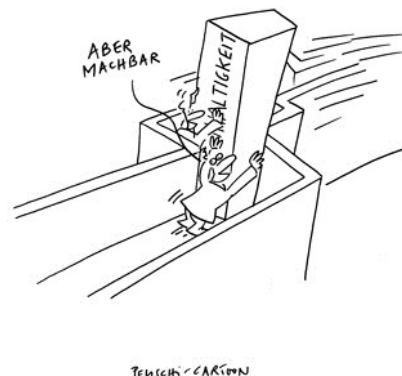


Figure 4: Cartoon Sustainability is heavy
(Ref: Universität Bern, Interfakultäre Koordinationsstelle für Allgemeine Ökologie, o.J.)



Illustr. 5: Cartoon Sustainability is feasible
(Ref.: Universität Bern, Interfakultäre Koordinationsstelle für Allgemeine Ökologie, o.J.)

A closer look shows that two classic issues of sustainability-oriented learning remain unsettled: the permanent effect and the constant benefit of the investigated educational opportunities for its participants.

Furthermore an investigation of the participants’ way of learning within the concrete educational opportunities of adults of both national parks would be appropriate and could enable – together with the results of this thesis – a more complex and differentiated description of this special education process.

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