

Society and Protected Areas in Flux – more than one hundred years of nature conservation in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Christina Pichler-Koban & Michael Jungmeier



Figure 1: Nature conservation in old and new garb
Source: Illustration by the authors

Abstract

In a research project, which was carried out from 2004 to 2007, the conceptions for nature conservation in Austria were examined. So-called “lists of events” were drawn up as a showcase for four protected areas (Hohe Tauern, Donauauen, Wienerwald, Dobratsch). Each “event” listed (e.g. the declaration of a nature conservation area or the demonstration against the construction of a power station) represents a milestone in the development of the area and was analysed from a socio-historical point of view. Four protected areas in Germany and Switzerland are now being included in the study as part of an ongoing research project. The historical and social context of different tendencies in nature conservation is examined through key events, and a chronological inventory is created of the conceptions for nature conservation occurring in the individual areas. The relevance of the identified conceptions for nature conservation to the current events in the protected areas is analysed. These conclusions will be used to attempt to forecast future trends in nature conservation activities. Similarities and differences in the three countries, as well as the influence of international and global developments, will be ascertained.

Keywords

Protected areas, history, social sciences, qualitative methods, Austria, Germany, Switzerland

Introduction

Nature conservation seeks to preserve and safeguard selected natural assets and thus represents an important segment of any comprehensive system of environment and resource protection. Measures to protect resources for economic reasons can be traced as far back as the 19th century, and this type of protection therefore has a long tradition (ERZ et al. 1990). In the past 150 years, nature conservation has become established as an essential element of the value systems and activities of modern societies, and is now included across Europe in politics, international programmes, and institutions. The study “Austrian Nature Conservation Movements in the Context of Social Developments” (PICHLER-KOBAN et al. 2006, 2007) represents the first research effort to focus specifically

on social scientific dimensions, rather than only exploring the Austrian nature conservation movement using questions and methods derived from the Natural Sciences. Using the example of four Austrian protected areas, (Hohe Tauern, Donauauen, Wienerwald, Dobratsch), the nature conservation movement and nature conservation were investigated against the background of social developments. Protected areas were chosen as the objects of research, because they represent central instruments of nature conservation. The authors further assume that they serve as a projection screen for societal interests and debates. The results of this study are explored in greater depth in the follow-up study “Society and Protected Areas in Transition”, a project funded by the Bristol Foundation. Furthermore, the methodology is developed further and the research area is extended to include Germany and Switzerland.

Research questions

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How can different conceptions for nature conservation be explained by their social and historical context, and how can they be rationalised?
2. What influence does a changing society have on the perception of and the demands on protected areas?
3. Which similarities/differences can be noted when comparing the development of protected areas in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and which influence do international conservation policies show in the respective country?

Initially conceived in order to conserve natural resources, today nature conservation represents a multi-layered task at the intersection of a wide variety of disciplines. This complexity becomes especially apparent in the area of nature reserves. According to their initial primary purpose, protected areas were intended for the protection and preservation of biodiversity and of natural or associated cultural resources (BLAB 2002, BLAB 2006, JUNGMEIER in print). Along with the transition and development of society over the past 150 years, the concepts behind protected areas have also changed significantly. The analysis of protected areas within their social and historical context reveals a surprising glimpse of the ideological conglomerate behind the modern understanding of nature reserves. Modern protected areas purport to being “Learning Sites for Sustainable Development” (UNESCO). The human – hitherto viewed as “enemy” and “destroyer” of nature – should no longer be largely excluded from protected areas (JUNGMEIER et al. 2009). Rather, the human is seen as part of the respective protected area, who, through economically compatible and sustainable activities, should ideally contribute to the conservation of the natural diversity of habitats (LANGE 2005). The restrictive nature protection measures carried out in nature reserves (“bell jar” nature protection) in years past, has been developed into an integrated system of spatial management, and has broadened into a transdisciplinary field, into which flow diverse elements from economics, sciences pertaining to planning, as well as the social and legal sciences (DUDLEY & MÜLLER 2011, GETZNER & JUNGMEIER 2009, MOSE & WEIXLBAUMER 2003). This development necessitates new knowledge and new practical approaches with regard to the management of protected areas. Modern nature reserves (biosphere reserves, world heritage sites, Ramsar sites, etc.) pursue an integrated approach, following the objective to integrate “the social sphere with the eco sphere” (BROGGI 2001). Today, protected areas are regarded as societal task, which must involve the relevant stakeholders (JUNGMEIER et al. 2009).

Methods

Drawing upon oral and written sources, a conceptual history of protected areas is reconstructed for Austria, Germany and Switzerland. So-called lists of events (Figure 2) illustrate the conceptual development of the protected areas. Based on key events or milestones the attempt is made to shine a light upon the historical and social context of various concepts from the sphere of nature protection.

The analysis is carried out using the example of eight protected areas.

The following protected areas are part of the study (Figure 3):

- In Austria: Wienerwald Biosphere Reserve, Donauauen National Park, Hohe Tauern National Park, Dobratsch Nature Park
- In Germany: Schorfheide-Chorin Biosphere Reserve, Berchtesgaden National Park
- In Switzerland: Parc Adula, Swiss National Park

Narrative interviews are used to question contemporary witnesses and managers with active responsibility for a protected area about the history and the milestones in the development of the protected areas, and about the issues – both past and present – that they believe are significant in relation to protected areas. The interviews are transcribed and are processed and evaluated in preparation for analysis using the QDA software Atlas.ti 7. In parallel, written sources on the history of the eight protected areas are systematically collected. Relevant passages from the texts are selected and also analysed using the QDA software. The subsequent synthesis of the results of the analysis will yield a framework of categories, which can be used to explain and understand events in nature protection. The analysis and evaluation will combine methods from qualitative content analysis in accordance with KUCKARTZ (2005), qualitative data analysis with Atlas.ti according to FRIESE (2012) and metaphor analysis according to KRUSE et al. (2011).

Year	Event
1979	- Lower Austrian Nature Conservation Union demands a national park
1980	- Citizens' initiative against hydropower plant and for a nature park
1982	- Nature Conservation Union demands impact assessment for the barrage Vienna - Donau-March-Thaya floodplains are recognized as Ramsar Sites
1983	- Public gets to know the plans for a new Danube hydropower plant - Public exchange of letters between the Minister of Environment and conservationists - International support for the opponents of the power plant project
1984	- „Press conference of the animals“ against the power plant - Manifestations of power plant supporters and opponents - Construction of the plant is approved according to Nature Conservation Laws - Initiation of the Konrad-Lorenz referendum - Positive decision according to water law and approval of clearing of forests for the Hainburg power plant - Occupation of the wetlands in Hainburg - Hainburg-conflict as a political landmark of the 2nd republic - Publicist Günther Nenning takes a stand on the Hainburg Conflict - Prof. Konrad Lorenz takes a stand on the Hainburg Conflict - Trade Union president Anton Benya speaks on the Hainburg Conflict - Artists take a stand on the Hainburg Conflict - Robert Jungk speaks on the Hainburg Conflict - Open letter to minister of interior Karl Blecha - Freda Meissner-Blau takes a stand on the Hainburg Conflict - Kurt Zukrigl speaks on the ecological value of the wetlands - Media take the Hainburg Conflict into the the public sphere
1985	- Environmental government retreat in consequence of the Hainburg Conflict - 11-point programme of the Austrian Government - The Friends of Nature participate in the Hainburg Conflict - Appointment of a commission for ecology of the Federal government
1986	- Federal Forestry Company is open-minded about a national park - Field mapping of the amphibians of the Danube floodplains
1987	- Nature Conservation Union demands a qualified termination of the expansion of plants along the Danube
1989	- Public discussion event to discuss the planned Donau-Auen-National Park - Public action „Redeem Nature“ - Concept for the Donau-Auen National Park

Figure 2: Extract from the "List of events Donauauen", showing period from 1979 to 1989 (Source: Illustration by the authors)



Figure 3: Overview of the study area and the selected nature reserve (Source: Illustration by the authors)

Results

Based on the Austrian data gathered during the preceding project, “The Austrian Nature Protection Movement in the Context of Social Developments” (PICHLER-KOBAN et al. 2006), three hypotheses were formulated and discussed:

Hypothesis 1: Nature protection follows in line with social debates and conflicts. Nature protection aligns itself with social interests.

- Concepts in nature conservation can be seen as consequence or as opposition to significant social movements and developments. The protection of nature is promoted by diverse social actors. Virtually every one of these actors could also appear to be an opponent of nature conservation.

Hypothesis 2: Concepts in nature conservation represent the result of value systems.

- Different social groups have different notions of nature (“views of nature”). These are implemented in different laws, organisations and actions which, in turn, have a direct impact upon nature and environment. In a feedback process these changes in nature and environment exert an influence upon society.
- Nature conservation and its various concepts build upon very specific social interests. Those interests, which are communicated most vehemently eventually determine the development of nature and of nature conservation.

Hypothesis 3: Social fragmentation is reflected in the current activities around nature protection

- In today’s individualised society, everyone has their own view of nature, which is revised or adapted as required or in line with specific interests.
- As a consequence of the many different views of nature held by the different actors in society, a great number of diverse concepts exists. Despite the widely diversified content of these concepts, they are all subsumed under the umbrella term “nature conservation”.
- If too many interests and objectives claim consideration, this can result in a stalemate, which effectively puts a stop to all nature protection activities and measures.

The work carried out in the present study so far supports these hypotheses. It remains to be investigated, whether they remain valid to the same extent, when applied to the development of nature protection in Germany and Switzerland.

A fourth hypothesis shall be proven or disproven by this study:

Hypothesis 4: Nature conservation concepts are moving towards the protected area of the third generation.

- Sustainability is based on the idea that only an implementation of ecological, economic and social objectives that occurs simultaneously and ensuring equal rights, can safeguard and improve the sustainability of a society (JUNGMEIER et al 2006).
- Depending on social developments, modern protected areas (biosphere reserves, world heritage sites, Ramsar sites, etc.) are pursuing this integrated approach (RUOSS in print).
- The topics, which are of relevance to modern protected areas, range from classical forms of nature conservation (natural Sciences), to issues of business management, legal and cultural matters, right up to project planning and management, education and marketing (JUNGMEIER et al. 2012).
- This new understanding of the concept of protected area is defined as protected area of the third generation by JUNGMEIER (in print).

Further initial results of the current study take the form of an extensive code list, which also acts as a catalogue of concepts of protected areas, and a system of categories, which facilitates the structured representation and analysis of all events investigated to date. At any point in time it is possible to expand the system of categories by including aspects which have not previously been recorded.

These are the main categories developed to date (Figure 4):

- Event: An occurrence that triggers resonance in the respective protected area. All further categories serve to provide more detailed descriptions of “events”.
- Year: When did the event occur?
- Spatial relationship: Where does the event produce effects?
- Actors: Which persons, organisations or institutions are involved in the event?
- Attitude/position: Does the chosen passage point to an attitude of agreement, neutrality, or rejection in relation to the event?
- Threat: Which perceived threat or hazard is reflected in the event?
- Protection objective: Which protection objectives are pursued by the event?
- Instruments: What actions are set in the event, which forms of conflict and types of argument are used, in order to achieve a goal?
- Process direction: Is the process direction during the event bottom up or top down?
- Movements and trends: Which movements and trends resonate in the event?

Current research activities involve using the system of categories described above to analyse and interpret the vast amount of available material and raw data. The results of the research process will be systematically prepared and are expected to be available as a publication to all interested parties next year.



Figure 4: Categories - an overview (Source: Illustration by the authors)

Discussion and outlook

In the recent past, historians have already examined the history of selected protected areas in great detail (e.g. for the Swiss National Park cf. KUPPER 2012a, for a global perspective see GISSIBL et al. 2012). An ongoing project under the leadership of Patrick Kupper is dedicated to the history of nature conservation in the Hohe Tauern (KUPPER et al. in prep.). The project “society and protected areas in flux – more than hundred years of nature conservation in Austria, Germany and Switzerland” is intended as a contribution to gaining an understanding of the concepts and approaches used historically and today, in relation to nature protection in Europe. Concepts for nature conservation can be viewed both as consequences and as counter-movements to social trends and developments. It is not always possible to precisely assign the actors involved. The same individuals can appear both as promoters and as opponents of nature protection. The insights gained from the project shall provide support to all actors involved with protected areas, helping them to understand their own role in current events in nature protection. The objectives of nature conservation today are far more complicated and diffuse than they were in the past. At the same time there is now an opportunity for nature protection to act as the creator of new possibilities – particularly in large modern protected areas (PICHLER-KOBAN et al. 2007). It is hoped that the results of the study will encourage the involved parties to critically reflect upon current strategies in nature conservation, and to reconsider them, where necessary.

The comparison of several nations reveals where protected areas quite literally reach their borders. The project is also intended as a contribution to allowing nature conservation to be grasped and negotiated as a cross-country and cross-nation phenomenon. The authors hope to provide a significant contribution to the debate on the “dynamics and conservation in protected areas“, and actively seek to enter into dialogue with all actors involved in events surrounding nature protection.

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Contact

Christina Pichler-Koban
pichler-koban@e-c-o.at

Michael Jungmeier
 E.C.O. Institut für Ökologie
 Kinoplatz 6
 9020 Klagenfurt
 Austria