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Park objectives in transformation: What are parks for and why do we want them?

Norman Backhaus & Olivier Graefe

Keywords

Relational values, *eudaimonia*, conservation, stewardship, park

Summary

Rather than presenting results from finished or ongoing research, in this essay we try to raise questions and open up a discussion on the objectives and rationale of parks for nature protection. They are increasingly embedded in market-based neoliberal conservation that coincides with the proclamation of the Anthropocene. The conception of this new era, in which we have supposedly lived since at least fifty years (and depending on its definition possibly much longer, cf. LEWIS & MASLIN 2015), challenges the notion of a nature-culture binary bi-polarity and therefore also the concept of a wilderness (to be) set apart from human influence. In the following we want to raise the double question 'What are parks for?' and 'Why do we want them?'.

Figure 1: Intrinsic, instrumental or relational values, what should be protected? © Norman Backhaus

What are parks for?

The amount and acreage of protected areas worldwide is increasing steadily since more than hundred years. According to the Aichi biodiversity target no. 11 by 2020 17 percent of the terrestrial and 10 percent of the marine area shall be protected (UNEP-WCMC & IUCN 2016). The reasons that are formulated for the creation of protected areas (e.g. national parks) revolve around 'biodiversity' and 'wilderness' that should be conserved, or 'sustainable development' that parks should make possible. Moreover, it is debated whether nature should be protected for human's sake (instrumental value) or for nature's sake (intrinsic value) (CHAN et al. 2016). Indeed, at the core of park rationales is the avoidance of negative impact to the natural environment a defining characteristic of the Anthropocene (cf. HOLMES 2015).

Therefore, if we ask 'what is a park for?", the answer seems evident to the above presented question about the purpose of a park. However, the core of park rationales and the framings of nature and conservation have changed according to MACE (2014) from 'nature for itself' (until the 1960/70s) to 'nature despite people' (until the 1990s) to 'nature for people' (at the beginning of the 2000s) and 'people and nature' (since 2010). At the same time market-based strategies became central to conservation (ADAMS 2017), expressed in the mainstreaming of Ecosystem Services (KELLER 2017), the funding of conservation by (oil) extracting companies (HACKETT 2015), or in the recent negotiations on the attempt to establish new national parks in Switzerland. There, environmental protection implicitly (but rarely explicitly) hovers in the background of protection rationales, while economic development, preserving cultural identity and keeping political freedom are in the forefront of discussions (Michel & Backhaus submitted). Hence, at the same time as in the conservation discourse people and nature are connected with an 'and', the role of parks becomes more unclear. Consequently, the segregation paradigm, in which nature is set apart from culture or humans is moving towards an integration (or post-integration) paradigm (ARPIN & COSSON 2015) that is heavily debated. Organizations such as Nature-needs-half (natureneedshalf.org 08.08.2017) that opt for setting aside half of the earth's surface in order to preserve biodiversity are a strong example for the segregation paradigm. Others (e.g. BÜSCHER et al. 2016) criticize this notion not only for its lacking practicability but for its injustice to people. We can conclude that the answer for our first question has become more difficult to answer in recent years.

Why do we want parks?

The second question is connected to the first and consequently as difficult to answer. Living in the Anthropocene where the (Western) culture-nature dichotomy becomes at least blurry if not illusionary, we must provocatively ask ourselves if and how a segregative approach to nature protection makes sense and if not, what the alternatives could be. By questioning reasons for nature protection we want to raise the awareness to the meaning nature conservation could bear and the forms it consequently take. CHAN et al. (2016) propose to concentrate on relational values instead of intrinsic and instrumental values of nature conservation, which they deem as problematic and not productive in the long run. They moreover state that *eudaimonia* – the feeling of wellbeing – is an important aspect of conservation. It can best be grasped by a concept of relational values that stress the dynamic affinity between natural objects or concepts and people and that goes beyond instrumental values. Hence, the armchair wilderness lover's attitude – or more up to date the person's buying a down jacket that is designed to survive Arctic winters for the daily commute in Middle Europe – towards nature should be regarded as viable reason for having nature protected. It amounts to the concept of stewardship that CHAN et al. often mention with which these relations are put into practice of conservation. Relational values also include neo-liberal attributions, since economic valuations are also based on relations with natural resources, objects or attributes. The question is how they contribute to whose wellbeing and whether their tradability is infringing on someone else's relations that are not based on neo-liberal thinking. Moreover, it can be asked what kind of nature is produced through these processes of economic valuation and nature's increasing commodification.

Focusing on relational values that only in certain cases can be expressed in numbers or currency for the establishment and management of parks can be demanding since different and competing values cannot be counted up. Whose values of nature do prevail, for what reasons with what consequences on the biophysical materiality are questions we intend to put forward for debate.

Conclusion

The questions we asked in this essay cannot be answered easily. However, since concrete park projects – but not nature conservation per se – are increasingly facing opposition at least in European contexts but not only there, the question 'why do we want parks?' is becoming even more crucial than before. CHAN et al. (2016) propose to consequently focus on relational values and the notion of *eudaimonia* or wellbeing for the establishment and management of conservation. This way people's different attitudes towards nature and its conservation and lastly the creation of a (national) park will be better acknowledged than with an approach that exclusively focuses on the protection of biodiversity. However, the accumulation of different and sometimes contrasting and competing (relational) values may lead to a stalemate. The addressing of these values and potential controversies in park research need not only to be continued but emphasized. This way potential new forms of conservation or different parks may be found and tested.

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Contact

Norman Backhaus
norman.backhaus@geo.uzh.ch
Department of Geography of the University of Zurich
Winterthurerstr. 190
8057 Zürich
Switzerland

Olivier Graefe
olivier.graefe@unifr.ch
Department of Geography of the University of Fribourg
Chemin du Musée 4
1700 Fribourg
Switzerland