

Trajectories of Protected Area Creation in the Austrian Alps: two case studies

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Abstract

Conflicts between nature conservation and human resource use are intensifying. At the focus of this study are two protected areas, which are set aside to protect biodiversity and to maintain a 'natural' character. At the same time, due to their natural resources and sometimes close vicinity to urbanized areas and tourist resorts, they are met by various interests. The present study focuses on conflicts that accompanied the establishment of two protected areas in the Austrian Alps over several years.

Keywords

conflict, resource use, nature parks, European Alps

Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a conflict is a serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests. Transferred to conservation, conflicts occur where parties have different opinions about or interests in conservation objectives and activities, and where one party is perceived to assert its interest at the expense of another (REDPATH et al. 2015a). In protected areas, various conflicts occur, for example, dealing with resource use (e.g. multiple use of water resources, see e.g. BRAGAGNOLO et al. 2016), large carnivore presence and abundance (e.g. REDPATH et al. 2015b; CHYNOWETH et al. 2016), recreational and tourism activities (e.g. STERL et al. 2010; STREBEROVÁ & JUSKOVÁ 2015), restrictions concerning land use (e.g. FRY & NIENABER 2011; KÖCK & BRENNER 2015), land use changes (e.g. KOVÁCS 2015), and conflicts between different land use groups (e.g. KOVÁCSA 2014) – to name but a few. Conflict analysis is the systematic study of a given conflict with the aim to understand the conflict, to identify the actors involved, and to analyse the impacts. Within the process of designating a protected area many interests of different local and non-local stakeholders and policymakers can be identified and analysed. We will present two case studies of the Austrian Eastern Alps.

Methods

We searched both digital repositories and local archives to identify and analyse newspaper articles, notifications of the environmental authority of the federal government, records concerning the legislative framework conditions, declarations of support, letters written to convince the opposing parties, and brochures of different interest groups. The oral history method was applied to interview experts involved in the designation of the two nature parks.

Results and Discussion

The two case studies presented mirror the overall conflict between the use of resources and protection of biodiversity. The nature park and quiet area 'Zillertal valley and Tux main ridge' is in close vicinity to large ski resorts, and the nature park, nature protection and Natura 2000 site 'Tyrolean Lech' is one of the last wild streams in the northern parts of the Alps. The designation of the nature park Zillertal valley took two decades whereas the designation process of the Lechtal valley to become a Natura 2000 site took almost three decades. Results from the Lech valley show tensions between a 'pristine' rural periphery and stakeholders from the Tyrolean capital. The fear of losing economic possibilities due to the designation of a protected area is evident and nature conservation is seen as an idea imposed by stakeholders coming from the capitals. It is criticized that urban stakeholders want to use the pristine periphery for recreation – without considering sufficiently the local population who economically depends on the use of resources in the Lech valley. The Zillertal valley case study underlines the conflict between the tourism/hydropower industry and nature conservation. The valley is well-known as a major Austrian tourist centre, where the interests of the ski industry were initially opposing the designation of a protected area. Although, in recent years, the nature park has become an attraction for visitors who appreciate Alpine cultural landscapes in summer, this sort of alternative tourism promoted by the nature park only plays – in economic terms – a minor role.

Conclusion

Conflicts increasingly emerge from the growing interest in the production of renewable energy, which requires new production facilities. Especially hydro power sites are currently in the focus. Moreover, conflicts are found where skiing infrastructure is planned within or near the borders of protected areas. Finally, top-down decisions by non-local policymakers cause resistance against nature conservation projects. Communication, awareness

rising and education, trust-building between different stakeholders may facilitate positive outcomes for all actors involved. To guarantee effective communication, the driving forces behind past and present conflicts need to be better understood. Future research should consequently focus on identifying regionally specific conflict variables, to pave the way for conflict-poor development of protected areas, bridging the gap between sustainable use and conservation.

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