

The National Park Gesäuse Partnership: From resistance to cooperation

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Keywords

national park partnership, cycle of translation, actor-network, social capital, socio-economic development, cooperation

Introduction

The National Park Gesäuse Partnership (NPGP) is an organization that establishes the cooperation between the National Park Gesäuse (NPG) and a group of approximately 90 local partner companies that are all scattered throughout the municipalities of the Alpenregion Nationalpark Gesäuse. The local companies that are enrolled in the NPGP belong to the activity sectors of accommodation, education, art and culture, direct sellers, 'Jausenstationen', leisure and sports, gastronomy, trade/commerce, handcraft and trade, alpine huts, mobility and associations. The NPGP is representing itself symbolically through a logo, which visualizes and communicates the collective identity of the NPG and partner companies (see Fig. 1). In my research I offer an ethnographic account of the main reasons why the NPGP was created in 2004 and how it subsequently developed until 2014. My analysis highlights that the NPGP is beneficial for the people living in the surrounding municipalities and the NPG itself. With the Partnership project the NPG is actually trying to implement policies that strengthen local socio-economic development in the Gesäuse area.



Figure 1: The National Park Gesäuse Partner Logo, Source: Nationalpark Gesäuse GmbH

Methods

By using a combination of questionnaires and qualitative interviews, conducted with key-informants, and participant observations of events (see Fig. 2), I generated the data on the NPGP, which I subsequently analyzed by using key-concepts drawn from Michel Callon's idea of the cycle of translation. I used the four 'moments' that compose the cycle of translation (problematization, interessment, enrollment and mobilization) as an analytical guide to look into some of the different kinds of interactions and power relations between many human and non-human actors involved in the genesis and evolution of the Partnership, which I broadly interpret as an actor-network.

Results

My analysis highlights that the NPGP was created in order to solve two specific problems, namely the low rate of local acceptance to the establishment of the NPG and the weakness of the local economy in the Gesäuse area. Despite some initial difficulties in the first stages of its formation, the Partnership eventually developed into a solid, but still evolving, actor-network that was successful in overcoming the scepticism of local people towards the park and to convince local companies to collaborate amongst themselves and with the National Park. Furthermore, my analysis points to how the Partnership was able to create a new social capital in the area and contributed to strengthening the local economy. My research project broadly contributes to academic and policy-making debates on nature conservation and local socio-economic development by providing an analysis of some of the reasons why such partnerships are established and how they may develop.



Figure 2: National Park Gesäuse partner workshop at Gasthof Hensle, St. Gallen, 26.3.2014, Photo: Christoph Gahbauer

Conclusion

The cycle of translation enabled me to point to how the NPGP is an actor-network composed of a heterogeneity of actants, human and non-human, such as, for example, the NPG directors, the NPGP project managers, policy makers, consultants, local associations of inhabitants and politicians, visitors and tourists; nature, natural resources, agro-food products, international and Austrian laws, local and institutional regulations, contracts, advertising materials and events (see Fig. 3). I have highlighted that the interactions of all these human and non-human actants contributed to the formation and evolution of the Partnership.

My analysis highlights that the NPGP played an important role in appeasing oppositional voices to the NPG and in creating local support and consent for the park. One the one hand, the creation of the Partnership has been successful in bringing some local businesses together into a network to collaborate with the NPG and, on the other hand, it has encouraged these companies to cooperate one with another. Therefore, the NPGP was useful to generate in the Gesäuse area a social capital which was (and still is) functional to generate (new fruitful and durable) economic relationships between some socio-economic actors in the area; namely the NPG and the companies now belonging to the NPGP. It can be argued that the Partnership project generated communities, in which many social interactions among individuals are established through the participation in relatively non-hierarchical associational activities (e.g. events), and through the establishment of trust and reciprocity, which, in turn contributed to the economic development of the Gesäuse area.



Figure 3: NPGP project excursion to National Park Doñana, Spain, 2014, Photo: Nationalpark Gesäuse GmbH

Furthermore the NPGP has contributed to promote a positive image of the National Park amongst the inhabitants; and most of them have today a positive attitude towards the park. It can be argued that the creation of the NPGP harmonized the three conflicting views of 'nature' (as something to be 'preserved' from harmful human intervention; as a resource to be 'exploited' for tourism and for making a living from cultivating the land, hunting and breeding animals; and as something that must be 'tamed' in order to protect humans from nature's own interventions) that clashed when the NPG was established. My analysis suggests that, today, these three ideas of nature keep coexisting in local understanding and perceptions of the NPG area, but in a less conflicting way than when the NPG was established.

I believe that my research can provide useful information for policy makers working in other national parks that may struggle with similar problems that the NPG had to tackle since the beginning of its establishment. Project ideas and activities of the NPGP could be adopted and implemented in other national parks to foster sustainable local development and forms of socio-economic cooperation because such 'cooperative partnerships' seem to have a potential to engender several (social, economic and environmental) benefits.

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