

## **A tourism toll road in the biggest central European National Park – a paradigm? Or an antagonism? And what about the inhabitants' expectations? – An Example from the Hohe Tauern National Park.**

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### **Abstract**

In the Austrians high mountains, we find a paradigm: A tourism toll road with more than 800.000 visitors a year embedded in a National Park, IUCN category II. Both, park and tourism attraction attract visitors one for the other and both have advantages through their proximity and close cooperation. One can even say, one was and still maybe is the reason for the other.

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### **Keywords**

Sustainable planning and management, participatory planning

### **Introduction**

The Großglockner High Alpine Road (GGHAS) is a high-alpine touristic toll-road in Austria, embedded in the Hohe Tauern National Park, the biggest protected nature area in central Europe (IUCN category II). Built in the early 1930ies, it is both prototype and best preserved example of a historical scenic mountain road and provides a spectacular experience for more than 800,000 visitors per year.

Since its opening, the same comprehensive management and preservation concept on the basis of sustainability will be applied in close cooperation with the National Park service as well as with the surrounding municipalities. Since 2015, the road is protected as national monument. The protected area includes the entire route between the two toll gates up to across the passes, both access roads, the essential buildings as well as moveable heritage objects such as, for example, the rotary snow ploughs. Its maintenance measures are implemented according to a comprehensive care concept in consideration of sustainability. This concept has been developed and implemented back in the 1930s by the road's architect, Franz Wallack. In 2017 the road was proposed as UNESCO cultural World Heritage property.

### **Methods/Results/Background**

The **Großglockner High Alpine Road (GGHAS)**, a high-alpine touristic toll-road in Austria runs through the **Hohe Tauern National Park**. While the street represents a human monument with dense traffic, the National Park (IUCN category II) serves as a refugium for high Alpine fauna and flora.

Plans for the Großglockner High Alpine Road date back to 1924 and were realised between 1930 and 1935. The road represents both prototype and best preserved example of a functioning historical scenic mountain road in Europe. It is the only road, which, since its opening as a toll road, is operated according to the same comprehensive management, marketing, and preservation concept. Its management- and maintenance-concept served as model for other toll-roads, like the Silvretta High Alpine Road (Silvretta Hochalpenstraße) between Tyrol and Vorarlberg. Planned and built as a toll road in a protected and largely untouched high-mountain landscape, it aimed at offering visitors a spectacular driving *and* landscape experience. *'Early engineers and surveyors in the United States, such as Robert B. Stanton, saw no contradiction between the beautiful railroad and grandiose landscape.'* (MAUCH & ZELLER 2008:6) This principle was the fundament of the American Scenic Highway – and it swept over to Europe where so far, only railroads had been used to open the land to the public. The main idea of Wallack was to open the view into the high alpine nature – by offering after each turn a new impression. The engineer himself described aim and ambition as follows: *'Die Straße sollte sich nicht nur harmonisch in das Landschaftsbild einfügen, sie sollte gleichzeitig auch möglichst viele schöne Aussichtspunkte direkt berühren. Diese im Interesse des Fremdenverkehrs und der Touristik gelegene Forderung sollte der Leitstern der ganzen Trassierung sein.'* (WALLACK 1949:30). A still increasing number of tourists from all over the world visit the GGHAS every year to enjoy and experience of the Hohe Tauern landscape.

The driving factors of tourism and the landscape perception, as found with the GGHAS, constitute a new construction theme, a concept, which has since then been copied many times in other places or has served as a model, f. ex. for the German Alpine Road, the Susten Pass Road in Switzerland, and the Vienna High Road in Austria. Still today, delegations from all over the world come in order to learn about the technical and engineer's features as well as the management and maintenance concept.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The road should integrate itself not only harmonically; it should at the same time directly touch on as many beautiful vantage points as possible. This claim in the interest of tourism and its administration shall be the guiding principle of the whole alignment.'

Since 2015 the protected area – as protected under the Austrian Monuments Protection Act - includes the entire route between the two toll gates up to across the passes, both access roads, the essential buildings as well as moveable heritage objects such as, for example, the rotary snow ploughs, which date back to the early years of the GGHAS. Its maintenance measures are implemented according to a comprehensive care concept in consideration of sustainability. This concept had been developed and implemented back in the 1930s by the road's architect, Franz Wallack.

The **Hohe Tauern National Park**, the largest protected area in central Europe with nearly 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> and with 300 peaks over 3000 m in altitude, contains the region around Austria's highest mountain, the Großglockner (3,798 m) as well as the Pasterze, with approximately still 8 km the longest glacier in the Eastern Alps. The park was established in 1983. One of the most well-known features is the so called 'Tauern Window' which offers a unique view of the earth's geological history. It comprises an approximately rectangular region extending from the Brenner in the west to the Katschberg Sattel in the east (approximately 176 km) and from the Salzach Valley in the north to the Matrei / Möll Valley line in the south (approximately 30 km). In this area, kilometre-thick layers have already been eroded from the Alps (rocks that once were part of the African continental plate), which provide us a window-like view of the lower layers of rock (and the clearly much younger rocks of an ocean floor). In Großkirchheim, for example, the rocks of both large geological units can be observed on the slopes of both sides of the Möll Valley. This allows us to experience within walking distance both the European and the African continental plates almost simultaneously.

The park, classified under IUCN II category, comprises the Pasterze and numerous further glaciers, the Krimml Waterfalls, several glacial valleys and alluvial fans, as well as extended tundra areas and forests. Among the flora of the Alps, especially Swiss Pines grow along the tree line; above subshrub, mainly alpenrose but also the endemic *saxifraga rudolphiana*, up to nival level at about 2,800 m (9,200 ft). The fauna includes chamois, Alpine ibex and red deer, as well as griffon vulture and the golden eagle. The formerly extinct bearded vulture and the Alpine marmot have been successfully reintroduced.



Figure 1: Every year after the re-opening of the GGHAS, a wondrous view is offered to the drivers and users of the road and the landscape is hidden in the snow. (Source: A. Kruse 2016)

The Großglockner High Alpine Road is not only a touristic highlight of the Eastern Alps and an excellent vantage point for the highest peaks in Austria, but also includes unique geological rock formations. In fact, there is hardly another point in the Alpine region that has natural geological rock formations of vastly different eras, including those created by humans that can all be observed directly in a relatively small area. For this reason, the 'Tauern Window' is intended to be positioned as an Educational Centre for the Anthropocene by 2018.

As since the beginning, the experience of nature and landscape had been the driving forces for the construction of the GGHAS, the administration of the National Park is a member of the steering group of the proposed World Heritage Site. Both partners agree on their ecological responsibility and have therefore agreed to achieve the following results:

- Through the management of tourism along the Großglockner High Alpine Road and in its surroundings, we have shared responsibility for one of the largest protected areas in Europe: Hohe Tauern NP. Sustainable commerce in a highly sensitive, high alpine natural area sets clear norms and limits for the company.
- Unique Experience of High Alpine Nature: However, the uniqueness of this landscape and of the national park idea also make it our job to bring the experience of high alpine nature to a broad audience in an environmentally friendly way through the Großglockner High Alpine Road. In particular, this includes educational and cultural facilities.
- Safeguarding the Future: We see ourselves as keepers and savers of the Großglockner High Alpine Road monument's future, and of the facilities and businesses belonging to it. We strive towards actively developing our services further to move the Austrian – and in particular the regional – tourism industry forwards as best as we can. Our expertise in the ecological management of the Großglockner High Alpine Road and our work for the national park idea is used by our affiliates and also for additional tasks.' (Guiding Principles of the operating company Grohag)

This is demonstrated not only by cooperation, common education facilities, and sustainable management including waste management but also by e.g. financial cooperation and investment in environmental protection research.

Apart from the two large players, there are also several small municipalities, living from a certain extent from tourism – winter and summer tourism. As it is their aim to extend tourism, this would mean - with regard to the winter season - the construction of e.g. new slopes and/or lifts, with regard to summer tourism the prolongation of the duration of onsite stay, from day to several days tourism. The most important selling points of the region are the GGHAS and the NP – as every slogan, every local brand and marketing concept underlines. Most recently another 12 local enterprises have been awarded by the Hohe Tauern NP Region with the Carinthian Quality label (<https://www.groehag.com/>)

### Discussion/Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the co-existence of a Tourism road in the heart of a National Park is not seen as being problematic – because from the beginning, the road was developed in order to valorise the landscape and the nature, to protect and to maintain it – for the visitors of the road. Therefore, both components are in a way dependent on each other. That the road and National Park are considered as a unit in one way or another, has been underlined by the fact, that both elements had been submitted jointly in 2002 as a mixed site to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Due to several formal reasons, the nomination had been withdrawn by the Austrian State Party during the nomination procedure (PAULOWITZ 2015).



Figure 2.: The street is literally embedded in the landscape – often hard to recognise – each turn opens a new experience, a new landscape view. (Source: A. Kruse 2015)

However, the inhabitants' expectations of this special region are at first place to have a bigger share at the tourism activities. More than 800.000 tourists visit the GGHAS each year – only during summer times, as the road is closed in winter. However, due to the conception of a DRIVING site, most people come by car (>187.000) or motorbikes (appr. 90.000). Although there is a growing number of cyclists (around 24.000<sup>2</sup>) – also due to the increasing number of e-bikes - these tourists cannot yet be considered as the main group. And more important, as they come, drive and leave, most of them do not stay in the villages at both ends of the GGHAS. To increase the number of bus tourists (with a concept of a 2 days stay by offering further visits or events) seems not to be an option, because the road was developed and is appreciated for a driving experience, which will be limited when the number of busses increases. A solution could be a time management, which restricts for certain hours access for cyclers, others for busses and so on.

Winter tourism is completely detached from the road – which is, at several points, not even perceivable. However, it is unlikely that the National Park authorities and administration will cooperate to extend slopes or agree to the construction of new ski lifts

Generally speaking the inhabitants of the neighbouring municipalities of Heiligenblut am Großglockner and Fusch an der Großglocknerstraße are satisfied with the situation, as they appreciate the advantages of living in-, respectively with the National Park and the GGHAS. Nevertheless they are quite attentive towards any changes and eventually upcoming further restrictions. Therefore, several hearings have been organised while preparing the candidacy for inclusion in the UNESCO List of World Heritage. A local stakeholder group with farmers and landowners is following the activities considerably. A dialogue has been established and will continue in order to inform on a regular basis and in order to let local stakeholders participate in planning and development strategies.



Figure 3: Citizens information events at Heiligenblut am Großglockner (right) and Fusch an der Großglocknerstraße, together with the Municipality of Rauris (left). Source: A. Kruse 2016

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<sup>2</sup> All numbers based on Grohag counted in 2015. The visitor statistics exist since the beginning of the road in 1935.