'What is a national park for?' – Principles of worth in a Swiss national park project

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Abstract

This contribution analyses an environmental dispute and its underlying moral issues in a direct-democratic and bottom-up setting to understand principles of worth in national park negotiations. I follow the question 'what is a national park for?' and point to the complex nature of conservation negotiations. I argue that loosely defined ideas of park rationales and therefore different ideas of the common good can lead to additional difficulties for a bottom-up project.

Keywords

National parks; Principles of worth; Negotiations; Switzerland

Introduction

This contribution explores the moral issues underlying the negotiation and establishment of protected areas and follows the guiding question 'what is a national park for?'. In order to answer this question, I analyse justification regimes people resort to in situations of conflict. The empirical case study I focus on involves the planned establishment of a national park in Switzerland, Parc Adula, which was based on a direct-democratic process and was abandoned after the negative outcome of a decisive popular vote in late 2016. The national park project was one of the first in accord with the Swiss federal ordinance on parks of national importance (ParkO), which came into effect in 2007 and defines the establishment of a national park as a bottom-up process. Parc Adula was intended to become a national park of this 'new generation'. The term 'new generation' already suggests that there are or have been different understandings and definitions of national parks. For instance, the main ideas fostering the establishment of the Swiss National Park in 1914 were pure conservation and scientific research. In contrast, the concept of the new generation of parks aims for sustainable development in its economic, social, and ecological senses (KUPPER 2016; PICHLER-KOBAN & JUNGMEIER 2015). I therefore analyse how people affected by the Parc Adula case justified their opinions in order to understand perceived objectives of a national park and underlying principles of worth, which are guiding such ideas.

Case Study and Methods

Parc Adula, a national park candidate in Switzerland, was planned to be established between 2001 and 2016. The proposed park covered 1230 km2 spanning the border between the cantons of Grisons and Ticino, in the Alpine area of south-eastern Switzerland. Approximately 14,000 people live in the 17 municipalities in the park area. On 27 November 2016, a slight majority of the eligible voters living in the area voted 'no' on the park's establishment in a referendum on municipality level.

Data was collected during several field visits to the Parc Adula region in summer 2015 and in summer and autumn 2016, before the popular vote. Seventeen semi-structured interviews and eleven unstructured interviews were conducted. In addition, open conversations and extensive participatory observation were used to gain further understanding of ongoing debates in these valleys. All data was analysed using MAYRING'S (2007) qualitative content analysis.

What is a national park for?

According to the IUCN, national parks are 'large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities' (IUCN 2017). This definition comprises different goals of protected areas, not only focusing on ecology, but also on social aspects. In the Parc Adula case, many different park rationales were negotiated. Some of these are elaborated in this section.

...for regional development?

Protected areas in the Alpine regions of central Europe are often regarded as opportunities for regional development. Topics such as the possible positive influence of eco-tourism or labels on the economic development of rural areas form the main body of current central European literature on protected areas (see MAYER et al. 2010; SIEGRIST & STREMLOW 2009; WEBER 2013). Economic surplus and regional development are also the main forces driving the politics of Swiss parks (BAFU 2010). In the Parc Adula case, the park proponents relied strongly on economic arguments about regional development, relating to recent discourses addressing economic hardship in alpine valleys (see MÜLLER-JENTSCH 2017). However, economic arguments were also used by opponents, who were afraid that the park could hinder business opportunities.

...for nature conservation?

Nature conservation was regarded as a positive side effect of a national park used chiefly as a regional development tool, but justifications based on environmental ideas were never presented on their own, as can be seen in the following quote from an interview:

'Often, the argumentation is 'you have to protect now in order to conserve the environment'...when you say that, no one wants to cooperate. But, if we say, we make a park, with which you can earn money, then the park and the money we earn will help to establish the protection'.

To some extent, this was used as a strategy by proponents to address more salient challenges in the valleys than protecting nature and thus to reach a wider audience. Indeed, THÉVENOT et al. (2000: 242) argue that the emphasis on economics is a keen strategic move to 'appeal to the sensitivity of politicians to economic arguments'.

...for conservation of cultural heritage?

The park project esteemed the preservation of local traditions and heritage and placed these at heart of Parc Adula's aims. For example, the project co-funded various restoration projects, such as the renovation and repair of dry walls on Alpine pastures. Many local residents stressed the importance of heritage and traditions in every-day life. Some respondents saw the park as an opportunity to maintain alpine culture and simultaneously spark new ideas. Others feared the park as something that could freeze the status quo and turn the villages into a museum-like setting.

...for solidarity or renown?

Some interviewees considered the park project as a great opportunity for regional development in other valleys in the region that struggle more that one's own. Furthermore, they described the park as an interesting opportunity to cooperate with other villages.

Considering the political process, the non-establishment of the park was very disappointing for policy makers, since it would have been the first national park in accord with the ParkO:

'...it would be a failure when...10 years after the establishment of the law we won't be anywhere. Different political circles would ask, well, why don't we achieve this in Switzerland'.

Conclusion

Rationales of national parks are very diverse and complex. Parc Adula's promoters relied on promises of neoliberal conservation as a way to sustain rural communities by ensuring additional income opportunities and long-term economic security (see IGOE & BROCKINGTON 2007). But, many other rationales of protected areas were also discussed within the negotiations, leading to multi-layered discourses surrounding Parc Adula. This 'discursive blur' (see BÜSCHER & DRESSLER 2007) seemed hard to translate into reality for many local residents and formed a very challenging basis for voters' decision-making. Diverse pro-park arguments rather resulted in an obstructive setting for the establishment of Parc Adula. The questions arise whether a national park brings together too many principles of worth, and thus whether nature conservation measures and regional development should be approached separately and by their respective principles to avoid the plethora of values that leads to a discursive blur and an ambiguous answer to the question 'what is a national park for?'.

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