

The Social Construction of Nature, an explorative investigation of the constructed meaning of Nature within four national park exhibitions in Austria and Germany



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Abstract

Inspired by the theoretical framework on the social construction of reality by BERGER AND LUCKMANN (1991), this master thesis investigates the concept of nature constructed in four National Park exhibitions in Germany and Austria. Based on the sociology of knowledge approach towards discourses, introduced by KELLER (2011), this thesis illustrates how four different discourses structure the meaning of nature displayed in the exhibitions: nature is portrayed from a scientific, in a sustainable and in historical perspective and as something that can be experienced. Since the discourses have been created through social practices that influence and at the same time are influenced by the social order, the thesis also illuminates the complex dialectic relationship between social norms and social practices. Common beliefs are reinforced, but at the same time also questioned by the exhibition practice. By drawing attention to the variety of manners for presenting nature, experts in this field can become more aware of the range of possibilities.

Keywords

Social Construction of Reality, Concept of Nature, National Parks, Exhibitions

Introduction

What is nature? For centuries, people have been arguing and discussing about our understanding of nature, about its value and the way mankind should treat or manage it. Today, facing global warming and other environmental problems, a deeper discussion about our understanding of the concept of nature seems more necessary than ever. Instead of arguing for a specific understanding of nature, this thesis focuses on a different approach. It follows the social constructivist idea, that our understanding of nature is not a given thing, an unchangeable fact, but rather a socially constructed concept. Our idea of nature changes with our social practices and thus goes hand in hand with our social interaction. In order to be able to grasp our current understanding of nature, one has to take a closer look into current practices. National Parks, as natural heritage sites, have always been an important influence on the idea of nature and therefore provide an excellent research field. Their practice and especially their communication with the public are of particular interest while investigating the social construction of nature.

Consequently, the research aim of this thesis is to explore the current meaning of nature constructed by four National Park exhibitions. Furthermore, it also wants to illuminate the manner in which certain understandings of nature get created and socially established at the first place. For this reason, the explorative research design is based on the theoretical framework of BERGER AND LUCKMANN (1991) and the sociology of knowledge approach towards discourses introduced by KELLER (2011).

Theoretical Framework

One of the most influential works within the field of social constructivism is 'The social construction of reality' written by BERGER AND LUCKMANN (1991). The emphasis is set on the shared common knowledge within our society. Instead of taking this knowledge for granted, Berger and Luckmann depict the manner in which it gets created and reproduced via social interaction. Through the fact that it is shared with others and applied in our daily lives, this knowledge gains its validity. In our upbringing, we internalize this shared knowledge by participating in society. It consequently shapes our lives on a daily basis: it guides the way we think, behave and interact with each other and the environment (BERGER & LUCKMANN 1991). In short, the knowledge we experience shapes our perception of reality and structures our worldview.

At the same time, the knowledge is reproduced continuously through our social interaction and is thus subject for constant change. Experts and big institutions have due to their stand in society a certain power to shape the social practices. Nevertheless, they are also bound by the social norms in order to ensure their legitimation.

Method and Research Design

The research design is based on 'The sociology of knowledge approach to discourses', introduced by REINER KELLER (2011, 2013). This method combines social constructivism in respect to Berger and Luckmann with the method of discourse analysis, mainly based on Foucault (KELLER, 2013). The term discourse is thereby defined as communicative pattern, including all types of media that structure our knowledge (KELLER 2011, 46). The database consists of the National Parks exhibitions of the two Parks, National Park Berchtesgaden (2016) and National Park Hamburg's Wadden Sea (2016) in Germany as well as the exhibition of Parks National Park Gesäuse (2016), National Park Hohe Tauern (2016) in Austria. All parks have been visited, observational and textual analyzed with the help of an open coding system.

Results

The four case studies illustrate different ways to present nature. Each of them illustrates a unique setting and storyline, but all of them depict nature in various ways, if you look closely on their details. Nature is portrayed as something we use, transform, master, experience, protect and admire. Other examples show that humans also depend on nature, are threatened by it or encounter it as a bigger system of which humans are only a small part. This illustrates the complexity of the current construction of nature, as the different parts within the same exhibition convey different understanding of nature, which sometimes even contradict each other.

Despite the differences, there are still some common features, which can help to develop a better understanding about the involved and socially rooted discourses. The following four discourses have been identified in the analysis:

- Scientific Understanding of Nature
- Sustainability Approach towards Nature
- Historical Development
- Nature as Experience

Discussion

The similarities within the exhibitions also indicate the way social norms influence the current practice. Linking back to the theoretical framework, the discussion illuminates how the institutional setting shapes the content of the exhibition.

Berger and Luckmann stress that every institution is also a product of its history (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1991). For this reason, the tradition of representing nature in museums, the IUCN guidelines as well as the fact, that the National Park concept has emerged in the US, structures the way nature is presented. The reason for this is that those institutional settings have created a certain guide of conduct.

At the same time, the investigation highlights the dialectic process between the objectivated social order and its constant ongoing human production. The reproducing of social order can be seen as stabilizer, but also as a driving force for social change due to their dialectic relationship. The examples show how new ideas about nature and nature conservation get integrated in social practice. Social institutions may change in order to make them more legitimate by adapting to upcoming new ideas or changing circumstances. Special attention is thereby drawn to the expert involved in the creation of exhibitions. With the choice of content and the general arrangement, the National Park administration can decide what knowledge is presented and how it is displayed. Consequently, they can influence to a certain degree the way nature is constructed within their work. Although this is a powerful position, it is important to keep in mind, that the production of reality is always a social process.

Conclusion

The thesis illustrates how the discovered common beliefs are reinforced in some parts of the exhibition, but also questioned in other parts of the exhibition. This demonstrates the possibility to portray and understand nature in various ways. With the different discourses of nature in mind, experts can become more aware of their possibilities to influence the way knowledge about nature is produced and transmitted. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the concept of nature is an abstract, changeable, but socially defined concept. In order to establish a new understanding of nature, a broader discussion about the social norms limiting the practice is also necessary.

References

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- KELLER, R. 2011. The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD). *Human Studies* 34(1): 43–65.
- KELLER, R. 2013. Kommunikative Konstruktion und diskursive Konstruktion. In R. KELLER, J. REICHERTZ, & H. KNOBLAUCH (eds.). *Kommunikativer Konstruktivismus*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden: 69–94.

Exhibitions

Nationalpark Berchtesgaden, visited March 18, 2016

Nationalpark Zentrum Haus der Berge

Exhibition: Nationalpark-Ausstellung, Vertikale Wildnis, Mensch & Berg

Hanielstraße 7

83471 Berchtesgaden, Germany

Nationalpark Gesäuse, visited April 14, 2016

Naturhistorischen Museum des Stift Admont

Exhibition: Leidenschaft für Natur

In the Benediktinerstift Admont

Bibliothek & Museum

8911 Admont, Austria

Nationalpark Hamburgisches Wattenmeer, visited March 9, 2016

Nationalpark-Haus Neuwerk

Exhibition: Nationalpark-Ausstellung

27499 Insel Neuwerk, Germany

www.nationalpark-wattenmeer.de

Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, visited April 21, 2016

Nationalparkzentrum

Exhibition: Nationalparkwelten

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