

Participation Processes in Biosphere Reserves – Development of an Intervention

Theory, Analysis of Strategies and Procedural Ethics by example of BRs Nockberge, Vienna Forest and Großes Walsertal (Austria)

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Summary

The establishment as well as the management of a Biosphere Reserve (BR) can be understood as a permanent intervention to promote regional change management towards sustainability.

These long-term processes need a proper theoretical base, concise tools and a consistent accumulation and reflection of experiences. By example of three Austrian BRs (Vienna Forest, Walsertal, and – in planning: Nockberge) very different processes will be documented, analysed and reflected along 7 guiding hypothesis. Five aspects are taken into account in particular:

- Intervention science and intervention ethics
- Participation processes
- Change management
- Diversity management
- Good regional / local governance

The workflow is structured as a sequence of scientific analysis and regional involvement. Empirical data is collected in document analysis, sophisticated workshop settings, a virtual platform and in-depth interviews. The interpretation is performed with methods of the different disciplines involved. The different perspectives within the interdisciplinary research-team and the focus on transdisciplinary synthesis will lead to new concepts of participation. However, this will enhance the capacity to understand and to conduct participation processes in BRs.

Keywords

Biosphere Reserve, participation, change management, governance, intervention, diversity management, protected areas management and planning

Aims and duration

Planning of protected areas in general and of Biosphere Reserves (BR) in particular is one of the largest spatial planning processes in a modern society. It is a large scale intervention with far-ranging and long-term economic, socio-cultural and ecological impacts. The portfolio of individual and common options for actions will change, rules between different players and groups will be newly defined, new institutions and mechanisms will be developed and implemented. The management of a BS may therefore be seen as a continuous process of regional change management.

By example of three Austrian Biosphere Reserves an interdisciplinary research team wants to document and understand the participation processes under the perspectives of:

- Intervention theory
- Intervention ethics
- Diversity management
- Change management
- Regional governance

The scientific process will lead to (components) of a theory. A step by step process of reflection with and in the BR-regions will lead to an enhanced capacity to understand and conduct participation processes in BR-regions.

The study which lasted 18 months, started in July 2008, and will end in December 2009.

Area of study

Primarily, planning and management processes in the three Austrian BRs are the "source" of the research project.

1. BR Großes Walsertal: The 192 qm² large reserve is situated in an agricultural and cultural homogenous area. Planning and management is (was) done under individual involvement of many stakeholders, which can be done quite well in a site containing 3.500 inhabitants in six municipalities. From an economic-geography point of view it can be seen as a disadvantaged rural area. The park was established through a participative process and was internationally recognised in 2000.

2. BR Vienna Forest: The reserve with an extent of 1.056 qm² borders 61 municipalities with more than 200.000 inhabitants. Economically, the site is situated on a gradient between the rural settlements and (peri-) urban areas. Geographically spoken, the local communities are oriented to different directions. This makes broad participation processes difficult and complex. Therefore the park management tries to orient the communication to specific target groups.

3. (Planned) BR Nockberge: The National Park Nockberge will be transformed into a BR in a large-scale participation process. More than 300 (!) events took place in the region in the last three years. Economically, the region which includes four municipalities, is characterised by tourism, agriculture and forestry.

The case study areas differ in many aspects. This diversity will contribute to broadening the approaches and the results and will therefor lead to more general hypothesis about the interventions made into these landscapes.

Workflow and methods

The workflow combines scientific analysis and regional involvement. The Scientific Advisory Board will meet three times during the process. It is tasked with controlling the scientific qualities (methods and results). The thematic analysis and workshops will lead to sectoral results, whereas the interdisciplinary analysis and workshop combine the different aspects and will lead to the integrating general results and findings. Regional workshops are instruments to collect, reflect and distribute information.

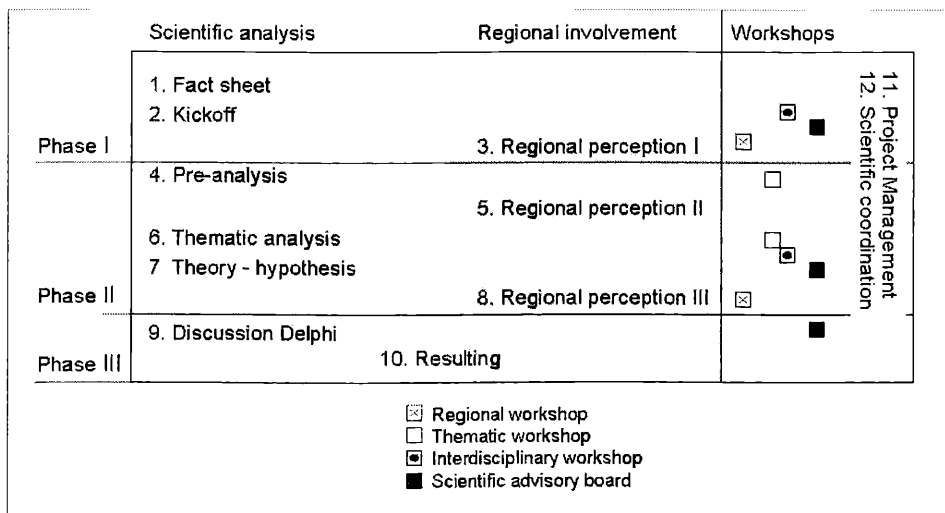


Figure 4: Overview of workflow.

The applied methods within the different thematical focuses are performed with methods of the different disciplines involved.

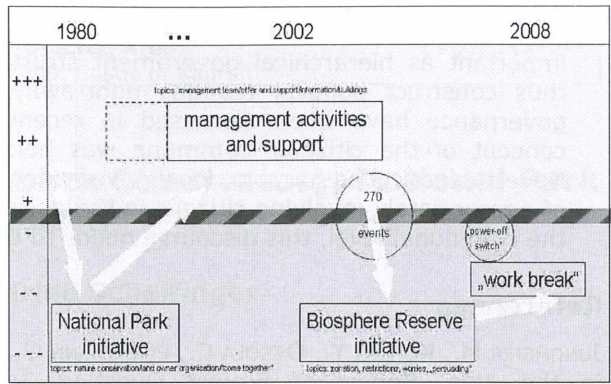
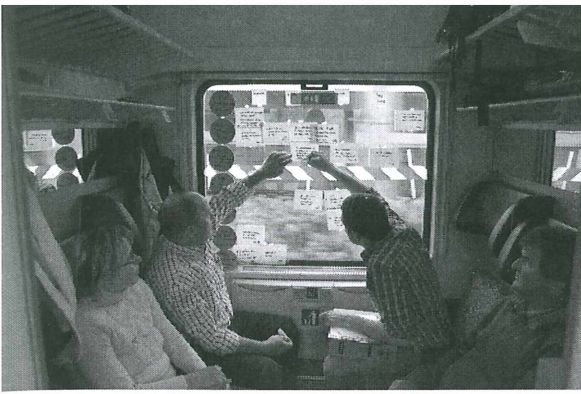


Figure 5: Perception analysis in the train.

By raising evidences of good and bad practices during the protected area development experienced by the participants of the “train workshop”, a “memory map” will be made visible along a timeline telling predominantly amicable periods from controversial periods. By analysing the single statements (shown in the left-hand picture), phases can be observed and interpreted (see right hand picture): While there was a good cognition in the late seventies, the initiative to establish a national park was seen as a major negative impact. By and by, the continuous activities of the national park management team turned the perception of the participants towards the positive realm. In the early new millennium, the initiative to commute the national park into a biosphere reserve was again seen as a strong impact. Though accompanied by more than 270 regional events and meetings, a positive impression could not be created. This prompted the responsible political representative to press the “power-off button” for the Biosphere Reserve initiative. Currently, the development is still “frozen”, and all actors are evenly unsatisfied with the situation.

Results

As the project is still ongoing, the final and approved results will only be available in December 2009. Basically, the main result however will be the verification and/or further development of the following seven guiding hypothesis:

Intervention impact: A BR is per se a permanent intervention by influencing different subsystems on several levels of impact. The essential components of the system are part of the triangle of sustainability. Thereby, social, ecological and economic subsystems follow different rules and show different impacts. The perspective of cultural sustainability may help as orientation how to make decisions sustainable. Aspects that are discussed intensively and emotionally are often not the factors that make the difference.

Intervention strategies: The establishment and management of BRs happen simultaneously with basically different concepts: Bottom-up vs. top-down, normative vs. process-oriented, sovereign vs. participatory, push vs. pull. The specific mix of components is an essential success factor.

Ethic of intervention: Due to the fact that simple cause-and-effect models fail, planning, establishment and management of BRs need a specific ethic of intervention. Moreover, increased knowledge of participants does not automatically lead to improved capacity to act. Therefore, all persons involved in the process have to develop new competences. A permanent process of (self-) reflection is a crucial element in this (new) ethic of intervention.

Regional change management: The set of tools and theories in organisational development in general and change management in specific can be used for understanding, analyzing and optimizing planning and management of BRs. Thereby, a few aspects have to be adapted and seen in a new context.

Diversity management: Activating and involvement (empowerment) of diverse groups and players is an essential success factor in a BR. The applied approaches, communication- and participation strategies only get through to a part of the target groups. The involvement of regional players depends on a variety of parameters (level of organisation, access to information, etc) and as a consequence specific groups of the population may be disadvantaged, or excluded.

'Subject-subject-relationship': For the planning, but also for the implementation of research projects in this field cooperative exchange between persons and interest involved (“stakeholders”) is a key factor (Subject-subject-relationship). A polarisation in “researchers” and “objects of research” or “planners” and “planned” (Subject-object-relationship) is counterproductive and should be avoided.

Local governance and participation: Participation on the communal level has become more important as hierarchical government structures increasingly lacked the ability to thrive and thus construct political realities right-away. Many "ideals" of a "just" form of good local governance have been discussed in recent years. Perhaps most prominently, though, the concept of the citizens' commune was held to represent a good instrument in this realm. Nevertheless, good forms of local governance need to consider the fundamental future necessity of appropriately involving citizens in the decision-making processes of their local authorities. On the communal level, this discourse needs to be performed in new settings.

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