

Perception and acceptance – key factors for participatory planning of protected areas in Europe

Ingo Mose

Summary

While protected areas become increasingly connected with a multitude of functions, they often suffer a lack of acceptance at the same time. This is often due to planning procedures that are executed in a top down manner, neglecting perceptions of population and actors concerned. Appropriate forms of participatory planning can help to build a fundament for substantial acceptance as well as acceptance provides a basis for the involvement of relevant actors. Thus, successful management of protected areas is dependent on the inclusion of multiple actors and the use of their competences. As a result protected areas may even become future models of sustainable development.

Keywords

Perception, acceptance, participatory planning, regional development

Protected areas: instruments of regional development

Protected areas play an outstanding role for nature conservation today. They are steadily growing in number and size. At the same time they experience considerable change regarding their aims and functions. In fact, many protected areas are no longer “only” areas of protection but rather fulfil a multitude of different functions: tourism, environmental education and research represent well known utilisations of protected areas since long. Further functions are continuously being applied (agriculture, renewable energies, etc.) and contribute to a more general debate about the role of protected areas today. Therefore, protected areas are more and more defined by the integration of protection *and* development functions and thereby are increasingly regarded as instruments of regional development (MOSE, WEIXLBAUMER 2007). By definition this is especially true for biosphere reserves, but also other types of protected areas under IUCN category V (nature parks, regional parks, etc.) throughout Europe (HAMMER 2003).

Even though having gained significant importance, many protected areas are subjects of controversial debate at the same time. Hence, protected areas often suffer a lack of acceptance and are the cause of political opposition and denial among concerned population and actors (STOLL-KLEEMANN, WELP 2006). Although this may seem odd, reasons for such negative reaction are quite obvious. As protected areas get increasingly connected with the aims of regional development, such projects challenge efficient planning and communication. But for too long planning of protected areas has been executed in a rather top down manner, solely building on an outside perspective, whereas neglecting the need to explore and understand the inside perspective as well. This practice explains glaring deficits of acceptance in regions affected by protected areas planning, building up considerable burdens for the implementation of corresponding plans.

Perception and acceptance: tools of understanding

Lack of acceptance provides a warning signal which should not be dismissed, especially with regard to possible political frictions that may result from this. Hence, there is an increasing understanding nowadays that high ranking projects in nature conservation require early communication to identify relevant perceptions of those who are concerned. As COY & WEIXLBAUMER (2009) point out, successful projects in nature conservation are equally dependent on the outsider and insider perspective both of which should not be overvalued to the others expanse. Traditional approaches to protected areas were (and sometimes still are) predominantly based on external aims and executed in a top down manner hardly taking into account any of the local or regional perceptions, concerns, expectations or ideas. Not surprisingly, acceptance of such projects turns out to be

rather low and can only be earned long after official implementation – often with enormous efforts to overcome scepticism and distrust.

Taking the insider perspective more seriously will require appropriate forms of investigation to explore people's perceptions towards a protected area but also the region as a whole. A number of instruments, mainly of informal nature, offer appropriate tools to identify different dispositions, arguments and attitudes, such as opinion surveys, community appraisals, internet forums, etc. These methods are well proved and supply sufficient information for better understanding of both the insider and outsider perspective. Thus, this will also allow for appropriate measures to communicate a protected area and hence earn greater acceptance for a specific project (Mose 2009).

Consequently, acceptance can be regarded as a key factor for participatory planning of protected areas. Although this might appear only as a buzzword, the need for participation in the context of planning processes is without question and has been discussed at lengths. As a result, new forms of participatory planning have emerged. Besides legally binding elements especially informal instruments like future workshops, round tables, planning conferences, etc. can provide sufficient incentives for participation. Sometimes application of these instruments may even result in the creation of more permanent network types of cooperation including actors both from the public, private and civil sector (FÜRST 2004).

Relations between participation and acceptance are twofold: Whereas sufficient acceptance will contribute to the establishment of appropriate forms of participatory planning, the latter can also support the development of acceptance. As COY & WEIXLBAUMER (2009) point out, acceptance is something that only can be acquired.

Empirical research: case study findings

Systematic research on perception and acceptance as key factors for participatory planning of protected areas is still a young area of research dating back to the late 1980ies. Since then, a growing number of studies have been recorded, often conducted after the creation of a protected area or (more seldom) shortly before. In recent years research on perception and acceptance has gained increasing attention, namely through the work of JOB (1996), WEIXLBAUMER (1998) and STOLL (1999) to name but a few.

Present research underlines the importance of well designed empirical research to explore perception and acceptance as well as appropriate forms of participatory planning that may build upon these prerequisites. Especially with regard to new protected areas (either being prepared or just having been installed) a number of case studies from The Alpes have proved the value of differentiated knowledge:

In the case of the Biosphere Park Großes Walsertal (Austria) research surprisingly displayed an even stronger attitude of local population towards the protective dimension of the area than was expressed by academic, political and regional development experts from outside (COY, WEIXLBAUMER 2009). At the same time participation in the region is actually growing from strength to strength and thereby reflects a high grade of general acceptance. Slightly different findings are reported from the area of the future Biosphere Reserve Val Müstair – Parc Naziunal (Switzerland). According to KARTHÄUSER (2009) associations of local population are focussing explicitly on the perspective of regional development and less on that of nature protection, which clearly mirrors the perception of the Biosphere Reserve as an instrument of regional development in a rather less favoured peripheral region. Opposite to this the vast majority of tourists see the area mainly as an attractive holiday destination.

Outlook

Future development of large protected areas will highly depend on the implementation of participatory planning accompanied by efficient forms of communication and cooperation. To support these challenges, reliable knowledge about perception and acceptance regarding nature protection certainly is of great value. According to STOLL-KLEEMANN & WELP (2008) participation in protected areas planning does not only take into account the reality of multiple actors being concerned but also reflects increasing experiences that involvement of these actors will result in sustainable acceptance and practical support. Finally, growing complexity of problems connected with protected areas more and more demands the inclusion of multiple actors and their competences to safeguard the quality of protected areas.

Against this background there is a need for continuous improvement of appropriate techniques in participatory planning as well as regarding identification and interpretation of perceptions, attitudes and expectations of those who are concerned. Hence, empirical research can make major

contributions to establish efficient forms of management which allow protected areas to become real models of sustainable development.

References

- COY M., WEIXLBAUMER N. (2009): Selbst- und Fremdbild in der Gebietsschutzpolitik. Das Beispiel des Biosphärenparks Großes Walsertal. In: Mose, I. (Ed.), pp. 37-81.
- FÜRST D. (2004): Regional Governance. In: Benz, A. (Ed.): Governance – Regieren in komplexen Regelsystemen. Wiesbaden, pp. 45-64.
- HAMMER T. (2003): Großschutzgebiete – Instrumente nachhaltiger Entwicklung. München.
- JOB H. (1994): Großschutzgebiete und ihre Akzeptanz bei Einheimischen – Das Beispiel der Nationalparke im Harz. In: Geographische Rundschau 48, 3, pp. 159-165.
- KARTHÄUSER J. M. (2009): Die Biosfera Val Müstair – Parc Naziunal: Zur Akzeptanz des geplanten UNESCO-Biosphärenreservats.- In: Mose, I. (Ed.), pp. 83-108.
- MOSE I. (2009): Akzeptanz, Einstellung und Image als Einflussgrößen von Großschutzgebieten. Einige theoretische und methodische Vorüberlegungen. In: Mose, I. (Ed.), pp. 9-36.
- MOSE I. (Ed. 2009): Wahrnehmung und Akzeptanz von Großschutzgebieten. (= Wahrnehmungsgeographische Studien, 25). Oldenburg.
- MOSE I., WEIXLBAUMER N. (2007): A New Paradigm for Protected Areas in Europe? In: Mose, Ingo (Ed.): Protected Areas and Regional Development in Europe. Towards a New Model for the 21st Century. Aldershot, pp. 3-20.
- STOLL S. (1999): Akzeptanzprobleme bei der Ausweisung von Großschutzgebieten. Frankfurt am Main.
- STOLL-KLEEMANN S.; WELP M. (Eds. 2006): Stakeholder Dialogues in Natural Resources Management. Theory and Practice. Berlin, Heidelberg.
- STOLL-KLEEMANN S., WELP M. (2008): Participatory and Integrated Management of Biosphere Reserves. Lessons from Case Studies and a Global Survey. In: GAIA 17, S1, pp. 161-168.
- WEIXLBAUMER N. (1998): Gebietsschutz in Europa: Konzeption, Perzeption, Akzeptanz. Ein Beispiel angewandter Sozialgeographie am Fall des Regionalparkkonzeptes in Friaul-Julisch Venetien. (= Beiträge zur Bevölkerungs- und Sozialgeographie, 8). Wien.

Contact

Prof. Dr. Ingo Mose
ingo.mose@uni-oldenburg.de

Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg
ZENARiO – Center for Sustainable Spatial Development
Regional Sciences Research Group
P.O. Box
D-26111 Oldenburg
Germany