

Managing a World Heritage Site – Potentials and Limitations of Transdisciplinary Approaches

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Summary

Management of the World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch is challenged by the interplay of conservation and economic development. This is a situation where a knowledge-based solution is sought for a complex societal problem. This sets the frame for transdisciplinary research where the problem is defined and solved cooperatively by actors from science and the life-world. The transdisciplinary setting in the case of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch constructs a situation of mutual learning among stakeholders from different levels and backgrounds. However, the positive effects of mutual learning are continuously challenged by the power play inherent in participatory approaches.

Keywords

transdisciplinarity; multi-stakeholder participatory process; protected areas; World Heritage Site; integrated management; Switzerland

Aims of the project

In order to protect the environment with its inherent natural beauty without preventing regional development we need to integrate knowledge from various scientific disciplines as well as from other societal fields. This takes us to transdisciplinary research, which is defined as 'research that includes cooperation within the scientific community and a debate between research and the society at large' (WIESMANN et al. 2008).

In the region of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch a multi-stakeholder participatory process was initiated in order to negotiate concrete objectives for this area. In this way persistent conflicting expectations should be overcome and ownership and common responsibility for the region enhanced. The discussions in the forefront of the nomination of the WHS as well as the multi-stakeholder participatory process itself have been analysed in various studies (AERNI 2005; WIESMANN et al. 2005; LIECHTI et al. 2008; WALLNER et al. 2008). In this presentation we re-examine the findings of these studies against the background of transdisciplinary research. Thereby we detect key issues prevalent in transdisciplinary research settings as well as tackling upon potentials and limitations of transdisciplinary approaches. The methods used in these studies include semi-structured interviews with participants of the participatory process, standardized questionnaires filled in by the participants of the participatory process as well as analysis of newspaper articles published in the forefront of the democratic decision-making.

Area of study: Unesco World Heritage Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch

The protected area of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch – designated by UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2001 – concentrates on the uninhabited high alpine zone. This area is positioned in a region containing settlements and small-scale cultural landscapes. The region composed of the protected area and the surrounding settlements constitutes a world wide known tourist attraction as well as an important economic basis for the local residents (35000 people living in the area).

The scientific advisory group of the management centre suggested implementing a multi-stakeholder participatory process in order to concretize the WHS by negotiating and prioritising overall goals, specific objectives, necessary measures and concrete projects for the region. Thereby contradictions between acceptance and expectations should be overcome and the management could work on the basis of broad acceptance.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the studies related to the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch revealed three key issues, which are crucial when trying to find a local based pathway to sustainable regional development and nature conservation.

The issue of integration into participation

The selection and integration of stakeholders into the process is a very sensitive procedure. Some participants were interviewed in order to assess their perception of the process. Most of them regarded the process of selecting the participants as positively in regard of broad involvement. Some of the participants were directly approached by the WHS Management Centre to participate, while others joined the process based on calls placed in the regional newspapers. Nevertheless, it was mentioned that it is extremely difficult to integrate persons who feel less concerned as well as people who are not linked or organised very well and who cannot formulate a common interest regarding the WHS. Furthermore, stakeholders range from the local level to the regional and even sub-regional and national level. These are all stakeholders from other societal fields than science and their perception of nature and economic development can be even more differentiating amongst each other than the perceptions from various scientific disciplines.

The issue of perceptions and positions

Our perception of nature influences the position we take regarding nature protection. In the case of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch different perceptions of nature and landscape were found to be an underlying current in the multi-stakeholder participatory process. Three main visions could be differentiated: a vision of pristine nature including aspects of wilderness and a wide range of conservation issues; a vision of nature as being related to humankind and manifested as cultural landscape; and a vision dominated by utility of nature focussing on economically relevant natural resources.

Different and especially conflicting perceptions influence negotiations and therefore have to be addressed by creating an atmosphere of mutual learning. In the case presented here, enabling a situation of mutual learning was essential for developing broad ownership of the problems at hand and thereby detecting common values hidden behind differing perceptions.

The issue of negotiability

In the area of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch, many persisting conflicts among stakeholder groups stem from the fact that there are existing legal norms which can not be negotiated by the involved stakeholders, because they are defined by the state government. In this situation they represent a kind of 'non-negotiable' feature in the participatory process. Nevertheless, these legal norms are often very important for the local population and therefore are always mentioned in negotiations.

Mutual learning and power play

The process launched in the area of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch in order to define objectives and activities in order to reach those objectives enabled mutual learning on different levels:

- between the different local stakeholder groups;
- between stakeholders from the local, regional and national level;
- between society and science.

This extensive situation of mutual learning made it possible for all involved stakeholders to detect common values despite conflicting interests. This is a decisive step in enhancing local people's sense of ownership and thereby also responsibility for the region. From this point of view we can conclude that there is great potential in transdisciplinary approaches for the management of protected areas.

However, power play is also a critical issue in participatory processes: Power play becomes evident

- in the decision who should participate;
- in different perceptions;
- by putting 'non-negotiable' features into the centre of negotiations;
- when assessing the success of implementation.

Power play is a key issue in the management of protected areas. The situation of mutual learning created by applying transdisciplinary approaches is continuously challenged by the underlying power play. Furthermore, local ownership and common responsibility for an area can be built through participatory processes but their survival might be threatened by prolonged discussions on financial support for concrete actions. These arguments illustrate that participatory processes hold enormous potential for management of protected areas but the limitations of these approaches must also be seriously considered.

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