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Nature parks in Germany facing societal change

Experiences from three nature parks in the Federal State of Brandenburg

Summary

This paper addresses the question of the relationship between residents and nature conservation in nature parks in Germany using the example of three "new style" nature parks in Brandenburg in what was formerly East Germany. Also examined is how the challenges of social change such as demographic change are being dealt with. To answer these questions, data was collected using socioeconomic monitoring. The strategies include, *inter alia*, the strengthening of regional identity. All three nature parks are characterized by having established various forms of cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders, including trustees, that are flexible and function well. This cooperation includes undertaking specific projects and the staging of a series of ongoing events. Good communication and cooperation have proven to be the key success factors.

Keywords

Nature parks
Socioeconomic monitoring
Brandenburg
Societal challenges
1. Introduction

Nature parks, with their long conservation history in Germany, are especially interesting examples for the so-called paradigm shift within nature conservation: away from strict protection towards a more people-inclusive approach. They are often seen as model landscapes and tools for sustainable regional development. According to Mose & Weixbaumer (2007, p. 14) "no other protected area category represents so well the advancement of the European Area Protection Policy and with it the resulting paradigm shift, but at the same time also the underlying development path of the mankind-nature (protection)-relationship in Europe".

This European development is mirrored in Germany as well. Germany's 104 nature parks extend over more than a quarter of the country's area. The legal mandate, according to the Federal Nature Conservation Act, emphasizes the parks' recreational function, which, however, must be in keeping with the spirit of nature conservation. A new vision of nature parks approaches that of biotope reserves: They are to strive for "balance among intact nature, economic prosperity, and a good quality of life" (Porzelt & Liesen 2012). Thus, in keeping with the current manifesto of the Association of German Nature Parks (VDN), they should be "model landscapes for the development of rural regions on the whole". The nature parks in the "new federal states" (i.e. those of the former East Germany) in particular—due to their history, which is quite different from those in the formerly West German regions—still fulfill a much stronger role in terms of nature conservation, overseen as far as possible by functioning nature-conservation authorities.

But what about the Brandenburg nature parks' performance at the societal level almost 25 years after German Reunification? What social challenges remain to be mastered and what strategies have been employed in this effort? Supported by the Brandenburg Foundation for Nature Conservation (Naturgeschaftsfonds Brandenburg), a system of socioeconomic monitoring developed at the University of Greifswald that has proven effective in biotope reserves has been deployed to clarify these issues.

2. Methods

In general, socioeconomic monitoring systems help to manage protected areas more successfully. The systematic identification and analysis of social processes provide decision makers with a sound basis on which they can take action that is appropriate to the local situation and adjusted to its needs (Lotze-Campen et al. 2008). Apart from this, the monitoring effort's output enhances the visibility of the protected area administration's work in the public sphere, legitimizing its presence to politicians and critics alike. The development of the monitoring system has involved close cooperation with the administrations of the protected areas involved. So far, five instruments have been developed:

1. Stakeholder analysis
2. Workshop on management effectiveness in the biotope reserves
3. Quantitative local attitude survey
4. Interviews with representatives of local authorities
5. Key socio-demographic and socioeconomic data (Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2010)

After completion of the test phase in four biotope reserves, the instruments were applied in a pilot study in three nature parks—Barnim (BAR), Stechlin-Ruppliner...
Land (SRL), and Niederlausitzer Heidelandeschaft (NHL)—to answer the above-mentioned questions. The case study areas are located in the map in Figure 1. The goal of the study was to acquire valuable information on the social perception and acceptance of nature parks. To achieve this, members of the local population, community leaders, and other people were interviewed. To answer the research questions concerning the social challenges, four detailed expert interviews were conducted with the directors of the three natural parks under scrutiny and with the managing director of the Association of German Nature Parks.

The following sections describe a sample of the results from interviews with representatives of local agencies and inhabitants.

3. Results: Strengths, societal challenges and strategies

3.1 Strengths: Residents express a high level of acceptance and the desire for more conservation of nature

The responses of many nature park residents were almost surprisingly positive, especially compared to an earlier study in which residents of biosphere reserves were interviewed. In reply to the question “If there were a referendum next Sunday on whether to continue financing the natural park system or not, how would you vote?” an overwhelming majority of the nature park residents (83–91 percent) expressed their preference for the parks’ preservation.

The nature park residents’ positive response was even more pronounced in regard to the very concrete question, “Is enough being done for nature and the landscape in your area?” Here, 85 percent in Barnim, 75 percent in Stechlin-Ruppiner Land, and 90 percent in the Niederlausitzer Heidelandeschaft said that in their view, “too little was being done for nature and the landscape.” This contradicts the widespread belief that many people want less nature conservation.

In a publicly circulated questionnaire, residents were asked to list what they particularly liked about their region. By a large majority, most respondents in all three nature parks mentioned “nature and the landscape,” far ahead of factors like “the mentality of the local people” or “economic factors.” And in regard to the statement, “I like nature and the landscape here in the region,” 91 percent of the people in the Niederlausitzer Heidelandeschaft and 100 percent in Stechlin-Ruppiner Land expressed their agreement.

An interesting picture emerged from responses to the statement “the nature park has increased interest in our region among people who would otherwise never come here.” In the nature parks Barnim, Niederlausitzer Heidelandeschaft, and Stechlin-Ruppiner Land, 85 percent, 70 percent, and 86 percent of respondents respectively agreed with this assertion. This supports the conclusion drawn by the representatives of local authorities in the three parks, i.e. that the nature park designation supports the development of tourism in the region. Respondents agreed as follows with this statement: Barnim 78 percent, Niederlausitzer Heidelandeschaft 76 percent, and Stechlin-Ruppiner Land 60 percent. On the whole, the results show that apart from local people’s high level of approval of the nature parks, nature conservation is viewed as the most important task for these areas, and the parks are recognized for the role they play in attracting visitors to the region. These assessments can be used by the nature parks’ administrations as an argument for moving the development of tourism in their region in a sustainable direction.

Overall, these very positive results demonstrate that the nature parks have strong support among the population. This is especially true when it comes to their nature-conservation function, a task that, by definition, is not as clearly articulated in their mandate as it is in the portfolio of Germany’s national parks. In sum, this high level of acceptance is essential for successfully meeting the challenges of social change.
3.2 Societal challenges from the perspective of the nature park managers and staff

From management effectiveness workshops, which included semi-structured group interviews and guided individual interviews with the nature park managers, it was possible to filter out very important societal challenges, as well as many other issues. These included threats, planning priorities, and legal dimensions. In this context, demographic change and the related factors of urbanization were also repeatedly and emphatically mentioned.

According to Linz & Sula (2011, p. 2) "the concept of "demographic change" describes a population's age structure adjusting to changes in living conditions. Consequently, changes in the composition of a society's age structure are the result of social shifts. Since the 1970s, demographers have observed negative trends in the population structure in Europe. The lower birth rates in the recent past and present come with increasing life expectancy for Europeans. Ongoing low birth rates lead to an ageing of societies if mortality rates remain low. If one speaks today of the challenge of or the adjustment to "demographic change," then this usually means the challenges or adjustments that come with an ageing society".

The different features of demographic change and urbanization were expressed very differently in relation to each of the three nature parks:

The Barnim Nature Park is a special case because it has experienced a significant population increase in the last fifteen years. This trend will continue in the coming years, though at a significantly slower rate (Gätter 2013). This influx has been characterized by a predominantly urban population looking for peace and quiet in the green metropolitan suburbs in a community with an intact municipal infrastructure and excellent transport links to Berlin. The nature park region was and is characterized by ongoing immigration and is thus one of the few regions in the new federal states experiencing demographic growth—the primary source being Berlin.

According to Gätter (2013), in the period 1992–2011, the nature park regions of Oehrzahl and Barnim had the highest and third-highest number of housing completions respectively of all of Brandenburg’s counties. More than three-quarters of them were created in “residential communities” conveniently located in Berlin’s suburbs. From 1994–2011, the number of dwellings rose by more than 36 percent, compared to 18 percent in the rest of the State.

Thus a strategic orientation was necessary when establishing the nature parks in order to deal with this social challenge from the perspective of nature conservation. In addition to the designation of protected areas, a particularly effective means was the designation of more than 70 percent of the nature park area as landscape conservation areas. Fifteen years after the nature park’s creation, the principle of this approach has proven successful. Applications for permits to be excluded from the conservation area are extremely rare, and the residents of the suburban communities now view the landscape protection areas as a “dam” against further urban sprawl in the area (Gätter 2013).

As might be expected, traffic growth has become a particular problem, since the proximity to Berlin and the population influx require constant expansion and development of the infrastructure and the concomitant scaling of the terrain. The main issue is currently the six-lane expansion of the Berlin ring road, which affects protected areas of the nature park. Optimizing the accessibility to cars also has negative consequences: In addition to the interventions in the natural environment, the current bridges, which are important for pedestrians and cyclists, will not be replaced over the wider highway for cost reasons!

The Barnim Nature Park is dealing with the contradictory challenges of growth vs. preservation and development of the large nature reserve by means of various projects that are carried out jointly with the municipalities and numerous stakeholders.

The other two nature parks also pursue a strategy of very close cooperation and excellent communication, although they are confronted with developments that are the opposite of those in Barnim. The social challenges in the Stechlin-Ruppiner Land Nature Park and particularly in the Niederlausitzer Heidelandchaft Park are related to demographic change, the main consequence of which is a disproportionately large ageing population.

The result is a vicious circle: Fewer people are born, and many of the small number of young people need to leave the region in order to find appropriate training and work. Also, due to apparently mistaken policy decisions, the process of marginalization is exacerbated: Youth clubs are forced to give up their premises, a disproportionate number of elderly people make up the memberships of other types of local clubs and associations, and the already inconvenient rail-transport links are further degraded through the decommissioning of stations and an overall reduction in the number of trains.

Another aspect of this population development is that the meadow orchards, which are valuable from a conservation perspective, are already beginning to degrade. The Niederlausitzer Heidelandchaft Nature Park is trying to counter these developments by becoming involved in political discussions and adopting topics of importance to the communities. This includes, inter alia, a biannual “mayor’s roundtable”. Also, as “regional leaders”, employees of the nature park spend a lot of time participating actively in appropriate bodies and committees. The region even actively markets itself by advertising attractive and affordable housing on various websites.

Although the Stechlin-Ruppiner Land Nature Park is also a region plagued by migration and negative population growth, it enjoys positive factors that clearly mitigate the social challenge posed by demographic change and its concomitant negative impacts. These include its greater proximity to metropolitan Berlin and better transport.
Towards decentralised renewable energy (and energy efficiency), with an emphasis on wind power and biomass use. The wide-ranging measures include a plan to establish more wind turbines also in nature parks and even in some forests, which is neither ecologically sound nor socially acceptable. This also acts as a deterrent to the desired migration of the population to rural areas. Moreover, the plan envisages an increase in the already large number of bioenergy crops, which also negatively impact upon the aesthetic advantages of the nature parks in terms of ecology and landscape. Nature parks, in contrast to what is being discussed and implemented, should remain as spaces to be protected from these adverse developments.

3.3 What do representatives of local authorities think about their local nature parks?

A comprehensive understanding of how representatives of local authorities view their nature parks can help a nature park’s administration to better anticipate how the local authorities will respond to its activities. In order to turn the vision of a model region for the development of sustainable rural areas into a reality, concepts must be supported and implemented by local people. This makes local authorities important partners: in addition to their own experiences, elected representatives also come to understand the local population’s views on a given nature park. These interviews with representatives of local authorities during each local legislative period can be used to examine public opinion of the protected area’s regional bonding.

The following results relate to 45 semi-structured interviews with local authorities in the three nature parks. Full-time and voluntary mayors, administrative representatives and district administrators discussed their views of their local nature park for an average of 43 minutes. Overall, the opinion of the mayors was consistent in regard to the question of whether the advantages of their local nature parks outweighed the disadvantages, or vice versa. In all three nature parks, the majority of mayors felt that their nature park presented an advantage, and they viewed it as a protective shield in nature-preservation efforts. None of the respondents indicated that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages or even that there was something approaching a balance between advantages and disadvantages. Seven mayors said they felt they were not in a position to judge adequately because their communities lie in a peripheral position within the nature park and therefore do not have much contact with the nature park and do not undertake any joint projects.

There are diverse reasons for the local representatives’ consistently positive assessments of the nature parks and their cooperation with the nature park administrations. Unlike in the biosphere reserves, where many mayors see disadvantages through the protected area (Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2011), the local representatives of the three nature parks feel the facilities are well integrated locally. They also highlighted the...
cooperative style of personal interaction in regard to park-related activities as being positive. In their opinion, the joint initiatives and projects deserve particular praise and should be continued and expanded. Examples include the nature park community competitions in the Barnim and the Niederlausitzer Heidelandchaft Parks and the canoe-touring guidance system in the Stochlin-Ruppiner Land Park, as well as conservation projects such as the reintroduction of wood grouse in the Niederlausitzer Heidelandchaft Nature Park. In Barnim, many local community representatives rated the nature park as a beacon for the preservation of scenic attractiveness — especially in the face of the pressure exerted by the city of Berlin and the strong tourist inflow that places a strain on both nature and the local infrastructure (Stoll-Kleemann et al. 2015).

In all three nature parks, the very diverse forms of cooperation, the exchange of information, and informal exchanges (including the "mayor's roundtable") were particularly highly praised. This positive assessment extended beyond project-based cooperation and formal participation and included all ongoing cooperation. The good collaboration between the nature park managers and the trustees was also acclaimed.

To summarise, in all three cases, the nature park concept fulfils the promise of regional management and can be seen as an "instrument for transcending borders and sustainable regional development" with its strong ability to communicate and act across established “bureaucratic borders” (Weber & Weber 2014).

4. Conclusion

When compared to the rest of Germany, Brandenburg’s nature parks can be seen as trailblazers with respect to the successful reconciliation between genuine conservation efforts and sustainable economic use. Similar accomplishments have only been achieved in other Federal States by implementing a variety of categories of protected areas. In order for them to continue to fulfil these functions, it is crucial that the nature parks are not subject to financial cutbacks. On the contrary, investment in the nature parks must be viewed as an investment in Brandenburg’s rural areas for the mutual benefit of people and the protection of nature.

Nature parks have the potential to enhance rural areas and thus help them come to terms with societal challenges such as strong urbanization or ageing and marginalized rural populations. This is much more likely to occur if the nature parks’ directors base their management style on cooperation and communication with local authorities and the population. The success factors found in the three nature parks in Brandenburg are in line with what Hammer et al. (2007, p. 245) have outlined as a summary for several other protected areas as well, namely that “protected areas gain dynamism in their development when they are not afraid to take unconventional paths” and take regional and national conditions into account.

On a more general level, this chapter reinforces what Hammer et al. (2013, p. 7–8) have summarized: Protected areas in general and nature parks in particular should be framed as special research sites with several priority research areas such as “innovations in regional economy in accordance with conservation and landscape protection objectives”, “images and regional identities”, “handling regional and global change” and “participation and governance”, issues which were prominent in the research project outlined in this book chapter. As a consequence, much more research on a conceptual level as well as on an empirical case study level is necessary and should be considered in upcoming funding schemes such as Horizon 2020 and others.

LITERATURE


Parks and landscape: Land use plan experimentations for biodiversity

Abstract

Although Natura 2000 sites and protected areas are the backbone of the EU’s nature and biodiversity policy, they are not coordinated and, in many cases, they are not integrated in land use policies and plans, in particular at the local level. Ecological corridors are tasked with strengthening overall ecological quality, connecting fragmented habitats and integrating protected natural areas and landscape. Effectively, connectivity has been identified as an essential element for habitat and landscape fragmentation, as discussed in various Italian local planning experiences.

Keywords

- Biodiversity
- Ecological network
- Connectivity
- Land use and landscape planning