

We are the political landscape – Governance in European protected areas. Report on the tutorial held at the EUROPARC Conference 2016

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Abstract

EUROPARC Conference is the largest gathering of park professionals in Europe. Every year the EUROPARC Federation members, partners and friends meet to discuss and debate the importance of protected areas and to share news, experiences and ideas.

The programme of the EUROPARC Conference 2016 was designed to explore in many different ways the topic *We are parks!* and examine the role of the people in parks – from fund raising to governance models.

The set-up of the conference offered short 2-hour sessions that allowed exploring some detailed aspects of the governance and management of parks. In these sessions inputs from selected case studies were followed by the opportunity to discuss current issues, challenges and opportunities on the selected topics.

“We are the political landscape”

Parks have to function within the framework of existing local and regional institutions and structures as well as within national regulations. However, in most cases parks are characterized by overlapping existing political-administrative units and by an increased involvement of non-governmental stakeholders. Against this background, Swiss Park Research designed and chaired a tutorial on the issue of governance by asking the question: Are parks a promising and reliable actor in regional governance regimes?

30 people from all over Europe participated in this tutorial, entitled ‘We are the political landscape’ in keeping with the conference theme.

Two inputs by invited speakers set the framework for the discussion. The first speaker, Yasmine Willi, from the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), focused on the various understandings of the concept of regional governance in practice and academia. Based on the findings of a Delphi survey, which she conducted among more than 50 practitioners and researchers, she developed a consolidated definition of regional governance: “*Regional governance describes the vertical and horizontal coordination of regional transformation processes by state and non-state actors in a functional space*”. She identified a framework of regional governance consisting of the following five dimensions: (1) participation, (2) bindingness, (3) formalization, (4) regional autonomy and (5) power relations. In addition, each dimension is broken down into a set of indicators. The multi-dimensional framework can be applied to a wide range of forms of regional governance, including nature parks, and can be used to systematically compare different forms and dimensions of regional governance across space and over time.

The second input came from Thomas Hammer, one of the editors of the book *Parks for the Future – Protected Areas in Europe Challenging Regional and Global*

Change (Hammer et al. 2016). He talked about collaborative regional governance. This term refers to a regional governance structure that actively involves actors other than park management, allowing them to participate in the decision-making and management processes and empowering them to act in the interests of park objectives. By presenting the Swiss park model in detail, Thomas Hammer explained that institutional provisions are important for the emergence of collaborative regional governance. In Switzerland the responsibility for the park is held by a regional authority in which the communes and other actors are involved. Other significant elements of the Swiss model are incentive systems with instruments such as the funding and labelling of parks as well as the labelling of goods and services produced in the parks.

Experience with governance in European protected areas

After these two inputs the participants asked several questions about the situation in Switzerland. They were interested to know how the labelling of products created by park inhabitants works. In particular, they were interested to find out how decisions are taken on who gets the label and how the quality of the products is assured over time. They also wanted to know if acceptance of parks has been measured and who owns the land in parks.

They used the opportunity to share their own experiences with regional governance in European protected areas. A participant from Scotland mentioned that the role of key actors and human relations were far more important than governmental structures. Participants from Scandinavia stated that the governance system had changed from a top-down system – in which the national government acted as the main governing body of protected areas – to a new governance system involving eight different bodies in the national park board. This has enhanced the involvement of re-

gional actors noticeably and raised awareness among politicians, who are nowadays much more familiar with the issue of managing parks. As a result, conservation could be improved. Representatives from Croatia and Lithuania reported that in their countries the question of political power was crucial, as parks are mostly managed by governmental bodies and the park directors are politicians. The park director is replaced at the beginning of each new legislative period, resulting in insecurity over the park's orientation and causing time spans of adaptation. Representatives of these countries also mentioned the widespread installation of *paper parks* (parks existing only on the paper but with no effective management).

The issue of financial resources was also brought up in the discussion. The possibilities of parks to collaborate with local actors and to initiate and accompany projects depend to a large degree on financial support from the governments. Cuts in budgets mean that parks have to cut back their conservation activities, but at the same time they are still obliged to implement the national conservation law. This may lead to conflicts of objectives and limit the parks' room for manoeuvre.

Conclusion

The focus of this tutorial was on the question whether parks are promising and reliable actors in regional governance regimes. From the discussion it can be concluded that parks are indeed an important actor in regional governance regimes across Europe,

as they fulfil a wide range of valuable tasks for a region, such as nature protection and regional development. However, the park's performance and its impact also depend to a large degree on the political system, the political will, as well as on the funding situation in each country. A lack of resources – in monetary and personnel terms – as well as political power games, hamper the effective management of parks and make it difficult for parks to become strong and active actors in regional governance regimes.

References

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