

## Summary

# Management of protected areas for the future

## – an analysis of the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park as a model region

Nature parks can act as an important pillar in the management of protected areas. They contribute to maintaining biodiversity, strengthen rural development, offer an attractive recreational outlet and support nature-oriented tourism, as well as providing education in sustainable development: in view of the national and international biodiversity and climate protection programmes, their importance is greater than ever. Today there are more than 100 nature parks in Germany, representing some 25 percent of the country's total area. In Austria there are 47 nature parks, covering almost 6 percent of the country's area: one is the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park, a 405-km<sup>2</sup> protected area characterised by its cross-border structures between Germany (Bavaria) and Austria (Vorarlberg) and its cooperative approach.

What will the protected areas of the future look like, and to what degree must a nature park regulate in order to ensure effective protection of nature? These questions are repeatedly discussed within the nature park family: the Alpine Network of Protected Areas (ALPARC) has now selected the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park in order to get to the bottom of such questions.

The Nagelfluhkette Nature Park covers 15 municipalities and is so far the only nature park shared between Germany and Austria. Walter Grath, former mayor of the German municipality of Oberstaufen in Allgäu, provided the decisive impetus for the project in 2008. His idea was also well received in neighbouring areas. The international protected area was therefore created at the request of local citizens and its acceptance in the region is correspondingly high. On this basis, it has grown to its current size in just twelve years and employs ten people. Other municipalities have also now shown great interest in becoming part of the nature park.

The methodology used contributed significantly to the establishment of the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park, with high priority given to the "four Cs": cooperation, communication, competence and continuity. These are a constant in every one of the park's activities, such as education for cooperative nature conservation, sustainable regional development, nature conservation and landscape management, as well as nature-oriented tourism. A cooperative approach is a characteristic of all fields: this means involving all actors with an influence on the natural diversity and conservation goals of the nature park.

Cross-border cooperation means increased communication and workloads, but on the other hand provides a valuable wealth of experience. The nature park above all benefits from ideas and actual implementation on both sides of the border, bringing decision-makers into the exchange process and thus permitting model projects to be initiated. Such cooperation is based upon trust, appreciation and credibility.

According to our survey, covering 44 key people, more than 85 percent see considerable added value in the cross-border cooperation between the Austrian Vorarlberg and German Allgäu regions. Most of those asked state that it is not so much the national border that is decisive, but rather the topics covered and the homogenous natural area. In the opinion of many respondents, “tourists and nature know no borders”. In addition, specialist exchanges between countries are very profitable, while another major advantage is the generation of funds. Nevertheless, survey participants also pointed out that the challenges of cross-border cooperation lie mostly in diverging laws, interests and principles.

The survey also showed which topics respondents would associate with the Nature Park itself. These were, alongside rangers, primarily environmental education and visitor guidance: the latter in particular played a major role during pandemic times in 2020/2021.



Fig. 1: The word cloud shows what respondents associate with the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park: above all rangers, Nature Park schools and visitor guidance.

The Nature Park relies on highly qualified employees to oversee this wide range of topics. To establish a diverse, cross-sectional team when filling vacancies, it is vital (just like in a business) to make independent decisions based upon qualifications and social skills. Team spirit and the working atmosphere are essential for the effectiveness of an organisation based upon cooperation that is responsible for a protected area: this includes the network and the partners contributing their knowledge to projects. The following success factors have emerged from the project work:

- Partnership-based conception and implementation with all interest groups will help to break down existing communication barriers. People talk to, rather than about, each other and thus build trust.
- Working together and learning from one another helps to change perspectives and fosters new ideas.

- The Nature Park is a neutral and accepted mediator and thus takes on a chairmanship role.
- The Nature Park always works to ensure that solutions are developed in the sense of preserving biodiversity and sustainable regional development.
- A collaborative approach is the key to robust networks.

It is also interesting to take a look at the legal basis for a nature park. The legal framework for nature park work is provided by the Bavarian and Vorarlberg Nature Conservation Law, the nature park regulations and the strategy papers of the German and Austrian nature park associations. This framework defines the main pillars for nature park work, but leaves sufficient leeway in their realisation for local people to become the main orchestrators on the ground, thus creating acceptance and appreciation. A direct connection between population and project team is especially important for all those involved in nature park work. A majority of those surveyed said that decision-making powers should continue to rest with the executive association and thus with municipalities, as this would guarantee a direct link with the region.

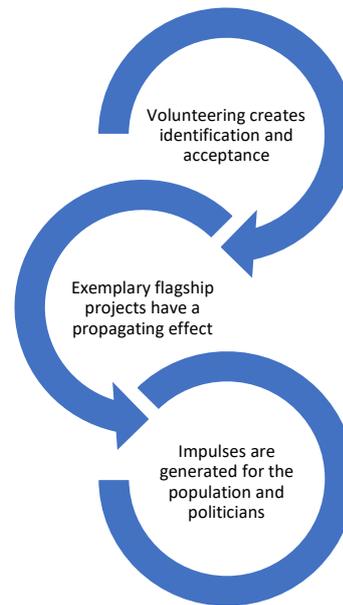
In addition to legal requirements, the volunteering principle is still a valuable asset in a nature park context. This raises the question of whether more regulation is needed to ensure effective nature conservation in protected areas. From the nature park's point of view, the question of regulation and volunteering is not an "either/or", but rather one of balancing the two poles. Legal requirements are necessary to provide a clear framework; the additional voluntary measures that nature parks can initiate represent an important complement.

The efficacy of a nature park stems from a population's degree of acceptance and its desire to take effective action. For this to be the case, it has to identify with the nature park. More than 95 percent of the key people surveyed see the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park as a model for other regions.

Excessive regulation at local level can achieve the very opposite and therefore a lower degree of acceptance, even if in some cases stricter regulation with regard to protection of nature und sustainability would be entirely reasonable in political terms.

Exemplary flagship projects are the greatest contribution a nature park can make in respect of politicians, population and nature. Awareness-raising work

by a protected area also helps to create understanding for legal requirements among the local population.



*Fig. 2: Possible effects of the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park.*

The EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 requires at least 10 percent of the land area to come under the protection of natural processes so as to preserve and restore valuable ecosystems. It would be desirable for protected areas to lead by example and meet this target. However, like most other protected areas, the Nagelfluhkette Nature Park is restricted insofar as it has no areas of its own. It is estimated that around 3-5 percent of the Alpine area of the nature park is equivalent to process protection areas, where the natural conditions, such as steep rocky slopes, do not permit any form of pasture farming and are therefore free from human influence. These areas can be seen as valuable ecological stepping-stones. Any intensification of strictly defined nature reserves would appear difficult. At this point, however, account must be taken of the ecological value of extensively managed areas, e.g. Alpine areas or protective forests that create important habitats for many species. Nonetheless there is no alternative to increasing the focus on nature conservation in the future. Species loss is considerable, while healthy habitats are becoming more and more important as they represent a kind of "life insurance" for human population. It should here be noted that protected areas also make a major contribution to biodiversity protection through their environmental education work.

One possible future approach would be for territorial entities to be more strongly obliged to purchase areas of high ecological importance, then to hand them over to an organisation oriented towards the common good (e.g. a landscape conservation association or a nature park) for their upkeep. The Nagelfluhkette Nature Park sees as a future model a so-called spatial concept whereby protected assets, such as rare animal and plant species, are analysed and appropriate conservation measures are agreed.

However, the basis of a nature park's work still lies in informing people and raising their awareness. Society must recognise and appreciate the value of landscapes and habitats. The future here lies with the "adults of tomorrow" – the children.

In order to develop their enormous benefits, nature parks will have to gain greater importance in the eyes of politicians and administrators. Nature parks should also possess sufficient financial and personnel resources to be able to oversee flagship projects. In this way, impulses that have a propagating effect become possible and nature parks will be an effective pillar in the management of protected areas.

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Nagelfluhkette Nature Park