

ABSTRACT

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The new common identity in the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Grosses Walsertal (Austria) – community conservation approaches in a living model for sustainable development

Local communities play an important role in conserving nature and caring for the cultural and environmental patrimonies. This is why they should be active players in the governance of protected areas. The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Grosses Walsertal in Austria is an excellent example of how a community conservation approach contributed to valorise the natural and cultural resources, to create a new common identity and to foster sustainable development in the communities of a protected area.

The Grosses Walsertal Biosphere Reserve is situated in the Western part of Austria and formed by six small villages within a single alpine valley. It was included in the worldwide network of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BR) – special protected areas with a particular focus on serving as model sites for sustainable development approaches - in November 2000.

The valley is a prime example of a living cultural landscape where a system of adapted mountain farming, pasture and extensive forestry has been developed. Today the mosaic of open land, forests and traditional settlements is the origin of a high animal and plant diversity. Anyway, living conditions – seen from an economic perspective – are not easy: the steep slopes of the V-shaped valley are neither suitable for intensive farming nor for winter tourism. After an avalanche in the midst of the last century more and more people have left their home valley. When the tourism boom of the 1960s and 1970s started to falter as well, the issue arose how to retain the remote valley as a viable space for existing and future generations.

It was a lucky piece of timing that in 1997 the UNESCO MAB label „biosphere reserve“ was included in the environmental protection law of the federal state of Vorarlberg. The six communities Thüringerberg, Blons, St. Gerold, Sonntag, Fontanella, Raggal and the 3500 people living in the Grosses Walsertal decided “to take their future in their own hands” in the year 1998. Turning the Grosses Walsertal into a biosphere reserve, so the hope was, would give regional development a positive impetus and boost a sustainable, authentic, close-to-nature tourism while retaining the local cultural identity.

A community based and strongly participatory approach was followed when planning, implementing and then managing the everyday of the biosphere reserve: the six communities decided that the management of the biosphere reserve is affiliated to the the REGIO – an association of the six communities. The public authorities give their financial and consultation support, but the BR manager is a dependent of the association of the six communities. There is no national funding for biosphere reserves in Austria, the provincial government gives a basic financial support yearly and each inhabitant of the BR pays the amount of 10.-€ pæ year for the management of the protected area.

The management must work by intense local participation to be a “special” protected area, where the focus lies on being a model for sustainable development while protecting certain areas in the core zones of the BR.

The strong community involvement during the planning phase, the implementation process as well as in the every day management of the biosphere reserve is surely one of the factors for the high acceptance of the protected area among the population. The result of the scientific research project “Future Development Strategies for the Biosphere Reserve Grosses Walsertal – A Regional Economic and Perception Analysis (2005)” proved that the inside perspective and the acceptance of the inhabitants results very positive: 84% of the interviewed persons think that the biosphere reserve is a very useful or useful institution and 68% of the interviewed persons think that there was a positive change in the valley after the recognition as an international biosphere reserve and after the elaboration of the common vision for a sustainable future.

Some examples for the strong community involvement approaches in the BR Grosses Walsertal are:

- a future vision and common strategy for the valley becoming a UNESCO designated biosphere reserve was worked out in 1999 with the participation of over 60 local inhabitants and was then approved in the communities
- making use of the common label “UNESCO biosphere reserve” the communities started to think and work strongly together, have common goals and realise visible common project on the territory of their protected area they live in:
 - f.ex. an energy audit for all the communities,
 - an energy consultancy service for improving energy efficiency for everybody in the BR
 - the introduction of an environmental management system for the valley,
 - equal fundings in every community for investments in renewable energy to achieve the goals of the BR and be a model of sustainability,
 - community participation in intelligent mobility,
 - six building-authorities become one for the entire BR,
 - one regional tourism instead of several community associations promoting the nature-oriented tourism by discovering local traditions and cultures in the BR,
 - promotion brochures for the biosphere reserve and not for each community any more
 - a network of small visitor centres and sites spread in the six communities,
 - qualified restaurant and hotel partners of the BR following sustainability criteria,
 - many projects to valorise the landscape and its products with the participation of people coming from all six communities.

Research studies proved that the BR and the common conservation – sustainable development approach contributed to create a new identity for the Walser people in the valley. The local communities use the UNESCO MAB (man and biosphere) concept and the biosphere reserve successfully as a mean to empower themselves to work together in meeting the challenges of the future – challenges which are shared with many other protected areas all over the world.

The key factors for making the BR visible and lively were:

Six communities and 3500 people working together for a future vision with the help of the label “Biosphere Reserve” – having one “joint brand” and knowing that the valley belongs to an international network of model regions for sustainability was very important for the step-by-step progress of the various projects and the implementation of the common vision. Participation and working with bottom-up principles and involving the local people right from

the beginning although lacking money was another key factors for success. Involving the local people and invite them for “designing” their sustainable future requires good communication skills of the management – it is important that the BR Management acts as an impetus and coordinator – not as somebody who does the work for the protected area but supports and helps to proceed.

In the Gerace workshop measures for success but also difficulties emerged, as well as actual research results concerning participation and community involvement in the BR Grosses Walsertal will be presented and discussed to share experience about community conservation in Europe.

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Some pictures: foto credits BR Management Grosses Walsertal



View into the Grosses Walsertal in the Austrian Alps



Community workers setting the entrance signs to the BR



Community participation in developing ideas and visions for the BR



Community engagement in renewable energy



Energy Audit for the BR and not for each community



Award for the cooperation and achievements in the communities, slogan "Crossing borders"



One of the core areas of the BR, Foto umg