

Protected areas – natural landscapes or institutions?



For more than 30 years, I was the coordinator of the Research Council for the Swiss National Park. During those years, I followed the evolution of existing protected areas (PAs) in the Alps and the creation of new ones. I observed that the question raised in the title of this editorial reflects a dilemma for many PAs: while their core mission is the conservation of nature and/or cultural landscapes, an institutional basis is needed to achieve this mission. But how can mission and institution be balanced, and how should available funds be invested?

Of course, the aim of PAs is to invest in conservation, education and research, as well as in enabling nature and scenic experiences for visitors through appropriate management. However, the reality is that more and more investment has been put into institutional development and the generation of immediate benefits for society and the economy. Examples of such institutional development activities are investments in image-building (such as modern visitor centres, or the celebration of jubilees), in branding (as a tourist destination, with product labels), in offers and facilities for tourists (e.g. trails, exhibitions), or in more staff (notably in administration or communication).

What motivates PAs to increasingly invest in institutional development and image-building? First, there is a change in social demands: today's PAs are expected to be a resource for local and touristic development, with specific offers and facilities for tourists, labelled merchandise, etc. Currently, many PAs invest in the marketing of nature rather than in nature conservation.

Second, PAs are facing the handicap that conservation is static, while social and economic development is dynamic. Successes in conservation are visible only as very small steps and over a long period of time, and therefore they are not perceived as an active part of regional development. Hence, a PA conveys a modern, future-oriented image of itself if it uses new technologies (for communication and management), has modern infrastructures (e.g. visitor centres), or presents a trendy corporate design. Consequently, many PAs have indeed invested a lot in modern infrastructures, often resulting in important ongoing operating and maintenance costs.

Third, PAs are facing another important handicap: even if they have a clear mission, they do not have government functions. PAs are professionally managed territories implementing national (supreme) law. However, the way they function is hardly compatible with the governance of existing territories such as municipalities or provinces. Consequently, PAs have to find means to interact in a constructive way with the existing political or social bodies. One of these means is to build a strong institutional presence, with growing staff and budget, and high levels of competence (including research and publications), to strengthen the PA's position in the established governance system.

While over the last 30 years I have seen PAs investing more and more in establishing well-administrated institutions and in marketing nature and landscape, investments in concrete nature protection (i.e. stronger protection, restoration of habitats, reducing impacts on the PA, presence of park staff in the PA, etc.) and related education and research have hardly increased. I am convinced that the current evolution of managed PAs towards institutionalization is not in the best interest of nature and landscape conservation.

The mission and institutionalization of managed PAs have to be reconsidered, if necessary with legal adaptations – a process which should aim at changing PAs' development strategies: their core activities and investments should (re-)focus on extending and improving the ecological and biological integrity of the area, rather than on institution-building and marketing.

To reach such a turnaround, I propose that the following points be reconsidered: a) the funds for institutional investments need to be limited to a certain percentage of the overall budget (e.g. no increased funding for new constructions or more administrative staff); b) the interactions and co-operations between political authorities (both inside and around the PA) and PA management need to be better coordinated; c) the management's competences and financial means have to be strengthened in order that all public funds influencing land use and infrastructures in the PAs can be steered and coordinated by the PA management following defined rules; d) the dual management functions of nature conservation and nature marketing need to be separated from each other.

I believe that it is worth tackling the dilemma that PAs are facing – how to balance their core mission of conservation, education and research within an institutional context – in order to strengthen their performance in nature and landscape conservation for the future.

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