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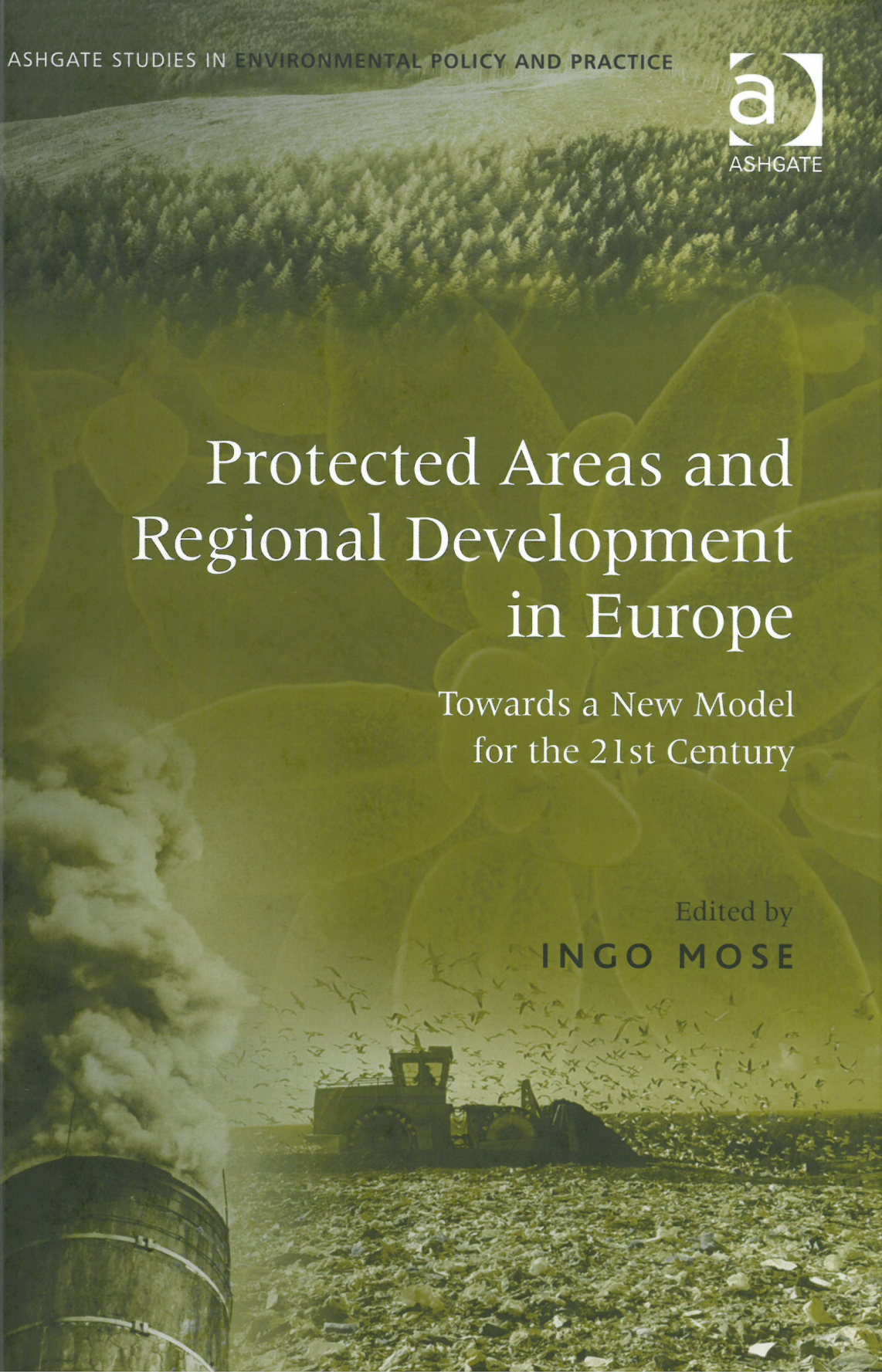


# Protected Areas and Regional Development in Europe

Towards a New Model  
for the 21st Century

Edited by

**INGO MOSE**



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Towards a New Model for the 21st Century

*Edited by*

INGO MOSE

*Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany*

ASHGATE

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# Nature Parks and Regional Development in Austria: A Case Study of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer

Christine Gamper, Martin Heintel, Michael Leitner  
and Norbert Weixlbaumer

### **Introduction: The European Context**

Since the 1970s nature parks in Europe have enjoyed an uninterrupted boom (see FNNPE 1994, 6). Nature parks in the wider sense are those protected areas that can be classified as IUCN-Category V. They comprise approximately one half of all protected areas in Europe in 2006 (see Chape et al. 2003, compare Figure 1.1). However, the range of all protected areas classified as Category V in Europe is large. At the national level (Austria) the protected areas falling under this category include national parks and regional parks, regional nature parks and nature parks as well as protected landscapes (see Weixlbaumer 2005a). Category V is defined as a protected area that ‘has as its main management objectives the protection of the landscape or the marine area, in addition to serving the people’s recreation’. It is an area that, ‘throughout time and through the interaction of humans with nature, has formed a landscape with a unique character, outstanding esthetic, ecological and/or cultural values and with an often remarkable biological diversity. The uninterrupted continuation of this traditional interaction is imperative for the protection, preservation and further development of this region’ (see Europarc and IUCN 1999, 30).

Nature parks in Europe have slightly different names and meanings. For example, in Austria a nature park is labeled as a ‘landscape’ with its legal status based on the decree of a (mostly) landscape protection or nature conservation area. It is a protected landscape area, which has developed through the interaction of man with nature and which has no or little wilderness. In Austria, nature parks do not belong to any official zoning. The management structure is formed by the responsible state government (Department of Nature Conservation) or by a regional management in cooperation with a local nature park association.

What are the reasons for the continued attractiveness of nature parks? Nature parks are, according to the above definition, instruments that can combine the protection and the use of a landscape (see Hammer 2003, Mose and Weixlbaumer 2003). With the wake up of the environmental awareness since the 1970s and the increasing demand for ‘leisure areas’, the nature park concept gained acceptance

and subsequently adjusted to various developments. Today, nature parks, due to their integrative approach, conceptually fit the dynamic-innovative nature conservation paradigm (compare chapter 1).

The following discusses the nature park concept and its potential for regional development using Austria as an example. In addition, a nature park in the Austrian province of Lower Austria, the Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer, will be presented as a case study. At the end of this chapter, strategies for an integrative regional management based on an analysis of this case study will be discussed.

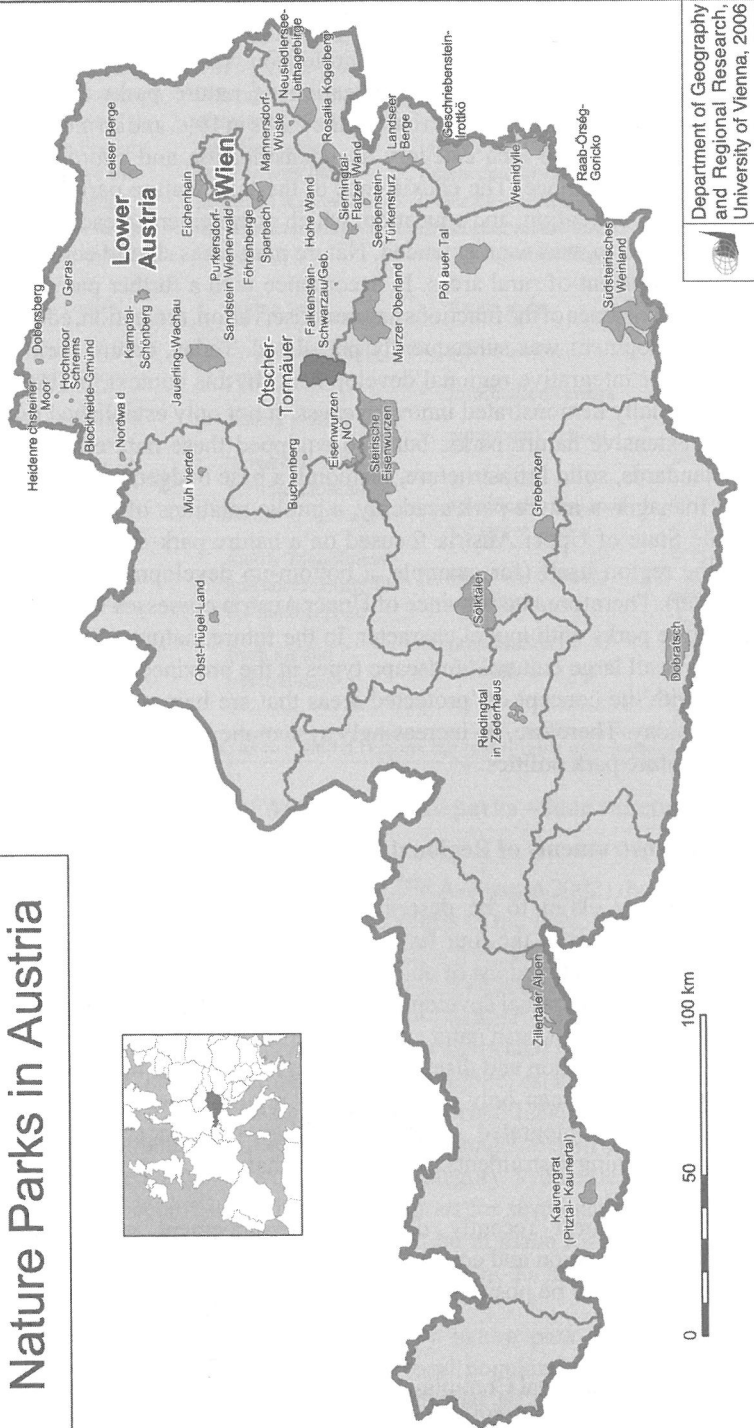
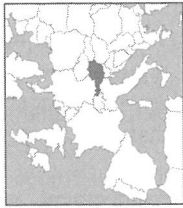
### **Nature Parks in Austria: Historical and Paradigmatic-Functional Development**

Nature parks in Austria, as a small Central-European country, are characterized by their small size. Sizes range from 17 to 58,000 ha. From a historical perspective, the development of nature parks in Austria is similar to other European countries, including Italy, France or Germany. In 1962 the first Austrian nature park, Sporbach bei Mödling (approximately 15 km south of Vienna) was founded. Recreation close to Vienna and (day) tourism were, during the founding days of nature parks, the important objectives. The first nature parks were small and close to urban centers. They represented, as for example the landscape with pine forest and lime stone cliffs, located south of Vienna, cultural and natural landscape types. From the beginning nature parks were not representatives of the classic-static paradigm, although conservation was in some parks the main objective: this was also true for the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer, when it was founded in 1970.

In 2006, Austria possessed 40 nature parks, which together cover an area of 350,000 ha and about 4 per cent of the size of the national territory. According to the Association of the Austrian Nature Parks, they can be described with the following features (Handler 2000, 43): 'Broad acceptance among the population; not only differences in size, but also in staff, equipment, and finances; voluntary contribution of many employees and mostly located in eastern Austria.' (22 nature parks alone are located in Lower Austria; see Figure 5.1.) Nature parks are basically free of charge and entrance fees are on a voluntary basis or for special attractions (for example game parks).

During this founding period, nature parks were mostly recreational regions for the Viennese urban agglomeration. The recreational function 'being in nature' was combined with a rather modest concept of nature conservation and landscape protection. This is evident from the first nature parks in Lower Austria (see ÖGNU and Wolkingner 1996). Within the scope of their recreational objective, nature parks pursued – although rather modest at the beginning – nature- and environmental education for a broad audience. Nature parks developed into 'educational landscapes' with the establishment of educational trails and information boards. At the beginning, the pedagogical implementation of this environmental education lacked value added landscapes – a few small nature parks insufficiently represented the Austrian types of landscape. On the other hand, the implementation lacked political will power, which

# Nature Parks in Austria



**Figure 5.1** The location of nature parks in Austria  
 Source: Drafted by authors after Zollner and Jungmeier 2003, 16

became evident with marginal financing and care. In addition, the local population was rarely included into the politics of nature parks. Altogether, awareness for an integrative nature conservation and landscape protection was missing.

Not until the period of the institutionalization of nature parks through the constitution of an Association of the Austrian Nature Parks in 1995 and an international reevaluation of this protected area category an intensification and coordination of activities has been taken place. The coexistence of the three nature park functions, nature conservation, recreation, and education, which complemented each other and was strongly believed in, was soon extended. Nature park areas should contribute to the regional development of rural areas. In accordance with a further paradigmatic development, a coexistence of the functions nature conservation, recreation, education, and regional development was subsequently postulated. Today, nature parks have become a factor for integrative regional development. In this context, the Austrian State of Styria initially demonstrated innovativeness. It not only established relative systematically extensive nature parks, but also equipped these nature parks with, by Austrian standards, solid infrastructure, including a base budget, a (municipality independent) manager, a nature park academy, a public relations office, and so on. In contrast, the State of Upper Austria focused on a nature park development that comes from the region itself (for example, a bottom-up development; the Nature Park Mühlviertel). Therefore, the province of Upper Austria possesses few, but well-functioning nature parks with model character. In the future, nature parks in Upper Austria will cover all large cultural landscape types in the province. In addition, the State of Tyrol with the concept of 'protected areas that are being managed' shows innovativeness today. Therefore, an increasingly systematic process is recognizable in the Austrian nature park politics.

### **Nature Parks as Instruments of Regional Development**

Nature parks can lay claim to be described as model regions for sustainable development. On the basis of the four functions (protection, recreation, education, regional development) a detailed list of objectives is drawn up (see Figure 5.2). With the additional function of regional development the Austrian nature park concept is in line with claims of other European nature park concepts. This has been an important step for the public's perception and discussions about nature parks in Austria.

However, nature parks can only become model regions in rural areas, if it is possible that, based on integrated sustainability, they can successfully become efficient regional planning instruments. This requires that:

- Based on the most recently discovered management goals, regional development, education and conservation should be treated equally and
- Nature parks should be positioned a new politically and in the awareness of decision makers.

For this reason, the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA) discussed at a conference titled 'Who is Frightened of Protected Areas? Protected



Nature parks – equal coexistence of ...			
Protection	Recreation	Education	Regional development
The objective is to protect nature through sustainable use of its diversity and beauty and to preserve the cultural landscape that has been formed throughout centuries.	The objective is to offer attractive and clean recreational facilities, which comply with the protected area and the character of the landscape.	The objective is to experience nature, culture, and their interactions through interactive forms of understanding and experiencing nature and through special offers.	The objective is to provide impulses for a regional development in order to increase the value added and to secure the quality of life for the population.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• visitor control</li> <li>• Information about natural history</li> <li>• ‘soft’ mobility</li> <li>• management of protected areas</li> <li>• research projects</li> <li>• contract about environmental protection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hiking trails</li> <li>• cycling and bridle path</li> <li>• resting places</li> <li>• ‘adventure’ play grounds close to nature</li> <li>• family friendliness and accessibility for the handicapped</li> <li>• fresh air and peacefulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• theme trails</li> <li>• adventure tours</li> <li>• information centers</li> <li>• nature park school</li> <li>• attractions specifically designed for target groups</li> <li>• seminars, courses, exhibitions</li> <li>• preservation of customs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cooperation between conservation, agriculture, tourism, trade and culture</li> <li>• jobs through nature parks</li> <li>• socially and environmentally compatible tourism</li> <li>• nature park products defined by specific criteria</li> <li>• nature park restaurants</li> </ul>
<b>Nature parks are model regions for sustainable development</b>			

**Figure 5.2 Strategies of Austrian nature parks – four functions and goals**

Source: VNÖ 2005, 4

Areas as a Chance for the Region’ (see CIPRA-Austria 2002) the current nature park policy. Politicians, regional managers, experts in the field, and individuals from the local population determined that nature parks and similar protected areas, including biosphere parks, are equivalent to the well-known protected area categories (first and foremost national parks) and therefore should be appropriately treated and financed. A crucial realization was that this fact has been advocated by the IUCN for a long time. This needs to be better communicated to the public, especially to politicians making funding decisions. Because only with appropriate idealistic and financial support, that is, the establishment of an appropriate management structure, nature parks and similar protected areas under the IUCN Category V can meet their presently high standards and become in reality model regions for sustainable development.

Which basic prerequisites need then to be in place for nature parks to provide impulses for rural development or even serve as model landscapes (see Weixlbaumer 2005b)?

The deciding factors for an exemplary nature park development are human capital (including the knowledge of the local population) and the landscape. Both factors need to be appropriately activated, that is, their values need to be taken advantage of. Because nowadays nature parks are expected to offer their visitors an

entire spectrum of attractions (compare the discussion in Gill 2003, as referenced in Reusswig 2004, 149). This includes a harmony aspiring human-nature-relationship, which is manifested, for example, in the search for peacefulness and balance. It also includes the effort to satisfy 'the hunger for adventure' in nature, for example, to experience the thrill in the mountains.

These basic factors for a nature park adequate (that is, integrative) regional development can only be effective with appropriate political will. Political will can initially be expressed through the execution of existing (nature conservation) laws. Political will power also means taking advantage of the existing network of interest groups, including NGO's and private business people. Overall, it is the goal to regulate and implement an entire package of fundamental ideas. This needs to be put on a legal, planning, and financial basis. Built upon this is the functioning of the park that has a sufficiently large size, zoning laws, if necessary, and sufficient personal. A general rule for Alpine parks, dependent on the type of landscape, is one person per 2,000 ha (see Scherl et al. 1989). As such, a nature park can become an efficient business for a region. In addition, a number of voluntary and part-time employees are needed. The number of employees is dependent on the seasonally adjusted requirements of the park.

Based on numerous studies (compare, among others, Heintel 2005, Weixlbaumer 2005a, Mose and Weixlbaumer 2002) during the last ten years in the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna, it has been shown that the relationship between area management, in the context of regional protection, and the associated measures of regional development, has increasingly become more important. However, the field of applications for a regional management with direct connections to strategies for regional protection has been paid insufficient attention overall. Newly planned or recently established national parks (that is, protected areas with the highest IUCN category of protection) are increasingly incorporated into regional development concepts (for example, National Park Kalkalpen, National Park Gesäuse).

### **Case Study Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer**

The nature park was established during the beginnings of nature park policies in Austria and during the wake of the European Year of Nature Conservation in 1970. Based on a landscape protection area it served as an instrument to prevent the building of a hydroelectric power plant. As an economically value added instrument of the agro-tourism region Ötscherland, it was never really effective. The park is located within the (daily) catchment's area of three provincial capitals, including Linz (Upper Austria), St. Pölten (Lower Austria), and Vienna (Vienna). This area is an agglomeration with a total population of approximately three million. The central massive of the park region is the 1,893 m high Ötscher, which is a far visible and identifiable landscape feature. The nature park is inhabited (approximately 800 people live inside the park) with an important landscape potential, mixed ownership and a consensus-seeking landscape protection. During a process of enlargement in 2001 the area of the nature park doubled and increased to 14,869 ha. After that an

additional enlargement to approximately 17,000 ha followed that included parts of the municipality Lackenhof, west of the Ötscher summit.

At the beginning of 2006, both enlargements have been informally executed between the state (province) and the municipalities, but have not been embodied into state law. The enlargement of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer should thus have come to an end. Future visitors can therefore increasingly experience the nature park as a 'wilderness nature park' that includes a series of tourist attractions (for example, a stalactite cave, water falls, gorges, pure watercourses, forests and alpine pastures, brown bears, and so on).

As in most Austrian nature parks, the legal authority is an association that includes the mayor from each municipality, located within the park. Until 2003, the staff and financial support was low. Therefore, the park portrays both the problematic and hopeful image of Austrian nature parks. With the implementation of the investment program (see ETB 2002) and the temporary employment of a project supervisor (until the beginning of 2006), the possibilities of a nature park management changed positively over a period of three years. Starting in summer 2006, the support for a professional management and marketing is again uncertain.

How is it still possible to utilize natural rural areas for regional management with especially protected areas becoming development factors (development engines) in underdeveloped regions? Our study area is the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer (see Figure 5.3), which is situated in the Eisenwurzen, a region that stretches across several state boundaries (along the Lower Austrian, Styrian, and Upper Austrian Eisenstrasse). The nature park is distinguished not only by comprehensive regional funds from the EU (the funding period is from 2000–2006: Objective 2 Region or transition region from Objective 2 or 5b-old; LEADER+ regions), but also by numerous adjacent protected areas. The Nature Parks Lower Austrian and Styrian Eisenwurzen, together with the landscape protection area Dürrenstein-Ötscher, the National Park Kalkalpen and the National Park Gesäuse founded in 2002 form together an extensive system of protected areas. This entire region lies adjacent to the project Eisenstrasse, which stretches across provincial boundaries (see Heintel and Weixlbaumer 1998). Although this region has shown massive decline since World War II, it has experienced strong economic impulses through measures of regional development more recently. The Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer is the oldest established protected area in this region nevertheless it still lives in the shadows.

In this case regional management must not only develop suitable concepts for area management, but also coordinated measures for an integrative strategy of a set of measures for the economy, tourism, and marketing for the entire region. The southern enlargement of the nature park in 2001 (includes the region of the Ötschergraben) can already be interpreted as a regional effort of the affected municipalities to attach greater importance to regional protection in connection with measures of regional development in the future.

A regional management is challenged twice in this context. On the one hand, it needs to strengthen dynamic strategies for regional protection in those areas, where too little has been done previously to manage the functions protection, use, education, and regional development and to coordinate them with each other. This does not only address the conceptual and marketing-oriented area, but also the coordination



and networking between the municipalities that are located inside the park. On the other hand, this addresses an integrative-coordinating activity at the management level between the already mentioned adjacent protected areas that is a coordinated commitment of support from funds targeting specific regions and community initiatives. Additionally, all this needs to be carried out across provincial boundaries.

## **Selected Results**

How does the local population perceive the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer as an engine for regional development vis-à-vis comprehensive development goals?

During a two-year project conducted by the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna two different studies titled 'The Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer in the Minds of the Local Population – Chances for Attempts of Regional Development' were conducted in five nature park municipalities, including Annaberg, Gaming, Mitterbach, Puchenstuben, and St. Anton an der Jeßnitz.

During the first study alone 807 interviews were conducted among the local population (approximately 12 per cent of the total population of the municipalities). The focus of these interviews included questions about the spatial perception and cognitive mapping of the boundaries of the nature park (using mental maps), qualitative perceptions towards the park (using perceptual profiles), and the knowledge and perception of how well the nature park fulfills the four objectives (protection, recreation, education, and regional development). Additionally, the interviewees stated their opinion about possible future development scenarios for their region (economy, tourism, and so on) and about different strategies for regional development (for example, nature park, LEADER+). Finally, the interviewees took the opportunity to express their wishes about the nature park and its management (using open-ended and structured questions).

The results from the first investigation showed that the local population perceived regional development and education as less important goals (as compared to protection and recreation) for the region Ötscher-Tormäuer. For this reason, the second investigation studied the goals of regional development and education in more detail. Therefore, the focus was on the 'marketing of the region' and the nature park's role in this context ('Which landscape features and regional images are created, communicated and which are effective?'). A second subject area was 'role model and conflicts of utilization' based on an analysis of different role models of the region (role model of tourism development of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer, role model of the development Eisenstraße, Ötscherland, Mostviertel, and so on) and the representation of conflicts of utilization in the politics of regional protection, in general and based on the functional diversity of the nature park, in particular. On the other hand, questions about the contribution the (nature park) landscape provides for 'education' (strengthening of the educational mission and drafts for a strategy for educational measures in nature parks) and the nature park regions serving as model regions for a sustainable development in rural areas (experiences from other nature parks, for example, as part of a regional competition about cultural landscape and possibilities for the Ötscher-Tormäuer region) were raised.



The goal of the following discussion is not to present this study in detail, but rather to focus on possibilities and limitations regional management faces with respect to regional protection.

### *Degree of Familiarity and Image*

As a result, 98.6 per cent (796 out of 807) of the interviewed local population in all five municipalities said that they would know the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer and that they would regularly frequent it with activities such as hiking, walking, cycling, hunting, fishing, skiing, and so on. The interviewees indicated that they practically live inside the nature park region. They identify themselves with the nature park, although specific knowledge about its planning are often missing. In addition, the 807 interviewees from the first study describe, on average, the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer as 'quite familiar'. Above all, the good image of the nature park is expressed with the following perceived characteristics: very 'natural', 'invitational', 'attractive' and 'important' as well as very 'interesting', 'colorful', and 'lively'.

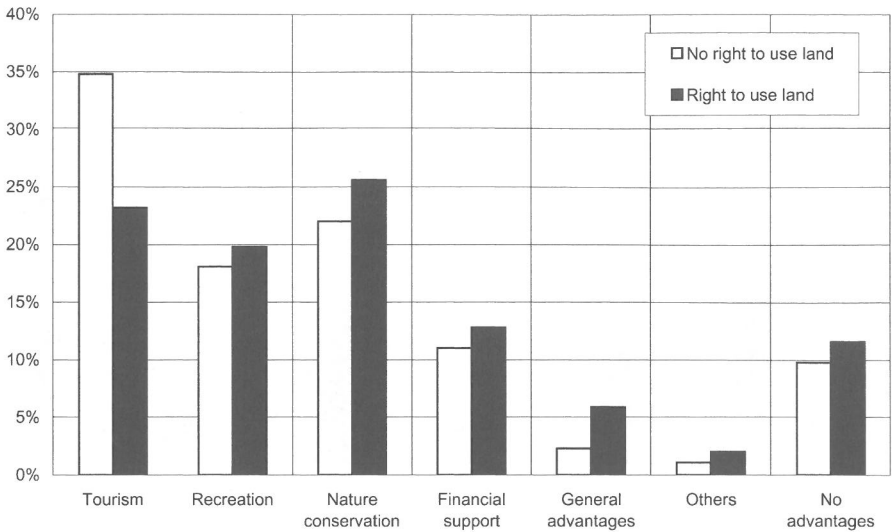
Of course, such a high degree of familiarity and positive image are a good basis for additional management- and planning measures in the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer. Favorable conditions seem to be in place that in the future a financially and structurally better equipped nature park policies will pursue with determination the desirable functional diversity between protection, recreation, education, and regional development.

Cross-sectional topics of regional and regional planning importance about the nature park can be laid out, formulated, and implemented in detailed (for each municipality independent) projects. These are the exact tasks of a regional management. An active and coordinated engagement can result in an impulse and a reevaluation of the region.

### *The Nature Park: Associations and Expectations*

The interviewees from the five municipalities located within the nature park associate the term 'nature park' foremost with characteristics, such as nature and (nature) conservation and less frequently with recreation, tourism, and landscape. Accordingly, the interviewees understand the central functions of nature parks mostly with broadly defined (nature) conservation, expressed in the protection of living space, regional protection and nature conservation. In contrast, all municipalities do not necessarily consider tourism, and especially education and regional development as characteristics to be associated with the nature park. This means that the regional population does not yet perceive an integration of the four functions (that is, conservation, recreation, education, and regional development), which has been demanded from the Association of the Austrian Nature Park's politics.

The two functions most often associated by the interviewees with the nature park, namely nature- and environmental conservation, are in reality associated more with nature conservation regions and national parks, rather than with nature parks. Only a well-organized regional management can satisfy this wishful thinking of the population.



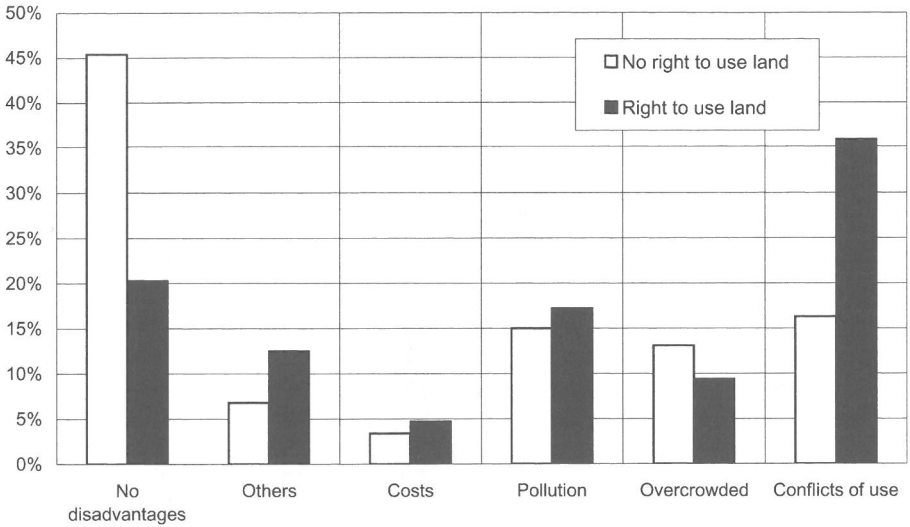
**Figure 5.4 Positive expectations by categories (in %) for all municipalities by ‘right to use land’**

*Source: Drafted by authors*

The general expectations towards the nature park are with approximately 60 per cent positive. 20 per cent of the interviewees expect rather disadvantages, and 20 per cent do not have any expectations towards the nature park. Comparing across all individual categories, the expected advantages towards the nature park are predominant. Especially tourism, nature conservation, recreation, financial and economic funding are rated as the most positive categories (see Figure 5.4). However, the portion of negative expectations is with 20.3 per cent (281 out of 1,383) relatively high and includes conflicts of use, pollution (noise, waste, and so on) and too many tourists. This can mostly be explained by limitations (zoning, conservation regulations, conditions for cultivation, and so on) that regulations of the nature park, in the opinion of the interviewees, could involve.

When the results are differentiated by interviewees with or without having the right to use land in the nature park, then hardly any significant differences within the ‘advantages’ categories can be observed. However, answers differ when ‘disadvantages’ categories are considered (see Figure 5.5). People who do not have the right to use land in the nature park perceive negative consequences of the park less often (that is, they expect more often the category ‘no disadvantages’), whereas people with the right to use land perceive more often ‘conflicts of use’ – predominantly in the form of restrictions for building projects and agriculture.

Since portions of the municipalities Annaberg and Mitterbach were in discussion to be part of the park enlargement, the detailed results for the ‘disadvantages’ categories are here especially interesting. Both municipalities record – with more than 25 per cent disadvantages each – a relatively skeptical position towards ‘conflicts



**Figure 5.5 Negative expectations by categories (in %) for all municipalities by 'right to use land'**

Source: Drafted by authors

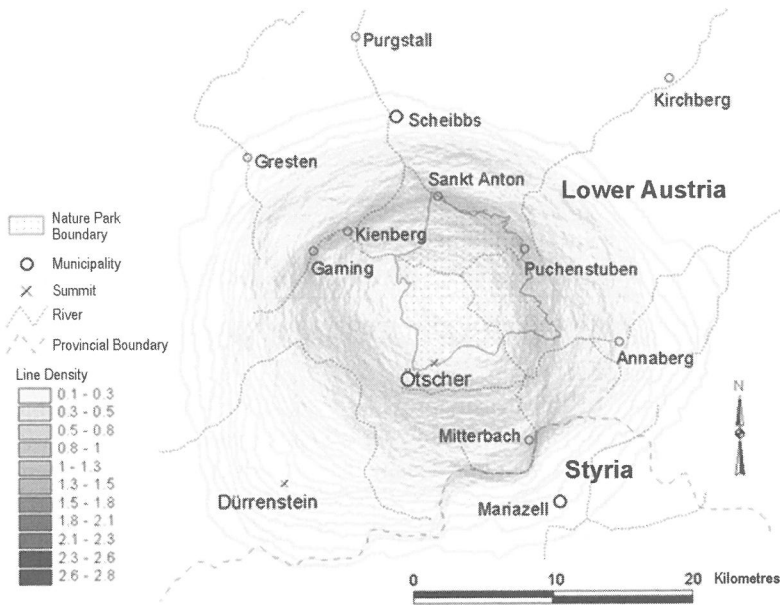
of use'. Apparently, many uncertainties and fears, as well as information deficits regarding future regional management had existed here. In both municipalities, the fear of too many tourists and larger user groups is rated much higher compared to all other municipalities. Whereas this category averages only 12.8 per cent in all five municipalities, it is 25.3 per cent in Annaberg, 20.8 per cent in Mitterbach, but only 3.4 per cent in Gaming.

Positively perceived categories:

1. Tourism: hiking, tourists
2. Recreation: quiet countryside, enjoyment of nature, walking
3. Nature conservation: conservation of species, protection against urban sprawl
4. Financial support: regional financial support, monetary financial support, financial support for restaurants, economic advantages
5. General advantages: general advantages for the region, stimulation for the region
6. Others
7. No advantages.

Negatively perceived categories:

1. No disadvantages
2. Others



**Figure 5.6** The nature park as a ‘giant’ – the size of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer is perceived as being much larger than it is in reality by the local population (n=758)

Source: Drafted by authors

3. Costs: costs for maintenance and infrastructure
4. Pollution: noise, waste
5. Overcrowded: too many tourists, mountain bikers
6. Conflicts of use: limitations for agriculture, landowner, development area.

#### *The Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer as a ‘Giant’*

The evaluation of all 758 hand-drawn mental maps of the boundaries of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer shows an interesting result: In the perception of the population of the municipalities with an average of 23,286 ha the nature park is much larger than the actual size before the enlargement of the park in 2001. The actual size of the park is with 7,586 ha only one third of the perceived area. The interviewees thus overestimated the area of the park by almost twice its size (see Figure 5.6).

Jointly responsible for these results was the ongoing discussion about a southern enlargement of the nature park at the time of the study (including the municipalities Annaberg and Mitterbach). Many were unsure or assumed that the enlargement of the nature park had already taken place at the time of the study. The enlargement by the two municipalities was not carried out until after the interviews – however, smaller than its originally planned size. Only a smaller portion of the municipality Annaberg was integrated into the nature park. Independent of this, the regional

**Table 5.1** **Achieving the objectives of the nature park, all municipalities (n=807)**

Achieving the objective	Yes		No		No answer		Total	
	Absolute	%	Absolute	%	Absolute	%	Absolute	%
Nature conservation	747	92.6	30	3.7	30	3.7	807	100
Recreation	766	94.9	20	2.5	21	2.6	807	100
Education	396	49.1	310	38.4	101	12.5	807	100
Regional development	454	56.3	257	31.8	96	11.9	807	100

population before 2001 already considered the Ötschergräben – part of the 2001 enlargement – the heart of the nature park.

In addition, studying the line density provides insights into which map elements the interviewees used for orientation in drawing the nature park boundary.

Noticeable is the band of higher line density that extends from Puchenstuben via St. Anton an der Jeßnitz to Gaming. This is also where the misjudgment in the size of the nature park is apparent: whereas the actual boundary of the nature park runs from St. Anton an der Jeßnitz due south, the interviewees often drew the boundary to the west via Kienberg to Gaming.

South of Gaming until south of the Ötscher is a zone lower line density. Apparently, the interviewees have oriented themselves closer to the course of the Ötscher stream, rather than the Ötscher summit, which at the time of the interview (before the enlargement) was an element of the actual boundary.

Much higher densities for the cognitive southern boundary of the nature park were found along the Styrian-Lower Austrian provincial boundary southwest of Mitterbach. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, the provincial boundary is represented as a very prominent element in the map and, on the other hand, a nature park boundary along a provincial boundary, especially in federal Austria, is perceived as being very plausible.

Between Mitterbach and Puchenstuben a somewhat broader band of higher density can again be recognized, which is also very close to the actual boundary.

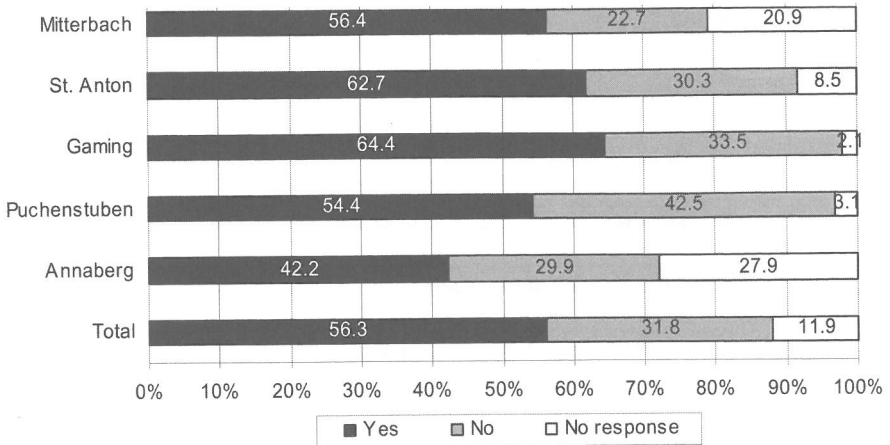
### *Regional Development and Education*

Regional development is included as an explicit goal in the nature park concept. The question now remains to what extent has this goal been achieved compared to other more predominant goals?

Interviewees stated that nature parks should fulfill several functions, including environmental protection and protection of species, recreation and education, as well as stimulation of tourism and regional development. At first sight, these results cover the entire spectrum of all functions of nature parks as defined in the concept of the VNÖ (see Association of the Austrian Nature Parks 2005) (see Table 5.1).

However, a closer look at the results shows that in the opinion of the interviewees some functions are more important than others. This leads to an uneven distribution across the different categories attributed to be functions of nature parks: (nature) conservation (environmental protection and protection of species) and recreation





**Figure 5.7 Comparison between municipalities in achieving the goal 'regional development' (n=807)**

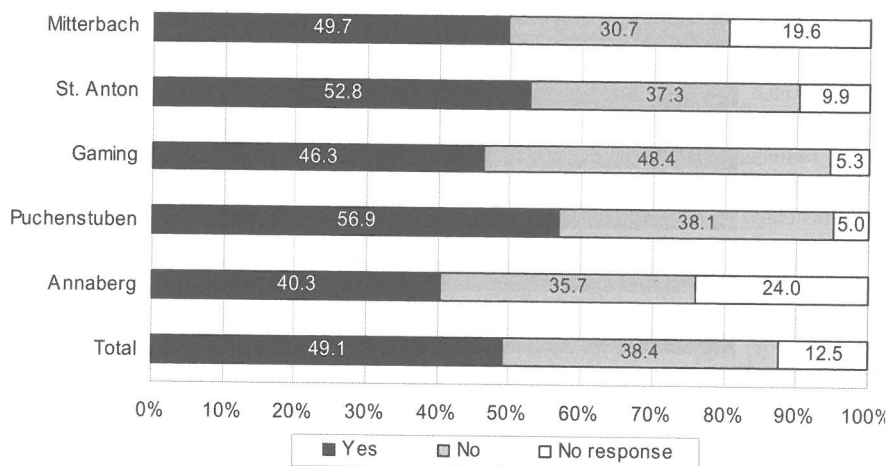
*Source: Drafted by authors*

were mentioned most frequently. Although education has always been a central theme in nature parks that has been visible in the form of information boards and educational trails, education was mentioned less frequently. Additionally, there is little awareness among the interviewees that nature parks play a substantial role in regional development and that regional development is becoming increasingly important.

When results are differentiated by highest completed degree of the interviewees then academics mention the categories education (11 per cent) and regional development (5.4 per cent) twice as often as compared to interviewees with less school education (5.7 per cent and 2.6 per cent respectively). In contrast, interviewees with completed mandatory education believe more often (12.5 per cent) than other interviewees (8 per cent) in tourism to increase the attractiveness of nature parks. While the nature park functions 'environmental protection' and 'recreation' are mentioned less often by academics compared to the other interviewees (difference of approximately 8 per cent), the 'protection of species' is mentioned more frequently. This may be due to a more differentiated knowledge and perspective of academics.

Overall, this analysis also shows clearly the different distribution in the individual task-categories and the level of information of the population (including all educational levels) across the functions of nature parks. A closer look at the factors 'regional development' and 'education', shows the following (see Figure 5.7).

More than half of the interviewees (56.3 per cent) perceive regional development tasks to be an objective of the nature park. Most likely this is due to the attractiveness for tourism, the use of the brand name and the possibility to receive financial support (EU-Structural Fond – Objective 2 Region, previously Objective 5b). The objective of the nature park to strengthen regional development is rated very high by the interviewees in Gaming (64.4 per cent) and in St. Anton an der Jeßnitz (62.6 per cent), but very low in Puchenstuben (42.5 per cent). Because of the difficult economic



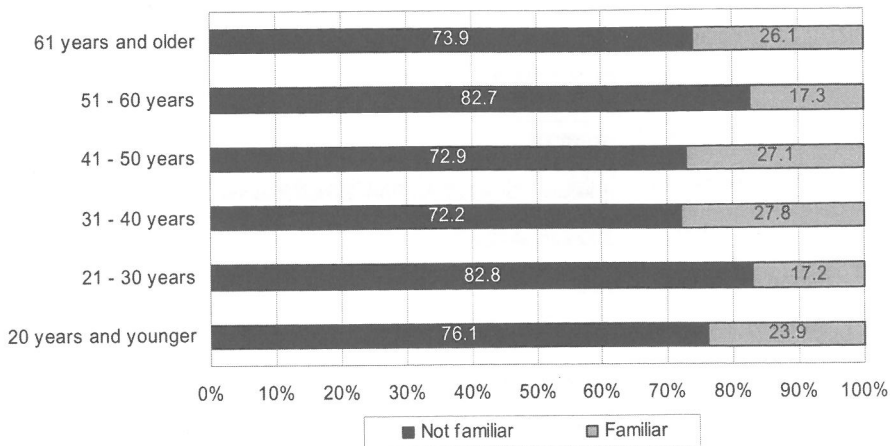
**Figure 5.8 Comparison between municipalities in achieving the goal ‘education’**

*Source: Drafted by authors*

situation in the region, there are too few noticeable positive effects from regional development in the nature park (new jobs, increase in overnight stays, stabilization in the number of agricultural and catering businesses). The study concludes that there are also too few initiatives and activities for improving the regional value added of the nature park and for an integrative development in the region (marketing, tourism offers, co-operations, raising of people’s awareness, and so on).

The interviewees – with the exception of Puchenstuben – rate the educational function (see Figure 5.8) of the nature park with the highest inefficiency. Especially in Gaming more interviewees (48.4 per cent) believe that the nature park has not yet achieved the ‘education’ objective. The satisfaction with this objective is also below average in Annaberg (40.3 per cent), with many interviewees (24.0 per cent) not providing an answer to this question. The discrepancy between the nature park’s self-image and how the local population perceives the nature park is remarkably high. All activities offered by the nature park – guided tours, information boards, educational trails, theme trails, and so on – should be more attractive and complemented with additional creative and group-specific (children/adults, gender, specific interest) educational offers. In addition, special co-operations, for instance with schools (environmental education), hotels offering seminars, such as the ‘Karthause Gaming’ and the ‘Alpine Hotel Gösing’, or local businesses (agriculture) with their regional know-how could provide new and interesting avenues for the local population (raising of people’s awareness, transfer of knowledge, continued education) as well as for tourists.

The local population from the region Ötscher-Tormäuer hardly recognizes regional development and education as objectives in the development of the nature park. There is thus a clear discrepancy between the regional perspective (from the



**Figure 5.9** People's familiarity with the nature park symbol (all municipalities, differentiated by age groups)

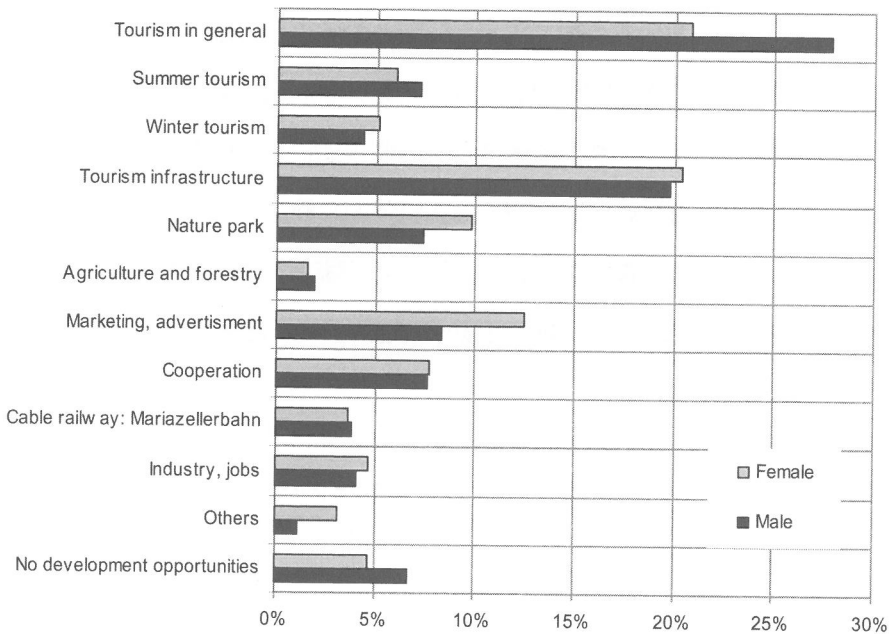
Source: Drafted by authors

local population) and the outside perspective (that is, nature park concepts as defined by the VNÖ). Empirical studies, such as this one, contribute to the communication about this topic within the population. For example, in the municipality Puchsenstuben alone, approximately one-half of the population was interviewed.

#### *Public Relations about the Nature Park*

Only a small percentage of the local population is familiar with the information material about the nature park. Such materials and media outlets include: brochures (37 per cent), information boards (15 per cent), printed media, local television or radio (11 per cent). Approximately 15 per cent of the interviewees – this is the second highest percentage – state that they do not know any public relation campaigns about the nature park. In Mitterbach, 26.7 per cent of the interviewed population is not familiar with any public relation campaigns. This is the highest percentage among all municipalities.

An important task of the management responsible for the Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer is to optimize the information-flow about the nature park to the local population. This can be achieved through an efficient, public, and engaging management campaign within the region (for example, emphasizing future plans, developments and projects of the nature park) as well as through promotions and self-projections to outside the region. Such a management campaign within the region would increase the perception the local population has about the number of educational activities in the nature park. The local population needs to be more informed about park events and activities and should be invited to participate in these activities. This could stimulate communication and cooperation within and between the local population and the nature park management.



**Figure 5.10 Assessment of development opportunities (all municipalities, differentiated by gender)**

*Source: Drafted by authors*

As the results of the first study clearly documented, 76 per cent of the interviewees did not know the symbol of the nature park. These results did not change even when differentiated by age groups (see Figure 5.9). Interviewees seemed to dislike the symbol that showed two hikers and had been the same since the foundation of the park. Interviewees called the symbol ‘old-fashioned’, ‘vague’ and it reminded them of a popular TV character of a young girl, named ‘Heidi’, growing up in the Alps. For this reason, a competition for a new nature park symbol was conducted in 2003. The new symbol shows a group of brown bears, which inhabit the nature park. Although, brown bears are well known to the public, they are both sympathetic figures and a source of conflicts. Unfortunately, a survey about the familiarity and acceptance of this new symbol has yet to be conducted. It can be assumed that a strong integration of this symbol in an effective public management campaign would increase the identification with and the recognition of the nature park region among the local population.

### *The Nature Park as a Potential for Growth?*

On average, 84 per cent of the interviewed population from the municipalities believes that the nature park can make a contribution to stimulating the economy. Almost 15 per cent of the interviewees think that the nature park will not improve the regional economy. While 88 per cent of Garming states that the nature park will positively impact the regional economy, ‘only’ 78 per cent of Puchenstuben shares this opinion.

All interviewees explain this largely positive attitude towards the nature park with providing an impulse to the regional economy with increases in tourism (the nature park and what it has to offer increases the attractiveness and brings visitors) and associated with it a securing and financial support of restaurants and jobs.

The majority of the interviewees see the general future development possibilities of the Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer (see Figure 5.10) in the tourism industry (55 per cent overall). A comparison across different municipalities reveals that development potentials in the category 'tourism infrastructure' were more often mentioned in Puchenstuben, Mitterbach and Annaberg compared to the other two municipalities. The realization of deficits and the lack of infrastructure must be especially apparent in these two municipalities. Since nature conservation and the protection of the landscape are also objectives of the nature park, the planning of new infrastructure may possibly lead to conflicts of interest.

### **Conclusions and Discussion: Strategies for an Integrative Management Exemplified by the Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer**

The Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer is located in a structurally weak and underdeveloped region characterized by few new jobs, high out-migration, aging population, low employment, large number of commuters, high density of weekend homes, and so on. The local tourism marketing and regional managements (regional management 'Mostviertel' and LEADER+ Management 'Eisenwurzen') try to make the public aware of the name Ötscher-Tormäuer to be a mark of quality for a region. The cooperation between the tourism association and the LEADER+ management under the label 'Culture Park Eisenstrasse Ötscherland' is an indication of the local networking and marketing. In order to secure the future goal of developing an integrative management in the region, additional measures, experts believe, need to be introduced.

The following list prioritizes ten different issues that are believed to be relevant for a future regional management concept of the Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer:

1. *Easing the burden on the legal authority:* The legal authority of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer is, similar to most nature parks in Austria, an association. Its board includes the mayor and a second person from each municipality in the park. The multi-functional position of the mayor may prohibit him/her to contribute to the operational aspect of regional development (that is, nature park development), including effectiveness, project implementations and strategic development. The contribution of politicians should be rather seen as 'figure heads' in support of commonly (that is, across boundaries of municipalities) agreed upon development decisions. This requires the absolute necessity of an operational support structure, which takes responsibility for planning, development and project implementation. This leads to the next item:
2. *Management of the nature park:* The financial support over a three-year period (2003–2006) as part of an investment program for the Nature Park



- Ötscher-Tormäuer has been an important basis for the development of the park. But this financial support ends at the beginning of 2006. The financial future of the park management is again uncertain and reminds of the time before the financial support started. Even the thirty hours per week position that was created during this time period is in jeopardy. If additional funding from different sources (for example, EU, federal, state, municipality) cannot be secured, then the successful and professional work of the park management cannot continue. Past experience has shown that marketing, the coordination of different interests and new ideas require professional and institutionalized supervision with adequate resources. This is the trend in professional regional development, which strongly emphasizes institutionalization and the moderation between interest groups. There are still many, so far unused opportunities that can be utilized in a coordinated fashion in order to secure the continuation of the park management with at least medium-term funding.
3. *Analog learning*: A stronger cooperation with other nature parks would be important, not only to strengthen the nature park idea, but also to stronger cooperation in areas of the nature park concept, including education and regional development that have been less developed until now (for example, specific educational activities for schools, field trips, and so on, as a coordinated offer from different nature parks with regional emphasis in Lower Austria). The first and most recent co-operations between the Nature Parks 'Buchenberg' and 'Lower Austrian Eisenwurzen' in 2005 give cause for optimism. In addition, a merger at least in some aspects of co-operation between all protected areas in the Eisenwurzen Region (including national parks), even across provincial boundaries would be extremely meaningful.
  4. *Enlargement of the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer*: The enlargement of the nature park in 2001 and 2002 can be categorized as a success of the nature park idea. However, it needs to be noted that mostly big landowners (for example Convent Lilienfeld) regarded this enlargement (of the size of the original enlargement plan, mostly in the municipality Annaberg) with fears and prejudices. Although the enlargement process of the nature park can be considered to have ended for now, it is important to keep up the dialogue and to try to harmonize the nature park with economic interests. This would be in accordance with nature park guidelines. In a region with a declining development at different levels, any useful option that could have a sustainable impact on development should be critically explored.
  5. *Cooperation across municipality boundaries*: Coordination, communication, planning and securing of resources across administrative boundaries are still full of barriers. Regional protection could be a guide for a coordinated getting along with each other, even across provincial boundaries. Not only transnational programs of the European regional fund show the way to a coordinated getting along with each other. The protection of resources (for example, competition for the number of overnight stays) in a region that is characterized by many negative factors may not be a suitable survival strategy. Common responsibilities (for example, 'competence centers' in each participating municipality) must be developed, which are coordinated among

- the municipalities and encourage tourists to mutual visits. The nature park management could take on a coordinating function.
6. *Coordinated development of tourism activities*: The Nature Park Region Ötscher-Tormäuer has many, partly segmented offers for tourism development. Coordinated marketing (that is, regional marketing) of individual activities that have until now been marketed by different municipalities, could be an important step towards a professional regional development. In the first place, this refers to tourism activities with respect to infrastructure and arrangements, but should also address marketing outside the region, especially in urban areas.
  7. *Implementation of the four functions of a nature park*: As discussed above, primarily the functions of conservation, namely the protection of species, and recreation are present in the consciousness of the regional population. This is similar with experiences from other nature parks in Austria. The perceived implementation of the four objectives by the local population coincides very strongly with the actual measures and 'non-measures' in the region. Creating a togetherness of the four functions in nature parks on the same level seems to be primarily a challenge in terms of educating and raising of people's awareness. This is not only true for the affected population of nature park regions. The coordination and implementation of the objectives – protection, recreation, education and regional development – can be seen to be a very important goal for the Nature Park Ötscher-Tormäuer.
  8. *Coordinating a set of measures by the EU*: As mentioned earlier, the larger study area (Eisenwurzen) is already the recipient of comprehensive regional financial support from the European Union (at least until the end of 2006). There is a need to establish measures of a regional management across state boundaries or to continue the coordination with different financial support after 2007. Although, the effects of state specific measures are encouraging (for example LEADER+ management in Ybbsitz/Lower Austria), the area of responsibility is also very locally defined. In general, there needs to be a stronger re-orientation from the side of the states. Even if it is important, in principal, to serve as the local spokesperson in his/her region, it would be more important to establish development measures together with other regions. A 'Europe of Regions' focuses on large regions and not on small regional development concepts. The region 'Eisenwurzen' offers numerous points of contacts for already existing projects that are partly stretching across state boundaries. The European Union also increasingly offers supporting measures, including NATURA 2000, and the Alpine Convention.
  9. *Conceptual versus reactive*: Area and regional management in the region Ötscher-Tormäuer must be actively working together at a conceptual level. A nature park management has the task to influence the landscape in a forward-looking way. To proactively anticipate new trends in regional development instead of passively reacting to these trends must be seen as a responsibility of the management. Today, area management with respect to regional protection cannot be viewed any more as unimportant. Not only because of a declining employment in agriculture and forestry, but also because of a gradual decline in the size of a cultural landscape that has been used for centuries, is a change

of mind necessary. The discussion surrounds the preservation or the dissolving of a cultural landscape that has grown over centuries. Area management combined with measures of a regional management allows altering the use of newly available land for the purpose of integrative regional development. Area management with respect to regional protection is an alternative measure to the intensive use of large areas, such as golf and ski tourism.

10. *Ecological, social, and economical sustainability*: Without flogging to death the term ‘sustainability’ in this context, it needs to be pointed out that protected areas can be considered a classic example for a socially acceptable, resources securing development with economic profit for each region. This debate has been paid little attention to in the Ötscher-Tormäuer region. With a – similar to all regional development programs, including Lower Austria or the European Union – progressive decentralized concentration of funding measures for regional centers, the functionality of regions will become further important (see Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung 2004). There needs to be a push for an independent profile, balancing economy, sociology, and ecology under the guidelines of sustainable development. Nature parks, in general, and those close to urban agglomerations, in particular, can already now take over this role. Area management, in the context of regional protection, ultimately serves the function of a social, super-regional collective good with immediate benefits for the region in the sense of an active value added.

When looking into the future it needs to be noted that for nature parks in Austria – in order to overcome the ambivalence problem (conflict between environmental protection versus other uses) – attention must be paid to the goal of equal coexistence of protection, recreation, education, and regional development. Any claim for the exemplary nature of this model is lost if education and regional development are not successfully integrated into the concepts of nature parks and put into practice and if the participation from the regional population and activists is not secured and not presented to the ‘outside’. Model and reality are still very much apart from each other.

The role the regional population and regional activists play with respect to their attitude towards the nature park has generally been unclear up to now. Not only contradictions (for example, economy versus ecology) can rarely be dissolved in participatory networks, but also especially business people (as shown in this chapter using the example of big landowners) express vehement opposition to extensive protected areas. Widespread reservations exist that communication will slow down or even prevent processes. On the other hand there is an involvement of activists that is not politically legitimized, embodied in a law, or possess the authority to act. The selective perception of regional activists thus blocks nature park regions frequently in their abilities to act. The contradiction of economic interests and goods (individual interests) opposite collective interests and goods (social interests) becomes clearly visible with nature parks. The lack of organizational structures in the form of nature park managements also makes the coordination of regional activists almost impossible.

The collaboration between the different levels of decision-making and instruments was not sufficiently discussed with this case study. European, national, regional,

and municipal funding instruments and institutions do not always coordinate their activities. Parallel structures are therefore typical for the implementation of strategies for regional protection. The necessary competences for project implementation are mostly perceived differently. Down-up processes, that is, top down approaches that are further designed as bottom-up, which are also typical for strategies in protected areas, have been insufficiently dealt with at both theoretical and practical levels.

In addition, the question about collective implementation of resource management (for example, in regional protection) is still unclear in many areas. In contrast to the regional-economical development, where already a more comprehensive discussion about forms of 'home rule' and approaches to regional governance has been conducted, public goods (for example, national parks) have until now for the most part been ignored from this discourse. There exists a need for an additional motivation to commit to collective goods beyond a cost-benefit calculation (see Fürst et al. 2005). Regional planning approaches, which focus on image, regional identity and quality of life, will therefore be more significant in the future.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this case study not only demonstrates the possibilities that are associated with the concepts of nature parks in Austria. But it also primarily outlines the future room for maneuvers and necessities, which for the implementation of strategies of Austrian nature parks are still not clear at this moment.

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