

Pärke, Parks and Reservate – biosphere reserves in Austria, Germany and Switzerland on their way towards *Biosphere 4.0*?

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Abstract

The biosphere reserve (BR), as conceived by UNESCO, is a permanent intervention towards sustainable development. With 727 BRs in 131 countries (Österreichisches MAB-Nationalkomitee 2021), this means interventions in highly diverse environmental, economic, socio-cultural and institutional contexts. With the MAB Strategy 2015–2025, the Lima Declaration 2016 and the Lima Action Plan 2016–2025, UNESCO BRs should develop fully into model regions for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals 2015–2030 (SDGs) (United Nations 2015). Because of their varied contexts, the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves consists of different, but globally self-similar, *fractal* institutions.

In this article we emphasize the understanding, implementation and management of BRs in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. These three European democracies are examples of federally structured states with comparatively wealthy economies as well as high political stability. Respect for property rights, regional acceptance, decentralized decision-making, and micro- and macro-economic considerations have always played decisive roles in the development of BRs in the DACH countries. We aim to identify, analyse and discuss the distinct characteristics and peculiarities of BRs in this area. We investigate how the framework conditions of sustainability, as presented in the concept of BRs, are perceived, discussed and implemented.

As a basis for our analysis, we use a sample of 18 peer-reviewed publications, which were published collectively as a book on BRs in the DACH countries (Borsdorf et al. 2020). The individual publications present overviews, case studies and in-depth investigations in the three countries. All authors were invited to participate in a meta-text analysis. This was conducted in the form of a survey, a transdisciplinary workshop with a reflective design using a virtual whiteboard, and a concluding feedback loop. The results of the qualitative exploration are interpreted against the background of international comparisons and recent scholarly discussions. Based on the assumption that different types of ambiguities and conflicts are inherently a key element of the BR concept, we conclude that the DACH countries may have found specific ways to deal with and overcome these differences.

Introduction

Biosphere reserves in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in a global context

The biosphere reserves (BRs) of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) can be seen as learning sites in which innovative approaches for sustainable development are implemented in cooperation with various stakeholders and their specific ecological, economic and social interests. After the introduction of the MAB programme in 1970/1971, the establishment of the WNBR in 1976, a fundamental adaptation of the programme in 1995 (Seville Strategy) and the Madrid Action Plan in 2005, the concept underwent a further major revision with the Lima Action Plan in 2016. The main innovation was the consistent orientation of the BR concept towards the UN goals for global sustainable development (Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) (see Figure 4; see also UNESCO 1996, 2009, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b; United Nations 2015).

Germany currently has 16, Austria four and Switzerland two UNESCO-designated BRs, see Figure 1. Zonation of BRs is crucial in conceptualizing their conservation functions. Therefore, all BRs must have a zoning plan (core area, buffer zone and transition area; see Braun et al. 2020).

Biosphere reserves and the changing conceptions of sustainability

The term *sustainability* is subject to constant changes of meaning (see Grober 2010), as seen in Figure 2. In the DACH (acronym for Deutschland (Germany, Austria and Confoederation Helvetica (Switzerland)) countries, the concept of sustainability has existed since the Middle Ages, although it was limited to individual natural resources: early forest and pasture regulations in the Alpine region allowed the long-term use of the corresponding resources. *Sustainability* in the sense of the sustainable use of renewable natural resources is often attributed to Hans Carl von Carlowitz and his book *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* (Carlowitz 1713).

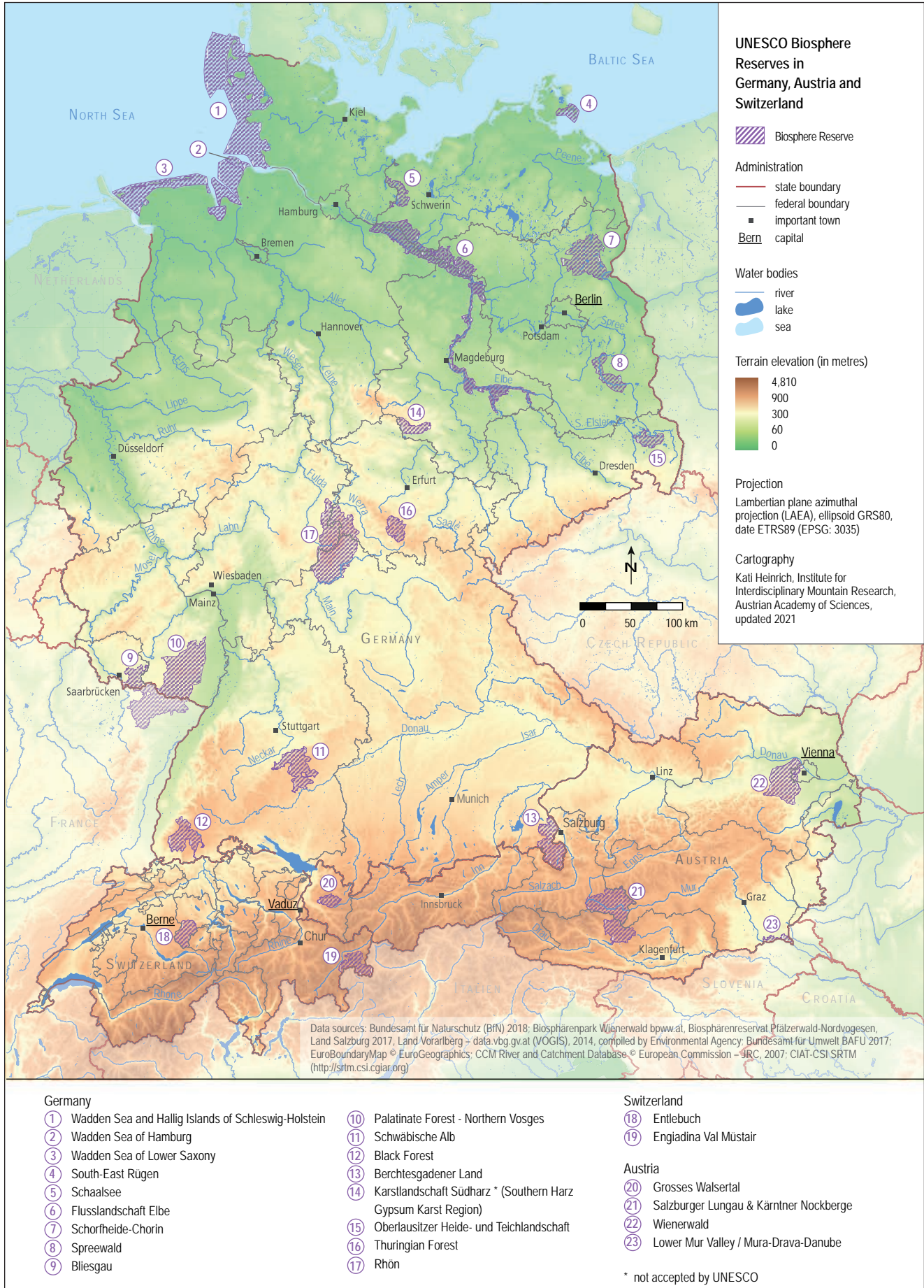


Figure 1 – Map of the BRs in the DACH region.

The increasing use of raw materials and fossil fuels in the 20th century led to the recreation of forest stands, but at the same time made the finiteness of certain resources visible. The roots of a globalized environmental movement can be identified in the scientific discourses of the 1960s (e.g. Rachel Carson's *Silent spring*; Carson 1962). The photo of planet Earth taken by Apollo 8 on 24 December 1968 (Figure 3) has become one of the most powerful iconic images of the 20th century (Harari 2015). Visualizing and symbolizing the beauty and vulnerability of the planet, the photograph may have had a significant impact on scholarly discussions of the early 1970s. This decade was formative for diverse concepts of nature conservation: the MAB programme (1970/1971), the United Nations Environment Programme (1972), the Ramsar Convention as the first international nature conservation agreement (1971), the adoption of the World Heritage Convention (1972), and even the first European Year of Nature Conservation (1970) all took place practically simultaneously shortly after the picture was taken. In 1970, Bavaria was the first state to establish a State Ministry for Regional Development and Environmental Affairs. It was not only the first environmental ministry in Germany, but also the first anywhere in the world (Merkel 2010). When in 1972 the scientists around Denis Meadows published the results of their simulation project on the use of resources under the title *Limits to growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), they sharpened awareness of the finiteness of natural resources and of the urgent need for an international environmental policy.

The SDGs of the 21st century, with their focus on justice or equity, introduce an ethically-based concept of sustainability that goes beyond scientific methods and discourses (Figure 2 & 4). While a concept of sustainability that focuses on needs, stocks, yields and limits raises technical, scientific and economic questions, justice raises complex moral, ethical and philosophical questions. The SDGs focus on equity (e.g. between countries of the Global North and the Global South, between generations, between different social groups, across social constructs of gender and race). In more than 60 of the 178 targets of the SDGs, equity is addressed explicitly; in many others, it is addressed indirectly. This is a significant expansion of the concept of sustainability towards global ethical and philosophical questions (Borsdorf & Jungmeier 2020). Overall, in both scientific and political discourse, it can be seen that the notion and definition of sustainability have gradually expanded. In addition, the term has gained an *imperative, ethical-appellative charge* (Heintel & Krainer 2014).

State of research and recent discourses

Initially, the MAB programme, which started as an international interdisciplinary research programme, and the resulting BRs were a science-driven programme (Nguyen et al. 2011). Many MAB National

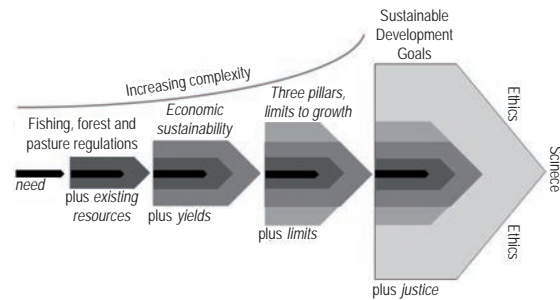


Figure 2 – SDGs as an ethical concept. Extension of the term sustainability in practical, scientific and ethical discourse (Borsdorf & Jungmeier 2020, adapted).

Committees / Focal Points are still anchored in scientific disciplines, and are thus well rooted in academia. Furthermore, regular reflection, evaluation and adaptation, which were later conceptualized as adaptive management (Dudley et al. 2000), have a clear focus on scientific principles.

Accompanying research for the development of individual BRs as well as of the WNBR is a constituent element of the BR concept (see e.g. Moreira-Muñoz & Borsdorf 2014). In recent years, numerous case studies have been published that refer to specific sites (e.g. Coy & Weixlbaumer 2009; Farghaly et al. 2016; Kratzer 2018; Rumpolt et al. 2016; Schmitz et al. 2017; Speelman et al. 2014; Mayer et al. 2018; Carius & Job 2019), or to supraregional or international developments (e.g. Hammer et al. 2016; Popelier & Vaessen 2014; Roth 2017; Sacchetti & Campbell 2017; Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008). The approaches, methods and tools of governance and management are under permanent scientific review and modification. These include the development of robust and meaningful monitoring systems (e.g. Buer et al. 2013; Jungmeier et al. 2011, 2013; Runst & Stoll-Kleemann 2020), and the acceptance by, and participation of, the population (e.g. German Commission for UNESCO 2015; Huber & Arnberger 2016; Rumpolt 2009; von Lindern et al. 2020; Wallner & Wiesmann 2009). Specific management issues include MIDAS (Multi Internationally Designated Sites; Schaaf & Clamote Rodrigues 2016), transboundary management (Taggart-Hodge & Schoon 2016), effective zoning systems (Wattendorf et al. 2017), and questions related to the Anthropocene (Egner & Jungmeier 2018). BRs trigger scholarly debates on social innovation and entrepreneurship (e.g. Francis 2009; Bergstrand et al. 2011; Knaus et al. 2017; The Scottish Government 2015; Sacchetti & Campbell 2017; Job et al. 2013; Kraus et al. 2014), and on conceptual and basic considerations, such as size of core areas or functions (Deutscher Rat für Landschaftspflege 2010; Egner & Jungmeier 2018; Jiménez et al. 2017; Köck & Arnberger 2017; Mose & Weixlbaumer 2012; Pichler-Koban & Jungmeier 2015; Pichler-Koban & Jungmeier 2017; Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan 2018; Plieninger et al. 2016; Pütz & Job 2016). New developments in re-



Figure 3 – Earthrise. Iconic picture of the 20th century, mankind's first view of their own planet. Image courtesy of the Earth Science and Remote Sensing Unit, NASA Johnson Space Center. Photo ID AS11-44-6550, taken 1968 by Apollo 11. © Earth Science and Remote Sensing Unit, NASA Johnson Space Center, <https://eol.jsc.nasa.gov>

search (e.g. Bela et al. 2016; Grasser et al. 2016; Petridis et al. 2017), education (Herrero 2017; Mammadova 2017), and integration and inclusion (e.g. Höglhammer et al. 2015) have also become visible.

Research questions, approaches and methods

In the context of 50 years of the MAB programme, we wish to focus on the development, current state and future perspective of BRs in the DACH countries. An assessment of the situation aims to contribute to international discussion. The research addresses the following questions related to BRs in the DACH countries:

- Past (P1): What are significant milestones in the historical development?
- Past (P2): What significant developments have been initiated by the BRs?
- The situation today (T1): What are the special features and characteristics of BRs?
- The situation today (T2): What are the particular strengths and weaknesses of BRs?
- Future (F1): What are the burning issues for the future of BRs?
- Future (F2): To which societal questions should BRs contribute in a distinctive way in order to shape the future?

The research project shall contribute equally to regional, national and international reflection. In particular, it will aim: (1) to initiate or support discussion among the BRs' management committees and stakeholders of the concepts of sustainability, justice or equity, and SDGs; (2) to support the BRs' management in implementing the SDGs through concrete

recommendations and applied research questions; (3) to promote scientific discourses about issues relevant for the further development of the BR concept and of BRs in practice.

The research was conducted over a period of three years (2018–2020). In the first step, the current or very recent situation, discussions and developments of BRs in DACH were assessed. In preparation for a book (*Biosphere 4.0*, Borsdorf et al. 2020), an open call was launched for contributions from academics, BR managers, planners and consultants that looked at and analysed the current status of BRs. The call resulted in 18 scientific articles, all of which underwent a double-blind peer review. Hence, these articles constitute an important information basis, highlighting different aspects, questions and research results.

In the second phase, the articles were subjected to a meta-analysis. First, we screened all articles and developed the research questions given above, deriving them from the existing literature and the 18 new articles. These questions were used for a qualitative survey that was implemented online using *Survey monkey*. Thirty-three quite diverse contributing authors were involved in the inquiry as well as in the interpretation of the results (Table 1). The results were condensed to hypotheses, which were refined in a joint virtual workshop (8 September 2020). The discussion was conducted in the program Miro, using a virtual whiteboard in connection with Zoom technology, and led to the revised and finalized results as presented in this article.

Results: BRs in the DACH region

Overview of recent research findings in the DACH region

In a comprehensive scientific analysis, Borsdorf et al. (2020) investigate the current state of BRs in the region; together with authors from the three DACH countries, they draw a picture of a *Biosphere 4.0* – a potentially new generation of BRs (for more information, see Supplementary Table 1).

Past (P1): What are significant milestones in the historical development of BRs in the DACH region?

Based on Bridgewater (2016), Hadley (2006) and Job et al. (2019), Braun et al. (2020) identified *phases* in the development of the BR concept and in establishing BRs. The historical development of BR territories in Austria, Germany and Switzerland illustrates and underlines how international policies and repeated paradigm-shifts had a visible impact *on the ground* (see Köck & Arnberger 2017; Weixlbaumer et al. 2020). The fact that changed and new policies are having an effect suggests that the BRs in the DACH region are not simply sites of learning for sustainable practices, but are indeed themselves also learning systems that respond flexibly to new developments and findings.



Figure 4 – Sustainable Development Goals. A global orientation towards sustainability (United Nations 2015).

However, it can take many years before just some of the conceptual and strategic considerations find their realization in regional management plans. One reason is that participative processes to define targets require time, and management plans usually cover a period of 10 years. Although minor adjustments to new policies can be implemented continuously, major amendments may be realized only in later management plans.

Past (P2): What significant developments have been initiated by the BRs in the DACH region?

The Seville Strategy introduced the three connected functions of BRs: conservation, development and logistical support. These functions are intended to facilitate the protection of valuable natural and cultural landscapes while also meeting the requirements of the people living in those landscapes (Köck & Arnberger 2017; Braun et al. 2020). The conservation function contributes to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity within the three zones of the BRs. DACH BRs generally aim to implement integrative concepts that take into consideration *classic* nature conservation as well as economic, social and other ecological interests. However, the conservation function takes a back seat to economic development. More emphasis should be placed on living in harmony with nature, i. e. preserving diversity as the basis for sustainable development. The development function contributes to the creation of greater added value for the region (e.g. through value chains, cooperation, regional products and services), while at the same time maintaining and enhancing biological diversity, landscape qualities, and social and cultural aspects, thus ensuring sustainable regional development. Within the support function, the importance of democratic processes, participation and acceptance at regional level should be strengthened; the importance given to science and research should be enhanced; access by (peripheral) regions to scien-

tific knowledge and institutions should be improved, and education for sustainable development should be promoted. A selection of the numerous ways in which the three functions are implemented in the BRs of the DACH region are presented in Supplementary Table 1. The variety of the examples corresponds to the diversity of the BRs and represents the respective regions well, but each BR must also set its own priorities taking into account the limits on its own resources (money, personnel, etc.). However, the DACH BRs should contribute their expertise more strongly to the WNBR. In order to do justice to new developments, further focal points should also be set, such as population decline, demographic change, migration, mobility and sub-urbanization.

The situation today (T1): What are the special features and characteristics of BRs in the DACH region?

Germany, Austria and Switzerland are federal states in which land ownership, political stability and decentralized decision-making are of great importance. Democracy and the rule of law play an essential role. The BRs in these countries are characterized by comprehensive, very diverse and regionally different participatory possibilities. This is visible in the diversity of organizational forms and legal implementation. Supporting structures are, for example, public administration entities (municipal, regional), associations, companies (mostly non-profit), foundations, or other specific legal entities. This diversity translates into a wide range of roles as regards (semi-)governmental authority, and also very diverse numbers of staff.

Nevertheless, the binding quality criteria of the Austrian and German MAB national committees and of the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment allow for implementation in accordance with international standards. The national quality stan-

dards were developed in comprehensive processes (Lange 2005; Deutsches MAB-Nationalkomitee 2007; Österreichisches MAB-Nationalkomitee 2016, 2017, 2018) and are an essential element of quality assurance in federal states that have many decentralized tasks and actors. Most of the BRs in the DACH region comply with the zoning requirements laid out in the Seville strategy. The three BRs on the Wadden Sea, however, all created since Seville, have yet to finalize their zoning and are currently trying to expand beyond the existing national park boundaries. They will then be evaluated for recognition by UNESCO in 2022 with the new perimeters; their merger into a single Wadden Sea BR is also on the cards in the longer term. In this context, it is worth mentioning that Austria has removed four BRs from the list because they did not meet the Seville criteria. National and international networking are taken seriously. Striking a balance between protection and use is always aimed for. The high standards with regard to innovation raise a number of fundamental questions, such as how innovative a BR must be, how to measure innovative strength, and how a BR as an intermediary institution can drive both structural and entrepreneurial innovation.

The situation today (T2): What are the particular strengths and weaknesses of BRs in the DACH region?

Among the particular strengths of BRs in the DACH region are the well-established participative processes (e.g. stakeholder involvement regarding BR designation and evaluation, and in drawing up management plans), democratic legitimacy, political support, the legal status of BR conferred by nature conservation laws, and cooperation between institutions (regional, national and international networking). Most BRs are regionally well anchored, local people express high acceptance of the BR in their area (von Lindern et al. 2020), and most BRs offer a wide range of sustainable development instruments and projects, particularly for peripheral regions. Thanks to the BR managements, projects and initiatives are mostly well conceived, initiated, implemented and supported. The BRs use their potential to develop into regions for real innovation and experiment. Those in DACH comprise very different types of landscape; most of them are extensive, traditionally used, cultural landscapes (Braun et al. 2020) and have high-quality standards oriented towards international developments and steered by the MAB national committees based on MAB's quality criteria. The BRs have a high degree of credibility because in the DACH countries some BRs have already been withdrawn voluntarily from the WNBR for no longer complying with current aims and criteria.

Furthermore, there are many examples of excellent visitor and environmental education offers. Awareness of sustainability topics is increasing and is generally well established among stakeholders and inhabitants of the BRs (von Lindern et al. 2020). The BRs have

developed good skills in initiating projects and in helping to support them both financially and in terms of human resources, even managing and implementing some projects themselves. In general, they also offer good opportunities for research and actively seek cooperation with scientific institutions. Marketing of BRs and the communication of sustainability topics are well established in most BRs. All BRs put a great deal of effort into monitoring their own activities. In Austria, the MAB National Committee offers funding for research projects, which are carefully approved in advance through an international peer-review process. A similar process is in place in Germany. The MAB National Committee in Austria has published several books. These include publications on local cuisine in BRs (Köck & Umhack 2011); on international examples (both good and less commendable ones) of mountain BRs (Austrian MAB Committee 2011); and a monograph on Chilean BRs (Moreira-Muñoz & Borsdorf 2014). The history of the journal *eco.mont* goes back to a joint initiative between the International Scientific Committee on Research in the Alps (ISCAR) and the network of alpine protected areas ALPARC, both of which are connected to the MAB programme.

The weaknesses of the BRs are partly due to the broad integration of the various interests and institutions at different regional levels (federal government, regional and local administrations), because of the federal structures of the DACH countries. The coordination of the different levels is time-consuming, and decision-making processes sometimes take a considerable time. For regional development initiatives to be truly sustainable, BRs need the active involvement of local stakeholders, businesses and the general population. Where this is lacking, there are significant deficits in implementation. It is typical of intensive participative processes that they require time and resources for all stakeholders' opinions to be discussed. Poorly prepared participation processes would cause considerable difficulties. This is why setting up new BRs involves enormous effort and resources. In view of the diversity of their tasks, BRs often see themselves as being under-resourced and lacking in political support compared to other protected area categories, such as national parks. Some workshop participants in our study argued that the transformative potential of BRs is not being used to the full at the political level.

Numerous specific weaknesses and opportunities for improvement can be identified in individual BRs and countries, or in relation to specific questions (e.g., insufficient financing instruments due to a lack of treaties between federal state and provinces in Austria; some German BRs see the term *Reservat* as a barrier, etc.). Overall, BRs in the DACH countries are well on their way to fulfilling the aims of BRs, but this must be continued and intensified in order to respond to the urgent ecological challenges as well as economic and social interests. Special attention should continue to be paid to the development of urban and cross-border

BRs. A successful example of the latter is the Franco-German BR Pfälzerwald-Nordvogesen.

Future (F1): What are the burning issues for the future of BRs in the DACH region?

The original intention to integrate man and biosphere within the management of BRs and to find a continuous balance between protection and uses has not changed. Both the number of questions raised and their complexity have increased significantly. In addition, very different questions have arisen in individual areas as a result of BRs' diverse ecological, economic and social conditions. The burning issues need to be dealt with individually, but a meta-methodology is needed to make the results generalizable and transferable. If a BR does not succeed in setting appropriate priorities and structuring goals and activities, or in attracting additional funding, there is always the risk of overburdening and overstretching the BR concept locally.

Future (F2): To which societal questions should BRs in the DACH region contribute in a special way for the future?

The BRs claim to take up social discourses in a comprehensive way and to contribute to solutions. They integrate major social issues such as migration, integration, inclusion, global change (in particular climate change), digitization, justice or equity, and mobility, as well as adequate performance, the post-growth economy, innovation and ecosystem services, and place them in their respective regional contexts. However, sustainability remains the central generic term. But these issues can only be addressed in reliable partnerships and in cooperation with the local populations and their interests. To avoid arbitrariness of the topics or overburdening BRs' managements and stakeholders, the BRs should develop individual future agendas that are complementary to each other at national and international levels, without losing sight of the three core BR functions. Scientific research will remain a key success factor to support transformation processes of BRs in the future (Scheurer 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

With their commitment to further developing BRs into model regions for implementing sustainability goals, BR managements face new challenges. BRs are well placed to continue spreading the idea of sustainable development in all regional fields of activity – and this they must do if they are to continue to fulfil their mission of being spaces of innovation for nature conservation, since they are explicitly supposed to integrate protection and use. This also means taking up the more recent discussions on, for example, environmentally friendly forms of mobility and lifestyle and, together with other actors, assuming a pioneering role in their regions.

There is a danger that BRs addressing sustainable development in the sense of *all* SDGs will overstretch themselves and dissipate their portfolios, leading to them becoming management bodies for all concerns related to sustainable development. This would be an impossible task and must not be allowed to happen. Nevertheless, BRs must give more thought to how they can take up the SDGs and what priorities they want to set against the background of the SDGs. Additionally, the framework of the Madrid Action Plan for BRs states that “*The role of biosphere reserves is essential to rapidly seek and test solutions to the challenges of climate change as well as monitor the changes as part of a global network. [...] [B]iosphere reserves can be areas for demonstrating adaptation measures for natural and human systems, assisting the development of resilience strategies and practices.*” In summary, the basic mission of a BR is nature conservation and biodiversity preservation, and how to anchor these in the region through regional climate protection measures, while addressing questions of mobility, lifestyle and livelihood, so that social and economic added value is also created.

BRs in Germany, Austria and Switzerland have sufficient experience in integrating nature conservation and preservation of biodiversity into regional resource-use and regional development. Thanks to their participatory procedures, mostly long-term cooperation with local actors, and relatively high acceptance among the population, they are well equipped to take up other topics in the 2030 Agenda with actors and to initiate appropriate projects, if political support can be increased. Within the network of BRs in the DACH region, only Germany has as many as 90% of its landscape biomes covered by BRs (Job et al. 2019). The representation of a sub-urban BR has so far been achieved only by Austria, with the BR Wienerwald. The aims throughout the DACH region should be to represent all landscape and cultural areas, and therefore to create further BRs.

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