

## Thematic catalogue of research topics on Swiss parks

Astrid Wallner

**Keywords:** Switzerland, research, parks of national importance, protected areas, transdisciplinarity

### Abstract

With the implementation of the new parks legislation, Switzerland has experienced a boom in the establishment of parks of national importance. From a scientific point of view, this presents a unique opportunity to accompany these new parks and to establish long-term evaluation in order to assess the changes in and the impact of these areas. From a management point of view, parks depend on scientific results in order to take adequate measures for valorization and development of their areas. It is important to foster the dialogue between science and practice and to develop research topics, which can be analysed comparatively across several parks. Commissioned by the Federal Office of the Environment (FOEN), the coordination office *Research on parks* and its accompanying group of experts drew up a thematic catalogue of comparative research topics on parks and protected areas. This catalogue represents a first step towards formulating a research strategy and establishing a long-term impact assessment.

### Introduction

In Switzerland, parks of national importance are created with the aim of maintaining and enhancing exceptional natural habitats or landscapes of outstanding beauty. In addition, these parks promote sustainable economic development in their regions. Seventeen new parks were established within four years of the legislation on the implementation of the new parks. This situation of park creation is unique to Switzerland and in the international context of protected areas. This situation presents a unique opportunity for science to study the development of the park regions in a comparative approach. At the same time, there is a great demand from park management for research results on various management-relevant topics. Taken together, these are exceptional prerequisites for enhancing the dialogue between science and practice.

To promote this dialogue and to concurrently coordinate research related to more than one park, the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) facilitated the appointment of a coordinating office for research on parks. The coordinator is supported by a group of experts, representing scientists from a variety of disciplines. During the last two years it has been the main task of this *Research on Parks* group to draw up a thematic catalogue of relevant research topics for comparative research on Swiss parks. In its work the group focuses on a transdisciplinary research approach based on an exchange between science and society and supports the quest for science-based answers to questions regarding the impact, aims and governance of Swiss parks. Thus, research on parks contributes essentially to the sustainable development of park regions and the enhancement of a *Swiss parks politics*.

### Development of the thematic catalogue

In a first step, we talked to park managers and looked at management plans in order to get an overview of research projects and research needs in parks. On the basis of this overview, we discussed the opportunities and possibilities parks offer for research. We then identified research topics which could be of interest for comparative research on several parks and drew up short descriptions and possible research questions. This draft was sent for consultation to a wide circle of researchers in Switzerland, as well as all park administrations in Switzerland and to representatives from the cantonal offices for nature and landscape. Researchers made good use of the opportunity to comment on the research topics, whereas there were only few comments by park administrations and cantons. Apart from specific comments on the various topics, clarifications were sought regarding the position of the catalogue (is it a research agenda; is it a clear definition of topics) and the funding of research on parks.

The discussions and the feedback from the research community showed that the scientific community focus on parks covers the following three areas:

- establishment of parks;
- operation of parks;
- impact of parks inside and outside of the park region.

While studies related to the establishment and operation of parks already exist, studies related to the impact of parks will only be possible once the parks have been in operation for some years. However, it is important to capture the current state of the park areas in order to identify changes in these areas over time and to predict the impact of the parks. These forecasts on the impact depend on long-term studies, which must be factored in from the beginning of a comparative research approach and will be of great

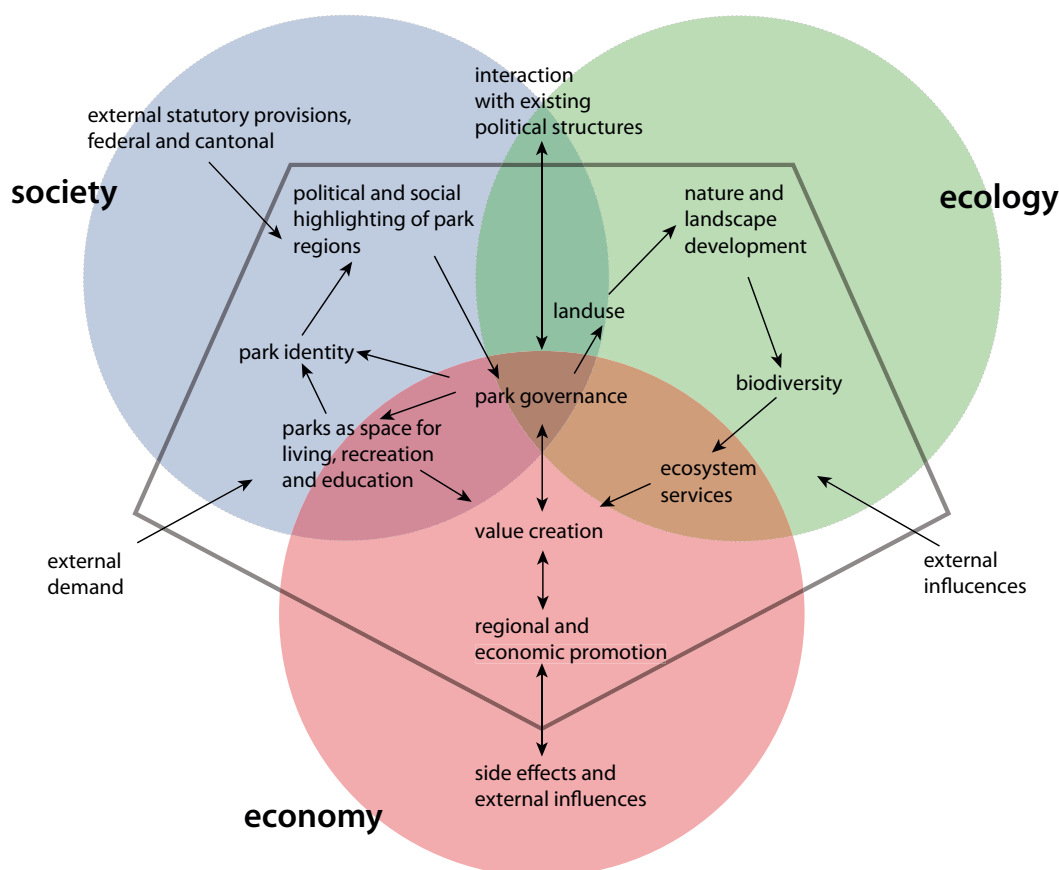


Figure 1 – Classification of the proposed research topics for parks of national importance (within the grey line) within the sustainability triangle.

importance for carrying out a long-term impact assessment.

Taking in all these thoughts and comments, we developed the research topics further. The result is a thematic catalogue covering seven transdisciplinary research topics. It is not yet a final selection of possible research topics. Various research questions will turn up during the first years of operation of the parks and the parks themselves will not be able to formulate their own research needs until several years into operation. However, the catalogue is a first step in the direction of developing a future research agenda.

### Conceptual design

The proposed research topics fall within the classical sustainability triangle of ecology, economics and society (see Figure 1).

Taking the external legal structures (especially federal but also cantonal regulations) as a starting point leads to the topic of the creation of park regions under political and societal aspects. This forms the basis for further topics in the areas of society, ecology and economy. Regarding societal aspects, issues concerning the creation of parks and related attitudes of local people as well as the development of a park's identity are at the core of our considerations. When looking at parks as spaces for living, recreation and education, park managers focus on developing a specific range of choices

to create added value in their regions and thereby strengthen the regional economy. Parks play an important role for ecological aspects since one of their main goals is to maintain and, wherever possible, enhance natural habitats and landscapes. Therefore, questions of the effects of parks on biodiversity and ecosystem services are essential. The theme of park governance marks the point where societal, economic and ecological issues intersect. Side effects on and interaction with surrounding regions are relevant for all aspects.

Space and time are further relevant dimensions in studying the development of park regions. Different parks can be compared in spatial terms or we can look at parks and their interactions with regions that do not carry a park label. The selection of the study areas depends on the topic.

The temporal dimension is shown in the process of parks establishment. The creation of a park in Switzerland passes through different stages – not only in the sense of the legal framework requiring a feasibility study, followed by phases of construction and operation, but also in the sense of social appropriation of these new landscapes as well as the ecologic and economic development of the park regions.

It may be surprising that single discipline aspects such as hydrology, forestry or climatology are missing in this thematic compilation of research topics. We are indeed aware of the importance of disciplinary research. However, in compiling research topics rel-

evant for all parks we focussed on inter- and transdisciplinary research topics. The disciplinary research will form the basis for a systematic monitoring of the park areas. Nevertheless, work is currently underway to develop a concept for a long-term impact assessment of parks of national importance but this is not discussed in detail in the thematic catalogue.

## Research topics

In the following we present each research topic with a brief description and potential research questions.

### Park identity

A park of national importance in Switzerland is based on a regional initiative. It is the result of a democratic participatory process that takes several years and passes through a number of stages. Such parks are not created on the drawing boards of administrators but in the hearts and minds of the local people who provide the impetus for establishing a park. Only then will the federal government support a park project and award it the park label – provided all requirements are fulfilled. The local communes play a considerable role in the park authority, making strategically important decisions about the park. In this sense, the creation of a park is a political as well as societal process.

#### *Potential research questions:*

What are the motives of the different actors, such as local communes and entrepreneurs, farmers, tour operators and others for entering into the process of park creation and how can the different ideas of these actors be brought in line?

What kind of societal and political processes are activated by the creation of a park?

Acceptance of a park today and in 10 years – have changes occurred?

### Park governance

The park is a new actor in an already complex environment. Local and regional institutions and structures as well as national regulations form the framework within which the park has to function. At the same time, the local population has great expectations of the park administration. However, the park as such usually does not form a political or regional or administrative unit and therefore has no official legal mandate.

#### *Potential research questions:*

What kinds of opportunities exist for park administrations to influence political sectors such as agricultural policy, transport policy or spatial development policy?

Parks are established on the basis of local initiatives. How strongly are they influenced by regulations at other levels (cantonal, national, international)?

### Economic and regional development

The establishment of a park is seen by many as an opportunity to encourage regional economic develop-

ment. Opportunities mentioned include promoting local products, creating added value by supporting local resource cycles, encouraging new choices for tourists. However, the impact of any action on nature and landscape has to be observed, since the protection and enhancement of exceptional natural habitats or landscapes of outstanding beauty is the main goal of the Swiss parks' politics.

#### *Potential research questions:*

Does the regional development supported by the park also contribute to enhancing regional identity?

How do the parks promote synergies between different economic sectors such as tourism, agriculture and trade?

### Landscape development

In recent decades, political awareness has turned towards the topic landscape development. Landscape can be considered as a collective resource with the characteristics of a public good instead of an individually usable good. In this way landscape becomes the central issue of a democratic process. Since preserving and enhancing the natural values of the landscape is the highest priority of the parks in Switzerland, it is logical to apply this concept of landscape also to parks.

#### *Potential research questions:*

Does the acceptance of a park by the local population imply a change in the appreciation of nature and landscape?

How can lay and expert knowledge be integrated into the appreciation of landscape?

### Ecosystem services and biodiversity

The various parks of national importance present a great variety of landscapes. These landscapes provide an important basis for different recreational activities and regional value creation. Furthermore, these landscapes offer services such as air quality, water purification and flood prevention.

The parks also include numerous areas under cantonal or national protection. Therefore the parks play an important role in biodiversity conservation. The relationship between biodiversity and ecosystem services is undisputed. However, research results should be used for presenting the services of biodiversity and ecosystems and to implement them in the long run as quality criteria in land use planning.

#### *Potential research questions:*

Which ecosystem services are provided by the landscapes of parks of national importance? Do they differ in quality and quantity compared to ecosystem services in non-park regions?

What is the potential of parks for biodiversity conservation and enhancement?

### Living, recreation and education

Many rural areas are affected by emigration and decline. Areas carrying the label *park of national impor-*

*tance* commit themselves to encouraging sustainable regional development and see the park as an instrument to counteract migration losses. Outside their area, such regions promote the special quality of living that comes from handling natural resources and from the landscape. Overall, this is a transformation process, which depends on local knowledge and includes a re-orientation within the local population. Educating local people and visitors and making them aware of this special quality are vital in this process.

*Potential research questions:*

To what extent are local and expert knowledge of specific natural and cultural places congruent and how can both be effectively integrated into educational programmes?

### Interaction with non-park areas

A park interacts continuously with its surrounding region, with positive and negative mutual influences. For example, the creation of new visitor attractions in the park can lead to an increase in overnight stays outside the park. Or, as a negative example, intensification of land use in the vicinity of a park might impact on the ecological and landscape qualities of the park.

*Potential research questions:*

Does the park become a locational factor for living, tour operators and further service providers who refer to the park attractions when creating their products and marketing strategies?

What are the relations between nature-based tourist attractions offered in the parks and the choices offered by large tourist destinations in surrounding areas?

### Conclusion

This catalogue is a first step towards defining a future research agenda on parks of national importance. Researchers as well as park managers are now invited to develop research projects related to the proposed topics and to develop these topics further by formulating their own research questions. The topics have not been prioritized so far. At the moment it is important to start initial comparative studies and for the parks to formulate their own research needs based on their experiences. This will strengthen the dialogue between science and practice and form the basis for the development of a research strategy on parks.

Researchers and park managers are kindly requested to contact the coordinator for research on Swiss parks and inform her on their progress in developing projects.

The catalogue is available in German and French (and will be later in Italian) at: [www.parkforschung.ch](http://www.parkforschung.ch)

### Author

#### Astrid Wallner

Coordinator for Research on Swiss parks; social anthropologist. Fields of research: protected areas, acceptance, land use.

email: [astrid.wallner@scnat.ch](mailto:astrid.wallner@scnat.ch)

Koordinationsstelle Parkforschung, Schwarztortstrasse 9, 3007 Bern, Switzerland