

# Negotiating Conservation – Meaningful Spaces in a World Heritage Debate

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**In negotiations about a potential World Heritage Site, people construct individual ‘realities’, ascribing meanings to the issues under consideration. Hence they construct individual, meaningful spaces. These meaningful spaces frequently do not correlate with the ‘outstanding universal values’ that are the criteria for inscription as a World Heritage Site.**

By exploring how the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn region was represented in the local press during the World Heritage decision-making process, we aimed to identify meanings ascribed to the potential World Heritage Site (WHS).

In visual representations (images), the WHS was largely presented as an unspoiled natural environment (Figure 1). This aesthetic portrait has no direct link to the population’s daily needs or questions and anxieties about the consequences of a WHS label and commitment to sustainable development.

This was apparent when considering verbal expressions (articles, letters-to-the-editor, comments) dominated by issues of regional economic development, fears of disappropriation, and different views of nature (Table 1).

Discussions referred to ways of dealing with the WHS’s ‘outstanding beauty’. It became obvious that reference only to scientific, aesthetic, or conservation-related ‘universal values’ (Figure 2) was unlikely to result in common agreement on how to proceed. These values are too abstract for the daily lives of local people, who construct individual ‘realities’, ascribing meanings to issues under consideration.

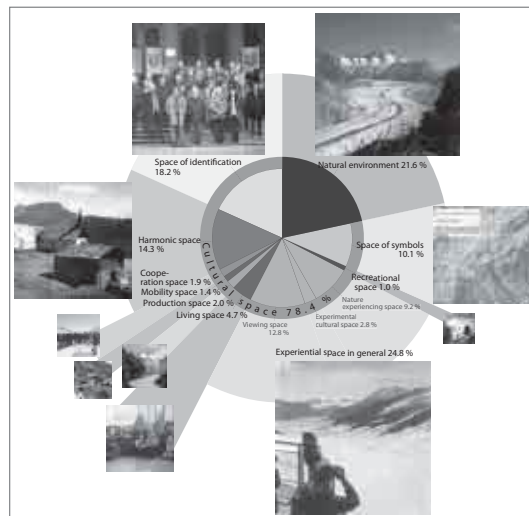


Figure 1: The image of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn as presented in the ‘Walliser Bote’ between 21 Feb. 1998 and 13 Dec. 2001 (graph by U. Müller, photos ‘Walliser Bote’)

The Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn region is the most glaciated part of the European Alps, containing Europe’s largest glacier and a range of classic glacial features, and provides an outstanding record of the geological processes that formed the High Alps. A diverse flora and fauna is represented in a range of habitats, and plant colonization in the wake of retreating glaciers provides an outstanding example of plant succession. The area is globally recognised as one of the most spectacular mountain regions to visit and its aesthetics have attracted an international following.

Figure 2: Outstanding universal values in the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn World Heritage Site (World Heritage Committee 2001)

In a spatial sense, they thus construct individual meaningful spaces. Dealing with these different meaningful spaces is decisive when it comes to negotiating pathways to sustainable development in a WHS region. As multiple realities exist in a pluralistic world, they must be taken seriously and adequately addressed.

Important issues in the media debate	Citation example
Aesthetics (+)	“This unique landscape is formed by wind, coldness, sun and the powerful flow of the glacier. Fauna and flora cover this landscape in every season, so that it bristles with beauty” (Walliser Bote, letter to the editor, 09/03/2000).
Economic development (-)	“It is our uppermost duty to keep [infrastructural] extension possibilities open in order to provide future generations a secure livelihood” (Walliser Bote, general article, 02/04/1998).
Economic development (+)	“The unique landscape should not be sacrificed to short-term and short-sighted tourist considerations” (Walliser Bote, general article, 28/02/1998).
Economic development (+)	“The inscription of the region in the World Heritage list would be a big international marketing campaign that we could never pay by ourselves” (Walliser Bote, general article, 26/03/1998).
Economic development (-)	“Nature protection alone is not enough – our descendants also want to eat and to drink” (Walliser Bote, comment, 07/03/2000).
Fears of disappropriation (-)	“Never should we allow foreign organisations, people from Paris, Berne [...] to decide what we have to do and how we do things in our mountains” (Walliser Bote, letter to the editor, 07/03/2000).
Endangered nature (+)	“Whoever wants to grant and preserve a unique landscape for coming generations should take the opportunity to vote in favour of the WHS. Only by doing this do we have a guarantee that the Great Aletsch Glacier and the protected area will not degenerate to a Disneyland or a carousel” (Walliser Bote, letter to the editor, 06/08/1998).
Endangering nature (-)	“Under the catchword of ‘sustainability’, certain circles are planning to resettle wolves, snakes, and other animals” (Walliser Bote, letter to the editor, 03/11/1999).

Table 1: Important issues in the World Heritage media debate and citation example (Legend: + / - : In favour / against establishing a World Heritage Site)