Switzerland’s Parks

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Gruyère Pays-d’Enhaut Regional Nature Park in the
Alpine foothills of Western Switzerland
Photo: Marcus Gyger/swiss-image.ch/Switzerland Tourism – FOEN

Good to know

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Parks are good for everyone

Have you planned your holiday for this year yet? If not, maybe this magazine will give you some ideas. How about a couple of nights in the historic Hotel Ofenhorn in the planned Binntal Regional Nature Park in the Valais? Or a hike through the Plaun la Greina in the future Adula National Park in the Graubünden Alps? Or heading off along the Anabaptist Path (“Täuferweg”) on the trail of a once persecuted religious minority in what is soon to become the Chasseral Regional Nature Park in the Swiss Jura?

These parks, which are now being set up or have already been created all around the country, offer hundreds of different ways to discover Switzerland. The procedure for obtaining recognition as a “park of national importance” guarantees that these areas are recognised as some of our country’s most beautiful spots.

Making sure that they remain that way is the job of the local people. They are well aware of the scenic, cultural and biological treasures that they have on their doorstep and that they can offer to tourists – and that they must therefore care for and preserve them. Although it covers a mere 41,293 square kilometres, Switzerland plays host to an impressive range of landscapes and ecosystems. And it also has a variety of measures at hand to maintain these natural assets: habitat inventories, nature reserves, protected zones and landscape inventories. And a national biodiversity strategy with the same aims is currently being drawn up, based in part on the decisions taken at the Biodiversity Conference in Nagoya (Japan) in October 2010.

Parks of national importance are an ideal addition to these measures. It is not a set of regulations that they bring, but a range of opportunities for self-determined, sustainable regional development.

This approach is not something that the Swiss have invented. Around the world there are many parks that not only bring ecological benefits, but also economic and social added value. What is special about Swiss parks is the fundamental democratic philosophy on which they are based: without exception they are the result of regional initiatives and the decision of a majority of Swiss citizens who are directly affected.

Willy Geiger, FOEN Vice Director
www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-01
A century after the Swiss National Park was set up in the Engadine, an Alpine valley in the canton of Graubünden, new parks are appearing across Switzerland. They combine the preservation and enhancement of nature and landscapes with sustainable development models for regional economies and societies in rural areas.
During the Belle Epoque in the early 1900s, Scuol and St. Moritz developed quickly into prestigious spa resorts. Other Engadine villages like Zernez, however, saw little of the money brought by the rich and beautiful to the Swiss Alps. To address this imbalance, Paul Sarasin, member of the Swiss Environmental Commission, made a timely recommendation. “The flora and fauna of the Alps should be given an untouched haven in a specific, clearly defined area (...),” he wrote in 1908 in a letter to Zernez's town councillors. “In time the community of plants and animals will once more resemble the precious and wonderful life that thrived in the Alps before humans arrived.” Sarasin had his eye on the Cluozza Valley, near Zernez. He made an attractive financial offer for the lease of this rather unproductive land. A deal was quickly reached: the contract to establish a “nature reserve” was signed in 1909, and the Swiss National Park was born.

A “grand experiment”. Creating the national park was a truly pioneering event; there was nothing comparable to it in Central Europe. Since then, the park has been left to evolve entirely naturally; people are only there as observers. “A grand experiment”, in the words of Paul Sarasin. And one which continues to this day: the park, now covering 172 square kilometres, remains an exciting field for scientific research (see page 33).

Pro Natura offers CHF 1 million. There have been several attempts to create new national parks. However, most projects have failed because of land-use conflicts. The Swiss conservation organisation Pro Natura took up the initiative in 2000, offering CHF 1 million of initial funding to the region that established the next national park. Six regions competed initially, and two are still in the running: the Adula National Park project, spanning the cantons of Graubünden and Ticino, which is well under way (see pages 30–33), and the Locarnese National Park, also in Ticino. Although the original plans for this park had to be dropped when the commune of Cevio withdrew, the remaining communes are moving ahead with the project. They submitted a revised application in January 2011 that is currently under review by the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN).

When Pro Natura began its campaign, two requests were pending before the Swiss Parliament. They proposed adding a provision on new parks to the Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage (NCHA). The
Federal Council quickly presented a draft proposal, albeit with no provision for federal funding. The Parliament saw things differently, and subsequently voted by a clear majority to make the federal government responsible for awarding a label to parks of national importance and providing financial support.

A park model for the present and future. The new section in the NCHA on “parks of national importance” took effect at the end of 2007 and created a new model for Swiss parks. The aim is no longer simply to preserve “the pure work of nature”, without the presence of humans, as Sarasin had in mind, but to sustain the key natural assets of a region – its rich biodiversity, beautiful landscapes, cultural goods and functioning ecosystems – and to make better use of them for economic and social development.

The NCHA defines three park categories, which are detailed in the Parks Ordinance:

• A national park consists of a core zone and a buffer zone. In the core zone, which in the Alps must cover at least 100 square kilometres, nature should be left to evolve undisturbed. The Ordinance also allows “traditional grazing use in clearly defined areas” and “regulation of stocks of game species in order to prevent significant damage”. Visitor access to the core zone is restricted to the paths provided. In the buffer zone, the cultural landscape must be managed as naturally as possible. This zone includes villages and areas devoted to agriculture, forestry and tourism.

• A regional nature park is a rural area which is characterised by the richness of its natural and cultural landscape: a diversity of indigenous plants, wildlife and habitats, as well as intact landscapes and sites of local character. Efforts are made to maintain these assets as well as to create added value from them, i.e. through green tourism, production and marketing of regional products, and environmental education.

• A nature discovery park provides undisturbed habitats for plants and wildlife in its core zone, and the surrounding transition zone must be suitable for environmental education.
Swiss parks*

* This is a list of all park projects whose application for the park label or financial support for the establishment of a park is supported by the FOEN. Status: December 2010.

1 Swiss National Park

Recognised parks of national importance
2 RNP Entlebuch biosphere
3 RNP Thal
4 NEP Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald
5 RNP Biosfera Val Müstair

Parks under development
6 NP Parc Adula
7 RNP Beverin
8 RNP Birrental Landscape Park
9 PNR Chasseral
10 RNP Diemtigtal
11 PNR du Doubs
12 RNP Parc Ela
13 RNP Gantisch
14 PNR Gruyère Pays-d’Enhaut
15 RNP Jurapark Aargau
16 PNR Jura vaudois
17 RNP Plym-Finges
18 RNP Thunensee-Hohlgart
19 PNR Val d’Hérens

NP National park
RNP/PNR Regional nature park
NEP Nature discovery park
that allows close contact with nature. It is no further than 20 kilometres from the centre of an urban area and is easily reached by public transport.

Additional park category? Discussions are under way on whether a fourth park category is required, a proposal made by the canton of Aargau, which would like to set up a park in the Wasserschloss area. This is where the Aare, Reuss and Limmat rivers meet to form a spectacular alluvial floodplain. However, the area does not meet the Parks Ordinance’s requirements for nature discovery parks; it is too small to accommodate a core zone covering four square kilometres in which free natural development can take place, and land uses inside the park would have to be restricted. This is also true of several other small natural habitats of ecological value in agglomerations or intensively used areas. A working group made up of the main players involved in parks policy is now considering the instruments required to create this additional park category.

Varied and intact. When park projects are reviewed at federal level, a range of advantages are considered: valuable biotopes including mires, floodplains, dry meadows and amphibian spawning sites, as well as landscapes of national importance and intact sites of local character. If there are any serious disturbances, these will have a negative impact on an area’s assessment. Moreover, landscapes and villages should preserve their typical regional character.

There are also structural requirements. An effective park authority and management is required to ensure that the project moves in the right direction, and a charter should set objectives and define measures for achieving them: what will be done to promote biodiversity, enhance the quality of the landscape, strengthen sustainable development and reduce disturbances? Park communities need to show how they will steer and manage their development to ultimately achieve the charter’s goals.

Public participation and support. All parks are the result of regional initiatives and enjoy the support of the public. When reviewing park projects at federal level, a range of advantages are considered: valuable biotopes including mires, floodplains, dry meadows and amphibian spawning sites, as well as landscapes of national importance and intact sites of local character. If there are any serious disturbances, these will have a negative impact on an area’s assessment. Moreover, landscapes and villages should preserve their typical regional character.

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port of the public, decision makers and business communities. Public participation and support are basic principles in Swiss parks policy. “A park can only work and be successful if a large majority of the public and all the most important players give their full backing to it,” explains Bruno Stephan Walder, who as head of the Landscapes of National Importance section at the FOEN was responsible for parks from 2003 until 2010.

Apart from the core zones of national parks and nature discovery parks, there are no additional federal or cantonal legal requirements imposed on parks, and no new areas have to be protected. “The idea is for the different regions to become more aware of the natural assets in their care, for them to take the initiative in maintaining these assets and at the same time be able to benefit from them,” says FOEN Vice Director Willy Geiger.

10 million francs each year. In 2010, 7.5 million francs of federal funding was made available for Swiss parks. From 2012 at the latest, ten million francs will be made available annually. Specific park projects receive federal funding according to the extent and quality of what they offer. The FOEN has drawn up an evaluation system by which to judge the parks’ programmes. This system provides clear results; the more a park can offer, the more money it receives. From 2008 to 2011, individual parks were given funding of between CHF 300,000 and CHF 1.4 million over several years.

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The park label indicates that a park is an area of natural beauty with a rich biodiversity and range of natural habitats, and these are accessible to both residents and visitors. When a park label is awarded, the park authority receives the right to apply the product label to goods produced in the park according to set quality criteria. This gives regional producers an economic advantage (see also pages 16–19).

The Swiss park brand. Labels are effective when they deliver what they promise. According to Bruno Stephan Walder, “the challenge for the park regions is to really make an effort and keep improving”. Visitors must clearly see that greater care is taken of the environment, habitats, landscape and soil than elsewhere, and that they are getting something special – authentic experiences of countryside and culture, flora and fauna, encounters with local people, home-from-home accommodation, and culinary delights made from fresh products from the farm next door. And visitors should leave the park knowing that the carbon footprint they leave behind is within reason, and the money that they have spent will remain in the local economy. And so they will return – or be encouraged to visit a park in another part of the country.

Developing and looking after the Swiss parks brand involves networking and cooperation. The authorities of the different parks and park projects have therefore joined to form the “Swiss Parks Network”. This is an umbrella organisation that unites the interests of its members and supports them in setting up and running parks.

Is Pro Natura satisfied with the results of its initiative? “Overall, there has been very positive development,” says Silva Semadeni, Pro Natura’s president. “An awful lot has happened since we launched our campaign. There is no doubt that

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(see also interview on pages 38–39)
“The Binntal is a quiet place. It has a cosy feel to it, but it’s not some kind of open-air museum. It is a place where tradition is kept alive, as it is home to many families. If I need a glimpse of the big wide world, I get it on holiday.

The horizon is very close here, with the mountains all around us. But you shouldn’t draw conclusions about the mentality of the people here because of that. I believe that we have a real love of life. I can see that in my grandmother, who ran the Jägerheim restaurant in Ausserbinn and bore 18 children. The Sunday afternoon dances in her restaurant were legendary, and I love to hear her telling stories about that time. It makes me realise how important the close-knit community in the valley is.

Of course, with today’s increasing mobility people are in danger of losing that closeness. That’s why a valley community like ours needs a project that is forward-looking. And that’s exactly what the Binntal Landscape Park was – and now it is going to be a regional nature park.

The people in Binntal have been aware of the value of their environment for a long time. This was demonstrated in 1964, when they signed a contract with the nature conservation organisation Pro Natura to protect the valley. This prevented the rivers in the Mässera and Geisspfad regions from being exploited for energy generation.

I was involved in the setting up of the Binntal Landscape Park from relatively early on. We are still organised into thematic working groups which discuss future strategies. I’m fascinated by the way the project grew and became stronger, like a child. It became part of the people’s mindset; it gives them hope for the future. Not everyone, of course; there will always be some who are critical.

I worked for the park administration until 2007. I now have three children to look after. But I still keep in contact with the 1,000 or so members of the ‘Hotel Ofenhorn’ cooperative in Binn – the hotel belongs to the Swiss Historic Hotels group and is very important to the park. Not just the hotel, but the whole valley is getting more visitors now. We’ve noticed that interest in us is growing.”

Reporter: Martin Arnold

www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-03
How does a park help a rare orchid?

The Jura Vaudois Park is home to some unique natural treasures. They are its main assets. But what can the park do to ensure that these assets bring a good return? What benefit does living in a regional nature park of national importance bring to the local plants and animals?
A third of the valley floor of the Vallée de Joux in the Swiss Jura is covered with mires of national importance that together form an impressive mire landscape. The River Orbe follows its natural winding course across the plain. The hills are covered in sparse woodland, and now and then there are meadows decked in flowers. Above the valley runs the lonely Grand Risoux, a mountain ridge with one of the largest local forests.

The area around Mont Tendre – the highest peak in the Swiss Jura – is an “Important Bird Area”, a priority area for the protection of birds. And the Marais des Amburnex is home to the largest incidence of the marsh saxifrage (Saxifraga hirculus), a mire plant, in Central Europe. With rare species, valuable habitats and diverse landscapes, the Jura in the canton of Vaud is truly endowed with natural riches.

**Scenic pearls.** Due to its wealth of natural assets, the area is an obvious site for a park of national importance. Since 2009, the 522 square-kilometre Jura Vaudois Park has been recognised as a candidate for becoming a regional natural park. For the establishment phase from 2009 to 2011, the FOEN has made available CHF 600,000 in financial aid.

However, the park label does not simply indicate that a place has a wealth of natural assets. It also promises that more will be done to promote these assets than elsewhere. “A regional nature park can clearly contribute to the preservation of biodiversity,” says Evelyne Marendaz, Head of the Species, Ecosystems, Landscapes Division at the FOEN. “But it has to set some ambitious targets when it comes to this.”

In other words: the park as an institution should bring benefits to its flora and fauna. But where do we find these benefits in the Jura Vaudois Park?

One example can be found in the integrated management of the alpine meadows on Mont Tendre, which has more to do with biodiversity than might at first seem. The 280-hectare alpine meadow, where farmers from the commune of Montricher put their cattle out to graze in summer, is a wooded pasture.

**Maintaining wooded pastures.** Wooded pastures are characteristic of the traditional landscape of the Jura: cattle graze between scattered groups of lone spruce trees whose branches reach down to the ground. Around the world, wooded meadows are common in traditional farming methods. The farmers put their livestock out to graze and fell trees in the same area to obtain their timber and firewood. This centuries-old form of dual use results in complex ecosystems where forest and pastureland intermesh.

Landscape engineer Fabrice Gibaud, the park team’s project manager for nature, agriculture and tourism, tramps over the Jura hills with their many ridges and gullies. From time to time he bends down to examine a plant: the rare orchid *Traunsteineria glo*...
Conserving the wooded pastures was from the outset a key concern.

**Conserving the wooded pastures** was from the outset a key concern. These species prefer chalky, drier locations. Although the Jura experiences a lot of rainfall, the hilltop meadows are not at all damp. The water drains away quickly into the depths of the karst terrain. “This means that many of the wooded pasture areas in the park are dry meadows,” explains the landscape engineer.

Wooded pastures are landscapes under threat. The balance between forestry and grazing use is becoming increasingly lopsided. The combination of isolated trees, groups of trees and pastureland in a small area makes efficient farming difficult. The pastures that are less fertile and harder to access are thus used less and less. While forest grows over these areas, trees are removed from the more fertile pastures and grazing is intensified.

**Many years of experience.** When it comes to drawing up an integrated plan for making use of the mountain pastures, the Jura Vaudois Park can build on earlier work, as a plan has existed in a rudimentary form since 1973. At that time, the nature conservation organisation Pro Natura Vaud entered into an agreement with 13 communes to set up a park covering 50 square kilometres, based on the model of the French “parc naturel régional”.

**Living drinking troughs.** In order to halt this trend, there is a need for integrated systems for using these hills that increase efficiency while at the same time preserving the landscape. Forestry measures must be combined with extensive agricultural use. Depending on how dense and old the stock of trees is in an area given over to forestry and grazing, some trees may need to be felled, for example to bring more light to the ground and bring about regeneration. Elsewhere, the livestock has to be kept away for a time so that young trees are given the chance to grow. And in some other areas, the animals must be made to graze in specific places in order to prevent the new growth from becoming too dense.

At the same time, it is important to position watering places carefully. Fabrice Gibaud knows that cattle are unlikely to graze in fields that are more than 500 metres from a source of water. Yet water is scarce high in the Jura. There are no springs, which means that rainwater has to be collected for the thirsty livestock. The normal method is to set up plastic troughs. These are far from attractive, but more than that, they have no ecological value. The meadows of Mont Tendre will therefore soon see the excavation of a near-natural watering hole, which, in addition to its use for livestock, will also enrich the landscape as the habitat of the emerald damselfly, the yellow-winged darter and the alpine newt.

**Rebuilding drystone walls.** Ever present in the Jura landscape are the drystone walls. Most were built in the 19th and early 20th century. They mark the boundary between meadows and private property, while their niches and crevices offer shelter to numerous animals such as stoats, adders or lizards. Their straight lines form an intricate network across the landscape.

To protect this network of habitats, since 1989 around 12.5 kilometres of drystone walls have been rebuilt. The partner in this project has been the Swiss Landscape Fund (FLS), which
A region rich in mires. The Jura in the canton of Vaud is a congested area when it comes to raised bogs. 21 raised bogs of national importance are located within the park, together with 16 fens and 3 areas of mire landscape. A recent performance review found that a great deal remained to be done to implement mire conservation policy in Switzerland. Although the area of mires of national importance has remained more or less constant over the past 20 years, quality has clearly declined. Many mires have become drier, lower in nutrient content and richer in nutrients and visibly overgrown with scrub. Sufficiently large buffer zones, in particular, are lacking.

But does that not mean that the Jura Vaudois Park should look after its mires as a priority? “Habitat conservation is a matter for the cantons,” says Olivier Schär, Head of the Park Office in St-George. “Having said that, we can contribute ideas and help make those concerned more aware of the value of these habitats. We can also contribute our expertise in the search for the right solutions.”

Concentrating efforts. For Sarah Pearson, Head of the Species, Habitats, Ecological Networks Section at the FOEN, it would certainly be possible to do more. “Natural assets, including the mires and their buffer zones, could for example be included in the integrated land use plans. We are also entitled to expect that the cantons will fulfill their duties under the Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage in park areas to the letter,” she says. “The parks must at least urge the communes and the relevant authorities to do everything possible to implement the inventories of habitats and landscapes of national importance.”

Maintaining and increasing biological diversity is a priority for the parks, Sarah Pearson argues. In this area, the parks must demonstrate that they are different from normal parts of the countryside. To draw attention to their special strengths and set the right priorities, each park should list the habitats and species that it particularly wants to encourage, she suggests.

Only in the Gantrisch. Christian Hedinger from the UNA Eco Office has devised a set of principles for this purpose on behalf of the Gantrisch Regional Nature Park in the foothills of the Bernese Alps. “Each park is home to certain habitats and species that make it unique,” he says. Either they are clearly found more frequently within the park than elsewhere or they are typical of the park. Based on these two criteria — exclusivity and representativeness — Hedinger selected 25 priority species, seven of which he especially recommended to the park management. They were a snail, a bat, two types of lichen and three plants. In addition he identified two types of habitat as being particularly worthy of support: the various species of pondweed that thrive beautifully on the shores of the Schwarzeissee, and the lime-rich spring fens, especially prevalent in the numerous ditches in the Gantrisch region.

Making a priority of looking after these species and habitats — which in each case will benefit entire natural communities — is the real day-to-day task of the Gantrisch Regional Nature Park. And due to the particular natural conditions of the region, the park can do this better than any other region in Switzerland.

A rare species of snail. According to Christian Hedinger, however, his list has caused the park authority a certain degree of irritation. Apart from the bat, the Lesser Horseshoe, eight per cent of the national population of which is found in the park, the list covers rather unprepossessing species of little attraction to visitors. Who has heard of the snail Cochlicopa nitens? Or the lichen Sphaerophorus melanocarpus? In scientific terms, the choice is probably justified: the snail is found in only three locations in Switzerland, one of which, the Dittrigsee, lies in the park. And the second species, a lichen in danger of extinction, occurs most abundantly in Switzerland in a forest in the Gantrisch region.

Yet as an emblem for the park and advertisement for biodiversity projects, neither of these species is much good. At the request of the park management, Christian Hedinger has therefore drawn up a list of species that are equally typical of the park but which are likely to be more popular: measures benefitting the Common Sandpiper, Black Grouse or Violet Copper butterfly are just as useful in the Gantrisch region and much better received by the public. Now all the other parks are planning to make priority lists in the same way.
PARK PRODUCTS

“The Thaler sausage is our
In the Thal Regional Nature Park in the Solothurn Jura, the “Swiss parks” product label has already been awarded to 14 food products. All those involved are delighted, and nature and the environment benefit indirectly from this commercial success.

“The Thal Regional Nature Park can now be found in Coop supermarkets,” enthuses Michael Bur, Regional Products Project Manager for the Thal Nature Park in the Solothurn Jura. Since January 2010, the second-largest supermarket chain in Switzerland has been stocking seven food products with the “Swiss parks” label on its shelves. The specialities with imaginative names like Hosenlupf (“trouser-lift”) – a cheese – or Jura-Kette (“Jura chain”) – a sausage – are available in 67 Coop stores in north-west Switzerland. “They have made it from the countryside to the markets in the cities: to Basel, Aarau, Baden, Olten, Langenthal and Solothurn,” says Bur.

Surprised by the demand. If, at the start of 2009, anyone had asked Michael Bur how many agricultural products from the park would have been certified within two years, he might have been cautiously optimistic and guessed two or three. But the truth of the matter is far more positive. In March 2009 – nine months before the Thal region was awarded the park label by the FOEN and thus officially recognised as a regional nature park of national importance – the Coop came knocking on the door. “Our market research has shown that Swiss consumers are increasingly asking for regional products,” says Philipp Allemann, chief meat buyer for the Coop. “Regional foods mean freshness, quality and supporting local producers.”

Just three months later negotiations began and in September 2009 the supermarket agreed to include products from the Thal Nature Park in its range. At the start of 2010, the first Thaler sausages and cheeses bearing the product label and the park logo appeared on Coop shelves.

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Since then more products have been certified and are now available from village shops and retail outlets in the region. For Michael Bur, the park products are of key importance: “They give a face to the nature park outside its boundaries and project its image to the outside world,” he explains. “They are our ambassadors. The Thaler sausage is our Roger Federer: elegant, yet down-to-earth and likeable.”

In other parks, park products are also held in high regard. François Margot, Project Manager of the prospective Gruyère Pays-d’Enhaut Regional Nature Park in the Alpine foothills of the French-speaking part of Switzerland, points out that the certified products will help to forge a
common identity for the communities making up the park, generate networks among the various players and build bridges, for example between agriculture and tourism. The main focus is on different cheese varieties. As they can often only be supplied in limited quantities and if possible the entire value creation chain in the region should be exploited, sales are made mainly in the park and in the surrounding towns and cities. “Nevertheless, we would be interested in any enquiries from a major distributor,” says Margot.

Promoting sustainable regional development. Any benefactor of a park of national importance can apply to use the product label. The label can be used for foods, non-food products and for services. The requirements were drawn up by the FOEN in consultation with the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG) and the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). “When we did it, we used the guidelines for regional brands that are recognised by the Federal Office for Agriculture,” explains Patrik Aebi, Head of the Quality and Sales Promotion Division at FOAG. The goods and services awarded the label should basically be produced or provided within the area of the park, and the main raw materials must come from the region. Simone Remund, project manager for parks at the FOEN, regards the product label as an important way of promoting sustainable regional development. “It is intended to help to preserve natural assets and landscapes, not to mention cultural values, that are typical of the park region, and to bolster the regional economy.”

The experiences in the Thal Nature Park show us that the product label really does benefit the entire local economy.
farmers too, the increased demand for cheese specialities is a bonus. “The milk for the cheese comes exclusively from local farms,” says Stoll. “Because we can process more fresh alpine milk into cheese, the farmers benefit from the higher milk price.”

**Best-seller.** Robert Stübi, a butcher plying his trade in the village of Matzendorf near Solothurn, buys the meat for his certified sausages from 14 farmers. “I find it important to work with local producers,” he says. “That way I know where the animals come from and how they are kept. It also means that the animals are spared the long journey to the large abattoirs.” Taking stock after a year’s cooperation with the Coop, he feels extremely positive about the situation. At times he has even run out of meat. Over the months, demand in Coop supermarkets has settled at a very pleasing level. At the same time, sales in his butcher’s shop have grown. The jobs of his ten employees are secure, and recently he added two apprentices to his team.

Because the product label opens up additional potential sales markets for farms, the Swiss Farmers’ Union (SFU) is also enthusiastic about the park concept. “In addition to the preservation and upkeep of natural and cultivated landscapes, we expect the parks to help improve economic and social conditions in regions that are weaker in structural terms,” explains Julia Zuberbühler, a member of the product label consultative group in the SFU. For the Thal region, this boost is coming at just the right time. It is predicted that the region will suffer a decline in population of more than 18 per cent by 2030. The economic benefits the natural park should bring may counter this trend.

A considerable workload. In the past two years, the Thal Nature Park has done the pioneering work needed for products bearing the park label. “Time and again we have received enquiries from parks that are currently in their establishment phase,” says Michael Bur. In the coming years, further products bearing the label may be added, ideally in categories other than just foodstuffs. However, the park authority will no longer be able to provide the all-round support that it has given to the manufacturers of the first 14 products. “The administrative work is considerable. We provide advice to manufacturers and processors, organise and provide support with certification, help with marketing and product launches,” Bur stresses. The Thal Nature Park is therefore drawing up a list of services. This sets out the forms of support that the branch office will be able to offer in future to manufacturers and service providers that are interested in the label.

The large amount of work and the resultant costs mean that the product label is in most cases only worthwhile for medium-sized businesses. Farms that sell their products from farm shop have no need for it. In their case, it is quite obvious that the product is local. In addition, only a commercial producer can guarantee that the foodstuffs can be supplied in sufficiently large quantities and at a constant quality level.

Nevertheless, there are economic benefits for the entire region. “These businesses have their roots in the region, they create jobs, train apprentices, use local raw materials and are tightly integrated into the value creation chains,” Michael Bur says. “They help to keep the region alive.”

**Indirect benefits for nature and the landscape.** But what use are growing sales of sausages and cheese to nature and the landscape? The benefits are indirect and more long-term. “Partners support the efforts of the park to persuade meat suppliers to provide services that conserve nature, in a way that goes beyond some sort of ecological stamp of approval,” as in the case, for example, of the partnership agreement between the Thal Regional Natural Park and the village butcher in Matzendorf. “Opportunities to do this are provided by the canton of Solothurn’s nature and landscape programme which runs over several years (agreements on forest margins, summer pastures, hay meadows or hedges), and by activities of the local or regional nature conservation organisations or the projects carried out by the park authority.”

No one is under any obligation to do anything. To impose some form of organic farming requirement or other special measures on farmers to encourage biodiversity, for example, would, in Michael Bur’s view, be clearly contrary to the park philosophy. Nevertheless he is convinced that the agreements will also bring benefits to nature and the landscape. “If the inhabitants of the region see that the park is bringing them economic advantages, they will also be ready to support or even initiate projects to maintain and encourage biodiversity.”

Gregor Klaus

www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-05
‘Seasonal and regional’ is our motto: we make everything fresh, even soups, sauces as well as bread baked in a wood oven. We use seasonal vegetables in winter and summer, including traditional, forgotten sorts. I bottle a lot of things, typical foodstuffs from the Jurapark: cherries and pears, for instance. We have a network of suppliers of local products such as vegetables, fruit, milk, bread and meat. And when local venison and game is available in the autumn, we serve it with grape jelly rather than cranberry.

But there’s no use having a wonderful menu if no one knows you exist. We are a small business and so can only afford to advertise locally. So we’re hoping that the planned park will really help promote the area. It will give the Aargau Jura national importance, and make it known throughout Switzerland.

We are already benefitting from working with ‘Dreiklang’, the park’s managing authority. We are a partner in several of the projects it has developed. For example, visitors who go on the two-day ‘herbal hike’ and learn about the edible herbs growing in Aargau’s meadows eat and spend the night at the Bären. And walkers on the Flösserweg and in the vineyards also pass by here.”

Reporters: Beatrix Mühlethaler and Hansjakob Baumgartner

www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-06
"I have worked as a self-employed joiner and carpenter since 1994. I am the only professional wooden shingle-maker in the Pays-d’Enhaut region. My company, based in Château-d’Œx, specialises in this craft. 15 to 20 per cent of the work we do is shingling, and we shingle an area of 800 to 1,200 square metres each year.

The wooden shingles are made from native fir trees. We use trees which are about 150 years old. The thin wooden boards are used on roofs and facades. Working with wooden shingles requires real skill, especially when we’re working on posts, hip rafters, valley rafters, chimneys or porches, or cladding dormer windows and openings.

Wooden shingles are very decorative in themselves, and can be cut into different shapes and forms to decorate facades and roof edges. They can also be shaped to make rounded shingles. We also do renovations. Recently we roofed the bell tower of the church in Château-d’Œx. 95 per cent of the money spent on that project has remained in the area. The timber was felled in the local forest, and we worked with local people. Only the nails and the means of transport came from further afield.

What we do is sustainable, in the true sense of the word. The only problem is that wooden shingles are quite expensive. A shingled roof costs twice as much as a roof made from corrugated iron. But people are interested in having family and holiday homes which are typical for the region.

I am a member of the park’s shingle-makers committee. The idea is to promote this craft and preserve our architectural heritage. The park’s logo even has a bundle of shingles on it. The opportunity to enhance the status of this ancient craft and help develop tourism and the local economy – that’s what motivates me."

Report: Cornélia Mühlberger de Preux
www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-07
Tourism that is low impact yet profitable

The park label can bring economic benefits to a region. But to achieve this, the parks must offer credible, high-quality tourist services that allow visitors to experience the park’s natural diversity, cultural values and scenic beauty.

The “Chemin de Crête” on the Chasseral in the Bernese Jura shows the local flora at its most beautiful. This nature trail enjoys enormous popularity, although not every visitor picks up the brochure on the flora and fauna of the region. To prevent people from trampling on the plants, small plots of ground along the path are marked off with posts: visitors should not step on them, if at all possible. Hardly anyone disregards this rule. This ensures the peaceful co-existence of nature conservation and tourism. In economic terms, the “Chemin de Crête” does not bring much income to the region though. It is an attraction for short-term visitors, most of whom go home the same day.

The situation is rather different with the “Chemin des Anabaptistes”: those who take on the Anabaptist Path from Scondeboz-Sombeval, which meanders over the Chasseral, face a two-day trek. Hikers plunge into the turbulent history of the Anabaptists, a religious minority that sought refuge in the Jura hills from persecution by the rulers of the City of Bern over 300 years ago. But you don’t have to pack a large supply of sandwiches before heading off: en route there are opportunities to sample the regional specialities. In 2010, the Anabaptist Path was the most popular attraction of what is soon to become the Chasseral Regional Nature Park.

“Top-quality natural, scenic and cultural assets make up the capital of each of these parks,” says Simone Remund, Project Manager for parks of national importance at the FOEN. “They should not only be maintained but also exploited to generate income.” She is convinced that tourist attractions which are developed or adapted specifically based on the assets of the park can bolster the economy of the region in which a park is located.

High expectations. Anyone who visits a nature park wants to experience the locality and its special features, is looking for authenticity and hopes
Out and about in the Chasseral Regional Nature Park:
On the “Chemin de Crête” between the transmitter mast and the Hotel Chasseral, cross-country skiing on the “Les Quatre Bornes” skiing trail, a pleasant coach ride or walking the Anabaptist Trail.

Photos: Chasseral Regional Nature Park
“Attractions that contradict the aims of the park will not be appreciated by local residents or visitors and may be damaging to its image.”

Simone Remund, FOEN

particular Austria – suggests that the potential is considerable. Andreas Weissen is certainly optimistic: “An increase of an average of 10 to 20 per cent in the number of overnight stays in nature parks is realistic.” However, he admits that the situation in each park is different, and that the added value for tourism that a park brings is hard to evaluate. “Visitors often find it hard to say why they want to visit an area, or indeed not visit it. Ultimately it is the combination of nature, the quality of the accommodation, the cuisine and the culture that determines the decision,” he feels. What is certain, however, is that “a park will only be successful in the long term if it fulfils the expectations of its residents and its visitors,” as Simone Remund adds.

Quality instead of quantity. On the Chasseral, the aim is to continue to make the most of the natural assets of the park in a more low-impact way. By steering visitors in the right direction, it is hoped to protect sensitive habitats. The priority will be given to offering activities that communicate the history, culture and traditions of the region and make people more aware of the value of nature. “We also want visitors to stay for longer,” adds Fabien Vogelsperger, manager of the Regional Natural Park.

It is planned to offer more attractions, such as spending the night on a farm or lama trekking. In addition, the park wants to upgrade the Anabaptist Path (Täuferweg) by planting trees and repairing drystone walls. The programme also includes an “owl night” and cooperation with the “Espace Abeilles” – “bee world” – association. This has built a bee house with the aim of educating people about the essential role played by bees in pollinating plants and – in view of problems in finding new young beekeepers – in the hope of kindling enthusiasm for beekeeping among the visitors.

In order to meet the increasing interest shown by visitors from German-speaking Switzerland and Germany, an expansion of the German language programme is planned.

Staying credible. The nature parks do not have mass tourism as their goal, but discerning tourism that is true to the natural surroundings. “A comprehensive range of attractions is not enough in itself, the quality of what is on offer must also be right,” emphasises Simone Remund from the FOEN. “Credibility is also important: attractions that contradict the aims of the park will not be appreciated by local residents or visitors and may be damaging to its image.” Visitors should also be able to find the special habitats and lovely scenery that the park promises on their own. Regional products
should be available in local hotels, restaurants and shops and it should be possible to visit the park by public transport, Remund adds.

The Binntal Regional Natural Park is committed to offering visitors local specialities, comprehensive information and a warm welcome, says Andreas Weissen, President of the Pro Binntal cooperative. He proudly reports that the number of overnight stays in the Hotel Ofenhorn has almost doubled in the last five years. He thinks the reason for this success story lies in the fact that the existence of the park has made people generally more aware of the existence of the hotel, and also in the tasteful architectural style in which the building has been renovated – it has been awarded the “Swiss Historic Hotel” label. Andreas Weissen sees enormous potential in nature tourism, which enterprising providers could exploit.

For his own part, he has launched winter tourism in Binn, which in a remote valley with little winter sun was anything but straightforward. “At the end of each year we organise two weeks with a range of cultural and gastronomic events, as well as snowshoe hiking. Then we continue in the same way for the rest of the season,” Weissen explains. These attractions boost the park’s local economy considerably, bring new business opportunities and help to maintain levels of employment.

Teamwork. A park cannot survive solely on the wealth of its natural assets and the beauty of its landscape. It must develop authentic, market-driven attractions based on the tourism infrastructure and involve its partners in the process. The attractions should be a true experience, be aimed at one or more target groups and be professionally marketed. “It also requires the motivation and cooperation of the local residents, business people, farmers, hoteliers and innkeepers within the park,” adds Simone Remund from the FOEN. A strong team spirit among the park organisers and those working in the tourist industry in the region is essential, she maintains.

“A park is no replacement for existing tourism structures,” is also the view of park manager Fabien Vogelsperger from the Jura. Synergies must be exploited and service providers encouraged to adapt to the demands of their customers, market their products, and at the same time remain true to the image conveyed by the park. In addition, it is essential to exploit and constantly develop all possible forms of cooperation with partners in neighbouring tourist regions.

Aargau cherries. It is the job of the park management to advertise the attractions and coordinate the work of all those involved. Tasks include drawing up a tourism strategy, just as the Jurapark Aargau Regional Natural Park (see page 20) has done. Weaknesses and risks relating to tourism in the park have been analysed, and a vision devised for 2016. The process has revealed that the current marketing of regional products – in particular cherries and other fruit – in shops and in the restaurant trade must be improved. Another current topic of discussion are new attractions for visitors over the age of 50. It is planned to develop these in cooperation with tourism partners, regional manufacturers and public transport companies.

Marketing and external support. In their efforts to attract more visitors to the parks, park organisers and their regional partners are receiving help from the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). SECO has launched the Innotour tourism promotion programme, the implementation of which is based closely on federal regional policy. In its third phase for 2010 and 2011, the campaign will support the parks in exploiting their tourism potential. Where necessary, a coach helps those responsible to devise model offers. “This requires a lot of staying power. Often you have to invest in an attraction for three or four years before it bears fruit,” explains Andreas Weissen from the Swiss Parks Network.

The FOEN recently entered into a partnership with Switzerland Tourism, the marketing company for Switzerland. This organisation advertises future parks via its national platform and thus provides them with valuable publicity. In the summer of 2011, the Swiss Parks Network will become a Category A partner of Switzerland Tourism. In this way, local parks will benefit from the same visibility and the same services as the Valais or Graubünden, which are marketed internationally as holiday destinations. The campaign will be partly financed by the FOEN.

Cornélia Mühlberger de Preux

www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-08
The freedom to run around and marvel

In the “Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald” nature discovery park the local urban residents have the opportunity to experience and learn about wildlife first-hand.

“We are now leaving civilisation and entering the wild.” With these words, Urs Hofstetter, schools programme project leader at the nature discovery park on the southern outskirts of Zurich, entices the children away from the sweet machines. Urs has just met the class of suburban 11- and 12-year-olds at the Sihlwald station. They have been learning about trees at school and are now going to spend a few hours looking at the real thing out in the forest.

To kickstart the forest discovery day, a competition is held on an area of even ground under some tall beeches and firs. Divided into four groups, each with a plastic ring of a different colour, the children are all set. As fast as they can, they must fetch a row of cards in their group’s colour from the base and put them in their own “nest”. The only catch is, the coloured side of the card is face down, and on each run each child may only turn up one of the cards. This means they’ll sometimes be running empty handed and it’ll take some time to bring the bounty to safety.

In search of... Running about and concentrating has awakened the children’s interest. Now the time has come to get down to business. The cards have different types of wood, leaves and fruits on them. The children now set out to find these different leaves in the
Explaining the game (left) and observations (right) in Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald. Boys join forces against the thickest branch (below).

Photos: Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald (above)/Beatrix Mühlethaler (right)
surrounding area. “A frog!” cries one of the boys suddenly. Everyone rushes to marvel at the little common brown frog, which Urs Hofstetter has skilfully been able to grab.

The frog is set free and hops off. The task now is to identify the collected leaves: rounded indents and pointed lobes suggest a Norway maple, whilst the reverse, pointed indents and rounded lobes, indicates a sycamore. The fir cone someone has found doesn’t come from a silver fir, like the branches that have been collected; it’s that of a spruce. Silver firs don’t drop whole cones, just individual seeds, the forest visitors discover.

The dangers lurking in the forest are also mentioned in the discussion: How do we protect ourselves against ticks? Wear long trousers and even tuck them into your socks. And against the fox tapeworm? Only eat berries which grow more than a metre above the ground, because these won’t have been touched by fox faeces. One of the children wants to know if you can eat moss. “Why not try it,” suggests Hofstetter, adding quickly: “But not off the ground!”

The joy of discovery. At the heart of the Sihlwald Nature Discovery Park’s education programme is the concept of “Education for Sustainable Development”. This is designed to equip children with the skills necessary to recognise the issues which will need to be tackled to ensure the future of the planet, and to teach them how to use their knowledge.

For children from urban areas, who often have weaker motor skills, the forest is a great place to move and learn, according to Urs Hofstetter. Even just straying from the path and climbing over branches can be a real challenge. Although visitors must keep to the paths in the central zone of the nature discovery park, there are also areas in which they can roam freely, opening up a huge area for discovery and learning.

The introductory session over, the class follows the environmental educationalist through the forest in search of animal tracks.

Building a fire. On they go, up a steep slope. When the path gets muddy and slippery, the schoolchildren can pull themselves up on a rope which has been fixed here for this purpose. Up top there is a sofa of branches to rest on, though everyone’s keen to get on with lunch.

So it’s time to collect some wood and make a fire to cook the sausages they’ve brought with them. The boys are in their element and not content with mere sticks, instead tugging persistently at a thin tree trunk stuck in the fork of some branches. By bouncing rhythmically on the thin trunk they finally manage to break the wood in two. This encourages them to take more daring leaps to break other thick sticks.

The sausages eaten, the children now have time to make up more games. Urs Hofstetter loves to see this, because this way the children can discover the forest by themselves and learn what a great place it is to play, and so develop an interest in the natural world.

Nature for everyone. Teachers are free to visit the nature discovery park with their class instead of booking a tour. Families and individuals can choose to attend an event on the wide-ranging programme or discover the park at their leisure. A lot can also be learnt from the exhibitions in the visitor centre, the beaver and otter park and permanent installations in the forest.

“People from the city and suburbs have often lost all connection with the natural world,” says Christian Stauffer, head of the nature discovery park. The Sihlwald provides the perfect counterpoint to this. No timber is felled here anymore, so the forest can grow freely without the interference of man. This “wilderness” poses a real challenge for children and adults. “But we, too, face the challenge of helping these people to rediscover their feelings for the natural world,” says Stauffer.

Something special. In a nature discovery park, the focus is on environmental education. This is also important in other kinds of park. “Finding ways of sensitising and educating the local residents and visitors is one of the basic tasks of all parks,” explains FOEN employee Ulf Zimmermann. “This involves focussing on aspects of education for sustainable development, highlighting what’s special about the particular park, creating authentic, interactive experiences and making
Games and education programme in the future Pfyn-Finges Regional Nature Park: Viewing the world through a sieve (right) and the chance to catch a snake – discovering an Aesculapian snake on a reptile tour (left). Photo below: Mirror walk in the Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald. Observing tree tops without straining your neck. 

Photos: Pfyn-Finges Regional Nature Park (above)/Wildnispark Zurich-Sihlwald (below)

Financial support for environmental education

Financial help is available from the Confederation for environmental education, as it is for all the services provided by parks, and is given according to the size and quality of the educational programmes. The amount of support given is based on the effectiveness of the programme, which is evaluated by FOEN when an application is made, and laid out in a four-year agreement between canton and Confederation. A catalogue of indicators provides the basis for the evaluation, and includes project size and relevance, if the goals set are likely to be achieved with the selected method of implementation, if the programme is geared to the target groups and if the programme providers and other persons involved are suitably qualified.

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sure these are always developed to a high standard.” For example, the management team at the Pfyn-Finges Regional Nature Park in Valais has a lot of experience in environmental education. The River Rhone flows through the heart of the park, which stretches up to the mountain peaks 4,000 metres above sea level. The habitats here are very varied, and the biodiversity of the region is rich: dry grasslands and floodplains, rivers and glaciers, vineyards and grazing land. And here, too, is a unique geological phenomenon in Switzerland, the Illgraben with its monumental flows of debris.

Environmental education should raise awareness among the local people and visitors for these natural assets. “We try in particular to make the content as hands-on as possible,” says park director Peter Oggier. The aim is to encourage visitors “to treat the natural world with respect and care in their everyday lives”. For Peter Oggier, the cultural diversity of this park on the French-German language border and its culinary specialities are particular attractions, which are reflected in the park’s wide-ranging programme. A visit to the park can be combined with enjoying the local products.
The new national park will be different

The project for a second Swiss national park recently passed an important milestone: in August 2010 the Confederation approved the application for financial aid to establish the Adula National Park. If the park is set up, it will operate along completely different lines to the existing national park in the Engadine.
A narrow bridge secured by a wire cable crosses the “Rein da Sumvitg” at the exact spot where the river prepares to plunge down 700 metres along the Camona Gorge and into the Sumvitg Valley. It is still a gentle stream at this point, but is about to become a raging torrent – an untamed natural force, of which there remain but few in Switzerland.

**Instead of a reservoir...** An 80-metre-high dam was once planned at this spot. The reservoir would have stretched over six kilometres, as far as the area in which the Rein da Sumvitg rises. The waters would have swallowed up “Plaun la Greina”, a kilometre-wide plateau 2,200 metres above sea level, which was formed by water and sediments washed down from the surrounding mountain peaks. Planning permission for the dam was granted as far back as 1958, and it was due start operating in 1991.

Things might have actually come that far had there not been such widespread and resolute resistance to the project. When the construction plans were finally shelved in 1986, one of the last Swiss watercourses in the Alps was saved. The villages affected, which had decided to forgo a considerable income from the generation of hydroelectric power, were duly compensated with the introduction of the “Landschaftsrappen”, or landscape fund. Under this scheme, the Confederation gives money to communes which decide to forgo the use of hydroelectric power in favour of maintaining valuable landscapes.

Today the Greina enjoys a kind of cult status. Several thousand visitors come to this mountain area each summer. The Terri Hut alone, one of four huts in the area belonging to the Swiss Alpine Club SAC, had over 6,000 guests in the summer of 2009. And it’s not an easy climb up to the hut; it
takes three to four hours, depending on the chosen route, and for those approaching from the Sumvitg side, there is an additional torturous steep slope to conquer. However, walking on the Greina high plateau is easy-going. The terrain rises in very few places and the soft, occasionally rather boggy ground has more in common with a springy fleece than with rock-studded mountain grass. The Rein da Sumvitg meanders tightly, its waters fed by streams rushing out of the side valleys. And even when the Greina is clothed in mist and rainclouds, you can still sense the openness and isolation loved by so many visitors.

... a national park. Twenty-five years after the high plain was rescued, it is now to become the centrepiece of the second Swiss national park, Adula, named after the 3,402-metre-high Adula mountain – the Rheinwaldhorn in German – in the south of the Greina. The park stretches over about 1,000 square kilometres, from the southern slopes of the Vorderrhein Valley between Disentis and Trun over the Greina and the surrounding area, down to the Hinterrhein Valley, Misox and the Blenio Valley in Ticino.

20 communes in four regions, two cantons and three language regions are involved in the national park project. A 280-page management plan has been drawn up, which makes exciting reading. In August 2010 the FOEN approved the park application. The Confederation has so far promised to contribute 686,000 francs for the years 2010 and 2011. The park has budgeted 5.5 million francs for the establishment phase, up until 2014. The funds will be used to set up park structures and for 30 individual projects – ranging from environmental education to promoting tourism and reseach. During the establishment phase, the aim is to draw up and adopt a charter which will be effective for the next ten years.

Pro Natura’s gift. The national nature conservation organisation Pro Natura is giving a million francs to help meet the costs of the project. Ten years ago the organisation held out the prospect of start-up financial support for the region which set up a new national park (see also pages 4–10); this money will now be paid out, promises Pro Natura president Silva Semadeni. And the offer stands for further national parks: “If another national park is set up somewhere else and receives recognition from the Confederation, then we will come up with the million francs we’ve promised to give,” she says. “I am still convinced that there is enough space in Switzerland for several national parks.”

Pro Natura is making this generous contribution to the Adula Park on the condition that the money is used for nature conservation projects – even if the national park project should fail. This could still be the case, for ultimately the decision to participate in the project will be made by the voters in all the communes involved. A majority in favour in all the communes is not necessary, but a no vote from the main national park communes in Surselva, the Blenio Valley and the Calanca Valley, where large parts of the park’s core zone lie, could mean the end of the project.

“The work is only just beginning,” says Sep Cathomas, member of the management committee. The first task is to inform people. Many are put off by the existing Swiss national park, where human activities are restricted to hiking along marked routes. In the Adula National Park this will only be the case in the core zone – and even here, there will be exceptions.

In the coming months, the management board, members of the management committee and the Parc Adula Association will be spending a lot of time convincing sceptics. The decisive vote is planned for the year 2014.

“I am still convinced that there is enough space in Switzerland for several national parks.”

Silva Semadeni, Pro Natura
Monumental project for the region. The opening of the national park is planned for 2015. Sep Cathomas won’t be too disappointed if things take a bit longer than this, or if one or other commune decides to remain outside the park perimeter. “We are working here on a monumental project for the region, and I won’t mind too much if things take a bit longer than planned.” For Sep Cathomas is convinced that “in the medium and long term, this national park will bring huge development potential to the whole region. And above all, the people in this peripheral area will have more control over their future.”

Martin Hilfiker, who was coordinator of the national park project until the end of 2010, is optimistic. Sceptical heads of communes and the operators of a quarry in the Calanca Valley have been persuaded to give their support to the project. The quarry operators had feared that they would have to stop their business. The opposite is the case, says Hilfiker. “The national park provides an opportunity – by labelling local products, we can give them added value.” And Hilfiker can also re-assure mountain hut owners who thought that they would no longer be able to use them: “Why not set up an attractive holiday home within the national park? That’s possible, too.”

Open-air research laboratory

There has been no livestock grazing on the Stabelchod mountain meadow in the Engadine Swiss National Park since 1919 (see pages 4–5). Normally, forest grows back within a short time on meadows left fallow below the tree line, but this is not the case on Stabelchod. In some places the grass is so short that you might even think a gardener had created an English lawn. According to a projection made by the Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape (WSL), it might take between five and six hundred years for the forest to grow back again here.

Are the deer, browsing instead of cattle on the mountain meadows, responsible for the slow regrowth of the forest? Only to a certain extent, as a WSL research group discovered a few years ago. Although there are a lot of deer in the national park, the naturally available fodder could actually support greater numbers. In actual fact, the deer’s hooves make holes in the densely packed alpine grass, and into these, tree seeds can fall and take root – something they would not otherwise be able to do. But that was a few decades ago. Since then, there has been little or no development – and no one knows why, exactly.

There is still much research to be done into the dynamic natural processes which take place without the interference of man. National parks provide a welcome open-air laboratory. Research is central to the idea of national parks, explains park director Heinrich Haller, and this will one day also be the case in the core zone of the Adula National Park.

New faces in park policy

At the FOEN, park policy is the responsibility of the new “Landscapes and Ecosystems” section headed by Matthias Stremlow. This is part of the newly formed “Species, Ecosystems, Landscapes” division which was created when the “Species Management” and “Nature and Landscape” divisions merged. The new division is headed by Evelyne Marendaz Guignet. Bruno Stephan Walder, who until recently was head of the Landscapes of National Importance section, is now a member of the division management team and responsible for the coordination of international activities in the fields of biodiversity and landscapes.

However, such promises cannot hide the fact that establishing the Adula National Park will also lead to quite a few changes. Without a wide desire for change, the project cannot be realised. But for Sep Cathomas, who lives in the Graubünden village of Brigels, there have already been positive results: “Up until now I’ve had very little to do with my fellow Swiss living on the Ticino side of the Lukmanier Pass, because we have shared very few common interests,” he explains. “Working together on the Adula National Park project has brought us closer – and made us closer.”

Open-air research laboratory
André Georges was born and bred in La Sage in the Val d’Hérens. “The Dent Blanche watched over my cradle,” he says. Rosula Blanc spent her holidays in the valley from a young age. A few years ago she came back to settle here. The couple breed yaks and do craftwork. He sculpts in wood, whilst she felts and pots. She runs a small boutique, organises treks and runs courses. André also restores old buildings. He has had to more or less give up his earlier occupation as a mountain guide due to knee problems.

The park project has set something going in the valley, according to the couple. The value of local products has been enhanced and there is talk of setting up a shop selling regional products. People would also like to establish a path through the valley for hikers, with farmhouses or alpine huts along the way where they can spend the night and get a good, wholesome meal. Rosula and André would like to see more people coming to live and work in and for the valley once it enjoys park status. “An initiative like this encourages us to open up and be creative,” Rosula is sure. “Before, everyone just did their own little thing. Now people are forming networks and helping each other.”

“We must grasp this opportunity,” says André, backing up Rosula’s opinion. He also has great hopes for cross-border cooperation with the Italian village of Valpelline in the Aosta Valley. The regions are connected via an old path over the Col Collon. “We speak the same dialects.”

Rosula is convinced that the park will help make people more aware of the value of their natural surroundings. “If they manage to live here, then they will destroy less,” she says with conviction. There is low-impact mountain tourism in the valley, but there are seasons when they could wish for a few more guests. The Val d’Hérens is particularly popular in the winter and summer, especially between mid July and mid August, but it is lovely here in spring and autumn too, according to Rosula and André. They hope that the park will attract more tourists.

Rosula Blanc and André Georges, craftworker and mountain guide, Val d’Hérens
Regional Nature Park under development in Lower Valais

Grasp the opportunity

Cornélia Mühlberger de Preux
www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-11
“In 1995 we spent many a long night trying to work out how we could stop this region, caught between the towns of Bern, Thun and Fribourg, from becoming marginalised. A lot of people had left the area, or were commuting to work in the towns. Of course, times of extreme poverty, such as those experienced in the 19th century, are long since past. But we had been left with an inexplicable lethargy, a kind of collective feeling of helplessness.

Then a study came out suggesting that we do not have a common identity, just similar problems and worries. That struck a chord with me. Over the next few years we tried to develop activities and market products and encourage the staging of cultural events. Often it was just little things – a play staged here, a farm shop there – and lots of thinking, and even more discussing.

Today we not only have a name – Gantrisch Nature Park – but there are more and more people in the region who have understood that we are the ones who make things happen here. This change in thinking didn’t happen overnight. A growing number of people, people who wanted to determine their own future, spent a lot of time convincing others.

But we mustn’t rest on our laurels. Let’s be honest; there won’t be any more subsidies coming our way to realise all the great ideas there are for the region. But we now know that it is up to us if we want to be more than just a marginal region. We can build on this; and perhaps, one day in the not too distant future, more money will be made available for the nature park.

In the past fifteen years so many positive things have happened here – I wouldn’t want to gloss over any of them. I hope that, in ten years’ time, the Gantrisch Nature Park will mean more to the Swiss public than just memories of military service or of the occasional day trip for urbanites who think this place is the perfect idyll.”

Karin Streit, farmer, Gantrisch Regional Nature Park under development

Reporter: Urs Fitze
www.environment-switzerland.ch/mag2011-1-12
According to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), 14 per cent of the earth’s surface is covered by protected areas, a term which encompasses a wide range of landscapes. These include wilderness areas, where there is minimal human interference, to areas of countryside which are inhabited and managed, but which are still valuable ecosystems – thanks to this very management.

**Ecosystem benefits for billions of people.** This 14 per cent of the earth’s surface is not only important for maintaining biodiversity; billions of people also benefit from the ecosystems in these areas in terms of clean drinking water, food, protection from natural disasters and recreation. They also play an important role in climate protection: according to IUCN estimates, these protected areas store 15 per cent of the carbon in the world. They also play a significant role in alleviating poverty by encouraging the sustainable use of biological resources and a just distribution of the profits gained from them.

The surface covered by these protected areas has increased greatly over the last few years. For example, between 1997 and 2003, the area of protected tropical rainforest rose from 9 to 23 per cent of the total. The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was a great step forwards in this respect – among other things, the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed at this event requires signatory states to contribute areas to the global ecosystem network.

The Convention on Biological Diversity combines the protection of a natural resource with its use. The IUCN has been doing this for a long time. In 1978 it moved away from the old nature reserve philosophy on which the first national parks were based. Protected areas are now divided into six categories, depending on different circumstances and objectives. For the Swiss policy on parks, the following three categories are of importance:

- **In Strict Nature Reserves/Wilderness Areas** (category I), there is absolute protection of natural processes. The Swiss
The National Park in the Engadine is one of the oldest protected areas of this kind (see also pages 4–5).

- **National Parks** (category II) are large natural or near-natural areas which are home to a diverse, often special range of species. However, only the core zone of the park is strictly protected. The planned Adula National Park would fall into this category (see also pages 30–33).

- **Protected Landscapes** (category V) are areas in which the interaction between nature and humans has given rise to landscapes of great natural and cultural value. Examples are Switzerland’s regional nature parks.

In Europe in particular, numerous category V protected areas have been established over the past few years. In Germany and Austria they are known as “Naturpark” – “nature park”, in Italy “Parco naturale regionale” and in France “Parc naturel régional” – “regional nature park”. In Germany there are already over 100 nature parks, which together make up a quarter of the total area of the country. France has about 40 regional nature parks, in which about three million people live.

In neighbouring countries there are also a lot of category II national parks, as defined by the IUCN and, since 2007, the Swiss Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage (NCHA). In Austria, six regions covering three per cent of the country have national park status.

**Biosphere reserves.** Besides the IUCN, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has also set up a large network of protected natural areas. There are currently 564 natural landscapes of value, which are representative of all the various ecosystems on earth – mountainous landscapes, forested areas, coasts, floodplains, grasslands – and which enjoy the status of UNESCO biosphere reserve. Of these, two are in Switzerland: the Entlebuch biosphere reserve in the Lucerne Alpine foothills and the Reservat da Biosfera Val Müstair – Parc Naziunal in the Engadine Swiss National Park. Under the Swiss law on parks, both of these fall under the category of regional national park.

**Ramsar.** And finally, there is the Ramsar Convention, signed forty years ago in the Iranian city of Ramsar, which is intended to protect wetlands all over the globe. These are places where water and wading birds can breed, rest and spend the winter. There are currently 1,910 listed wetlands throughout the world, eleven of which are in Switzerland.

**European network.** There are three cross-border platforms which help to coordinate the conservation area policy in the European states:

- Under the Council of Europe’s **Emerald** programme, of which Switzerland is also a member, all countries are required to protect and ensure the survival of endangered species and habitats for which they have a special responsibility. In 2009 Switzerland submitted a list of 37 areas to be added to the Emerald Network. The programme’s EU counterpart is known as Natura 2000.

- The **Alpine Network of Protected Areas** (Alparc) is a network of protected areas in the Alpine area whose purpose is to aid the implementation of the Alpine Convention in the domains of nature and rural conservation (www.alparc.org).

- The **Europarc** federation is a centre of excellence and the voice of Europe’s protected areas. It brings together park professionals from thirty-six countries (www.europarc.org).

### Interview with Simone Remund, project leader for parks at the FOEN

**environment:** There are already numerous regional nature parks in Switzerland’s neighbouring countries. What is characteristic of these areas in this country?

**Simone Remund:** There are three main features: firstly, a strong awareness of local and regional particularities; these include natural and agricultural assets, for instance places whose appearance displays the traditional local character, and regional culture, such as local specialities, crafts and music. Secondly, a shared vision and strategy for the sustainable development of a region which has these assets and wants to enhance them. And finally, the political will to encourage innovative projects which pursue these objectives.

**Interviewer:** There are also dozens of national parks in neighbouring countries. Are there any common standards for these parks?
**Parks in Switzerland – pragmatism and vision combined**

There’s something special about Switzerland’s new parks policy: it is an expression of regional efforts and national vision. The Swiss National Park – the oldest national park in central Europe – has been Switzerland’s only national park for many decades, but now the country has decided to play a pioneering role once again in nature and rural conservation in the Alpine region.

The Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage (NCHA) sets a new pragmatic tone which is typically Swiss, building on tradition and looking beyond borders. For example, from the French system of regional nature parks – parcs naturels régionaux – it borrows the basic principle of sustainable development, drawing economic benefits from a still relatively intact natural environment of significant scenic beauty and natural assets, and issuing a charter to establish binding regulations.

In creating the three park categories, national park, regional nature park and nature discovery park, Switzerland has equipped itself with a modern, pragmatic system for protection areas. And a new feature of the Swiss system compared with other countries’ is the way in which financial aid is distributed according to the services provided by the parks, thus encouraging healthy competition among them.

Also worthy of note is the system of grass-roots democracy, another unique aspect of Swiss society. Whereas most regional protected areas in other Alpine countries were established as the result of local or regional initiatives, the process in Switzerland is somewhat more complex. Each community affected must give its consent to becoming part of the protected area, and this should ensure its long-term success. Only if the local population supports a project wholeheartedly can its survival be guaranteed.

Guido Plassmann, director of Alparc (Alpine Network of Protected Areas)

The legal structures for promoting parks in Switzerland are based on IUCN criteria. Switzerland has been able to benefit from the experience of other countries when devising the different park categories and establishing the measures required to set up and maintain the parks. The FOEN encourages cooperation between Swiss parks and the Swiss park network, and parks and networks in Europe. Part of this cooperation involves developing common standards.

Compared with parks elsewhere in the world, the FOEN wants the parks in Switzerland to be of a particularly high quality. What, apparently, is so special about them?

One special thing about the Swiss policy on parks lies in the “bottom-up principle”: in this country, parks of national importance are only created on voluntary regional initiative. The Confederation only awards the park label to parks which also enjoy the support of the public. This results in the park enjoying a high degree of acceptance from the very beginning: without this, it could not have been set up in the first place.

A further example is the optimum use of existing instruments, such as spatial planning procedures. Parks in Switzerland fall under the cantonal structure plan. This means that the objectives set are binding for both the cantons and the Confederation.

Since our parks are financed by the individual regions, the cantons and the Confederation, everyone has a great interest in ensuring that the money is used in an efficient and well-targeted manner. It also means that more wide-ranging and better quality services can be provided.

“In this country, parks of national importance are only created on voluntary regional initiative.”

Simone Remund, FOEN
> Topic Parks of National Importance
www.bafu.admin.ch/parks

> Swiss Parks Network
www.netzwerk-parke.ch/en

> Swiss parks on the MySwitzerland website
www.myswitzerland.com/nature