The Swiss National Park: A Model of Nature Conservation for Scientific Research

Patrick Kupper

Summary

Between 1909 and 1914 a group of Swiss scientists and conservationists managed to designate an area of approximately 14,000 hectares in the Swiss Alps as a national park. This Swiss National Park became one of Europe's very first national parks. In contrast to the dominant US concept of national parks as tourist destinations, scientific research became the park's hallmark. This concept of conservation with a scientific focus became an important model for the establishment of nature reserves around the world.
“complete nature reserve”:

“Human interference is absolutely excluded from the whole region. Hunting, fishing, manuring, grazing, mowing and wood-cutting are entirely prohibited. No flower or twig may be plucked, no animal killed and no stone removed; even the fallen trees must remain untouched. In this way absolute protection is secured for scenery, plants, and animals; Nature alone is dominant.” — Carl Schröter, 1923

Long-term monitoring of vegetation change, a key element of research, included taking photographs (ca 1920)
his colleagues spoke of “a grandiose experiment to create a wilderness.” In the park they hoped to witness a process of “retrograde succession” leading gradually to the reestablishment of “the old primitive biocenosis” as it had existed before civilized man set foot in the Alps. Spectacular sights and exceptional phenomena were of less importance. Unlike in the US, Switzerland’s national parks were not meant to attract large-scale tourism. On the contrary, the rapid development of Alpine tourism and the opening up of mountain tops by cog railways accentuated the plea for large Alpine reserves.

As the Swiss National Park shows, the criterion of seclusion also entailed practical benefits. The whole area was sparsely populated and the revenues from forestry and grazing were small. Therefore, the land-owning local communes agreed on long-term leases for relatively modest compensation. Suitability and practicability went hand in hand.
The early Swiss conservation movement promoted park creation as both a national and an international endeavor. Its leader, Paul Sarasin, simultaneously campaigned for parks in Switzerland and for what he called “Weltnaturschutz” (global nature conservation). The Swiss park was his model for what should be achieved by every state and result in a world-wide web of reserves, an aspiration that was soon hampered by World War I. Scientific research became the hallmark of the Swiss National Park and made it an important model for the establishment of protected areas elsewhere. It provided an alternative prototype to the dominant US national park concept, emphasizing the use of parks for scientific research rather than tourism. Nowadays, the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) classifies the Swiss National Park not as “national park” (category II) but as a “strict nature reserve” (category Ia).

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

2013 Patrick Kupper

This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights. Please click on the images to view their individual rights status.

ISSN 2199-3408

Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia

About the author:

Patrick Kupper

Patrick Kupper is a Full Professor for Economic and Social History at the University of Innsbruck. His main fields of interest are the history of environment, technology, and knowledge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He studied history and environmental sciences at the University of Zurich and at Humboldt University Berlin, and received his PhD from the University of Zurich in 2003 and his Habilitation from ETH Zurich in 2011. He has published on the history of conservation, environmentalism, nuclear energy, natural sciences, and higher education.