

Switzerland's nature conservation policy under fire : from pioneer nation to problem child

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From pioneer nation to pro

Switzerland was once in the vanguard when it came to natural and landscape conservation, but now the situation looks very different. While neighbouring countries have managed to create dozens of parks and reserves within the space of a few years, Switzerland has not yet drawn up a national blueprint for large-scale protected areas.

At the beginning of this century Switzerland was one of the first countries to recognise the value of its natural treasures, and in 1914 created the first national park in central Europe in the Grisons. But the Swiss National

*Helmut Stalder**

Park has seen practically no growth over the past seventy years or so, and at 169 km² is the second smallest of the 14 parks in the alpine range. Nor has Switzerland since succeeded in creating

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a single new large-scale reserve of the type so essential to the survival of many endangered species of animal and plant.

Isolated protected regions

Although 1700 protected zones have been created, few are larger than a football field and practically all are isolated. While Switzerland grapples with small, self-contained areas, broader developments are afoot in the rest of Europe. Over the past decade France, Germany, Austria and Italy alone have established 11 national parks covering a total surface area of 3000 km², 17 biosphere reserves, 122 large-scale protected zones, and dozens of regional parks. "Switzerland has changed from a pioneer to a developing country in terms of natural conservation," criticises Urs Tester of Pro Natura.

Moreover, Switzerland was given bad marks last autumn in the OECD's first environmental performance review of its 29 member states. In the technical ecological categories (water, air, waste, noise) Switzerland came out well ahead, but in terms of natural and landscape protection it was far down the scale, with 34 mammals, 45 fish and 22 plants under threat from extinction. And with 44 endangered species of birds, Switzerland was bottom of the OECD class.

Settlement, over-exploitation of land and, above all, intensive agriculture are destroying many natural spaces. For this reason the OECD has called for greater emphasis on natural conservation in infrastructure and zone planning, stronger co-operation on the part of government, industry and science, and more spending in this area. Philippe Roch, Head of the Federal Office of the Environment, Forestry and Agriculture (Buwal), largely shares this view. In his opinion the OECD touched a particular sore point: "There is no Switzerland-wide policy on nature conservation."

Streams meander through the Greina uplands of the Grisons, one of the most ancient alpine landscapes in Switzerland.



(Photos: Herbert Maeder)

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To date the government has focused on conducting an inventory of landscapes that merit conservation. Protection agreements are then negotiated with the owners of the land – a labour of Hercules in a country where municipal autonomy and property are jealously guarded. This makes it almost impossible to create large-scale protected regions that cross municipal and cantonal boundaries, because the larger the region, the more parties are involved and the higher the potential for conflict. As well-meaning as the focus on nature conservation agreements was, it resulted in energy being wasted on petty wrangling and no protection concept being developed at national level. Now environmental organisations complain that the government has no clear objectives, no minimum requirements, no regulations governing responsibility, and no special resources to support the conservation of natural regions of national importance. The government, they say, needs to take its responsibility more seriously once and for all.

Modern conservation schemes

At the beginning of September this year, Pro Natura launched an offensive aimed at re-establishing Switzerland as one of the best environmental performers in Europe with a new generation of protected zones. "Instead of sealed-off areas, we need protected zones put to an appropriate use, and natural landscapes in which people are welcome as enthusiastic observers," says Pro Natura's Central Secretary Otto Sieber. In addition to wilderness parks, Europe has seen the appearance of more and more protected cultural landscapes with sustainable management of resources and "green" tourism. Sieber argues that such solutions could help overcome resistance in Switzerland too, and valuable landscapes could thereby be protected. Over the next 15 years Pro Natura is aiming to define around ten percent of the national surface area as nature reserves and another ten percent as landscape protection zones. In addition to the National Park, they want to

see the creation of eight large protected areas covering between 100 to 1000 m², some for sustainable use; plus at least 13 landscape protection zones covering 3800 m² and six biosphere reserves with wilderness, and a protected zone for sustainable development and management. They also want to see a consolidation of existing protected areas and the elimination of several dozen small wilderness zones.

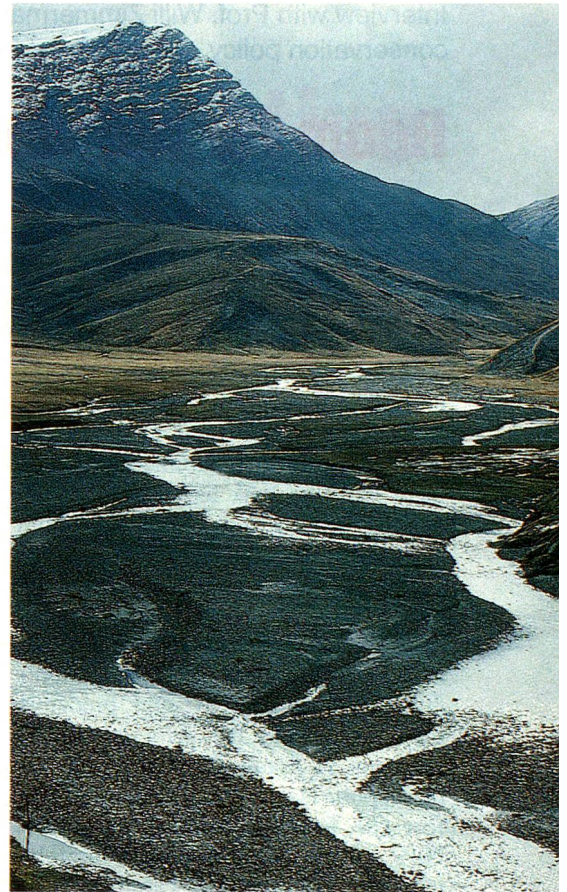
Such ideas are by no means Utopian. Over-production has led to a shift in the direction of agriculture, away from product subsidisation and towards acreage-indexed direct payments for biological farming. Consequently many farmers nowadays no longer work unprofitable river banks and zones directly bordering forests, and receive direct compensation for environmental care. As intensive agriculture declines, the space for natural conservation projects is growing.

This is not the only reason why the time is right for an offensive. The Swiss National Park is currently planning its first major expansion, consisting of a small additional core zone and a 300 km² surrounding zone where sustainable exploitation would be permitted. This move requires a revision of the 1980 National Park Law: an opportunity for environmental associations to push for a comprehensive rethinking of government policy.

Sluggish progress for water meadow conservation

Although the ordinance on water meadows has been in force since 1992, its implementation by the various cantons is only half-hearted. According to Willy Geiger, Vice President of Buwal, commercial operations such as quarries or energy plants impede effective conservation in many areas. Over the past 200 years ninety percent of Swiss water meadows have disappeared.

The model pupil among cantons with water meadows is the river-crossed canton of Aargau, with twelve water meadow regions of national importance. Aargau is currently investing around CHF 16 million in setting up a water meadow park. Lagging furthest behind are the cantons of Berne and Vaud. According to Markus Graf of the Bernese Nature Conservation Inspectorate, shortage of funds and staff are responsible for delays in implementation of the ordinance. LS



In 1998 the government designated Val Madris in the canton of Grisons as a protected moorland.

Framework law demanded

SP National Councillor Silva Semadeni (GR) has put forward a motion proposing that the Federal Council draw up a framework law governing large-scale conservation areas, instead of merely revising the National Park Law; but the government has rejected it, claiming that there is no lack of laws governing natural and landscape protection; it is their execution that is the problem. If the National Park Law were linked to a framework law, argues the cabinet of seven, the National Park extension would be delayed.

Conservationist groups are disappointed that the government has not seized the chance to draw up a nationwide law governing protected zones. Now their hopes are pinned on parliament. At the same time, however, criticism is being levelled at the National Park management. A whispering campaign accuses the National Park management team of furthering its own ends by favouring a separate revision of the law instead of supporting a future-oriented strategy that could put Switzerland back on a par with the rest of Europe. ■