

Deutscher Rat für Landespflege

Naturschutz in Deutschland – eine Erfolgsstory?

Summary

(Übersetzung: Faith Gibson-Tegethoff)

In May 2003, official and honorary nature conservationists from all over Germany met for the symposium of the German Council for Land Stewardship (Deutscher Rat für Landespflege) at Drachenburg Castle in one of Germany's oldest protected areas „Sieben-gebirge“ near Königswinter on the Rhine, in order to take stock of the long tradition of nature conservation work in Germany.

Many representatives of nature conservation and landscape management tend to chiefly focus on the disappointments of their work; therefore, the aim of the meeting was to identify successes gained and to build on the measures and strategies that lead to success. The subject matter of the speeches ranged from historical aspects to trends in regional and species protection, and from planning and testing instruments to observations of social acceptance, media relationships and funding possibilities.

An assessment of the speeches, the discussion results and additional study resulted in the realization that it is fundamentally impossible to generally define „the success of nature conservation“. Society in general and nature conservationists as a group estimate successes very differently. This applies, for instance, to how they evaluate the extent to which goals are reached and indicators for such, as the field of nature conservation has many objectives, and some of these are contradictory.

Since precise indicators are scarce, the German Council for Land Stewardship attempted to describe the successes using selected areas of nature conservation: nature conservation organizations, administration, legal foundations, region protection, species protection, planning and testing instruments, social acceptance and funding.

The roughly 100-year-old field of nature conservation is fundamentally established in society with a certain degree of independence. However, we cannot cleanly break down the strengths and weaknesses of the nature conservation movement and its successes and failures. This reflects the

enduring dilemma resulting from the complex and complicated views of all people active in nature conservation.

Nature conservation and landscape management continue to have serious difficulties gaining acceptance and reaching implementation. Attempts to examine why so many of its ideals have not gained acceptance within society ensued relatively late. Nature conservation deals with complex and sometimes abstract topics, which are not easy to convey (e.g. food chains, habitat systems, biodiversity) or which were simply poorly conveyed. Some of the problems that nature conservationists describe as grave are often not sufficiently perceptible (e.g. species decline, changes in the landscape) or are hard for people to believe (the importance of so-called weeds and pests for the balance of nature, the significance of historical models in the target system of nature conservation). The lack of acceptance of nature conservation aspects by other policy-making areas is often the result of ignorance, of economical and social constricts or of the fear of being dictated to. In these cases, nature conservationists have failed to educate objectively.

In the opinion of the German Council for Land Stewardship, it is essential to improve the image of nature conservation both outwardly and inwardly. For far too long, the nature conservation movement has disregarded the importance of the image it conveys – or its image was left more or less to chance.

Nature conservation has high ethical demands and therefore society fundamentally deems it important. With this in mind, we can and should work to build up a consistently positive image. The characteristics of this image should be unmistakable, understandable, trustworthy, professional, idealistic, altruistic, fascinating, modern, progressive, open, tolerant, courageous, self-assured, optimistic and successful. Above all, nature conservation must cease to be viewed as a major impediment and constraint to nearly all plans. Instead, it should project the image of a cooperative and competent co-designer of sustainable development.

Rather than publicly bewailing its failures, the successes of nature conservation must be „sold“ better. In doing so, all positions and individuals involved in the success should be equally emphasized (often nature conservation organizations and nature conservation authorities or other expert bodies); this is essential to the inner cohesion of the entire sector of nature conservation („corporate identity“).

We must convey that nature conservation does not necessarily stand *against*, but often *for* something. Nature conservation should not only *prevent*, but also *enable*. It can do so, for instance, through concrete, integrative schemes and measures on regional or local levels, which combine the aspects of utilization and protection (recreation, water management, etc.).

Above all, we in nature conservation must keep in mind that goals cannot be achieved in a democratic society solely through top-down strategies. These often do not meet with acceptance, but, on the contrary, trigger resistance. Instead, from the very start, we must address and involve social groups and especially those who are affected from the bottom up.

Nature conservationists – like other social groups – must be prepared to make compromises, accept partial successes and pursue a policy of small steps, as they recently proved effective. They must seek out objective debate and cooperation with conflicting parties early on, basing communications on a high culture of debate and the ability to enter into sincere dialogue.

The German Council for Land Stewardship offers recommendations for the sections studied and closes with the comment that nature conservation and landscape management are important cultural responsibilities that must be laid out for the duration and aim at the future. Nature conservation is a success story that needs to be carried on. There are many challenges ahead: the progressing process of urbanization, the implementation of sustainable use of resources, global environmental changes and decreased funding, to name only a few.