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Management of Natura 2000 in an Austrian private forest estate

Like in many countries protection and economic use of nature are highly controversial issues in Austria. That is also true for Natura 2000. Except for high Alpine regions Austria is a fertile country, where agriculture and especially forestry are of economic importance. More than 80% of its territory is privately owned. Since 50% of Austria is covered by forests - predominantly private forests - Natura 2000 and its management is mainly a private forestry issue.

I am convinced that landowners are the key factor in conserving nature values. It therefore appears logical and essential to ensure their participation in managing Natura 2000 areas, no matter whether the landowners are public or private. That however is a minority point of view at least in the nature conservation administration in my country. The administration tried and is still trying to implement Natura 2000 regardless of the affected landowners. Results are moderate.

Disastrous beginning

Austria joined the EU in 1995 years after Fauna-Flora-Habitat- and bird directives had been adopted. No discussion of these questions had therefore taken place in Austria prior to accession. Many agriculture and forestry officials did not attach importance to this topic. Even today many landowners attribute little relevance to Natura 2000. Nature conservationists in the administration and NGOs had a vast field of activity of their own. One result of this ignorance was the designation of over 30% of my province's territory as Natura 2000 areas whereas a neighbouring province only designated 3%.

Grafenegg estate and Natura 2000

The Grafenegg private forest estate is located mostly in the Danube valley near Vienna. Over 4.000 out of its 5.000 hectares have been designated as parts of three Natura 2000 areas. Possible consequences and problems are numerous: Tree species like hybrid poplars, black walnut and Douglas fir are undesired by nature conservationists. Due to the proximity of Vienna and other cities forestry is only one of many uses of the estate's lands. Hunting, fishing, recreational activities, gravel mining and public infrastructure projects compete with forestry. All these activities rival Natura 2000 goals.

Problems due to Natura 2000

Up to now the authorities do not seem to have a clear perspective on the future development of Natura 2000 sites. One reason may be the fact that management restrictions would entail compensation claims. Therefore landowners do not get clear answers to questions on future management options.

As soon as the authorities started to establish management plans for Natura 2000 areas, we suggested making one for our estate. The authority did not approve the idea. Private landowners have not been welcome at any stage of Natura 2000 implementation.

By now official management plans exist, but their content is superficial and imprecise. This leaves us with a dilemma: The orientation of our management towards the goals of Natura 2000 entails financial losses, but there is no compensation due to the lack of explicit regulations in the management plans. We experience a second dilemma: Public infrastructure projects of a certain size are regularly carried out due to their economic importance. They cope comparatively easy with higher planning costs and compensation requirements due to Natura 2000. Small-scale private projects however usually fail already in the planning phase. They have to ensure the same high level in nature compatibility declarations as big projects and consequently face high costs.

In brief Natura 2000 increased uncertainty for our management decisions and set up new barriers for diversification in non-agricultural fields of activities.

Involvement of Grafenegg estate in managing Natura 2000

Since the early stage of implementation Grafenegg estate tries to get actively involved in Natura 2000. Five examples shall illustrate different strategies.

Reducing uncertainty

In 2005 and 2006 we issued two studies partly financed by the nature conservation authority named “Natura 2000: Conflict management in a private forest estate”. On the one hand we specified aims and requirements of nature conservation, on the other hand we listed possible projects and ideas on land use by the owner. We identified potential conflicts between these goals and tried to define ways of conflict resolution. Finally we classified the projects into a group not requiring further examination by the authorities, a group, which definitely needs their consent and one in between, where the approach depends on the specific circumstances of the project. Since that time we follow the results of these studies in our daily work.

Forestry and Natura 2000

In a next step we focused on forest management. We established a so-called “Waldfachplan”, a sectoral land use planning instrument according to Austrian forest law. We listed silvicultural management options and their respective interactions with Natura 2000 goals. For essential goals we did a more detailed assessment. We analysed silvicultural options enhancing these goals focusing on time frame, costs, possible scale of implementation and obstacles. This planning was partly financed by the Ministry of Forestry. Up to now however the actions we proposed have not been implemented due to lack of funding.

Realizing compensation measures for infrastructure projects

In 2006 a new motorway was planned in the proximity of Grafenegg estate including a bridge across the river Danube. The motorway crosses the floodplain forests along the river designated as Natura 2000. Extensive compensation measures have been demanded to ensure nature compatibility of the project. We proposed their realisation in our estate. An agreement

could be reached, which allocated a total of 50 hectares of these measures to Grafenegg estate. The measures include afforestations, alteration of the structure of forest stands, long-term changes of tree species, elimination of foreign species and special habitats for birds. All of them are designed to promote the goals of Natura 2000. It will be our responsibility to ensure their proper implementation in the future.

"Forest Network": Landowners managing Natura 2000

Last year we started a project named "Forest Network" financed by the regional nature conservation authority in one particular Natura 2000 area. It is designed as a test for the participation of landowners in conserving and managing Natura 2000 sites. The project has a political background: Up to last year subsidies earmarked for Natura 2000 areas have not been utilized at all by forest owners in Lower Austria, a fact that demonstrates the existing gap between nature conservation authority and landowners. Our tasks are to establish a network of private and public landowners, to create interest and confidence on the landowners' side and to promote management methods compliant with Natura 2000 by encouraging the usage of existing subsidies.

If the project is successful, it will be an indicator that Natura 2000 goals can be achieved - in specific cases even in a better way - by assigning the management of Natura 2000 areas to landowners. It will also be an indicator that nature conservation goals can be reached by offering subsidies, avoiding legal compulsion and compensation payments.

However success is not granted yet. No sooner had the first landowners declared their willingness to participate than subsidies were cancelled. Support from the authority is scarce. Sometimes it almost seems that a failure would be welcome. We will have to intensify our efforts to convince nature conservation authorities that landowners can be reliable and useful partners in managing Natura 2000 areas.

LIFE+ Nature in private forest estates

Already in 2004 the idea was born to develop a LIFE Nature project in one of our Natura 2000 areas. Landowners and scientists from the Agricultural University in Vienna started promoting a restoration project in a heavily modified river stretch. In 2008 it found support in the EU Commission under the title "Habitats in the estuary stretch of River Traisen".

The project is being coordinated and co-financed by Austrian Hydro Power, the company operating all hydroelectric power plants on the river Danube in Austria. Landowners receive compensation payments for disadvantages and losses. The impacts of the project are considerable: Some 180 hectares of land will be dug off to create a new meandering riverbed and extensive flooding zones. The majority of the area is actually covered by forests, which have to be uprooted and partly replanted on a lower level. Construction work will interfere with fishing and hunting activities. The forest road system will have to be reconfigured. Afforestations will have to be carried out on agricultural land to compensate forest losses.

This LIFE+-Nature - project is the biggest and most costly realized in Austria so far. Obviously a project of this dimension is of interest to many stakeholders like neighbours, communities, NGOs and public authorities of all levels. They brought and bring forward demands, desires and ideas, many of them colliding with landowners' interests. It was essential that it would have been legally impossible to realize the project without consent of

the landowners. Therefore two landowners owning approximately 90% of the project area have been involved in the entire planning process.

Agreements are being elaborated between the project coordinator and landowners defining the rights and obligations of both sides. This includes the specification of the landowner's post-LIFE management. It implies restrictions where the Natura 2000 regime requires them and autonomy where it does not.

The final ecological audit will take place within a fortnight. I am convinced that results will be spectacular in terms of nature conservation. I am also convinced that our future work according to the guidelines of the project will prove that landowners are perfectly capable of managing Natura 2000 areas and of achieving satisfying results.