

## History of Hohe Tauern National Park: a case in point of use and protection

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### Abstract

In Austria, Hohe Tauern National Park occupies a model position. Between 1981 and 1992, the federal states of Carinthia, Salzburg and Tyrol established the first Austrian national park as Hohe Tauern National Park (NP). If we consider a larger spatial level, however, a completely different picture emerges and the pioneer park turns into a latecomer. All neighbouring countries have considerably older NPs. The Swiss NP, the first NP within the Alpine Arc was established in the 1910s, around 70 years before Hohe Tauern NP. Had the people of Carinthia, Salzburg and Tyrol and all Austrians overlooked the emergence of NPs for decades? Did they care less about conservation than their neighbours? Or did they simply believe they could do without the internationally acclaimed instrument of a NP?

As we will demonstrate below, such assumptions can definitely be refuted. All the same, there is no simple explanation, neither for the long delay nor for the eventual establishment of Hohe Tauern NP. Instead a complex bundle of factors emerges. The analysis is based on research done for our book *Geschichte des Nationalparks Hohe Tauern*, where you can also find detailed references for the statements made below (Kupper & Wöbse 2013).

### Profile

Protected area

Hohe Tauern National Park

Mountain range

Alps

Country

Austria

### The National Park idea

In the Hohe Tauern area, the idea for a park goes back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the next hundred years, debates took place between the two poles of general trends and local peculiarities. Certain developments in the Hohe Tauern evolved similarly to those in many other places and fit neatly into a universal history of modern conservation. Other developments, however, include very specific local, regional and national components that give the history of the Hohe Tauern its particular profile.

Yellowstone NP, created in the American West in 1872, is usually taken as the oldest NP, but the early establishment is often misinterpreted. Yellowstone's early fame was not as a large protected area but as a collection of natural curiosities, especially hot springs and geysers. Perception changed when species and landscape protection attracted more interest. Yellowstone became the place where the last bison had found a sanctuary and rampant land speculation had been halted. In Europe, the Swiss and the Swedes were the first to establish NPs in the 1900s, posing a challenge for Germany as a leading cultural nation. At least that is how those men and women saw it who founded the *Verein Naturschutzpark* (nature protection association) in Munich in 1909 with the express aim of establishing large protected areas in Germany and Austria.



Figure 1 – Incorporating both cultural landscapes and wilderness areas into Hohe Tauern NP was key to its establishment. Cover of a 1985 pamphlet of the NP Committee (NP Committee Archives).

### The Alpine Park of the Verein Naturschutzpark

In 1913 and 1914 the German-Austrian *Verein Naturschutzpark* (VNP) bought up several pieces of land in the Salzburg part of the Hohe Tauern range. The acquired areas covered the inner high-alpine meadows of the Stubachtal and the Amertal valleys – i. e. the easternmost lateral valley of the Felbertal – including the mountain huts and hunting lodges there – to form a continuous area of 1100 ha in total. The VNP saw these acquisitions as just the start of a much larger operation that would culminate in the establishment of a nature protection park of 120–50 square kilometres. In this endeavour the association relied on support from the Austrian state, which owned forests near the acquired high-mountain meadows. As early as 1913, negotiations were started with the agricultural ministry in Vienna, but they never produced any results. The failure of these talks was due to the rapidly deteriorating overall situation. In late summer 1914, the First World War began and put a heavy damper on conservation efforts not just in the Hohe Tauern but across Europe.

The activities of the VNP next concentrated on the Lüneburg Heath in the northern German flatlands. While the two-pronged mission of heath park and Alpine park remained the aim of the VNP, funds and energies were mainly channelled into the heath. The Alpine park was always administered by an association member from Salzburg. After 1945 the assets of the VNP were put into public administration and restituted to the VNP in 1958.

### Conservation in the inter-war period

Between the wars, numerous infrastructure projects threatened the ecosystem and characteristic scenery of the Hohe Tauern: the Großglockner High Alpine Road was the most important Austrian road building project of the times. Added to this were ambitious plans to produce energy through hydropower, some of which (e. g. the *Tauernkraftwerke*) were only realized later under Nazi rule or even after the war. At the same time, pressure from leisure activities increased, with hiking and mountaineering and particularly the winter sports booming. Huts and cable cars were being built, rare alpine flowers were picked en masse and the winter rest of the animals was disturbed.

The conservation cause in the Hohe Tauern, however, also gained support in the inter-war period. On the one hand, all three federal states – Salzburg, Tyrol and Carinthia – passed nature protection legislation and established various protection areas. On the other hand, conservation issues attracted increased public attention in the context of several controversies. The German-Austrian Alpine Association took on the role of main advocate for conservation issues. An endowment by Villach-based merchant Albert Wirth in 1918

had added a larger area in the Glockner massif to the Alpine Association's holdings, but Wirth had combined the transfer of ownership with the desire to establish a nature protection park modelled on the US. At various places (Gamsgrube, Adlersruhe, Fuscherkarkopf) the Alpine Association rebutted tourism expansion plans in the 1930s, supported by a broad coalition of Austrian conservation and scientific organizations. During these years the idea of combining the existing conservation areas in one large park with improved protection status gained additional support in view of lost battles (in particular the *Promenade* conflict at Gamsgrube). It was not until the late 1930s, however, before concrete steps were taken.

### Greater German National Park in the Third Reich

With the annexation of Austria to the German Reich in 1938, conservationists at first got their hopes up that protection in the Hohe Tauern would now become possible on a large scale. The German *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* (Conservation Act) of 1935 provided the basis for comprehensive landscape protection. The act did not envisage NPs but, authorized by Hermann Göring, Berlin Zoo director Lutz Heck was planning *großdeutsche Nationalparke* (Greater German National Parks). Heck wanted to preserve characteristic heroic German landscapes in these parks and make them available to the national-socialist people for the purpose of *völkische Erbauung* (völkisch edification). In this way he bridged a gap between conservation and national-socialist welfare. The planning games played in Göring's forestry ministry after 1938 focused on the Bohemian Forest, but also on the Hohe Tauern.

Conservation officers were mostly loyal to the regime and had the support of local activists in their efforts. However, in Nazi Germany they were not able to address their concerns except in isolated cases. Successes with the protection of flora and fauna were outweighed by massive interventions by the construction of hydro-power plants. As early as 1938, the VNP was forced to sell off some of its lands in the Stubachtal and Felbertal. In the Sulzbach valleys the association soon found replacement areas. Many conservation initiatives got bogged down in the chaotic responsibility structure of the Nazi administration. Others had to make room for autarky and war effort priorities or were plagued by the deepening scarcity of all resources. Heck's NP plans were shelved and postponed to post-war times.

### New attempts after the war

After the war the first priority was to clarify ownership: until the late 1950s the confiscated VNP assets were held in trust, at first by the Austrian League for Nature Conservation. The following decades saw dramatic interventions in the regional landscape, e. g.

through the completion of the Kaprun group of hydro-power stations. The many infrastructure projects of the 1960s included the construction of the Felbertauern road and the trans-Alpine oil pipeline. At the same time Austrian conservation efforts restarted. In 1951 the first Austrian Nature Protection Day in Krimml attracted much media attention. The village had been carefully chosen, as plans for a hydro-power station were threatening the natural asset of the Krimml Waterfalls. Conservation associations mobilized the public against these plans and collected 120 000 protest signatures in the early 1950s. From the late 1940s onwards, the Austrian League for Nature Conservation had also become active in debates about establishing a NP in the Hohe Tauern. However, strong opposition to the concepts developed at the time meant that they were not realized. Even so, areas in the Salzburg and Carinthian parts of the Hohe Tauern were designated as protected from the 1950s onwards.

In the 1960s the conservation efforts increased in dynamics and range. The Hohe Tauern region was more and more presented as a mountain area unique in Europe and internationally significant. In 1967, for instance, the Krimml Waterfalls were awarded the European Diploma of Protected Areas. When the Council of Europe declared 1970 the European Nature Conservation Year, this provided a special impetus for the NP idea. Austria wanted to use this opportunity to raise its international profile and started new initiatives for implementing a NP.

### Establishing the NP

In 1971 the first concrete political step was taken to realize a Hohe Tauern NP. Against the background of the Alpine landscape, the federal state governors of Carinthia, Salzburg and Tyrol met in the open air to sign the so-called Heiligenblut Agreement. This road-map then needed to be filled with concrete content. Following a first model study, the three federal states established a NP Committee charged with drawing up a concept for a joint future NP. It soon became clear how difficult this huge regional planning project would be. The energy industry and the municipalities, as well as representatives from tourism, agriculture and forestry, put forward fundamental concerns about the effects of a NP. Land owners and municipalities got organized in interest groups. At national level the NP was declared to be of national conservation interest and its implementation pushed. Negotiations advanced at different speeds in the three federal states, with the consequence that each state headed for its own declaration. Carinthia established a NP in 1981 and Salzburg in 1984. This meant a rejection of all large commercial hydro-power plans, with Tyrol only following in 1992.

It had long become clear that the NP should not only protect wilderness but also cultural landscapes.

In Salzburg models of targeted support for traditional Alpine livelihoods were tried out in the Sulzbach valleys and in the Krimmler Achenal. The broad involvement of the regional stakeholders led to an increasingly positive response in situ. In 1991 Salzburg even managed to expand the NP area to the east.

### Conservation agreements and international recognition

In 1992 the long process of establishing the NP in the Hohe Tauern reached a festive and reliable completion. With the signing of the state treaty the boundaries, the framework and the conditions of the Austrian three-state NP Hohe Tauern were fixed in 1994 and national funding secured. The conservation agreement became a vital instrument of peace-making between NP administration, local farmers and other interest groups. Now the NP stood on secure ground and scientific, educational and conceptual work was increasingly professionalized.

Since the 1970s there had been a clear desire for the future protected area to fulfil the strict international criteria of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which was gradually implemented over time. Again the boundaries between cultural and natural landscapes were closely debated and certain areas taken out of production. In 2006 the Tyrolean and Salzburg parts were finally recognized internationally, as the Carinthian part had been in 2001. The protracted social debate bore fruit: the high acceptance of the NP among the local population and the educational efforts in the NP were appreciated inside and outside the country. Today the NP is much more than a national prestige project – rather it is part of a network of European and international large protected areas.

### Summary

Any NP also reflects societal interests. Harmonizing (or deflecting) them was the main reason for the time-consuming process of achieving the conservation designation. It was mainly the diplomatic negotiations needed to arrive at consensual solutions that made Austria relatively late in international comparison to obtain a NP designation. Bringing proponents and opponents closer together, mediating between local circumstances and international standards took many very small steps. Hardly any other NP featured as many land owners who needed to be convinced of the significance and benefits of such a project. The 1995 mission statement for Hohe Tauern NP breathes the astonishment at having achieved it by declaring it *a miracle of spatial planning and conservation*. This miracle had not come about through divine or state intervention but was the result of endless talks and of mobilizing new sources of income for the region.

## Reference

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