

## Let's partner up! From resistance to collaboration: A strategy for regional development, or how to create partnerships between nature conservation and local companies – a success story

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### Abstract

In the years following the foundation of the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park (in 1996) and Gesäuse National Park (in 2002), both nature conservation organizations faced heavy resistance from the local population and actors in the local economy. Today things look different: the so-called Gesäuse Partners are building a strong network that brings the parties together. Our experiences can be used practically by the managers of protected areas.

### Profile

Protected area

Styrian Eisenwurzen

Nature Park and Gesäuse National Park

Mountain range

Alps, Austria

### What is in it for nature protection institutions, and what are the benefits for the local economy? This success story highlights the benefits for both sides.

In the northern part of Styria, Austria, lies the Gesäuse tourism region, see Figure 1. Harsh limestone summits in contrast to gentle mountain crests, whooshing wild waters and gently flowing streams, hostile buttes and fertile meadows – cultivated and natural landscapes are characteristic features of this area. Also known as the *wild heart of Austria*, this region is rich in biodiversity. The existence of both Gesäuse National Park (IUCN category II) and the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature and Geopark (IUCN category IV) hint at the natural richness of the Gesäuse region. While the lack of tourist infrastructure such as cable cars was considered a disadvantage in the past 80–100 years, it is now the region's unique selling point.

### Fast forward: The (tourism) situation today

As authentic nature experiences are becoming increasingly important, the Gesäuse tourism region is attracting increased interest and tourist numbers. For Admont, the largest community in the Gesäuse region, this growth is quantifiable: overnight stays increased by about 25% in 2014–2019 (Statistik Austria 2021; Tourism Association Gesäuse 2021). The foundation of the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park in 1996 and Gesäuse National Park in 2002 led to sustainable change for the entire region – presenting the Gesäuse as an ideal place for authentic cultural and nature-based experiences. As part of both nature conserva-

tion initiatives, a partner network was created, comprising about 100 companies which cooperate with the nature conservation institutions and the tourism association. The network was originally introduced in order to help improve the economic situation and as a multiplier for the nature-conservation ideals of Gesäuse National Park and the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature and Geopark. Similar networks in regions with protected areas around Europe served as role models for the project. Our project differed from other networks from the beginning, however, by focusing on various economic sectors, not only on tourism.

2017 marked a turning point in the region's networking systems when the two existing networks (one involving a National Park, the other a Nature Park) were merged to form the Gesäuse Partner network. Currently, there are more than 100 members (and their number continues to grow) from various sectors, including accommodation (such as guesthouses, inns, family-owned hotels), food producers (bakeries, beekeepers), mountain guides and craftworkers. This heterogeneity is one of the defined goals of the network. The members are divided into five sectors (gastronomy; craft and trade; art and culture; outdoors; speciality products), each of which elects a chairperson, who represents them in the so-called *Partnerrat* (partners' council) for two years. Twice a year, the chairs, project managers and the CEOs of Gesäuse National Park, the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature and Geopark, and Gesäuse Tourism Association meet to discuss recent difficulties, future development strategies and new memberships. Applicants and their fit into the network, or the planning of common activities such as excursions or company visits, for example, are subjects

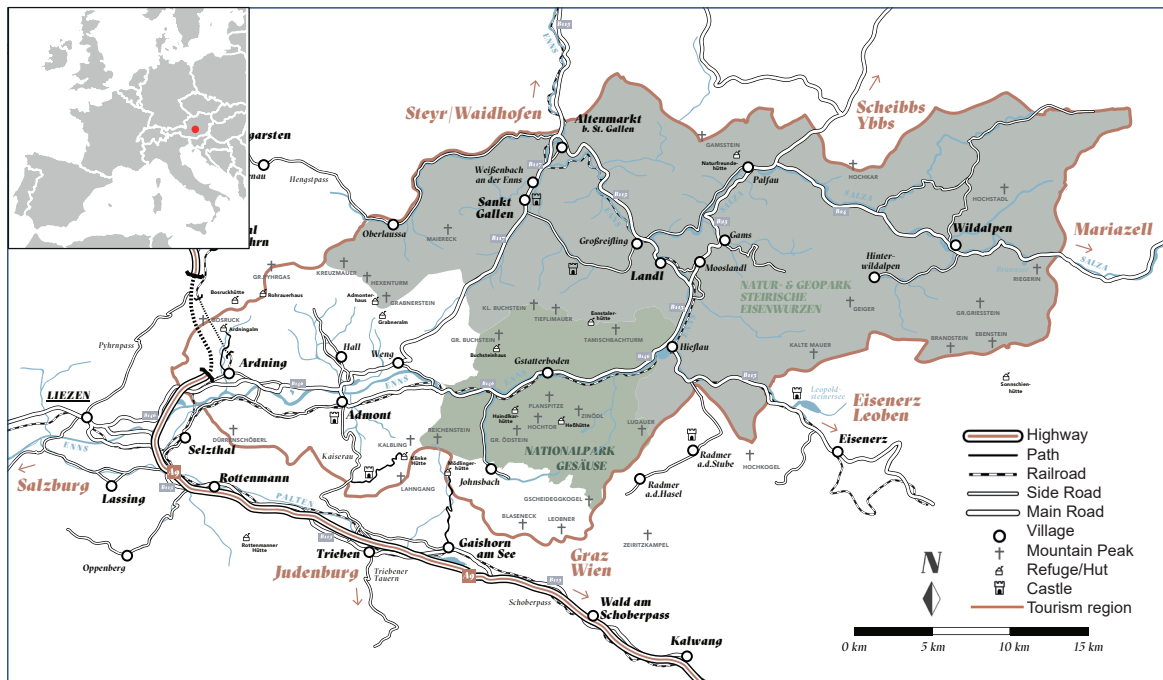


Figure 1 – Location of the Gesäuse National Park and the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park. Data: GIS Steiermark <https://gis.stmk.gv.at/wgportal/atlasmobile/map/Basiskarten/Basiskarte> Digitaler Atlas, own design. Inlay: EuroBoundaryMap © EuroGeographics.

of lively discussion. The aim is to allow close cooperation while avoiding red tape as far as possible, leading to added value for both sides – the partners and the institutions.

### Rewind: The starting point for Gesäuse National Park

Let's travel back in time, to the early years of Gesäuse National Park. The park was officially recognized in 2002 by the IUCN. In the beginning, there were two major problems which had to be resolved. Firstly, the relatively high resistance of the local inhabitants towards establishing the Gesäuse National Park. Similar projects in relatively close proximity geographically to the GNP (for protected landscapes and National Parks in the Schladminger Tauern, Dachstein and Totes Gebirge) had failed because of the inhabitants' opposition to them. Secondly, the local economy in the Gesäuse area was relatively weak. The National Park project in the Gesäuse region was supported predominantly by policymakers, who saw an opportunity for improving the regional economy, especially through tourism. As in other regions where nature conservation projects were discussed, this one sparked controversy. The main reasons for the negative reactions of the local population were mistrust and a fear of a top-down approach. Some opponents were afraid that the National Park would be a prestige project for policymakers at federal and state levels which would fail to ask for locals' opinions. The local people involved (mostly farmers, woodworkers, foresters, hunters and rangers) opted instead for land-

scape protection within IUCN category IV. Under this model (category IV), their activities would not be so heavily affected by the creation of the protected area, making it their preferred outcome. In the end, policymakers at federal, state and local levels enforced their own wishes, and the Gesäuse National Park was established as an IUCN type-II protected area. (On the history of the National Park, see Gesäuse National Park 2021; Gahbauer 2014.)

### Rewind: The starting point for Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park and the road to UNESCO World Heritage Site status

The Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature and Geopark was founded by seven municipalities in 1996, originally with the intention of strengthening local structures for regional development. The Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park is shaped by a diverse natural and cultural landscape but also by old industry – iron ore mining, near the Styrian Erzberg. After the decline of the industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasing tertiarization, the region was faced with depopulation. One answer to help create a brighter outlook for regional development was the foundation of the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park and its partner network in 1996. A Nature Park, as a protected landscape that owes its existence to the interaction of man and nature, is a perfect base for cooperation between regional partners from agriculture, gastronomy and tourism. In 2002, the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park was awarded the title of European Geopark; in 2004 it became a member of the Global Geopark Network under the auspices of

UNESCO and was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

### The partnership today

After the creation of both the Gesäuse National Park and Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature and Geopark, questions arose regarding the involvement of local companies. How could the perception of nature conservation be changed? What could be done to promote the regional economy? The strategy was to establish a network that enables collaboration between the local companies themselves and the institutions that manage protected areas. Today, we are in a fortunate position: collaboration with our partners offers positive and sustainable future prospects for them and the local population, and the number of partnerships has been increasing over the last couple of years.

So, how can one become a Gesäuse Partner? The two parks and the regional tourism association are ready to cooperate with other potential partners who share their philosophy of nature conservation. Prospective partners have therefore to demonstrate that they implement environmental protection and sustainability measures, and the following requirements, set by the partners' council, have to be fulfilled to be accepted as a partner:

- Applicants have to be located in the Gesäuse tourism region, as the ultimate aim is to generate income for the region and the local population.
- Regionality has to be *lived* (i. e. products for processing and transformation should be local, preference should be given to local suppliers, and local structures should be taken into account).
- A strong interest in cooperating with the other partner companies, the institutions and within the network itself is required.
- Partners should see their membership as a possibility for increasing productivity and not as a burden.

### Why should one collaborate with the Gesäuse Partners, or: what are the benefits for companies?

First of all: being a partner was, is, and will continue to be exclusive. Exclusive, that is, for those who truly want to collaborate with the regional nature organizations, for the partners themselves, and for those who have an inner belief that regional development should be a bottom-up process and that collaboration can be a key factor for a region worth living in. Every application is reviewed by the partners' council to guarantee suitability for the network. Of course, the potential benefits of marketing that focuses on regionality, sustainability and nature conservation does play a part in applications to become a Gesäuse Partner. The visibility and the marketing impulse for both sides – partners and institutions – has been increasing in recent years. Most local products are sold within the region,



Figure 2 – Gesäuse Partner logo (archive).

but some individual products, services and/or partners also have supra-regional visibility. In this manner, the external visibility of the nature conservation organizations themselves is increased. This in turn might generate better acceptance of the idea of nature conservation itself amongst local people. Marketing strategies for companies in the network can be bundled, and the visibility for the partners generally is increasing due to the careful use of their corporate identity as *Gesäuse Partners* (through their logo, see Figure 2, presence in print media and shared values). A network is more visible than a small local company. But access to marketing is not the only reason to become a Gesäuse Partner. There is considerable cooperation in the network, with events, meetings and excursions, all of which have their impact on networking, too. In addition, many partners now purchase products from each other, because trust is growing and thanks to a realization that it is not always necessary to look outside the immediate area for goods. The local economy is thus becoming more circular and larger, with the circulation of partners' products increasingly hugely. The status of *Gesäuse Partner* is seen as a seal of quality, meaning that a company is fulfilling high standards in ecology and sustainability contexts. Cross-selling of products or services is the consequence: companies promote each other, e.g. with special corners in grocery stores or inns. This, in the long run, increases the visibility for locals and visitors, not only of the Gesäuse Partners themselves but also of the nature protection institutions.

### Putting things in a nutshell and a take-home message: Why should nature conservation organizations “invest” in regional development?

The most obvious advantage: mutual promotion. Local economies profit from the assistance and guidance of experts. They receive in-depth information on nature conservation and the Gesäuse area, which they then pass on to visitors. The mission is to make the partners-spokespersons for nature protection and multipliers for the educational mandate of these institutions. Simultaneously, the common front enhances the positive perception of the area by guests. The network's advertising platform multiplies the advertising presence and gives all members a voice in re-

gional development strategies. The partners and the organizations are working for a better future for the region – *together*. In our case, the partnerships also actively contributed to overcoming the initial scepticism regarding nature conservation ideas, and so local support for the ideals of protected areas was increased. The partners also contribute to added value for local produce, and are therefore strengthening the economy. Partners from different areas of business get to know each other better in the network and can cooperate. They have found a framework in the partner network in which they can interact with and trust each other, stimulating a local market for locally produced goods and services. This helps create a local economy in which word-of-mouth serves as recommendation and in which people actively seek to buy local goods and support local services.

Problems that need to be solved in the future include the increasing number of different interests that occur in the network. While this might not be a problem at first sight, the motivations of the *founding members* for becoming part of the network may be very different indeed from those of new members. Increasingly, we see the potential for marketing as being the prime (or even only) reason for wanting membership of the network. Without doubt, marketing is one of the main missions of the network, but support for nature conservation must also be in the foreground. And of course, wherever people and companies interact with each other, there will be those who are highly motivated, while others will not often be seen at meetings or events. To balance the demands of networking without losing sight of the economic reality is a challenge for the future. Networks at first sight do not generate income; they are seen as *nice to have* adjuncts, but not as a must.

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The Gesäuse Partners network is managed by the Styrian Eisenwurzen Nature Park and the Gesäuse National Park, as nature conservation institutions, in addition to the Gesäuse Tourism Association.