

Critical Issues in Managing Protected Areas by Multi-Stakeholder Participation – Analysis of a Process in the Swiss Alps

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Abstract

There is common agreement in discourses on nature protection that it can only succeed if local participation in conservation measures is granted. In the region of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch a multi-stakeholder participatory process was initiated to negotiate concrete objectives for the World Heritage Site Jungfrau-Aletsch. In this way persistent conflicting expectations should be overcome and ownership and common responsibility for the region enhanced. In this paper we critically reflect this multi-stakeholder participatory process and evaluate three core issues, which we regard as decisive in participatory processes: conflict resolution, power play, and continued participation. We conclude that participatory processes support mutual learning, but at the same time inherent multi-level power play can threaten continued participation.

Profile

Protected area

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch

Mountain range

Alps

Country

Switzerland

Introduction

In its operational guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee requires a management plan for each property inscribed in the World Heritage List (<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide08-en.pdf>). In the case of the World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch (WHS) – nominated by the World Heritage Committee in 2001 – a unique process was launched to negotiate concrete objectives, measures and activities for the WHS, which was to form the basis for developing the management plan: a multi-stakeholder participatory process in the region. There were two reasons for choosing this approach: First, there is common agreement in the discourses on conservation that it can only succeed if local participation in nature protection measures is granted (Pimbert & Pretty 1997), and second, very diverse and in many cases conflicting expectations of a WHS existed in this region. These different expectations were discovered by evaluating opinions expressed in the local press between 1997 and 2003 – which covered the period before and after the nomination of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch. Prior to the nomination in 2001 a formal democratic decision-making process had taken place at the level of the communes involved. Each commune had voted on the idea of a WHS in the region, and the results had shown a high level of acceptance. However, this acceptance was based on diverse expectations and not on common goals and strategies for implementation and management (Wiesmann et al. 2005; Liechti et al. 2008). Some parties expected increased conservation efforts, others expected increased attention to



View from the Aletschwald towards the Great Aletsch Glacier © Astrid Wallner

be given to cultural landscapes, and another group of stakeholders expected immediate economic gains. The management centre of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch initiated a multi-stakeholder participatory process to negotiate concrete objectives, measures and activities for the WHS in the hope to overcome the persistent conflicting expectations and to enhance ownership and common responsibility for the region. These are two aspects which are seen as crucial for increasing understanding and lowering conflicts in relation to protected areas (Mannigel 2008). But even though there is general agreement that public participation is an important principle and goal for achieving ecologically sustainable and socially just environmental go-

vernance (Sneddon & Fox 2007), participation is an exceedingly difficult objective to define and implement (Cooke & Kothari 2001). 'Participation' can be understood in many different ways. The approach chosen in the case of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch corresponds to what Pimbert and Pretty (1997) have described as 'interactive participation' and which can be interpreted as 'empowerment' (Pimbert & Pretty 1997; Berghöfer & Berghöfer 2008). However, a participatory process in the sense of interactive participation does not automatically imply that just because the actors are fully engaged there won't be any tricky moments in these processes. As Berghöfer and Berghöfer (2008) put it: 'If participation is to mean more than a mainstream acclaim, its different levels and objectives have to be made explicit.' This request leads to the question of limitations and risks of participatory processes. We tackle this issue in this paper by critically reflecting the multi-stakeholder participatory process of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch from a scientific perspective and evaluating core issues of this process. This reflection of the process is based on the insights of the process we gained in our role as researchers in an interdisciplinary research project which accompanied the multi-stakeholder participatory process (see Wiesmann et al. 2005; Wallner et al. 2008). The methods used in this project included semi-structured interviews with participants of the participatory process, standardized questionnaires filled in by the participants, observation during the discussions, as well as an analysis of newspaper articles published in the run-up to the designation of the region as a World Heritage Site.

Defining a vision for the World Heritage Site Jungfrau-Aletsch

The central purpose of this process was to develop a common vision with the aim of assuming responsibility for sustainable regional development. Developing a common vision was particularly important as the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch is situated in a region characterized by a high level of complexity. What we call the Jungfrau-Aletsch World Heritage Region is neither a political, nor an economic, administrative, social or cultural unit. In administrative terms this region stretches across two cantons and covers part of the territory of 26 communes (Figure 1). Furthermore there are five regional planning associations that play an important part in planning the region's development strategies. These associations aim to bridge the institutional gap between the local and cantonal levels and serve as a platform where largely sectorally organized entities of public administration and representatives of civil society can coordinate actions in a more inclusive and trans-sectoral manner (Hammer 2007). Given this complex administrative situation, it is absolutely crucial for the communes covered or touched by the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch to think of themselves as belonging to a World Heritage Region and developing a common vision.

The World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch encompasses a high-alpine landscape and consists mainly of rock, ice and unproductive vegetation. This perimeter is surrounded by an area of settlements and small-scale cultural landscapes. Altogether this region makes up world renown tourist attraction and serves as an important economic basis for the local residents (35 000 people live in the communes of the region of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch). It is the declared intention of the involved communes to preserve the whole region made up by the 26 communes in all its diversity for future generations and to promote its sustainable development as an economic, living, recreational, and natural space (Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn Association 2005/2007). This means that there are ongoing efforts in the region to combine protection and economic use, which poses one of the greatest challenges for the management.

The multi-stakeholder participatory process aimed at negotiating concrete objectives, measures and actions was divided into several phases (Figure 2). Some participants were selected after a preparatory workshop in the region, others joined as a result of several announcements in the media or after face-to-face communication. 256 participants representing various stakeholder groups (i.e. groups from agriculture, tourism, trade, public administration, conservation, education, transport) were separated into two thematic groups: one group dealt with questions of agriculture, forestry, tourism and trade, while the other group dealt with questions of education, sensitization, natural and cultural values.

In each canton these two groups working on topics met at the same time. In total, three rounds took place (Forum A – C) with a core group taking intermediate steps between the rounds.

The process resulted in a total of 69 objectives and 226 related measures being formulated in relation to issues of protection and economic development in the region of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch. These objectives and measures were prioritized by the participants and grouped into 21 project lines – 7 on issues of conservation, 7 on development efforts, and 7 on management and sensitization (Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn Association 2005/2007). For each of these project lines, a so-called core group, consisting of participants of the process and newly recruited people interested in working on the future of their own region, developed concrete projects and recommended them to the Jungfrau-Aletsch World Heritage Association for implementation. Such projects included an upgrading of important regions to achieve a significant improvement in the quality of habitat for flora and fauna; marketing possibilities for local agricultural products; enhancing local people's and visitors' awareness of the WHS through publications, guided tours, collaboration between schools; joint promotions of the different tourist associations.

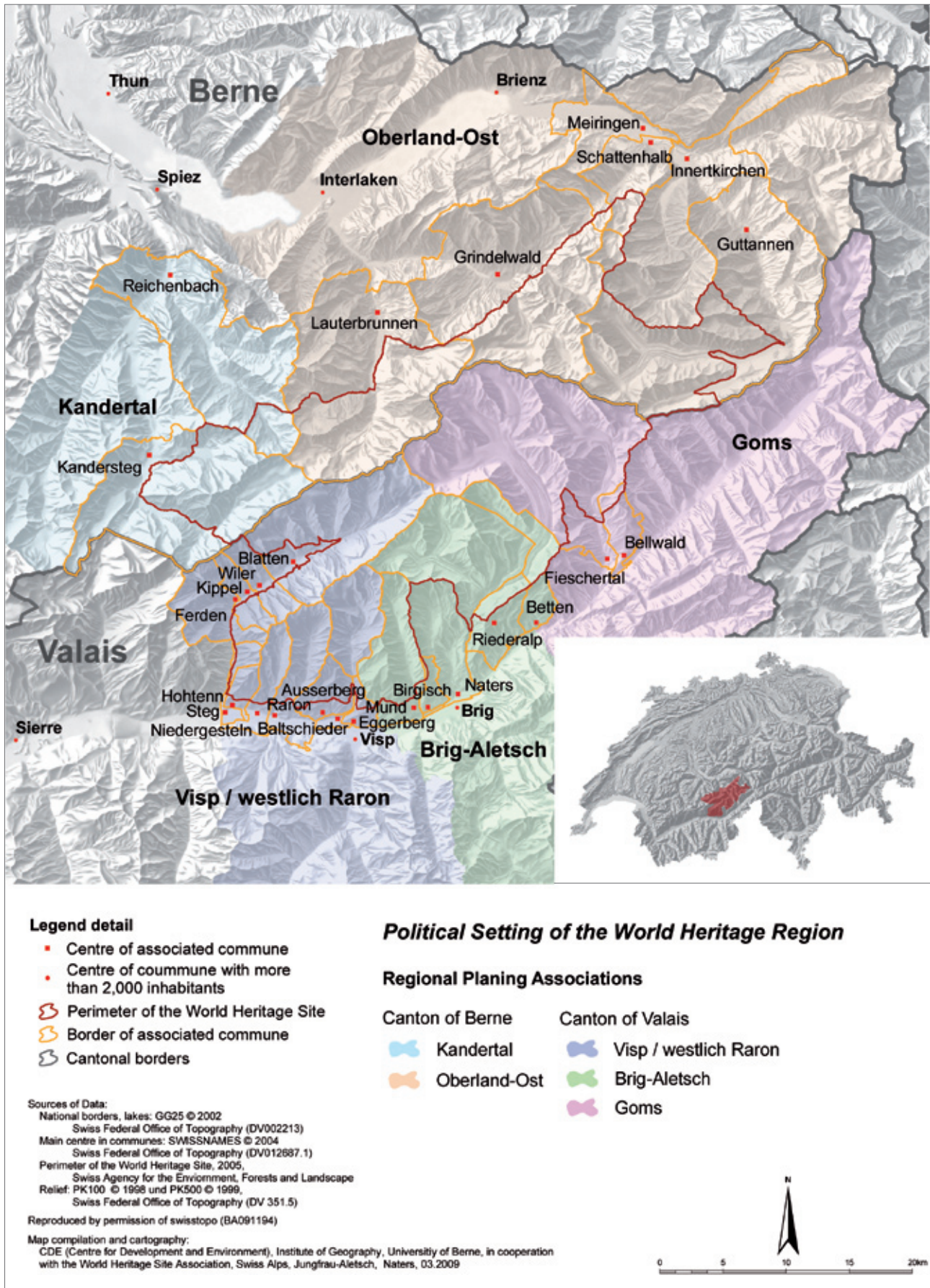


Figure 1 – The World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch and its associated administrative units.

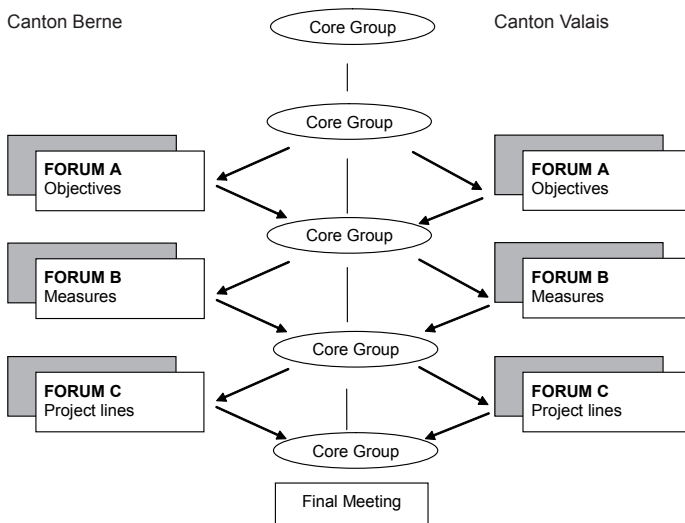


Figure 2 – Phases of the multi-stakeholder participatory process in the World Heritage Site Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch, 2004.

In each canton the two groups working on different topics (see text) met at the same time. In total, three rounds (Forum A – C) took place with a core group taking intermediate steps between the rounds.

Since not all the defined projects can be launched simultaneously, an activity programme has been drawn up by the Management Centre of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch. Financial means have to be secured separately for each project and the priority of implementation is discussed with the main funding organizations (these are the Federal Office of the Environment as well as the Cantons of Berne and Valais).

Reflection of the multi-stakeholder participatory process

The reflection of the participatory process revealed three core issues which are crucial when trying to find a local based path towards sustainable regional development and conservation. These are: (1) conflict resolution, (2) power play, and (3) continued participation.

Conflict resolution

In a multi-stakeholder participatory process diverse and often conflicting opinions emerge. In the case of the World Heritage Site Jungfrau-Aletsch, it became possible to integrate the great variety of opinions into the negotiations by dividing the discussions into three different rounds as well as into thematic groups. Each round concentrated on different steps (negotiation on objectives, on measures and on actions) towards the creation of a shared vision. This approach revealed that many apparent conflicts between objectives that had emerged during the nomination process partly disappeared or were transformed during the three rounds of discussions. The reason for this lies in the fact that some conflicting issues did not require concrete measures but rather a discussion on values and interests. For example, the discussion about objectives for a higher degree of conservation in the area did not

require immediate measures since the values to be conserved are currently not endangered by any human or natural processes (see also Wiesmann & Liechti 2004). The multi-stakeholder participatory process helped to bring different perceptions out into the open and raise the discussions from the level of conflict to the level of negotiation. However, the process did not leave time for solving the conflicts that emerged from diverse perceptions of nature. The process was oriented towards defining objectives and a common vision and not towards the process as a means of solving persistent conflicts between stakeholder groups. These are two different expectations which can not be addressed within the same process.

Power play

There is always some sort of power play involved in participatory processes, even in a case where the selection of participants has been as open as in the case presented here. In the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch power play became apparent along four different lines:

- Representation: how to guarantee that the interests of a stakeholder group are represented. In any participatory process we find people who will say in the end that they have not been included in the process and therefore their opinion has not been taken into consideration. The same problem arises in the case of formal decision-making. There are always people who will not vote on the issue at hand and will complain in the end that they did not have a say in the process (Wallner et al. forthcoming).
- Insiders versus outsiders: conservationists are frequently not local inhabitants but people with an urban background, due to the fact that this actor category builds on well-established national networks in which local conservationists are strongly embedded. This leads to a situation of conflicting positions between outsiders' vision of pristine nature and wilderness and local inhabitants' visions of regional development (Wiesmann et al. 2005; Liechti et al. 2008).
- Existing legal framework: persistent conflicts between stakeholders often stem from the fact that there is existing legislation that cannot be negotiated by the stakeholders. For example, legislation, together with relatively high amounts of direct payments remunerating the ecological services provided by farmers, ensure a relatively high level of biodiversity in Switzerland. These existing ecological standards cannot be negotiated in a regional multi-stakeholder participatory process, because changes in national law are needed in order to change such regulations. Therefore, the ecological standards are 'non-negotiable' features in relation to protected areas, a fact which can be used by different stakeholder groups in order to strengthen their own position against others (see also Wallner et al. 2008).
- Power balance: inscribing a site in the World Heritage List as well as establishing a protected area is in most

cases accompanied by the appointment of a newly created management body. These management bodies usually are not political entities and therefore have no political mandate. But they are a new player in the region and therefore create a shift in the existing power balance. (Wallner et al. forthcoming).

Continued participation

Multi-stakeholder participation did not end with the definition of objectives and measures for the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch. Continued participation was secured by involving some participants in the development of concrete project proposals based on the defined objectives and measures. However, stakeholder participation must be secured beyond that to guarantee continued identification of stakeholders with the common vision created during the process. There are two constraints which threaten continued participation at this point: time and money. In the case of the WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch, the concrete project proposals were evaluated by the foundation board. In some cases sufficient financial means were available for implementing the projects immediately. In other cases, where financial means were not secured, the Management Centre had to write detailed project plans to secure financial support by the state and cantonal government departments. This is a very time consuming process and even though a small group of people is working on it intensively, it is difficult for the general public – including participants of the process – to detect concrete signs of action. This time lag between the participatory process and the visibility of continuous results presents a risk of losing the recently established ownership and common responsibility.

Conclusions

Stoll-Kleemann and Welp (2008) advocate more integration of all relevant stakeholders and more experimentation with participatory methods to reach successful biosphere reserve management. In this context they talk about ‘management as mutual learning’ that ‘characterizes the ideal condition for communication, where activities of different sectors are coordinated and participation is regarded as a central element right from the start of planning processes (problem formulation)’ (ibid.). This calls for transdisciplinarity in protected areas’ management: ‘Transdisciplinarity implies that the precise nature of a problem to be addressed and solved is not predetermined and needs to be defined cooperatively by actors from science and the life-world’ (Wiesmann et al. 2008).

We fully support the quest for management as mutual learning (Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008) and we conclude from our example that participatory processes indeed lead to social learning processes and contribute to mutual learning. However, we also have to take into consideration the inherent multilayer power play in participatory processes. This can cause stum-



UNESCO meeting WHS Jungfrau-Aletsch on Alpigen, Grindelwald, 2005
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bling blocks in transdisciplinary practice and threaten the successful continuation of participatory processes (Wallner et al. forthcoming). Our findings correspond to those of Berghöfer and Berghöfer (2008) who state that the local leaders might struggle ‘with local power relations, lack of interest, or with people turning open meetings into one-to-one confrontations’. Elzinga (2008) pleads for ‘a greater degree of reflexivity’ by asking ‘who gets empowered and what potential users get left out’. We conclude that multi-stakeholder participation is an important asset of management when it comes to combining issues of protection and sustainable regional development but participatory processes ‘require carefully structured, sequenced and selected negotiations and interactions’ (Wiesmann et al. 2008). Local ownership and common responsibility for an area can be built through participatory processes but their survival might be threatened by prolonged discussions on financial support for concrete actions. These arguments illustrate that participatory processes hold enormous potential for management of protected areas but the limitations of these approaches must also be seriously considered.

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