

European perspective and experience in transboundary cooperation

■ By Robert Brunner

Europe is different
Why transboundary
co-operation is necessary
Nature's limits versus
political borders

Borders in a geographical or political sense can be very clear, like state borders, fixed by treaties. Borders of natural areas are often unclear, fluid and depending on the background of the observer. Only in rare cases do political borders correspond to natural borders. Rivers for example are a contradiction in itself. Rivers link territories, river basins are natural areas for settlements, but rivers very often are also borders.

From isolated areas
towards networks

In the past, protected areas were designated according to their value, their biodiversity, or their availability. It just happened in the more recent decades that environmentalists put more weight on protected area networks like clusters and bio-corridors.

Upstream and downstream.
Mountains and lowland.
Different points of view

Protection also depends on the point of view. The disaster on the Romanian Thiza River in 2000 showed clearly the impacts on protected areas downstream of mines. Impacts on the valuable Danube delta could have destroyed one of the most important but vulnerable habitats in Europe.

A border theory

In Europe, many borders are found in remote areas, where a low population density and less development pressure have together created optimal preconditions for the



Saxonian Switzerland National Park and the Labske Piskovce Protected Landscape Area.

preservation of ecological diversity.

But borders do have two sides. Environments and habitats have the same value, the same beauty, the same richness on both sides. Protection on just one side of the border can never lead to sufficient nature protection. From the planning and the designation of protected areas to their administration and management, transborder co-operation is a necessary and important task.

Size of countries and density of borders

Europe – many states in a small area

Europe is a small continent – or let us say it is just a part of Eurasia. On nearly 10,000,000 km² from the Atlantic to the Ural, from the polar circle to the Mediterranean, more than 40 national territories can be counted.

What do borders mean to people,
economic development, political
tensions and to nature

Border areas very often have a common history, the same culture

and sometimes a similar language. Due to a separation during the Cold War, a distinct social and economic decline appeared across Europe.

At the same time, nature was protected in the shadow of a strict border. More than 6,700 km² in the heart of Europe benefited from a kind of protection by the strict borderline.

Remote areas and their
natural value

By concentrating economic progress in the central areas, the areas along the Iron Curtain were cut off from economic development. Less pressure, emigration and resignation characterised these border regions.

But it was an advantage for nature. Modest use of natural resources helped to preserve areas of high natural value.

Overcoming borders

Immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, many initiatives appeared to help preserve

PHOTO BY EUROPARC

areas of high natural value. Ecological bricks for Europe, Green Belt of Fennoscandia and others have been developed.

But there are still borders and restrictions to overcome such as on the Balkans or in the former Soviet Union.

Size of protected areas

Small but beautiful

There are many protected areas in Europe. Apart from the large unspoiled nature in Scandinavia, Europe is a continent where natural areas have to exist beside a high pressure in land use and competing interests. Very often, protection is a kind of compromise between these interests.

Wilderness under pressure

Land use, economic development, tourism, traffic, and housing are the more recent factors that threaten the wilderness. Some decades or centuries ago, it was the protection of settlements and securing daily life, which became a threat to our environment. Prevention from natural disasters and protection against wild animals were the main arguments to turn wilderness into a cultural landscape.

Wilderness and/or sustainability – a theoretical approach

We have lost the feeling for original wilderness in Europe. Wilderness is more the chaos, the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrolled nature, with all its dangers for people and their living space. At the same time, it is a nostalgic, idealistic image of the environment.

How much room can we give back to wilderness? How much wilderness do we want to protect? And how much wilderness can we af-

ford? Can we find a compromise between land use and wilderness? There are many questions but we cannot provide a general answer. We have to find it for the specific area, under specific conditions, and for ourselves.

Many of these conditions can be fulfilled only if we think "transboundary".

Natural and cultural landscapes – land use or restrictions

What's left of unspoiled nature

For many centuries, men have learned to control nature. Up to high mountain pastures and down to drained lowlands, people have cultivated the land for their use. The image of Europe is more the cultivated landscape than wilderness. Can environmentalists be satisfied with what is left? In Europe, wilderness and large untouched areas can only be found in Scandinavia or partly in the Alps and in Eastern Europe.

Nature reserves are mostly left-over areas where land use has

stopped due to extreme conditions like alpine farming. Recently a system of biosphere reserves with strict protected core zones and extensively used farmland is becoming more popular and possibly an interesting approach for Europe.

Coexistence of land use and restricted areas

Nobody wants to turn cultivated land into strict reserves in a large scale. But there are several areas in Europe, which have a rich biodiversity, a high natural value, and habitats of threatened species. These areas are interesting for environmental protection.

Competing / conflicting interests in protected areas

Nearly all national parks in Austria and many in Europe were established to avoid other types of land uses. Valleys are wonderful sites for hydro-power plants and at the same time worth protecting for their habitats. High mountains can be ski resorts or at the same time the last refuges for large birds. The value of trees can be measured as the price for wood or the price tourists are willing to pay for untouched nature.

Cultural and national borders vs. natural borders

National borders are not necessarily ecological borders

Nature has neither limits nor borders. Ecological units are not necessarily state boundaries. High mountain ranges often act as climate borders or divide different habitats. River basins are much more ecological units.

Rivers - state borders but ecological units

Large rivers very often form state borders. These are easy to defend in times of



View on the Thaya River, at the same time the border between Austria and Czech Republic and the two National Parks.

Photo courtesy of NP Thayaatal

conflicts, and sometimes hard to cross. But they are at the same time ecological units. They have the same water, the same fishes, and the same floods; create the same living conditions, and influence the local climate equally. And they build corridors for habitats, migrating routes, and unique ecosystems.

National minorities, common culture, but no common future?

Large rivers divide people, even when the culture, the language, the traditions are the same on either side. Remote areas, which are very often the home of minorities, and border areas, are at the same time the most valuable landscapes.

and to bring it forward. EUROPARC, IUCN and others published material or supported initiatives.

Flying high – what managers expect

The expectations were high. A questionnaire helped to evaluate the European experience in 1997.

Hard landing – the daily reality

But reality was somehow different. At the same time, double barbed wire fences divided ecosystems in the Balkans and in Poland. Strict reserves had no other partners on the other side of the river other than gravel digging companies in Croatia; the forest was logged in Karelia on the borders to national

to cross borders whenever they want, we managers have failed in our job. Keeping reserves fenced to keep wild animals in a compound has nothing to do with protected areas but a lot with zoos. There are several reasons for opening borders to wildlife like migration routes, genetic pools, etc.

A chance and a challenge for border people

Borders are both, a threat and a chance. A threat because of restrictions, control, and limits. A chance because of exchange, crossroads, and trade. Border people are used both to limitations and contacts. Transborder protected areas are more than just reserves. They provide the responsibility for the environment across borders, and combine common interests and different sights on the same object.

Political soap-box oratory

We know a lot about the importance of open borders, for nature, for wildlife, and for people. Protected areas and their management need to be harmonised on either side of a border. But theories and political ideas very often differ from the daily reality. People fighting for their basic needs have no chance to think about sustainability, peace parks or restrictions on land use. Politics has to build the foundations for equal conditions for life in and around protected areas.

Threats to transborder co-operation

The burden of history

Some 80 years ago, Europe had a few large multinational empires - multicultural and multiracial. After World War 1, empires were split into dozens of small states. Even if there was a common history, relations were not always the best. WW2 did a lot more to fix boundaries and their burdens.

Political tensions and social and economic decline

In Europe, one can still find a west-



Photo by Z. Niewiadomski

Polish-Ukrainian border, Bieszczady NP, Mt. Tarnica (1,346) to the left, Mt. Halicz (1,333) to the right.

Transborder co-operation means – what? Questions and (no) answers!

Transborder co-operation – statistics and reality

Transborder co-operation in Europe at the end of the 90's

– a quick glance

Transborder co-operation became very popular in the last decade. Even if the first transborder protected area was established in 1932, it took some decades to raise more interest. The fall of the Iron Curtain and a growing European Union helped a lot in this particular field. Some conferences and meetings were held to discuss this topic

parks in Finland. And there are more examples to show.

Who co-operates with whom?

Managers, park rangers, scientists – a transborder self gratification

The typical co-operation is personal contacts and exchange of staff. That sounds great – but only for people. Joint seminars and publications do help to strengthen contacts. But they do not help nature. Joint managers is not the goal but joint management. And this has still to be developed.

Wildlife – a need for exchange

As long as birds are the only ones

east decline in economic wealth and social benefits. Or you can call it the rich and the poor, where one side can afford to protect nature whereas the other side has to exploit natural resources to balance the state budget.

Private interests, governance and local heroes

But even in the wealthy countries in Western Europe, private interests can be a threat to the environment. Landlords want to make profit, companies exploit natural resources and governments are often rather weak in the field of nature protection. In border areas, different interests develop and are much more evident.

Language problems?

An easy excuse

One of the most common arguments against co-operation across borders is the language. I am convinced that similar differences as the ones between Austria and the Czech Republic can be found on most continents. But especially in border areas, one can always find people who speak both languages. And what keeps us from learning the other language? The daily work does not need translators but joint plans on how to do it.

Protected areas in wartimes

During the Ruanda/Urundi conflict, refugees partly cut the Virunga NP in Congo. During the Kosovo conflict, the Shar mountains and others were mined. Between Ecuador and Peru, a territory has been claimed by both sides. Protecting areas in war times cannot be done through written agreements only. Mutual understanding, long-term co-operation and the involvement of local people might help to prevent such conflicts.

Can international conventions help to improve transborder co-operation?

A big NO! But

Many international agreements exist at the global or the regional

level: Ramsar, Bonn and Bern Conventions, Convention on Biological Diversity, World Charter for Nature, Washington Convention. Such conventions can help of course, but the local understanding of either side of the border comes first.

From Kyoto to local agreements, the scale of treaties

This is one reason why right at the beginning the National Park Thayatal negotiated an agreement on transborder co-operation. International protocols are something we have to obey in all types of protected areas. But the difference lies in the local scale, the special situation in certain spots, which cannot be regulated by international conventions.



Director Brunner (left) and the Czech National Park Director (standing) discussing the joint management of the Park.

Frameworks and guidelines

Several institutions have worked out guidelines or proposals for such cases. But so far they all failed to produce accepted principles. Neither IUCN, the Council of Europe nor EUROPARC could agree on principles for transborder co-operation. So far, some good examples are the Mercantour (F), the Trilateral Biosphere Reserve (P/SK/UKR) or the Thayatal.

Who could be a helpful umbrella?

IUCN could be an umbrella (if they want to), and the international criteria for protected areas could

easily be extended as criteria for transborder co-operation in all categories of protected areas.

A future for transborder co-operation – an outlook

Theories of transborder co-operation

From simple contacts to an understanding of co-operation

Some protected areas were declared transboundary protected areas by politicians. The first one in Europe was Pienniny in Poland / Slovakia in 1932, but with no particular results in the beginning. They showed only in the 50s when co-operation was effectively carried out by both administrations to improve the quality of protection.

Protected area staff or local

people know best how co-operation can work. Personal contacts are important and a trustful basis for co-operation. Management should provide support to this co-operation, and formulate agreements.

A unique protected area – extraterritorial unit

Usually protected areas do not start at the same time on either side of a border. They have to grow together. Borders do not make sense within an ecological unit. Claire Shine (1997) called this an ecological utopia, but it is worth going for it.



Photo courtesy of NP Thayatal

The historical bridge in Hardegg connects the two Parks.

Bottom-up or top-down

It makes sense to listen to locally experienced people. Experts from outside, who take a quick look at an area and then tell the people what to do are not needed. Common history, old traditions, the knowledge of the nature across the borders bear a lot of information and experience for protected area managers. But they have to find time to listen. Together with the local population, protected area managers can find a serious basis for the future development of protected areas.

Basic needs for nature, people and managers

Free nature: nature as it was

Protected areas are homes for nature in the first place. Nature has no limits. We cannot always preserve nature in its original condition, but we have to make room for free development - with all considerations for people.

No limits for nature's development

If nature has no limits, we cannot bind it to state borders.

Land use versus protection: How to find a compromise?

Restrictions mostly result in a compromise. How much land is needed to secure protection and biodiversity? Do we need reserves for protected species or reserves for the exploitation of natural resources? Is a compromise possible for areas that are left for the protection of nature?

In many countries, there are problems when trying to design a protected area in the national level. So, is it not much more difficult to create a transborder protected area system? The compromise across borders is hard to negotiate, but it is necessary to secure last refuges for endangered species and landscapes.

Tourists, adventure, Disneyland

Transborder protected areas can offer a lot to tourists. The chance to experience a nature conservation area in another country can be an adventure for tourists, but can also be a threat on its carrying capacity. However, it might help to promote an understanding and awareness of transnational nature protection.

An attempt at European recommendations

Some examples and how they work
Europe has some excellent ex-

amples of transborder co-operation. The National Park Mercantour (F) and the Regional Park Alpi Marittimi (I) have been co-operating since decades; in the Pyrenees, the French National Park and the Spanish Ordesa National Park found good ways to work together, and along the former Iron Curtain some existing protected areas improved their co-operation after its fall in 1989.

Others try to find an efficient co-existence, but some still suffer from threats due to political tensions and strict borders, especially in the Eastern European countries.

Along the Polish-Belarusian border or in the Carpathians, fences and border installations hinder both the exchange of staff and the border-crossing for wildlife.

'Musts' and 'shoulds'

Musts: Joint management comes first. The National Park Thayatal and Podyjí agreed on principles for joint management, regular updating and evaluation of transborder co-operation. Short-term working plans, based on joint research processes, are negotiated bilaterally to find solutions to the daily problems.

Shoulds: But there is more to consider. Joint presentation, joint corporate design and corporate identity, common cross border infrastructure or joint marketing all help to promote protected areas and raise their public image.

Defining minimum standards

The approach to nature conservation regarding national legislation, the status of the protected area or the special aims can be different in neighbouring parks. But as all measurements have an effect on the other side of the border, a minimum standard for each task and each topic has to be defined.

In the National Parks along the Thayatal, fishery is an excellent example. Since 2000, regulations concerning time, size and kind of fish, and fishing equipment and methods have been the same on both sides of the border. Information leaflets are printed in both languages (and also in English). National park guards cover the ground on bilateral patrols.

How to adapt them to Southeast Asia

Lessons to be learned

Anything goes. It was hard to imagine transborder protected areas along the Iron Curtain two decades ago, with joint management, staff exchange, and research.

Transborder co-operation is needed. We cannot protect the full range of habitats with strict borders. Nature is unlimited. The thinking of park managers has to be the same – unlimited.

Nature protection has to consider the people, their traditions, their

habits, and their manners. But in border areas, it must also consider the improvement of mutual understanding.

Joint management is an important step forward. It is the basis for common development and therefore the quality of the protection status.

Bring your staff together. Joint research programmes and international projects will help to improve the understanding for the other side.

Towards a smaller world

Border restrictions will be lifted sooner or later. The world is becoming smaller. The protection of areas can help to enforce this process. Act locally! The global thinking will follow and it is needed to protect areas in a shrinking world. ■

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