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Autor: Lob, Gerhard
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The unsuccessful fight for a new national park

Switzerland's big natural spaces are under pressure. More national parks would be the answer. Yet, a promising project in Ticino has just failed. And the prospects for Switzerland getting even one additional national park in the foreseeable future are fading.

GERHARD LOB

The road up to Bosco Gurin is twisty. The remote picture-perfect Walser village lies at 1,500 metres above sea level, making it the highest lying village in the canton of Ticino. Bosco Gurin was one of two municipalities that in a popular vote on 10 June 2018 approved the establishment of a new national park: there were 20 Yes and 17 No votes. Ascona on Lago Maggiore was also in favour. Six municipalities that would have been situated in the new national park, however, returned a majority No vote: Brissago, Losone, Ronco sopra Ascona, Centovalli, Onsernone and Terre di Pedemonte. And that spelled the end of the national park project in the Locarnese – an area on the Italian border that features a wild and sparsely populated mountain landscape.

In the Hotel Walser situated at the entrance to the village, we meet Alberto Tomamichel, farmer and mayor of Bosco Gurin. One month after the vote, disappointment is still written all over his face, even if

he is proud of the vote of his own municipality. Yet, it is clear that the projects that were foreseen for the national park area in the Locarnese will not come about. Five million Swiss francs would have been poured into the national park annually. Now there will be nothing. “For us, some civic community projects have been affected,” says the mayor, who recalls that all the mayors and civic communities stood behind the national park project in the Locarnese. “For now we’ll just let the dust settle and then we’ll see,” says Tomamichel. Will opponents of the national park now bring suggestions and ideas as to how the structurally weak area can be helped? “I doubt it,” he says.

Hope has generally died out

With the No in the Locarnese, not only has a regional project died, but also hope in general for a second national park in Switzerland. In 2000 it was Swiss environmental organisation Pro Natura that initiated the



The Onsernone Valley, here with a view of Russo, Comologno and the Isorno canyon, which would have been central to the failed Parco Locarnese. Photo: Keystone

debate via the campaign “Let’s establish a new national park”. The decisive factor was the realisation that Switzerland lags behind in big nature conservation areas compared with other countries. That is demonstrated by a look at neighbouring countries to the north and south: Germany has 24 national parks, Italy 16. Switzerland has just a single national park in the Engadin, which is actually a nature reserve. When it was established in 1914, Switzerland was a pioneer. The Parc Naziunal Svizzer, as the site is called in Romansh, is the oldest national park in the Alps and central Europe. But it remains an isolated case in Swiss history.

Following the Pro Natura initiative, the Swiss Parliament created the legal basis for a new national park through the revision of the Federal Act on the Protection of Nature and Cultural Heritage and the Ordinance on Parks of National Importance. The idea was to link nature protection and regional economic development through a new generation of national parks. Yet it seemed that the reservations of the population of the valleys about the national park regulations were just too great. Above all, the prohibitions in the core zones, the hunting and fishing prohibitions, and the prohibition on leaving marked trails met with bitter resistance. After initial enthusiasm, many projects were shelved. Or the promoters switched to the idea of setting up regional parks, for which less strict rules apply. And in fact, according to the Federal Office for the Environment, in the past 20 years in Switzerland 15 regional nature parks and one nature discovery park have come into being that have been recognised by the federal authorities. The Jorat (VD) nature discovery park is in the project phase.

In the top tier of nature reserves – the national parks – both projects that had made it to a vote failed. Prior to the No in the Locarnese this summer, the Parc Adula National Park Project in the border area between the cantons of Grisons and Ticino was stopped by residents at the ballot box. In a popular vote on 27 November 2016, eight of the 17 municipalities rejected the proposal. And no project will succeed in Switzerland unless it is democratically legitimised by support from the regions. A park cannot be imposed from above.

No further projects

Although the planning for both national park projects was exemplary – as was the interaction between the local, cantonal and federal authorities – the distrust and trepidation of the population prevailed. There is great disappointment now in nature and environmental circles that following the vote in the Locarnese there is virtually no prospect of a second national park. “At the moment there are no projects for a national park in Switzerland,” says Grisons Social Democratic Party (SP) National Councillor Silva Semadeni, who presided over Pro Natura for a long period.

Raimund Rodewald, director of the Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation, has not given up yet, though. He proposes that the authorities and also opponents of the national park sit down together to seek out new possibilities. “After more than ten years of planning we cannot simply say, ‘that is that.’” When road projects fail, there is always

Placards with Yes and No slogans: the Locarnese Park referendum was typically Swiss.
Photo: LOB



a search for new solutions, he says. Rodewald has written to Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard, who is politically responsible, as well as to the authorities of Ticino.

Christian Stauffer, director of the Swiss Parks Network, is disappointed about the failure of the two projects at the ballot box. In the short term, no new national park will be established. In the long term, however, he believes it is necessary. “Even in Switzerland the big natural spaces are under pressure,” says Stauffer. Among the population there is a belief that as far as nature and landscape protection go, everything is actually OK. The need for such protected areas is not recognised. It is important now to initiate a national debate, he says.

Resistance to restrictions

During the drafting of the nature and cultural heritage protection law and the parks ordinance, the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) repeatedly pointed out that from a nature conservation point of view the rigid restrictions were not necessary and could lead to strong local resistance. “Our concerns that the law was too strict have turned out to be justified,” says Philippe Wäger, head of the SAC environment and spatial planning department. The SAC central association supported the project in the Locarnese, despite misgivings.

Is there any chance at all of a new, second national park? The Federal Office for the Environment points out that parks are created on the basis of regional initiatives. In principle the possibility of a national park remains, “if the local population would support a new project.” In Switzerland, though, there are only a few regions which would fulfil the requirements for a national park, it says. For a further revision of the law, it is clear that the initiative has to come from the government or from parliament.