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Turn off the light and be lit up by the stars

Switzerland has its first star park, an area where special care is taken to preserve the darkness of the night. This is much more than a romantic project.

MARC LETTAU

One thing is for sure: the Ottenleuebad hamlet on a sunny mountain slope in the municipality of Guggisberg (BE) is not exciting. It may have been in the past. A health spa was opened there in 1886, i.e. a slightly infamous wellness and pleasure facility. However, the thriving, sensual bathing culture of that time has completely disappeared. Nowadays, it is truly unspectacular once more: a few farms and weekend homes, grazing cows, and circling birds of prey. Occasionally, you can hear a dog barking. Sometimes a mushroom picker wanders past. he peaks of the Bernese-Fribourg alpine foothills tower over the southern horizon. Gantrisch, Bürglen, Ochsen, Kaiseregg. This pre-alpine world forms the Gantrisch Nature Park.

Take the fuse out

The only thing which stands out in Ottenleuebad today is the large number of small observatories. On moonless nights, the area seems to attract stargazers, and their numbers will probably increase further. That is because, although the nights have already been quite dark up to now, they

have been a shade darker since 30 August 2019. That was when Guggisberg's mayor, Hanspeter Schneiter, unscrewed the electrical fuse of Ottenleuebad's few streetlights without further ado. As they say in the area, it was "as dark as the inside of a cow" afterwards.

The Milky Way is visible to the naked eye

Schneiter made it dark because the sparsely populated, remote region had seen the light. The night is disappearing everywhere, but not in Ottenleuebad where you can still see the Milky Way on clear nights. That is no longer possible in the Swiss urban areas because of the omnipresent artificial light. The night-time darkness has therefore become something special in areas where it still exists at all. For this reason, large portions of the Gantrisch Nature Park have been designated a star park, i.e., an area where the night is protected.

Those in charge at the Gantrisch Nature Park have been planning the very first Swiss star park for years (see "Review" 5/2016 for further information). It has not been an easy road, says project manager Nicole Dahinden:

"You first need to understand the importance of the night." However, now she is excited by "the dark heart" of the star park, i.e. the 100 square kilometres of the large core zone in the central area of the Nature Park that is well shielded by the mountains.

The light comes from the outside

As Dahinden knows, a dark heart does not remain that way when everything around it depends on illumination. The star park, this little Swiss chamber of darkness, cannot become even darker by itself: "Light enters the park from the outside." So, cities in particular have to combat light pollution.

"They have to cut down on unnecessary light," she says. The amount of light pollution in Switzerland is enormous: "The price of lighting objects at times when no one is looking at them is lost energy, sleeplessness and the loss of animal species." Municipalities in the vicinity of the "dark heart" of the star park are already working on this and have undertaken to use less artificial light. Furthermore, they are directing companies to turn off their display window lighting after 10 p.m. And if private citizens want to build, they are told how they too can contribute to the fight against light smog. Gantrisch Nature Park wants to become a competence region for sustainable lighting over the long term.

Lukas Schuler, President of Dark-Sky Switzerland, is very taken by the first star park. The organisation has been campaigning against light smog in Switzerland for years. "The star park project is helping to retain night in



The Milky Way stretches like a glittering band from the horizon between the Gantrisch and Bürglen mountains right across the entire night sky. Photo: Bernhard Burn

Hanspeter Schneiter unscrews the fuses – and it turns pitch-dark. Photo: provided

the alpine range," says Schuler. Many people are aware that light pollution harms animals and human beings. However, many places have no idea what they can do to combat it. "The star park project now means that the municipalities can control and change more in regard to night-time darkness than they were aware of in the past."

Insects stay away

The star park is far more than a romantic project for night-time enthusiasts. It has been scientifically evaluated for years as it was being developed. There are already new findings on the essence of the night.





Researcher Eva Knop and Dark-Sky activist Lukas Schuler observe an artificial light experiment in the star park. Photo: Marc Lettau

That is also necessary, says Eva Knop, a researcher at the University of Zurich and the Swiss Confederation's Centre of Excellence for agricultural research, Agroscope: "We still do not know enough about the ecological importance of the night." It is true that life as we know it couldn't even exist without the day-night cycles. However, we are only just starting to understand what happens when the night disappears. For example, Knop came to understand through her field research just how much artificial night light affects biodiversity. In the past, we did not see just how much occurs in the meadows at night, she says. A surprising number of insects pollinate flowers at night. "They do this a lot less when artificial light disturbs them," says Knop. Insects that are active during the day are not capable of compensating for the absence of nocturnal pollinators. If the subsequent experiments substantiate these initial findings, then this would unfortunately be a "new problem to address", says Knop.

Clarity instead of bravery

In light of the seriousness of the situation, Mayor Hanspeter Schneider was also praised for his bravery in unscrewing fuses and prescribing more darkness for his municipality. Schneider waves that aside: "Bravery changes nothing at all. But the power of persuasion may do." This can only happen when the people living here understand the importance of a star park. Thus, a great deal depends on the principle of hope and mutual encouragement. When asked whether the "dark heart" would one day see more circumspect handling of the night beyond its limited borders, Dahinden responds: "It is written in the stars."

Further information on the topic:
www.sternenpark-gantrisch.ch
www.ogy.de/nachtdunkelheit
www.darksky.org; www.darksky.ch

Switzerland in figures

About Emmas, lightning strikes and waste

30.7

Statistics back the claim that women are having children later in life. The average age of Swiss women on the birth of their first child is currently 30.7 years. In Europe, only Spain and Italy have a slightly higher average age.

504

A propos births: of the 42,838 girls born in Switzerland last year, 504 were called Emma and now there are more than 41,500 Emmas in Switzerland. The only name more popular is Maria (82,500). The most popular name for boys in 2018 was Liam. However, Liam is (still) a minority name: the Swiss prefer traditional names like Daniel (62,500), Peter (58,500) and Thomas (52,500).

85,270

There were 85,270 lightning strikes recorded in Switzerland during June, July and August this year. That is an unusually high number. By way of comparison, the electronic monitoring network recorded 53,430 strikes in summer 2018. Ticino was the main lightning hotspot.

24,849

How many kilometres do the Swiss cover in a year? On average 24,849 km. The most common mode of transport is the car (10,371 km), followed by the aeroplane (8,986 km) and the train (3,499 km). On foot the distance covered is 459 km, and by bike it is 301 km. It is interesting to note that holidays and leisure pursuits account for far more kilometres than commuting to work.

706

The Swiss recycle or compost more than half their waste every year. At the same time, the volume of their waste is on the rise, with 706 kg of municipal waste per person, per year. That is a lot higher than the European average of 486 kg.