

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 77 (2011)
Heft: [10]

Artikel: Swiss "tundra" sparks tug of war
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943451>

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Swiss "tundra" sparks tug of war

An eerily beautiful Swiss natural landscape being eyed by federal authorities for possible hydropower development has conservationists up in arms. Located between cantons Ticino and Graubünden, the Greina high plateau was approved for a power plant in 1962.



Only a few hikers are to be seen in the heart of the Greina.

But strong resistance from conservationists during the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with inefficiencies, scuttled the project in 1986. It lay dormant until recently, when the decision of the government to phase out nuclear energy spurred renewed interest in the modest expansion of hydropower.

An untouched, tundra-like landscape of outstanding beauty, the Greina has been variously described as "a piece of Tibet", and "a desert of grass and stone". Home to a plethora of rare species, its extensive water meadow is dotted with springs and brooks, including a source of the River Rhine.

Conservationists consider the Greina a pristine wilderness of national significance. It can be reached by foot only. There are no houses, cable railways, or even trees - only the occasional hiker navigating its mountain paths. Its striking landscape has remained untouched by people, in contrast to virtually everywhere else in the Alps.

The Swiss Federal Energy Office, in the context of the cabinet discussion on abandoning nuclear power, floated the idea of possible hydropower utilisation in protected regions, for example in the Greina plateau. Objections were fast and swift, with Pro Natura going so far as to speak of "an abandonment of nature and landscape conservation". The Energy Office, for its part, responded that any development would be ecologically sustainable.

The Greina is a central element of a prospective new Swiss national park, the Adula. It would be Switzerland's second national park, and the first established under new federal legislation stipulating regional approval and participation in such parks.

swissinfo

Highest wind turbine completed

A ceremony to mark the completion of what claims to be Europe's highest wind turbine, at over 2,400 meters above sea level, has been held in the canton of Valais.



The new turbine at Gries, Switzerland, is higher than any other in Europe

The turbine, which cost SFr5.5 million, is due to start generating power at the beginning of 2012. It will produce three gigawatt hours per year, enough for about 800 households. A further four or five turbines are to be added in the next few years. Erecting a turbine at such an altitude posed unusual technical problems. The 35-metre long blades had to be taken to the site up the winding road to the Nufenen pass on a special articulated vehicle nicknamed the "millipede".

Given the extreme cold to which it will be exposed in winter, it has a heating system - which uses very little energy - to keep the blades snow and ice free.

The designers say that numerous feasibility studies showed that the turbine will have little impact on the fauna and flora, and that it will be well integrated into the environment.

Its location near the Gries dam means that it will benefit from existing connections into the grid.

Die zwei Wurzeln

*Zwei Tannenwurzeln gross und alt
unterhalten sich im Wald.*

*Was droben in den Wipfeln rauscht,
das wird hier unten ausgetauscht.*

*Ein altes Eichhorn sitzt dabei
und strickt wohl Strümpfe für die zwei.*

*Die eine sagt: knig. Die andre sagt: knag.
Das ist genug für einen Tag.*

Christian Morgenstern