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Regional Marketing in German Biosphere Reserves 2007

Regional marketing in Germany is booming. Over 500 regional marketing projects are registered on the database maintained by the German Association for Landscape Conservation; more than half have a focus on agriculture. Regional products in the retail food trade are just as common these days as farmers' markets and regional produce shops, as well as gastronomy projects of the tourist industry. Many projects are located in the model regions of the UNESCO biosphere reserves. These regions develop own brands and coordination centres or marketing organisations, which organise functional logistics and distribution.

Spree Forest cucumber
and eco-carp

The status of regional marketing in the biosphere reserves was investigated between 2001 and 2003 within the framework of a research and development (R&D) project commissioned by the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and financed by the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU). Since then, regional marketing has developed further in some biosphere reserves. Examples of current developments are presented in a brochure produced by EUROPARC Deutschland and the BfN in 2006. For the purposes of this journal a survey was carried out at all the remaining biosphere reserves.

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In the biosphere reserve Schorfheide-Chorin, the former marketing logo was developed into a regional quality brand using the framework of the programme 'Active Regions'. This serves, above all, to extend the admissible origin of the products. Individual projects were also promoted, such as a franchising concept for regional retailers or a brand name for game products.

Endogenous potentials were made use of in an exemplary fashion in the Spree-wald biosphere reserve. After German unification, the survival of the traditional cucumber industry was seriously threatened. They were supported by the biosphere reserve establishing the over-arching economic area 'Wirtschaftsraum Spreewald'. A 'Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)' issued by the European Union today ensures that famous Spree Forest cucumbers predominantly originate from this region.

'Biosphere innkeepers' is a key project of the Upper Lausitz Heath and Pond Landscape biosphere reserve. Following many years of experience in marketing Christmas geese, the local important pond industry is to be involved in the future as a potential partner; possibly marketing eco-carp.

The regional brand of the Schaalsee biosphere reserve is already being used by about 60 businesses. The famous German movie director Detlev Buck was awarded with the regional brand for his most recent film 'Hands off Mississippi' – a clever PR-event! Farmers' markets regularly take place at the information centre 'Pahlhuus'.



The Elbe River Landscape biosphere reserve also organises an annual farmers' market and promotes the marketing of fruit juice produced in traditionally managed orchards. A feasibility study for a regional brand was carried out and an application was submitted to the European Union funding scheme LEADER for the purpose of introducing the regional brand.

The Franco-German Pfälzerwald/Vosges du Nord transboundary biosphere reserve commissioned a feasibility study for a transboundary regional brand in 2006/2007. Approximately 35 partner businesses and the 30 suppliers of the successful German-French farmers' markets (about 10 to 12 events per year) are to be integrated under this brand.

In the Rhön biosphere reserve a new, uniform brand was developed, which is now being used by 125 businesses. The focus is on meat and its products. The twelve partner businesses of the biosphere reserves use a joint eco-regional brand. More and more processing and retail businesses from the region are using the association with the biosphere reserve for their own marketing purposes.

In the Berchtesgaden biosphere reserve there are even three organisations promoting regional marketing today.

Following the R&D project 'Sustainable Management in Biosphere Reserves' in 2007 and 2008, regional marketing will also gain greater in importance in the

Lower Saxon Elbe River Landscape and the Upper Lausitz Heath and Pond Landscape biosphere reserves. The Wadden Sea of Lower Saxony biosphere reserve as a 'Sustainable Region' is to receive increased European Union funding.

In the Bliesgau biosphere reserve (currently being founded) regional marketing is actively being put into practice with the Bliesgau-Regal, a rack with a set range of regional produce. Eleven suppliers currently market around 50 different products in 25 supermarkets. Special action weeks, for example to promote beer, game and lamb as well as 'products of the month', are an integral part of the marketing strategy.

Some of the mentioned projects and regional brands from biosphere reserves are well known today at the national level. In other biosphere reserves, regional marketing is less well developed. There, the topic is either not considered to be a central item for the purposes of sustainable economies; instead there is stronger focus on tourism and environmental education. Other biosphere reserves do not see any possibility to spur on regional development due to their size, their geographical structure or their staff resources.

Success factors

The following aspects are important success factors for a regional marketing conception for biosphere reserves:

Strengthening regional brands

Increasing national significance

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- a) Size of the region. Many biosphere reserves are too small for effective and efficient projects. In these cases, involving the administrative district as a whole could be useful.
- b) Criteria of production. Conventional production is not sustainable, ecological production usually results in too limited production. An appropriate criterion could be 'ecological plus extensive'.
- c) Involvement of local businesses. Not only farmers and craftsmen, but also the production and retail industries should be approached.
- d) Political support by politicians, above all by the ministry in charge at federal state level.

Within the framework of the above mentioned R&D project, 20 success factors were identified, by which the strengths and weaknesses of regional marketing can be assessed efficiently.

Competition for the biosphere reserves

These days, the biosphere reserves are no longer the only model regions aspiring to sustainable development. Sustainability is also aimed at by nature parks in the PLENUM-regions in Baden-Württemberg or in the project 'Active Regions' (2001-2007) defined by the Federal Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV). In addition European Union governance structures such as ILEKS and LEADER play a role. All these backdrops for activity either overlap or end up in competition with each other.

In regional development and regional marketing there is a definite trend towards large territories with regard to admissible origin of products like the (entire) Rhön, the Eiffel, the whole of Ostfriesland or the Bodensee region. New over-arching regional brands serve as umbrella brands, for non-food products as well as for integrated location-marketing.

This is definitely appropriate for making marketing projects economically viable. With a larger backdrop for business the number of farmers, medium-sized production and retail businesses grows; the distributed amounts grow with the number of customers. In that way piece prices decrease, the organisation pays off sooner and becomes less dependent on subsidies. Yet also larger regions are, for the most part, reliant on subsidies for the first three to five years.

As a result regional brands from different regions now compete for scarce rack space in the supermarkets of large cities; also the respective governance-structures are in competition. Competition will require increasingly professional structures as well as different production and distribution scales in future.

On the other hand, the food retail industry is now more easily accessible for regional products. In the federal state of Hesse for example the supermarket chain REWE is increasing its range of regional products on offer. EDEKA Südwest, another grocery store chain, is already copying the 'regional marketing strategy', developing a regional retail brand of its own. Middle-sized branches such as Tegut in Fulda and Feneberg in Kempten use marketing of eco- and regional products in order to enhance their company profile. The economic success of marketing projects more and more depends on the retail food industry. It is the driving force for new scales, structures and levels of professionalism of regional marketing projects.

The need for further research

After the BMU paved the way, the BMELV is supporting the regional movement and regional marketing throughout Germany more actively. For example, it supports the internet platforms www.tagderregionen.de and www.reginet.de. However research is being neglected at present and it is no longer keeping up with the changes occurring in practice. There are still no cost-benefit analyses available for regional marketing projects, neither for entire projects nor for the individual farm, the middle-sized business or for trade. There is an urgent need for research, as the presumed results will almost certainly be suitable for attracting further businesses.

Research is also lacking on the more ambitious intention of some model regions to support sustainable economic development. This relates to, above all, the UNESCO biosphere reserves, but also the PLENUM-regions in Baden Württemberg and future LEADER projects. The development of regional added value chains is often fundamentally important. However what does sustainable economic development mean beyond typical regional development projects? Can biosphere reserves offer more business-oriented support for sustainable economy? What do the businesses need and what do they expect? An R&D project addressing these very questions 'Sustainable Economic Development in Biosphere Reserves' is currently being commissioned by the BMU, exemplary in two of the German biosphere reserves.

A match to this challenge?

The association of German protected areas, EUROPARC Deutschland poses some fundamental and critical questions in a new guideline on regional

marketing. The catalogue of demands put on the biosphere reserves has expanded drastically over the last decades, while the human resources and budgets have hardly changed to this day. Human and other resources as well as insufficiently qualified staff mean that professionalism is sadly lacking with regard to tackling regional development and regional marketing.

Some projects in the biosphere reserves, even more so in other regions such as 'Active Regions', PLENUM or 'Our Country' (Unser Land) however show that large, ambitious as well as economy-oriented projects can be organised. Thus in the biosphere reserves, structures as 'intermediary organisations' have to be created, which allow for entrepreneurial action in regional or marketing management. Such intermediary structures have successfully been put into place in the case of the LEADER or PLENUM programmes for regional management. Such concepts were in effect already encouraged for the biosphere reserves by the National Guidelines. The support of decision-makers in higher-ranking

authorities and ministries as well as in the administrative districts involved is also necessary. However, how can such support be systematically improved?

A handle is to regularly check customer satisfaction. The image and performance of regional management are regularly checked, for example, in the PLENUM programme by the self-assessment method of the EFQM model (European Foundation for Quality Management). Additionally, an external assessment is carried out through consulting regional key persons. Coaching for specialist and executive staff is also becoming increasingly established in regional development. Systematic instruments such as these can also serve to optimise organisational structures, leadership, strategies and marketing for achieving sustainability goals in the biosphere reserves.

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