Geotourism:
The Tourism of Geology and Landscape

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Introduction

A sharp increase in interest in geotourism worldwide in recent years has transformed many suitable regions into unique geotourism destinations opening up great opportunities for geoconservation and regional sustainable development. To fully capitalize on this potential, however, it is essential to bring together the fragmented stakeholders from the public and private sectors and establish appropriate structures and processes to facilitate their effective communication and collaboration. Only through such a partnership can an adequate knowledge base, built on diverse experiences and expertise, be established to provide certainty and guidance in the sustainable development of local geotourism products. Thus, effective communication networks and an open exchange of information are cornerstones of a successful implementation of geotourism in a region. The Network History of the Earth is a case in point for such a successful geotourism partnership. It was founded in 1997 as a framework for cooperation between a range of diverse stakeholders working together to develop a high quality sustainable tourism product based on the unique georesources of South-West Germany (Pforr and Megerle, 2006).

South-West Germany mainly comprises the State of Baden-Württemberg and covers an area of 35,752 square kilometres with a population of around 10.7 million people (see Figure 8.3). A typical feature of the state is its wide variety of natural landscapes which can be subdivided into three main landforms, the Upper Rhine Graben (Oberrhein-graben) in the west surrounded by the Black Forest (Schwarzwald) in the east and the Vosges Mountains (Vogesen) on the western French side, the southwestern cuesta landscape (Schichtstufenland) gently sloping towards the south-east as well as the Alpine piedmont (Alpenvorland). These diverse and distinct landscapes form the resource base of tourism, and, in some cases, like the jurassic geopark Swabian Alb and the mining areas of the Black Forest, also for geotourism (Geyer and Megerle, 2003). The service sector industries contribute almost 34 per cent to the state's economic activities with tourism being an important industry for the state in general, but especially economically significant for regional areas.

The Network History of the Earth, comprising a diverse range of stakeholders from south-west Germany, has helped to foster a creative atmosphere, to identify the hidden

potential of the various network partners and to ensure the sustainability of its products and processes. To achieve this ambitious task, personal ties and frequent communication have been core elements, which often emerged from an active involvement in local projects (Megerle and Pauls, 2004a).

In the past, as part of assessing the network's actions, instruments and tools were developed to examine the transfer of know-how and the creation of competencies within the Network History of the Earth (Pauls and Megerle, 2002; Sydow *et al.*, 2003). Methodologies employed included observations from inside, interviews with network partners, and data analysis. With the help of these evaluations some difficulties have been identified over the network's ten-year lifespan as the creativity and success of the Network History of the Earth relies on the stability and quality of its relational constellations. Stakeholder interviews, for instance, unveiled that a high degree of staff fluctuation within the various partner organizations can have a negative impact on the network's performance. Furthermore, at times insufficient communication and information exchange in certain areas, for example with staff of visitor information centres, resulted in only limited transfer of know-how among tourism partners. Another significant outcome of this evaluation process was the importance of personal ties between network participants. It was found that know-how is mainly transferred informally, outside official meetings during coffee or lunch breaks, and on occasions when the various players participate in a common experience-building event (Megerle, 2005; Elsholz *et al.*, 2006). In the following, we will have a closer look at the evaluation system of the Network History of the Earth which is dynamic and integrated into the network process (Pollermann, 2007).

Designing a network evaluation system

In general, evaluation can be described as the systematic and target oriented collection, analysis and assessment of data for quality management and quality control. Its function is to help assess processes concerning planning, developing, designing and implementing offerings and/or actions (e.g. methods, programmes) taking into account quality, functionality, impacts, efficiency and benefits (evaluationsnetz.com, n.d.).

The complexity of this definition and the notion 'target-oriented' already illustrate that network evaluations have to be adapted to a certain context, to the specific demands of the respective network and its stakeholders. This is important, not only for the construction of a specific contextual evaluation design but also for its de-construction, which is a crucial step in the interpretation of evaluation results or evaluation systems and also in relation to network assessments. The framework of the network, but also the interests and motivations of its stakeholders create specific perspectives, constraints and foci of the individual evaluation system.

The specific demands on the evaluation system for the Network History of the Earth can be described by the following aspects:

♦   It had to focus on the development of competencies on all levels, i.e. core stakeholders, affiliated partners and the network as a whole.

♦   As quick and flexible reactions are imperative for an innovative network, the evaluation had to be of a formative nature.

♦   As researchers driving the evaluation process were also key stakeholders in the network, the evaluation constituted more or less an internal self-evaluation.

Chapter extract

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