

Preface

Prof. Dr. Georg Grabherr, Chair of the MAB Committee

It must have been 1985, when someone from the provincial government of the Tyrol rang me and asked if it was true that there was a biosphere reserve in this province. I was able to confirm that, as indeed the Gurgler Kamm, along with the Lobau (Lower Austria), Neusiedler See (Burgenland) and the other Tyrolian site Gossenköllesee had been proposed in 1977 by Austria as biosphere reserve and been accepted by UNESCO. However, hardly anyone had noticed the designation of the Gurgler Kamm, not even the administration under whose responsibility it fell. Spare a little understanding for the authorities, though: unlike the national parks, biosphere reserves at that time did not have any legal basis, their content and management were not really defined. It is therefore hardly surprising that the biosphere reserve Gurgler Kamm continued to exist at best as a “sleeping beauty”, some even thought of it as dead. In the day-to-day work of conservation and land-use planning, biosphere reserves were seen as a brand without substance. This only changed when UNESCO developed a clear concept of the content and character of biosphere reserves in its Seville Strategy, which was officially declared in 1995. The Seville Strategy was de facto the “prince” who kissed the biosphere reserves awake with a new, liberal concept for conservation and utilisation. It brought with it the pressure to think again about what to do with the “old” parks. According to the Seville Strategy, the conservation of the natural resources of a region and its traditional forms of utilisation should be linked in an exemplary way with sustainable economic development. Biosphere reserves must therefore orientate themselves not just towards conservation but also towards the needs of the affected population. In the early years after their introduction in 1974, via

the UNESCO research programme “Man and the Biosphere” (MAB), biosphere reserves had mainly served as focal points for MAB relevant research and for “conservation of natural areas and the genetic material they contain”. With the newly formulated tasks of the Seville Strategy however, another chapter was opened. In its wake, early parks based on this concept evolved in Germany, for instance on the Rhön, followed by the Swiss biosphere reserve Entlebuch. Research took a back seat, the main focus in these areas, all of which were underdeveloped, being on regional economic support. Biosphere reserves with their subdivision into core area, buffer zone and transition area, were considered lucrative propositions and so, with the close involvement of the local population, the only Austrian biosphere reserve to adopt the Seville Strategy to date, the Großes Walsertal (Vorarlberg), was created. Planning for a biosphere reserve Vienna Woods (Lower Austria/Vienna) has progressed well. By now a veritable boom can be noted: there are initiatives along the rivers March and Thaya (Lower Austria), in the Pongau and the Lungau (Salzburg), in the Wachau (Lower Austria), for the Koralm (Carinthia) and in the region around the Dürrenstein (Lower Austria). At the same time, UNESCO, in its MAB research, which in Austria is carried out and co-ordinated by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, is pursuing a strategy of focusing research on the biosphere reserves.

To make efficient use of the relatively small research funds, the national committee decided to start by gathering all useful information on biosphere reserves in general and for Austria in particular. Apart from developing a research concept, the Austrian Academy of Sciences also set out to assess the status quo



Since 2003, Prof. Georg Grabherr is chair of the Austrian MAB Committee. He is leading the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology at the University of Vienna.



Researcher at Gossenköllesee: among other things biosphere reserves serve as laboratories for scientific questions.

Photo: Roland Psenner

of current and planned biosphere reserves in Austria and of the research efforts from the MAB-era and to present the situation in a whitebook aimed at a broader public. With this whitebook, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which is dedicated to basic research, has entered new ground and is responding to the demands for widely available and comprehensible information on its research, voiced with increasing intensity by society at large. Likewise, future MAB research should and will orientate itself on concrete research requirements of the local population and the management in biosphere reserves. This is not to curtail basic research: the opportunity for using biosphere reserves as “open air laboratories” for research in the natural sciences as well as the humanities should be taken advantage of.

The biosphere reserve scene is clearly moving. This means that a more thorough debate on what should be done about first generation parks like the Gurgler Hauptkamm has become unavoidable. Particularly from a scientific point of view this would be very welcome, as there has been research going on there for more than thirty years since the start of the UNESCO MAB programme and it would allow interesting comparisons in ecological but also in social and economic terms. So there was another telephone conversation with the provincial government of the Tyrol, this time initiated by me: “Re-definition of the biosphere reserve Gurgler Kamm?” – “Please, don’t!” This reaction, too, is in part understandable. The officials were just wiping their brows with relief after the completion of the large EU conservation project NATURA 2000. Strenuous debates, heated conflict and prolonged negotiations lay behind them and now they were confronted with something new again. No, they could not and would not confront the population – and themselves – with this new conservation concept.

It takes considerable effort to redefine or re-establish a biosphere reserve. Biosphere reserves are not a classic conservation concept. Their designation is mainly intended to trigger an ongoing process. It takes a strong and committed management and a matching infrastructure to control and co-ordinate this process, i.e. to secure conservation and at the same time to support economic stability in the region. It will always need support from the public purse. Biosphere reserves are much more demanding than national parks, they are more expensive and they represent a never-ending project. They are areas of excellence and can have an enormously positive impact on the future of a country, and as a global network, on the entire world. Society should afford itself this impact. The MAB National Committee at the Austrian Academy of Sciences is determined to make its contribution. This is to thank all those involved: the members of the committee, the Austrian commission for UNESCO and the many people we talked to, who contributed to making this whitebook work. I want to express particular thanks to Dr. Gerlinde Schrammel, for many years the life and soul of the MAB programme. Schrammel, responsible for all international programmes at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, looked after the MAB programme with expertise, charm and decisiveness, thus giving excellent support to a demanding field of research. May she now enjoy her retirement, which in the opinion of the undersigned came much too early, in the “Austrian Puszta” to which she relocated. I wish her successor, Dr. Günther Köck, best of luck for the new MAB era. Last but not least, I would like to thank the project workers who surpassed expectations with this carefully researched work.

Königstetten, 5. September 2004
o.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Georg Grabherr