

NEWSLETTER

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Babara Schauer: Oberhirschgraben - A typical landscape in the Austrian pilot region Mühltal Kernland

DECLARATION FOR VITAL LANDSCAPES

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Central Europe Project “Vital Landscapes” aims to contribute to preserving the quality, diversity and beauty of cultural landscapes in Central Europe. The project tested innovative participation and visualization techniques with a view to introducing cross-sectoral development strategies for selected regions, and in doing so generated new techniques and a series of good-practice examples.

This Declaration for Vital Landscapes presents the generally applicable results of our project activities and reflects active discussions within the project

partnership regarding the aspects that constitute a vital landscape. This Declaration for Vital Landscapes comprises seven key findings that, based on the status-quo, represent a draft vision for a future state of “vital landscapes”, as well as missions that should be considered by key stakeholders in designing, adopting and/or implementing landscape policies on all levels of decision-making.

Please feel free to pass the declaration onto anyone you think may be interested.

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I. Vital landscapes are perceived by people.

They play an important role in shaping regional, local and personal identities.

Status Quo: The European Landscape Convention (ELC) defines a landscape as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (Art. 1 lit.a ELC). Whether in urban areas or in the countryside, in everyday areas or in those characterized as being of outstanding beauty [ELC, preamble], people value different aspects and qualities of landscapes. Landscapes are constituted through perception and are the result of human-nature interactions. A comprehensive understanding of landscapes includes near-natural and cultivated landscapes as well as settlements in urban and rural areas. Humans form an intrinsic part of these landscapes. In our regional processes we found out that people are aware of their landscapes, and that landscapes are already an important part of local and regional identities, but that people often do not realize what exactly creates identity and how their behaviour influences landscape development, and in turn their local and regional identities.

Vision: In vital landscapes the general public, planners and decision-makers are aware of and value the elements and ways how landscapes and their elements, may they be natural or man-made, contribute to local and regional identities. Identity via landscape is part of the public discussion and local and regional policy making, in order to preserve, manage and develop the landscape features and elements that constitute local and regional identity.

Mission: In planning processes, key landscape features and elements have to be identified that contribute to local and regional identity. Landscape quality objectives (LQO) for these features and elements have to be formulated in order to define the target states. An awareness has to be cultivated, that even simple everyday actions, like the choice of regional foods and products, have an influence on the state of landscapes, and, thus, on the shaping of local and regional identities. This awareness has to be transferred into everyday action in line with the agreed LQO. Participatory planning processes on the local and regional level provide useful frameworks to achieve these issues (see point IV of this Declaration).

II. Vital landscapes are expected to meet diverse demands.

Healthy environments provide a wide range of ecosystem services.

Status Quo: In the past few decades, developments in several economic sectors and subject areas have accelerated the transformation of landscapes and led to a loss of landscape diversity and biodiversity. For instance, on-going structural changes in agriculture (decrease in the number of farms, increasing farm size etc.), afforestation or uncontrolled urban sprawl and permanent sealing of surfaces comprise such challenges for vital landscapes.

Vision: A high diversity of landscape elements, a variety of plant and animal life, diverse landscape functions as well as socio-spatial diversity are key features of vital landscapes. As multifunctional landscapes they have the potential to fulfil ecological, economic, cultural and aesthetic functions. Vital landscapes have the distinctive characteristic of being able to provide for a wide range of ecosystem services. These span from provisioning (food, water, energy etc.) to regulating (climate, floods etc.) as

well as cultural (e.g. recreation, aesthetic enjoyment) and supporting services (e.g. soil formation or nutrient cycling).

Mission: Each use of landscape resources has to demonstrate that it complies with environmental capacity limits (1) by introducing regionally differentiated environmental objectives, for example LQO, in any planning process relevant for landscape protection and development, (2) by defining measures within action plans related to landscape protection and development, and (3) to assess if proposed actions are in line with environmental and landscape protection and development. In relevant planning processes the relation between environmental and other desired objectives, proposed actions and environmental impacts should be made visible so that decision-makers and local/regional communities are empowered to adjust objectives and measures so that they remain within environmental capacity limits.

III. Vital landscapes are economically self-sufficient and provide the resource base for sustainable societies.

Status Quo: Unsustainable economic activities impair landscape services. Actions to increase one landscape service may often be to the detriment of other services. Economy – as a sub-system of society – often oversteps its boundaries, impacting on parallel system(s) in society and/or the environment and endangering the stability of the overall system.

Vision: Landscapes constitute and provide resources for a multitude of goods and services and, therefore, support economic activities. The use of regional resources is a main factor of endogenous regional economic development. Economic activities based on own regional resources (e.g. agricultural products, processing of primary products, energy generation, tourism or new (social) services) represent an opportunity to strengthen the quality of life for local communities and to create income from landscape resources. This means closing regional economic cycles between production and consumption to keep spending capacity in the re-

gion. In this way the multi-functionality of vital landscapes enhances sustainable development.

Mission: For each region, ways in which landscape quality is already being developed, or can be developed into an important economic factor need to be elaborated, as well as which sustainable economic activities can be based on regional resources. Entrepreneurs need to embrace their ecological and social as well as economic responsibility, e.g. by offering resource-efficient products and services or promoting the use of the best-available technologies. Public and private consumers should be encouraged to exercise their responsibility for sustainable development in the choice of products and services as well as in the use and disposal of goods. Synergies between sustainable production and consumption on the one hand, and landscape preservation and development on the other hand, should be systematically explored.

IV. Vital landscapes are home to vital communities.

Status Quo: The degradation of landscapes, for example, through the loss of landscape diversity affects the quality of life because landscapes are a key factor for physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being. Policy- and decision-makers as well as the general public regularly underestimate their influence on landscape development. Across policy domains (e.g. agriculture, economy, energy) regulations have a considerable impact on landscape development. Local and regional decision-makers influence landscape transformations, for example by implementing land use regulations. Finally, the general public is also responsible for landscape degradation in their everyday activities, such as car-based commuting or the consumption of resource-intensive products.

Vision: Natural processes and human activities together with human attitudes and values shape vital landscapes. Humans do not simply live in landscapes, but are integral parts of vital landscapes. People with particular drive initiate and sustain landscape-related activities that strengthen local and regional identity, raise awareness for and create a sense of ownership of the landscapes, as well as the societal and economic processes shaping them. They assume responsibility and motivate others to take part in conscious and self-organised

action. The consideration of economic, social and cultural landscape issues opens new perspectives for sustainable development based on the existing skills of local people or skills that can be developed within the local/regional community, consequently contributing to the improvement of quality of life and local/regional knowledge utilising local and regional landscape resources.

Mission: People are invited to take the shaping and utilisation of their living environment into their own hands. Participation processes dealing with landscape issues help to develop a sense of identification and to anchor the implementation of sustainable landscape development in day-to-day thought, decisions and (economic) actions. They provide help towards self-help by making potential visible and by activating local know-how. Furthermore, landscape protection and management can be supported by community-based and civil-society-based (voluntary) work. Landowners, e.g. farmers, should be partly released from the duty of landscape management, and in return should at least tolerate landscape protection and management activities on their properties. In this way, relevant stakeholders and the general public can work together for the protection, management and development of vital landscapes.

V. Vital landscapes are dynamic.

Clear visioning prevents arbitrary landscape developments.

Status Quo: As outlined in the European Landscape Convention, landscapes are a key factor in individual and social well-being. People assess their quality of life with reference to the quality and state of the landscape they inhabit. Participatory planning in landscape development is not equally practiced in Central European Member States, regions and local communities. Visions and action plans for landscape development, though included in strategic planning documents, are very often not elaborated through intensive active public or stakeholder involvement.

Vision: The public shall be involved in the elaboration and implementation of visions and action plans for vital landscapes. Active participation as “local experts” and “stewards of landscape” – e.g. in the form of landscape dialogues, photo competitions or school workshops – allows people to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of current landscapes

and to elaborate visions of future vital landscapes. This enhances people’s sense of ownership of the participatory process and fosters self-organization in regional and landscape development. The participatory development of visions for vital landscapes may also increase public acceptance of future landscape developments as well as landscape protection and management measures.

Mission: Local and regional planning authorities must assume key roles in initiating participatory processes in landscape development. In cooperation with agents of local and regional development (such as village renewal, LEADER or Local Agenda 21), they are encouraged to promote more active public involvement in elaborating visions and action plans for vital landscapes such as through co-planning and co-design, co-decision-making or co-implementation.

VI. Vital landscapes constitute an essential part of quality of life.

Visions and action plans for vital landscapes shall be elaborated in participatory processes involving the general public.

Status Quo: Visions for landscape developments are an integral part of current Central European planning strategies. Although they explicitly address current challenges in land use and aim to limit negative human impacts on landscapes, problems in landscape development still persist. In particular, urban sprawl, land consumption and loss of landscape diversity and biodiversity pose serious threats to landscapes throughout Central Europe. Current instruments in spatial planning and land consolidation have as yet been unable to contain these adverse effects. On the contrary, in some regions they have accelerated landscape degradation.

Vision: Shaped by anthropogenic and natural influences, landscapes evolve over time and are subject to perpetual transformation. To prevent arbitrary developments and regulate human impacts, landscape dynamics need to be managed and steered according to generally accepted visions for landscape protection and development. Visioning provides a frame of reference for the future, desired

state of landscapes. Formulated as landscape quality objectives, these visions may also address current challenges in land use (e.g. urban sprawl or soil-sealing). Visualising the actual state of landscape, landscape changes and development scenarios provides an effective method for understanding and developing visions for vital landscapes in participatory planning processes.

Mission: Formal and informal planning procedures have to be applied to limit and counter negative human impacts on landscapes. Political decision-makers and authorities must strengthen the legislative basis, ensure a more effective implementation of land-use regulations, re-assess subsidies that have adverse landscape impacts (e.g. commuter allowances, certain housing subsidies) and limit energy and land consumption through coordinated energy and spatial planning. This can provide the necessary top-down frameworks for developing sustainable and vital landscapes in bottom-up processes.



VII. Vital landscapes are spaces of learning. They encourage social interaction and knowledge-based actions.

Status Quo: Educational institutions and agents of regional development (e.g. village renewal, LEADER, Local Agenda 21) – though enhancing knowledge-transfer and enabling social processes of learning within their institutions – currently do not sufficiently exercise their roles as agents for landscapes of learning. The potential of landscapes to serve as learning environments is as yet not exploited to their full extent.

Vision: As the result of human-nature interrelations, landscapes themselves constitute environments for learning. Learning about, with and in landscapes are key elements of vital landscapes. Learning fosters a comprehensive understanding of landscape

dynamics and knowledge-based actions in everyday life (e.g. housing, mobility, economic activity, consumption) as a prerequisite for developing vital landscapes.

Mission: Decision-makers and planning authorities, especially on the local level, shall assume key roles in promoting landscapes as spaces of learning. By actively involving educational institutions and regional/local development organisations in participatory processes for developing visions for the landscape, they can encourage a comprehensive understanding and a critical reflection of current landscape developments.

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