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Native Americans and National Parks – A question concerning Sustainability

A case study of environmental controversies in the United States National Park System - taking a "reason-based" approach in terms of the principles of discourse ethics as the common ground for local interests, global responsibility and participation in decision-making.

1. Background and proposed idea

Conflicts in nature conservation can be observed worldwide.

The goal of my research is to advance the knowledge of how we can establish nature reserves founded on the concept of sustainability.

The totality of this research will focus on conflicts that have developed around **national parks,** in order to judge them in the light of the idea of sustainable development (SD). However, the evolution of this concept over the last 20 years has led to many serious contradictions resulting from multiple interpretations, conflicting goals, and discrepancies among the ethical norms which govern the processes that implement these various ideas; e.g., there are dilemmas arising between social integration, environmental protection and economic development in respect to present and future social needs. As a result of this confusion and the lack of consensus, a danger

presents itself if national parks continue to be used as a yardstick for SD without continually being subjected to a critical reflection in regards to the fundamental principles determining their function. Without this necessary groundwork, there is a serious threat of undermining basic human dignity. To persist down this blind alley without evolving a proper dialogical platform will inevitably lead to further problems, at the expense of the environment and the lives of many people.

Based on the research I have conducted in Germany, similar problems to those found in the US also affect the country's protected areas (Reinsch 2010).

In light of this connection, I am highly interested in the current debate in the US amongst stakeholders and the community of scientists and humanities scholars. US national parks are perceived world-wide as functioning models for the world's national park movement and therefore, a deeper analysis of them is bound to provide further insight into the general issue concerning the international community.

Additionally, Native Americans living in National Parks across the US introduce a further challenge to SD. Dispossession and land rights issues have become increasingly heated topics of debate, and these factors in turn exacerbate an already fragile situation concerning environmental protection. As a European scientist, it would be a privilege to gain access to the debate on these pertinent issues for the purpose of my research. This would lead to a more thorough grasp of the inherent challenges SD must potentially face, and those essential to the research and understanding of what constitutes a project worthy of addressing the totality of human needs in the most desirable and rational manner.

1.1 National parks: A wide range of differing views

There is a wide range of fundamentally conflicting opinions about what should constitute a national park and how it should be governed.

For example, in a book published by PBS titled "The national parks: America´s Best Ideas" (Ducan et al. 2009), homage is paid to America's national parks and the people who have fought to save them. This book emphasizes the value of wilderness and champions America's national parks as the "**crown jewels"** of its natural heritage. To preserve this heritage, the "**National Park Service's Sustainable Design Initiative"** was established**.** This initiative tries "to integrate principles that enable humans to live in harmony with the natural world, protecting biodiversity and sharing habitats with other species" (NSP 2011). This approach attempts to achieve its environmental goals on the basis of a holistic idea, which attributes an intrinsic value to nature. (E.g. Hannover Principles in: McDonough 1992; NPS 2011).

On the other hand, publications such as, "Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples" (Dowie 2009) and "American Indians & national parks" (Keller et al. 1998), point out the enormous price of **social exclusion** paid by the indigenous people who live in these protected areas, as well as the **misunderstanding of the concepts of** "**wilderness**" and "**intrinsic value**"; concepts that have always played a crucial role in the shaping of our attitude towards conservation and nature in general.

1.2 Conflicts in the Lower Oder Valley:

Based on the research I performed in the rural East German area of the Lower Oder Valley national park, my initial impression is that the opinions of relevant stakeholders are as divided on the issues surrounding national parks in Germany as they are in the USA. Many local residents in the area feel excluded from the management of the park and have expressed strong dissatisfaction. They believe that their input is as valuable as that of the so called 'experts,' and that they should be consulted on various issues such as how the landscape should be designed; how natural resources may be used; how the protection of nature is understood and defined; and how participation in this process must be realized; all this being in stark opposition to the top down structure, which determines the park's current fate (Reinsch 2010).

Furthermore in the US, the slogan "national parks – the best idea America ever had" has often been promoted. This attitude is also propagated by the German Lower Oder Valley national park administration. In this context, the attitude takes on the form of propaganda used to dispel objections against the present governance of this protected area, and also to fight against the antagonisms of those who resist the attribution of an intrinsic value to nature, which was introduced in the legislation of the country's latest conservation laws (Wilke 1996; Haber 2008). In short, there is still a great demand for a fairer and more lucid discourse concerning the issues and challenges facing the park (Metzner 2011).

2. Discourse Ethics as a background of research

My research project is outlined in terms of the concept of SD as conceived in the Discourse Ethics (DE) of J. Habermas and K.O. Apel, which combines Critical Theory and ecological ethics in a practical orientation (Brulle 2002). The main issue here is not the conflict of ideologies, but the more essential question of how to implement modes of communication between them.

My approach will necessarily involve the study of goals, the means through which they are achieved and the results that are actually obtained. This leads the focus of my research towards five essential questions:

1) Which **goals** are being followed and what **norms** are obeyed in their achievement?
2) How are **communication, participation and the processes of decision-making** realized?
3) What are the **effects** of goals, norms and processes of communication and decision-making?
4) Who are the **stakeholders** and what are their ideas and problems pertaining to the issue(s) at hand?
5) What possible **solutions** are available for these problems?

In the light of these questions, I will structure my fieldwork and break them down into more detailed research questions. In the end I will discuss how goals, norms and processes that help govern national parks and their local residents can be understood as a contribution to SD.

The concept of SD itself is defined as set forth in my dissertation, fundamentally grounded on the principles of Discourse Ethics (Reinsch 2010; Apel, 1992). This inquiry is an investigation into the essential conditions which must belong to a given discourse context if it is to develop the most optimal situation in which open, free and fair discussion and decision-making processes prevail and regulate the needs of the effected people according to the notions of local and global justice.

3. Research Questions

By introducing the sustainability approach as a means of dealing with the aforementioned problems, the following questions, which will facilitate my research, will be asked:

A) What conflicts currently exist between the Native American community and the conservation policies of the National Park System in the US?

B) Is there a contradiction between ecological and social sustainability within the function of its protected areas as they currently operate?

To begin, my research will focus on the native constituency of the local population on the basis that they are generally understood to be the most vulnerable in regards to these conflicts (Keller et al. 1998: xii). Obviously, some research will have to support this hypothesis.

These two main guiding research questions will be articulated by more specific questions as formulated in section two above. These subsidiary questions will be applied directly to current issues of high priority for the local native population.

Establishing useful contacts on both sides will constitute a primary outcome of this program. Beyond the fieldwork of this project I will expound upon the collected information by subjecting it to a further examination as put forth in the catalog of questions listed in the appendix.

4. Fieldwork: Process and Making Contact

The acquisition of knowledge during my research will be carried out in a transdisciplinary fashion. The empirical base will consist in part of interviews conducted with individuals responsible for nature conservation, people affected by it, government officials, and scientists.

The information gained through fieldwork will be supplemented by scientific publications, media research and official documents from ministries and government agencies.

Given my concerns, I have compiled the following list of initial contacts for my research:

- Arizona State University: The Global Institute of Sustainability (e.g. Advancing Conservation in a Social Context (McShane 2007)),
- The Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona,
- The Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency.

Any further recommendations will be highly appreciated.

Appendix:

Catalog of questions:

1) Questions pertaining to goals and norms, e.g.:

- To who should the land, the forests and fish belong? (Sachs 2003: 4). (To future generations; to the native people; to the majority who is represented by democratically elected decision makers?)
- Should we leave present conditions untouched or cherish them and make sure they last? Or, continue to wall it up, fence it off and take shiny things from it so we can all get rich?
- What obligations do others owe to people displaced by parks? (West et al. 1991: xv ff.)

2) Questions pertaining to communication and processes of decision-making, e.g.:

- How can the administrative and legal framework be reconciled within DE?
- How can resource preservation and native economic development be reconciled together?
- Who plans? Who decides? Who has political power and what does that mean?
- How are and should decision-making processes be implemented on different levels of society (from a local point of view in terms of self-understanding to global obligations e.g. of biological sustainability and needs of future generations).

3) Questions pertaining to outcomes e.g.:

- Do national parks accommodate the needs of local people in regards to their livelihood, considering well known issues such as unemployment, food security, social disarticulation etc. (Cernea 2003)
- Do the national parks serve the interest of the developed countries (e.g. USA) at the expense of local people? (Schelhas 2003)

4) Questions pertaining to stakeholders, e.g.:

- Does the assumption that native people live in harmony with nature fit reality? Do environmentalists have an overly romantic view of natives and ecology?

5) Questions pertaining to possible solutions (best practice), e.g.:

- What is the success rate of existing policies etc.?

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