

characteristics that convinced UNESCO to designate the Swabian Alb BR.

The Alb plateau

On the Alb plateau, forests, especially on low crests, alternate with fields and meadows in a pattern of small patch sizes. The characteristic and ecologically valuable juniper heaths came about through centuries of sheep keeping. Selective browsing and trampling by sheep and goats prevent scrub encroachment in the heaths, thus preserving high species diversity, e.g. silver thistle (*Carlina acaulis*) and pasque flower (*Pulsatilla vulgaris*), on poor soils. Grazing animals avoid the typical juniper (*Juniperus communis*) because of its hard, pointed leaves. Traditional itinerant shepherding plays a vital role in the exchange of species between pastures through sheep transporting bits of plants and small animals in their coats.

While sheep keeping was still quite profitable in the 19th century, it cannot survive today without subsidies from agricultural environment programmes. In today's landscape of settlements and transport infrastructure, it has become impossible to sustain the traditional system of large-scale transhumance, which meant spending the winter in warmer regions on Lake Constance or in the Rhine valley. The BR administration supports projects to encourage the consumption of lamb, and the use of wool and juniper products, such as bangles, necklaces or household items, in an effort to maintain shepherding and with it the juniper heaths. Preserving dry habitats such as juniper heaths or poor meadows is vital because the Swabian Alb is one of the overarching ecologic corridors for dry habitat species in Central Europe.

The Großes Lautertal

The karst processes of the limestone have left the Alb plateau largely devoid of bodies of water. This makes the valley of the Große Lauter river, roughly 35 km in length, a special landscape feature of the Swabian Alb. It meanders through riverine meadows, past romantic villages, towards the Danube. The valley slopes are covered in juniper heaths and dotted with rugged rocks, often crowned by a fortress or ruins. A cycle path follows the river, at certain times of the year canoeing is tolerated. In the southern part of the Großes Lautertal, no roads disturb the enjoyment of nature of walkers on picturesque paths.

Former army training ground Münsingen

Another special feature of the BR is the former army training ground at Münsingen. It was used by the military for more than a hundred years until its closure in 2005. The 6 700 ha plot, not dissected by any roads, feels like a typical 19th century landscape. Extensive pastures with large herds of sheep, picturesque



Figure 3 – Lautertal. © R. Koch

clumps of willow, wood pastures and fluid transitions between forest and open land let visitors experience a landscape from the past. In densely populated German Land of Baden-Württemberg, this is one of the few places to experience nature without any disturbance from roads or settlements. Two thirds of the area are used for grazing sheep and it is also home to the only occurrence of many rare plants and animals in Baden-Württemberg. These include wheatear

Infobox

Location: South-western Germany, Baden-Württemberg

Administration: The office of Schwäbische Alb BR is a subsidiary of the Dept. of the Environment of the Regierungspräsidium Tübingen (a regional authority in Baden-Württemberg)

Established: 22.03.2008, designation by UNESCO in May 2009

Size: 85 269 ha

Landscape: Varied cultural landscape of the low mountain range Swabian Alb, elevation: Ermstal 329 m, Römerstein 872 m

Objectives: Sustainable regional development, preservation of the attractive cultural landscape shaped by traditional land use, recreation, sustainable development education, research

Zoning: Core area: 3.1%; buffer zone: 41.5%; transition area: 55.4%

Visitors: Nearly 1 million overnight stays in BR municipalities in 2011 (source: Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg)

Main information centre: Biosphärenzentrum Schwäbische Alb in Münsingen (30 000 visitors in 2011 and 2012); 15 additional information points dotted across the BR area, integrated in existing tourist facilities

Special features: Albtrauf with wooded slopes and ravines, meadow orchards, juniper heaths, former army training ground at Münsingen, many fortresses and ruins, part of GeoPark Swabian Alb (under the auspices of UNESCO)

Contact

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grassland and richly structured forests, all of which are a high conservation priority. Most of them came about through traditional forms of land use that are no longer economically viable. A major challenge for the BR is preserving such habitats through subsidies and through ensuring the continuation of agri- and silvicultural use adapted to these landscapes.

Transition areas – sustainable regional development

The development zones cover 55.4% of the total area and represent the more intensively used and the settlement areas. Several model projects are in place to promote sustainable development here, which would take into account the environment, society and the economy in equal measure. This might be settlement development that would first use inner-municipal potential before sealing new areas outside existing villages. The expansion of short-distance public transport and the implementation of innovative concepts for e-mobility would benefit both the local population and visitors of the BR. Targeted advice on energy efficiency and energy saving for municipalities, enterprises and private households serve climate control and reduce energy costs at the same time.

The framework concept

The UNESCO requirements envisage BRs to develop a framework concept after they have been set up. Starting with an analysis of the status quo, it lists the development options for the area and ways of implementing them. The Schwäbische Alb BR chose a highly participatory approach. Twelve working groups developed the main input on the following themes: conservation, agriculture (subdivided into shepherding, meadow orchard fruit growing and wine growing), forestry and hunting, environmental and climate protection, municipal development, planning and transport, tourism and hospitality, education for sustainable development, historical-cultural heritage, and marketing and PR. Each working group included 10–20 representatives from authorities, associations and practitioners. In four workshops the working groups formulated visions of how the BR will have developed in their respective sphere within 10 years. From these visions they distilled concrete development aims and project ideas for attaining them. From the many project proposals, they jointly selected priority projects for the BR office to work on. Several public events and forms of participation, such as film, painting and short story competitions, involved the local population who could also submit project proposals.

This framework concept involves experts and citizens to an extent not seen in any German BR to date. The BR administration co-finances the implementation of the concept with € 200 000 per year and endeavours to raise additional funds.



Figure 5 – Urach waterfall. © R. Koch

The partner initiative

Establishing the Partner Initiative in the BR is a first successful step in promoting sustainable regional development. The Partner Initiative is implemented throughout Germany in national parks, BRs and nature parks. It aims to attract actors from the protected areas into the partner network. They all adhere to jointly developed quality and environmental standards in their range of products. Currently the Schwäbische Alb BR has 98 certified partners. About half of them are specially trained nature and landscape guides, around a quarter are hotels or restaurants. Nearly a fifth are partners involved in information and education centres, and another fifth are processing businesses such as bakeries, pasta producers, wool processors, breweries or processors of meadow orchard fruit.

Restaurant and hotel partners are required to fulfil criteria such as providing a broad range of regional dishes from the BR and offering direct marketing of regional products. If guests arrive by public transport they are eligible for discounts, and hotels must provide a free shuttle service to the nearest public transport station. Processing partners must purchase a minimum amount of produce that has been grown to conservation criteria such as four part crop rotation or including flowering strips in cereal farming.

The partner businesses are a driver for the sale of regional products grown with conservation in mind, which contribute to the preservation of the characteristic cultural landscape. The partners benefit in many

ways. The BR administration advertises their products and provides funds for investing in buildings or equipment, for leaflets and certifications. They are also integrated into the regional as well as the national network of the Partner Initiative. Last but not least, they benefit from the quality promise of the initiative and the very positive image of the large protected areas within the German population.

Outlook

The young team of the BR administration is looking forward to cooperating with local actors in the exciting task of implementing the idea of sustainable regional development in actual projects. Promising approaches abound. A mayor from the region caught the spirit of optimism succinctly when he compared a BR with a happy marriage: convinced of your choice, you are curious how things will develop.

Author

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Figure 6 – *Albtrauf in spring*. © D. Ruoff



Figure 7 – *Leucojum vernum*. © K. Ströble

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