

The Rhön Biosphere Reserve: Developing New Marketing Strategies to Conserve a Traditional Agricultural Landscape



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Himmeldunkberg. Photo: Vogel Georg.

Abstract

The Rhön Biosphere Reserve was created to revitalise a marginalised area of Germany after the fall of communism. The landscape consists of moderate hills and plateaux up to an altitude of 950m, with high open pastures separated by walls and hedges and kept free of trees by grazing. European Union (EU) agri-environmental subsidies have been complemented with an extensive marketing strategy for local food products and brands, created by local actors and facilitated by the Biosphere Reserve units. The Rhön regional label, introduced in 2005, is provided to businesses that wish to become biosphere reserve partners by complying with a set of process quality criteria. Horizontal and vertical regional networks, formal and informal, have evolved beyond Länder (federal state) boundaries. Nearly 20 years later, the combined efforts on all levels can be recognised as a great success, and UNESCO itself celebrates the Rhön as one of the best exponents of the Biosphere Reserve concept in the world.¹ This case study outlines the main factors that have led to such an outcome.

A picture of the region

Settlements are mainly small villages and towns in the Länder of Bayern, Thüringen, and Hessen. With a total population of about 136,000, the Biosphere Reserve covers 1850 km² and includes many different types of ecosystems, e.g. woodlands (deciduous forests, mixed forest), grasslands (meadows, pastures) and farmlands (hay-meadows, orchards). Endangered animal and plant species are found in two bogs, and the region is known for its black grouse (*Tetrao*

¹ The UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme (MAB) was established in 1977. The World Network contains places that support livelihoods and contribute to economic and social development, whilst also conserving and maintaining the natural resource base.

tetrix) habitat. With the exception of woodland reserves, all priority areas for nature conservation are protected and managed privately by local farmers.

When the Biosphere Reserve was designated in 1991, the area had already entered the classic pattern of rural decline. Shops such as butchers and bakers were closing in the villages and people were shopping within larger settlements and towns. There was very limited marketing of local produce either within the area or further afield. Agriculture was also in decline with more than 4% of farms being abandoned each year. A significantly higher proportion of young people left the region than was normal in the rest of Germany.

Farming included a strong tradition of keeping a local, hardy, breed of sheep ("Rhön sheep") suited to the harsh open pastures. Nearer to settlements, apple production has long been important, together with plums and pears. A range of local varieties existed, though many were disappearing as standard non-local products became more easily available. Other land-based activities include cattle farming, dairy farming and management of the beech woodlands for timber and fire wood.

Agriculture and environmental services

Farmers have an important role to play in maintaining the cultural landscape, stewarding genetic diversity and providing habitats for endangered wildlife that has disappeared under more intensive agriculture (Degenbeck 2003). They are also the stewards of agro-biodiversity, including varieties of crops (to date, 176 apple, 38 pear and 12 plum, Pokorny 2008) and livestock that are better adapted to the mountainous climatic and soil conditions.

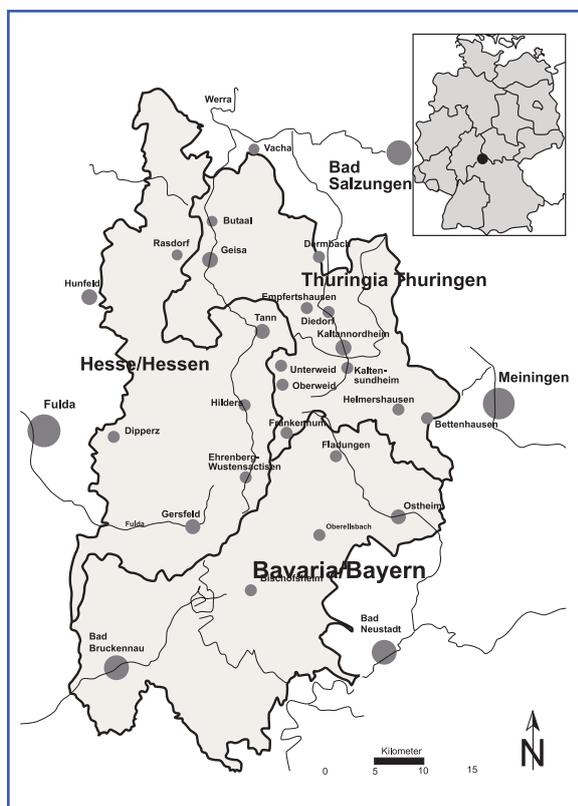


Figure 1: Map of the Region

² GmbH: Company with limited liability.

³ The Rhön quality label for organic production has achieved EU notification. Due to high bureaucratic preconditions, there has been no application for EU notification for the Rhön quality label for conventional products and services. As a result, the label can be used for the service sector, i.e. gastronomy, but not directly for agricultural produce.

The basic concept

EU agriculture receives funding to achieve social and environmental objectives, including the provision of environmental services. Agrobiodiversity production and marketing qualifies for this type of support. However, a critical additional intervention to ensure long term sustainability has been the development of a market for added value local produce under the Rhön label (see figure 1), founded in 2009 and now professionally managed by the Dachmarke Rhön GmbH.² Today, traditional intensive and biodiversity friendly farming has been facilitated by public grants and the development of a market, which means consumer willingness to pay higher prices for Rhön goods. Consumers internalise the costs and benefits of conservation, whilst for the farmers, the Rhön label indirectly³ brings market recognition, secures premium payments and access to niche markets.

Incentives

The main forms of remuneration for positive externalities are from added value produce (partly supported by the EU Leader programme in the initial stages) and direct agri-environmental payments under the European Commission's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP 2005), co-financed by the German Länder:

- From 1993-2001, an EU Life-Project (in two phases I and II) was implemented in the Rhön for the sake of maintaining high value ecosystems such as specific types of grassland and woodland.
- EU payments are received for managing land to achieve contracted environmental and nature conservation orientated objectives, with detailed management prescriptions for different types of area and habitat. In the Rhön payments in the range of 150-200€/ha/year (2000 prices) are available for land grazed by sheep or cattle, or for meadows which are used for hay making.
- Farmers converting to organic production (roughly 9.5% of the agricultural land in the reserve) have been able to get transitional payments of about 250€/ha for a limited period.
- EU Less Favoured Area payments also support agriculture in hill and mountain areas; they contribute to environmental goals in areas such as the Rhön where land abandonment is likely and would lead to loss of environmental quality.

Impact

Economically speaking the region is still relatively poor compared with other booming areas in Germany. However the Rhön's positive reputation nationwide as an innovative rural region is increasing, and this creates positive feedback to the region and its people. Between 1991 and 2006 194 permanent jobs were created, a 36% increase for the area, and unemployment fell by 9.2% as compared to a national rise of 2.4% (Pokorny and Nattermann 2008).

The Rhön label is growing consistently in strength and popularity: 85 enterprises were using the label by mid-2005, and by the end of 2006 the number had increased to 120, more than half of these local restaurants (Pokorny 2008). 55% of businesses surveyed in 2006 (Pokorny and Nattermann 2008) reported some increase in profitability as a result of the Rhön sustainable economic strategy. Expectations of future turnover were also positive, despite the adverse

economic outlook at the national level. Tourism based on recreation and health has expanded by 50% since 1991 and is the fastest growing income factor in the Biosphere Reserve (Raggamby 2007): 70% of farmers receive related direct and indirect income.

Unfortunately there is no extensive data available on the impact of the more extensive land use practices on biodiversity. However, there are some concrete examples of successful conservation initiatives, the most famous being



Figure 2: Labels used in the Rhön, source: Pokorný 2008

that of the Rhön sheep. The Rhön breed lambs easily and is well adapted for transhumance and rough grazing in harsh mountain conditions. Although the meat is considered of excellent quality, the small size of the animal (less meat per sheep) makes it difficult to sustain a market. As a consequence they were a threatened breed in the 1980s, with only 100 animals registered. Following a breeding programme funded through seed money from the LEADER Programme and marketing development, there were over 3000 in 2005. Prices have doubled over the same period, despite the increase in supply, and Rhön lamb sells for twice the price of imported lamb. The reasons for this lie in the qualities consumers associate with the meat: slow growth

producing better taste, traditional farms, positive environmental values, and the attractive landscape and culture.

Remote census land use monitoring suggests that between 1993 and 2006, rates of land abandonment have decreased on average to 2.5%.⁴ The number of agricultural enterprises has declined dramatically but this is not manifested in a reduction in land use, because remaining farmers have bought land from retiring smallholders and enlarged their holdings. Without EU agro-environmental grant schemes, it seems likely that most of the Rhön biosphere reserve would have become fallow land.

Organisation

Success has resulted from a two-sided approach that works from both the top and the bottom. At the higher levels, tri-lateral agreements between the Länder provide the basis for co-operation and strategic planning; at the local level, assistance and facilitation has been made available for people and groups to develop their own ideas and to become part of larger scale initiatives through a co-operation group, organised by the five Districts. A key factor for the success of the Rhön initiative was the coordination and common vision between public sector, including the three federal administrations (Bundesländer), and NGO and private sector, including agricultural, tourism and gastronomic associations. Broadly speaking, the public sector is responsible for protected labelling and funding for environmental management, the NGO/private sector for production and marketing. An analysis of the level of trust between stakeholders, and between them and the public institutions, suggest it is generally good or very good (Raggamby and Lange 2007).



Labelled Honey. Photo: Rundell Hannelore.

⁴ Direct correspondence with the Rhön Biosphere Reserve Bavarian Administration Unit, 2009. Rates of land of abandonment have decreased particularly for fallow grass land (4.48% to 2.78%) although have increased slightly for fallow ploughed land (1.75% to 2.2%).

Sustainability

It is difficult to gauge the total costs of projects involved in the Rhön Biosphere Reserve, as the funding sources are varied and a large number of initiatives have been undertaken. Marketing successes indicate that demand for Rhön labelled products is strong, and it seems unlikely that the current trend for high quality food and tourism experiences will be reversed. The market based elements therefore seem secure. Environmental policies and trends also suggest that EU support for the provision of environmental services such as biodiversity and landscape beauty will continue. Overall the Rhön initiative looks strong and sustainable.

Main Lessons and Conclusions

- Adaptive management practices have allowed the marketing of the Rhön landscape as a distinct product and an ecotourism destination, with a unique cultural, ecological and geographical identity.
- The Rhön is relatively close to wealthy markets in the rest of Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe; consumer behaviour has been shown to a key influence in driving conservation of biodiversity within this landscape.
- The Rhön BR would not have been so successful without a long term commitment by government and without continuity in governance structures. A strong BR identity, at least within the institutions, has assisted this process.
- The Rhön BR is widely recognised for the way it has successfully combined top-down (institutional) and bottom-up (participation) approaches. Together they seem to have been much more successful than either would have been alone.
- Bottom-up initiatives may be more difficult to monitor and evaluate because of the diversity of funding sources, programmes and projects. This may make it difficult to get an overall picture of impacts and outcomes.
- Clusters of synergetic activities (particularly nature conservation, farm tourism, quality production and direct marketing) are likely to be particularly important (Knickel and Renting 2000). The clustering can happen at farm level, and also between different sectors at local level. The positive effects increase with time.
- Conservation of agrobiodiversity within traditional landscapes would be facilitated by specific, consistent and well targeted grants for agrobiodiversity. Agrobiodiversity as an intrinsic goal has received too little attention with limited financial incentives or effective legal and monitoring instruments; this would pave the way for an assessment of the financial efficiency of the use of public funds for positive environmental impact.

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The Rhön sheep. Photo: Vogel Georg.

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¹ see http://www.fao.org/sard/common/ecg/1182/en/AdelbodenDeclaration_en.pdf

² The Adelboden Group is an informal advisory and lobbying body. Its members come from different mountain countries, multilateral organisations, NGOs, and scientific organisations.