



Places to go: Berchtesgaden National Park

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In 2008 Biosphere Expeditions introduced taster days in collaboration with various national parks to its portfolio, because there was a clear demand for dipping into what it's like to be on expedition with us closer to home. One of the taster day destinations is the iconic Berchtesgaden National Park in the Bavarian Alps in Germany and since 2008 more than sixty people have taken part in this high mountain taster day experience.

The Bindalm - an Alpine pasture, that is still in use.

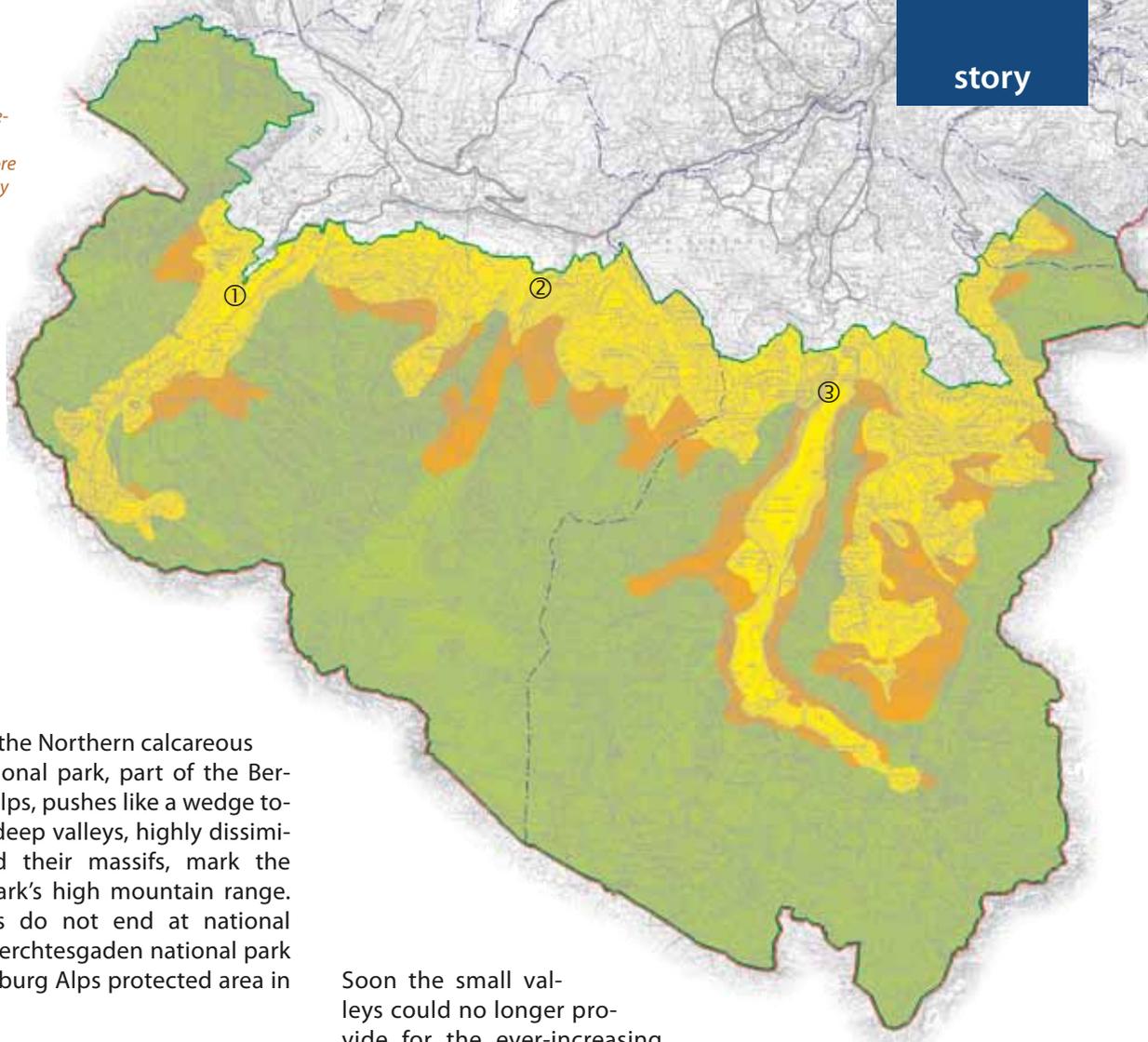


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Overview map of the wedge-shaped Berchtesgaden national park showing the core zone (green), the temporary activity zone (orange) and the permanent activity zone (yellow).

The green line marks the national park's boundary, the red line marks the border to Austria.

Numbers show the location of the three valleys: Klausbach valley [①], Wimbach valley [②] and Koenigssee valley [③].



At the edge of the Northern calcareous Alps, the national park, part of the Berchtesgaden Alps, pushes like a wedge towards Austria. Three deep valleys, highly dissimilar in character, and their massifs, mark the topography of the park's high mountain range. Here nature reserves do not end at national boundaries and the Berchtesgaden national park and the adjacent Salzburg Alps protected area in Austria are linked.

The park's history

The Berchtesgaden National Park was established in 1978 as the third stage of a protected area, which is now 80 years old. In 1910 an early nature reserve prototype, the Berchtesgaden Alpine Plant Protection Area was created. When early Alpine tourism began to develop at the turn of the century and when collecting flowers was a real trend, plant protection became nature protection.

The 21,000 hectare Koenigssee Nature Reserve was established after the First World War, in 1921, for the purpose of protecting plants and animal species. Traditional forestry and Alpine farming, hunting and fishing were allowed to continue. The perimeter of the protected area did not change with the establishment of the national park, except for the Northern boundary facing a residential zone. At the same time a "buffer zone" of about 25,000 hectares was set up. In 1978 a new conservation strategy, favouring the national park concept, was the key step that led to the national park in its present shape.

Land use

After the foundation of an Augustinian monastery in Berchtesgaden at the beginning of the twelfth century, tenant farmers began to settle in the region.

Soon the small valleys could no longer provide for the ever-increasing population, who had to seek additional sources of income in wood-carving and salt-mining. Salt was produced between Berchtesgaden and Schellenberg as early as the twelfth century. All areas suitable for agriculture had been cleared by 1500. At the beginning of the seventeenth century human impact advanced further into the mountains, so that by the end of the eighteenth century almost every piece of forest land was being exploited and cattle grazed everywhere except on the steepest slopes. This was the principal reason why Northern mixed forests gradually changed into spruce forests.

A new development began with Napoleonic secularisation in 1803 and the annexation of Berchtesgaden to Bavaria in 1810. The Bavarian kings, in between building fairytale castles, used to come in the summer for their holidays and in the autumn for hunting – Berchtesgaden thus became fashionable. This and the work of artists made Berchtesgaden increasingly well-known, contributing to the development of tourism as the main source of income for the local people. In recent years more than 2.5 million overnight stays per annum have been registered and almost half of local employment is now in the service industry.



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Koenigssee valley

The Koenigssee valley was created along a natural break in the rock. A river chiseled its way into it, forming a V-shaped valley. It obtained its present shape during the ice ages; a mighty glacier that stretched far into the Alpine foothills chiseled out a U-shaped valley with a 200 m deep basin. The melting glacier filled the bowl with water, forming the iconic, picture-perfect Koenigssee.

For varying reasons, the use of Alpine pasture land has declined in the past 150 years. At present, only twenty-three Alpine pastures are still in use, fifty having been abandoned recently. The erstwhile royal court excessively hunted red deer and chamois, which adversely affected the regeneration of the mixed mountain forest. Today the scale of game browsing is monitored by ground vegetation monitoring. Winter feeding stations have been installed in various places to keep game off the developing tree shoots in late autumn, winter and spring.

Animal life

Animal life in the national park and its vicinity reflects the landscape and the various human activities over a number of centuries. As in most of Western Europe the bear, wolf, lynx and bearded vulture have gone. The last bear was killed in the eighteenth century, the last lynx in the early nineteenth. Although the area offers enough space for top predators, the density of human settlements is a big problem for reintroduction. Only time will tell whether humans and predators can learn to live side-by-side again in the Berchtesgaden Alps.

Species of vertebrates and a few invertebrates living in the national park and its "buffer zone" have been recorded in a dedicated catalogue. This catalogue includes 92 species of birds, many of

them on the red list of protected species. Sixteen

species of amphibians and reptiles have been counted, as well as 15 species of fish. Twenty-six of the 50 mammal species observed or assumed to exist in the region are classified as endangered species.



Conservation tasks within the Berchtesgaden national park

Even though traditional types of utilisation have discontinued, various important nature conservation tasks still remain. The main task of the national park is undoubtedly to protect the core zone from human interference, thus allowing for the area's long-term natural recovery. Within the activity zone, ancient rights held by local families still allow pasture and fishing. Although this undoubtedly interferes with the character of a national park, it includes the important task of conserving local heritage and traditions.

Scientific research, such as long-term surveys of flora and fauna, are vital for a better understanding of nature development within the protected areas. As knowledge is gained, it helps to increase the effectiveness of nature conservation measures, not only within national park areas.

Leisure activities are welcome within the national park's activity zone, but are yet another source of



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Wimbach valley

Lying between the craggy massif of the infamous Mount Watzmann of German folklore fame and the cliffs of the Hochkalter, Wimbach valley stretches about 12 km from North to South. The main features of this impressive mountainous terrain are its steep cliff faces, its 300 m high scree slopes and its deeply carved gorge.



Klausbach valley

The Klausbach valley was formed by a mighty glacier roughly 10,000 years ago. When that glacier dumped its 'gravel-tongue' in the valley as it melted, the valley obtained its present box-like, flat-bottomed shape.

environmental pressure. The national park service keeps impact low by providing information as well as policing of rules. Traditional activities, such as hiking, can cause damage, including erosion. As new leisure activities emerge, the national park service surveys and regulates new kinds of sports equipment, for example the use of mountain bikes away from forest paths.

Last but not least, environmental education is an important component of the mixture. Numerous information materials, such as brochures, books, films, etc., are provided free of charge and visitors are invited on a regular basis to join guided tours with a national park ranger. More information is at www.nationalpark-berchtesgaden.bayern.de.

Collaboration with Biosphere Expeditions

Inspiring conservation – this slogan describes perfectly what a taster day in Berchtesgaden is all about. A traditional rustic wooden hut, provided by the national park authorities, serves as base for the day. The morning is spent there learning about field research and trying out research equipment. In the afternoon the team goes on a field walk with a national park ranger. "I have learnt much more about nature & conservation in the last few hours, than within the last couple of years" is a comment we hear often in the evening. So come and join us on a taster day, whether it's at Berchtesgaden or any other location around the world! (www.biosphere-expeditions.org/tasters) ■

This article is an excerpt out of the Biosphere Expeditions Magazine 2011, packed with stories from the field, achievements, looks behind the scenes and an overview over our expeditions, projects, taster days and other activities. Access the full magazine at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/magazine.



*Left: guided tour with a national park ranger
Right: taster day team*