Challenges and opportunities for Protected Areas in the new normal

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There are currently numerous challenges for protected areas in the 'new normal' we are heading for - or already in - and most of them do not relate to COVID-19. The new normal is conditioned by a world that is more complex than ever before.

Until the early 2000s, the tasks of protected areas were usually clearly defined with nature conservation and environmental protection, environmental education, a little leisure and tourism. But if you ask people today for statements concerning the current development (inside and outside of PAs) – the answers are quite different: trends, dilemmas, change, seeking, confused choice, alternatives – in short: We are living in a VUCA world.

VUCA is an acronym first used in 1987 and based on leadership theories and stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. We live in a world that's constantly changing, becoming more unstable each day, where big and small changes are becoming more unpredictable – and they're getting more and more dramatic and happening faster and faster. As events unfold in completely unexpected ways, it's becoming often impossible to determine cause and effect. Problems and their effects are multi-layered, harder to understand. Decisions are reduced to a mesh of reaction and counter-reaction – and choosing the single correct path is almost impossible. The demands on modern organisations and management are more contradictory and paradoxical than ever. Making decisions requires courage, awareness, and a willingness to make mistakes.

What's needed today – if you work in any development area, as Protected Areas do – is to be a VUCA facilitator. Trying to change the meaning of VUCA to Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Agility. Huge tasks for often small PA's administrations and teams.

Society is subject to trends and megatrends in its actions. Policymakers take these and the new mega-drivers climate change, globalisation 4.0, new pandemics and others on board and formulate complex and demanding policies and strategies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the different Climate Treaties, the EU Biodiversity Strategy, etc. All of which generate new facts and requirements that protected areas are confronted with. This article attempts to summarise the most important of these challenges in 10 theses:

Thesis 1: The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 ‚Bringing nature back into our lives' is a very powerful document, which foresees the 'Transforming at least 30% of Europe's lands and seas into effectively managed protected areas.' This, the EU Green Deal as well as the UN decade 2021-2030 on Ecosystem Restauration show increasing political demand. The implementation of those strategies will present the protected areas with enormous management challenges and new skills, e.g. in participation methods for its implementation.

Thesis 2: Economic Pressure on PAs is increasing as well: Deforestation and the search for mineral resources or release of fishing in PAs is one of the signs - from Romania to the Amazon and the USA. The protection status alone is not (everywhere) sufficient for effective long-term preservation of the protected property. Protected area managers must express

international political solidarity and develop better strategies and tools to support each other beyond borders.

Thesis 3: The societal expectation on solutions for climate change are increasing, expressed e.g. in the EU Biodiversity Strategy: "*Nature based solutions such as protecting biodiversity and restoring ecosystems are an excellent means of countering the effects of climate change and a very cost-effective use of resources*." PAs need adaptation strategies to climate change that can cope with adaptation to CC per se, but also with the required compensation of CC impacts elsewhere.

Thesis 4: The European Green Deal and Paris Agreement aim for the EU to be climate-neutral by 2050 – an economy with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. Even PAs are contributing to climate change and need to rethink all their activities and infrastructure such as buildings, mobility, supplies, offers, etc. Even if the impact is relatively small, PAs need to serve as role-models.

Thesis 5: The societal pressure after COVID-19 is increasing: More people search for 'undisturbed' areas for leisure und holidays. This search in combination with Social Media like Instagram will always create new hot-spots with tremendous speed. Traditional forms of visitor management are not sufficient anymore, new flexible instruments to react quickly on new developments are needed.

Thesis 6: Unsustainable forms of tourism such as cruises and Alpine winter sports are also declining due to circumstances (climate change, COVID-19, ...) and new trends – e.g. health tourism – are coming up. Today tourism goes beyond the simple stay in nature towards concrete treatments in nature: After the proven health of some waterfalls, forest bathing, originally coming from Japan in the 50th, is today an important new health product. PAs need to accept that they are (also) important touristic stakeholder and go for a full implementation of sustainable tourism in their (surrounding) destinations.

Thesis 7: We face an aging society with an increasing number of people with mobility restrictions or other special needs. At the other end of the age pyramid, bringing (young) people with a migration background closer to nature and ecosystems is a major integration challenge. PAs need to find ways to fulfil the claim that '*national parks and other PAs are open to all visitors and offer experience-oriented offers for different target groups*'. At the moment it is hardly fulfilled.

Thesis 8: COVID-19 has given the final push for digitalization both in the classroom and in leisure. Environmental education in PAs is rather conservative, several areas did not do the step from nature education to environmental education, and only very few are implementing principles of education for sustainable development. And many of the PAs have a focus just on children & schools. PAs are actors of education for Sustainable Development and need to integrate the trend to digitalisation into their educational offers.

Thesis 9: The EU Strategy 'Farm to Fork' drives towards a more sustainable agriculture, food industry and societal behaviour. PAs, having an integrated approach to land management, are both key actors in promoting this new European strategy, but could also be key beneficiaries of the respective EU Policies, Programs and actions.

Thesis 10: Authenticity and 'regions' per se have an increasing importance in the mind set of larger parts of society. PAs are considered 'healthy and authentic regions'; this should be used for building consistent images as well as better implementation (and funding) of their objectives.

PAs should at the end become real engines of sustainable regional development, this could be the desirable 'new normal'.

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