



CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

Example of Good Practice

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Regionalpark RheinMain

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1. Introduction

- This is a park with an unusual layout: A network of routes and attractions for pedestrians and cyclists is covering a large area.
- It is truly regional because it is touching the territories of dozens of municipalities (various NUTS3 and LAU2 entities).
- Most of the park is located in the peri-urban area, where open space is a valuable asset under pressure from urbanisation. It has rural features, but cities are never far away.
- The Park is a part of the regional public infrastructure and provides social services (recreation).
- This is a good example for an intervention by the public authorities: It is making open space attractive and accessible, both mentally and physically. What can we learn from it? Ambitious projects can work when there is a good idea and an enthusiastic group of people with influence behind it.

2. Project Intention / Background information

The Park originated from the *Regionale Grünzüge*, which are comparable to but by no means identical with English Green Belts. These are enshrined in the formal plans for decades, to protect open space from land take. They are semi efficient because they do not appeal to the regional population. And, the authorities in charge of defining them, can also modify them. Unfortunately, often just for the purpose to enable land take. The intention of the project 'Regionalpark RheinMain' was to enhance this regional asset, because, after all, this region is

unique among the European metropolitan regions due to its polycentric structure and the resulting presence of open space within easy reach for everybody. When the project started some 20 years ago there was a window of opportunity because of convening political interests and the process of drafting a new edition of the Regional Land Use Plan.

In the early days it wasn't easy to convince stakeholders of this revolutionary idea. We experienced mistrust by farmers, who were afraid of land loss, trespassing and theft, and a lack of finance. As the area in question crosses many administrative boundaries, and touched the competences of various sectoral administrations (forest and environment authorities, water boards, agriculture administration etc.), we faced a complicated government structure. Another complication was that everyday landscapes, landscapes that aren't necessarily idyllic, have been under-appreciated. The target group is the regional population, for after work and weekend recreation; strolling, hiking and cycling. Through the network layout the park is never far away for the local residents, they can choose for the short evening loop or for a day trip in the weekend.

Nowadays, the park is very well accepted. Lots of visitors are present on the routes, at the attractions and at events. However, there is no systematic monitoring, due to the sheer size of the park, and an under-resourced administration. Free maps are provided and well sought after, which is an indicator of the park's success. The park is mainly financed from public budgets. There has been some sponsoring. In places gravel extraction and land fill provides some income. – The municipalities are crucial because in most of the cases they own the land; there are no substantial costs for land acquisition. Investments are usually done by companies, legally private but owned by groups of municipalities. There is an umbrella company, again owned by the authorities, co-ordinating and co-financing.

Figure 1: Signposting in the Regionalpark RheinMain



Source: Reinhard Henke, 2018

3. Main Description

The park is a network of routes and 'stations' (attractions). The route should be a comfortably surfaced path of some 3 metres wide, with green rims where feasible. Often the routes are refurbished country lanes already existing, often they fill gaps in the network. Generally, they are supposed to be inviting (no mud, for example) and self-explaining (no need to consult maps). 'Stations' in the Regionalpark are sites to stay and rest ('the pearls on the string'; the string being the route, the pearls being the attractions supposed to be located at fairly regular intervals). There is a great variety of stations, from spacious (a rosary) to small (a roman stele), from new (again the rosary) to ancient (again, the roman stele). They include pieces of art, nature reserves, playgrounds, mineral springs and also two visitors' centres.

Figure 2: Station in the Regionalpark RheinMain



Source: Reinhard Henke

Sometimes the idea is to make sites accessible, e.g. think of a bridge across a brook, both filling the gap in the route network and giving visitors the chance to witness the beauty of the site, sometimes they are designed to keep people off sensitive habitats. This is possible, for example, by providing a watch tower outside the ring fence of a protected area: People do not feel excluded and are educated about the treasures of regional nature. Often routes are linked to stops of the regional railway network (*S-Bahn*). This is very practical for cyclists because bicycles are transported free of charge.

The network approach also adds to the park's efficiency: Technically, it is only the routes and the attractions, but for the visitor, the landscape in sight forms part of the park. By the way, this approach has its predecessor in the Dessau-Wörlitz landscape park from the 18th century.

Starting from a pilot project area around 3 municipalities struck by abandoned gravel pits and fly tipping, the project soon (a matter of a few years) spread across the region, with the ring route around Frankfurt alone now being almost 200 km long. Today, there are few amendments (more routes, more attractions, more participating municipalities), but the focus now is on maintenance, promotion and marketing.

The Project faced fierce opposition from farmers who were afraid of land loss, trespassing and theft. Many people didn't recognise the need for the project (readers from outside Germany should know that here, farmland is generally open for visitors anyway, on footpaths and country lanes). Others didn't see the value of an urban landscape. Government and governance of these issues is complex. It helped that the Regional Authority's predecessor had the right to invest in recreational infrastructure, so that the initial phase of the project was in that organisation's hands.

Reorganisation put the project at risk, but INTERREG funding (projects Sustainable Open Space, and Sustainable and Accessible Urban Landscapes) helped: The Land government tolerated the Regional Authority's predecessor's activities until the 'umbrella company' (under public control) had been founded. This umbrella company is responsible for marketing, information, financing, for the strategic development and for the co-ordination of the (sub regional) companies who in turn carry out investments. – After a while, such a project seems to reach some kind of a point of no return: its size and quality makes it an indispensable ingredient of regional public infrastructure.

The Park is now managed by this network of companies (legally private but owned by public authorities) and the municipalities. The Boards of the companies are controlled by persons with a political mandate. The manager of the umbrella company is a member of the standing conference of regional companies which is convened by the Regional Authority. The park adds to social and ecological sustainability (protection through use) and social welfare (open for everybody, free of charge). Economically, it is a soft locational factor (companies competing for qualified staff can demonstrate that there is enhanced work-life balance here), regional self-esteem and proof of the advantages of co-operation.

Nowadays, the park is almost complete as far as the route network is concerned. There will be the occasional gap to be filled. Every now and then new stations are added. The focus now is to keep promoting the park's use, for example through a series of festivals throughout the year. There is, however, untapped potential: The Regionalpark could act as the regional agency to implement open space provisions of the Regional Land Use Plan.

4. References

<https://www.regionalpark-rheinmain.de>

<https://rural-urban.eu/sites/default/files/G-FRA2%20Regionalpark%20RheinMain.pdf>