

Europarc Atlantic Isles Exchange Programme:

Germany: Rhön Mountains

Summary of Events



Sunday 10th- Monday 18th June 2018

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Background

As part of the Europarc Atlantic Isles Programme I spent the week of 11th-18th June 2018 shadowing various staff members in the Bavarian state of the Rhön Biosphere Reserve. This included assisting with educational groups, guided walks, invertebrate sampling and inspecting moorland management. The point of the week long exercise was to observe how a European protected area counterpart is managed within areas of educational outreach and landscape management. This facilitated insight into work of the Biosphere along with opportunities for discussion and sharing experiences of protected area management between The Rhön and the North Pennines AONB.

Other benefits of the programme have included:

- Understanding purpose and rationale of the Biosphere Reserve, how it operates and its long term vision.
- Appreciation and awareness of strong cultural interlinkage within the Biosphere designation in combination to nature conservation objectives.
- Observation and inspection of case specific land management practices in recreation, education, forest, meadow and moorlands.
- Transfer of knowledge, skills and experiences in protected area management within a European context.

Diary of Events

DAY 1- Sunday 10th June:

- Travel to the Rhön from Durham and arrive in early hours and then check into educational facility/hostel in Oberelsbach.

DAY 2-Monday 11th June:

- Attended morning meeting at Biosphere reserve in Oberelsbach where the opportunity to meet staff followed.
- Visited information centre in Oberelsbach to observe interpretation of the natural and cultural elements of the area.
- Travelled to Bad Neustadt to meet Biosphere Lead Director Thomas Habermann and discussed the North Pennines AONB and my role in the partnership.
- During the afternoon, had a brief tour of the area with Klaus Spitzl getting to see landscape and habitats: woodland, meadows, mountains.

DAY 3- Tuesday 12th June:

- Attended educational event at Schwarzes Moor where a kindgarten group were shown traditional bread making including grinding the corn, moulding the dough and baking in an old oven kiln.
- Had guided tour of Schwarzes Moor educational facility being informed of its history during the cold war and it's evolution as a outreach for natural and cultural education.
- Given demonstration of how programme interprets moorland structure to school groups using objects such as sheets and laminated plant stickers to display moorland formation over a long term period. This is to serve as an introduction before groups are taken out onto the Black Moor itself.
- Observed miniature moorland growing beds where trials had taken place looking at how rates of water impacts on moorland plant structure and composition.

- Visited southern area of the Rhön (Black Mountains) to see local forester and see further moorland restoration work within an afforested bog system.

DAY 4- Wednesday 13th June:

- Returned to Schwarzes Moor educational facility to partake again in further traditional bread making with a different kindergarten group.
- Attended a tour of the Schwarzes Moor with a school group looking at the different moorland plants, environmental conditions and formation of bog systems.
- Climbed the Schwarzes Moor observation tower to view overall different habitat types of the moor (wooded bog, wet meadow and pond systems) as well as panoramic vistas of the Lange Rhön.

DAY 5- Thursday 14th June:

- Assisted with Rhön Field Rangers fixing/installing various visitor infrastructure such as picnic benches, boardwalks and benches across various areas in the Lange Rhön.
- In the afternoon met with GIS specialist Thomas Lemke to observe use of GIS in management planning of the Rhön.
- Discussed use of GIS in the role of the North Pennines AONB Peatland Programme with Thomas Lenke.
- Visited Bad Kissingen in the evening and saw numerous historical buildings within the Spa town.

DAY 6- Friday 15th June:

- An early rise to go out with Rhön Biologist and undertake some bird watching where Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*), Corncrake (*Crex crex*) and Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) were encountered.
- Out with hunters of the Lange Rhön finding out what they do and their role in predator control of the central protected area.

DAY 7- Saturday 16th June:

- Out with the local ranger collecting insect samples from additional traps across the Rhön as part of university project looking at invertebrate diversity.
- Visited the Kreuzberg mountain to see the monastery and views of the surrounding landscape.

DAY 8- Sunday 17th June:

- Visited Gersfeld market to see how the variety of local produce being showcased and the outreach undertaken by the Biosphere Reserve to inform members of the public about ongoing projects within the reserve and the importance of its natural and cultural elements.
- Visited a local garage which was celebrating 35 years in operation and an important employer within the local community. At the event traditional Bavarian food was offered along with local music of the region.

DAY 9- Monday 18th June:

- Depart Oberelsbach to Gersfeld for train to Frankfurt. Fly from Frankfurt to London and train back to Durham.

Evaluation of Topic Areas

Designation:

The Rhön Biosphere Reserve operates on a 3 tier system of protection with a core zone, intermediate zone and development zone. The fundamental purpose of the designation is for humans and nature to co-exist with an overall sustainable approach to land management and development. Each zone contains specific objectives with the core zones purely focused on nature conservation outcomes and a 'let nature do its thing' approach. The other two zones allow human activities/development so long as they are sustainable and enrich the local natural and cultural heritage of the area.



Figure 1: Core protected area 'Lange Rhön' where primary focus is nature conservation.

In comparison, the North Pennines AONB does not follow a zonation approach to achieve conservation and landscape objectives. Instead, projects and developments are considered on a case-by-case basis. These must be considered against the main objective of the designation which is the conservation and enhancement of natural, cultural and special qualities of the area. Developments and built infrastructure are decided by local planning authorities with consultation from communities and the AONB Partnership. These are usually guided by documents such as local development plans (where development should go/kind of development and appearance) and landscape character assessments to determine how certain building projects may affect characteristic features of certain areas.



Figure 2: North Pennines AONB Landscape.

Observations on this topic area:

- Space and land use seem to be an important factor in facilitating the zonation approach within the Rhön. There are large areas of semi-natural habitat and little to no population centres within core areas thus development is restricted and a 'rewilding' approach can be adopted where applicable while human activity can commence out with core zones.
- Sustainability within human areas is a prominent concept with nature friendly farming, local food produce and strong appreciation of cultural heritage actively encouraged and evident.

Educational Programmes & Outreach

The Rhön Biosphere Reserve maintains an active educational programme to foster appreciation of natural and cultural elements of the region. Events include traditional crafts such as bread making, nature based/activity camps and guided excursions in outdoor settings. For the general public numerous visitor centres present these same principles in the form of interpretation. The visitor centres have exhibits on important biodiversity features, for example mountain meadows and bird life as well as human elements such as apple orchards and the Rhön sheep.



Learning at the Black Moor Educational Facility encouraged a practical/hands on approach to tasks.

Figure 3: Traditional tools for grinding corn and making bread.



Figure 4: Interpretation content of mountain meadow biodiversity and orchard diversity of the region.

In the North Pennines AONB, educational programmes and outreach largely follow the same principles as in the Rhön which is appreciation of the natural and cultural environment. Most programmes and projects operate from the AONB visitor centre in Teesdale, County Durham due to its accessibility, facilities and surrounding landscape features (woodlands, meadows and moorland), however, some venture to different sites across the area depending on the nature of the programme. Such events include guided walks, biodiversity workshops, nature discovery days, practical conservation days and exhibitions i.e. recent one included first geological map of Britain from April to June 2018.

Observations on this topic area:

- Learning programmes in the Rhön are very practical and interactive offering a different dimension to learning.
- There is a strong cultural focus on activities for example traditional bread making looked at different corn types grown in the Rhön therefore providing a context to the event rather than just simply bread making for the sake of it.
- Local produce is an important component of interpretation material provided at visitor centres and events given it's prominence in shaping of the landscape seen today.

Moorland Management

Moorland areas can be encountered within the Rhön with particular interest points at Rotes and Schwarzes Moor. These sections are accessible to the public with interpretation and boardwalks to showcase the unique habitat. The bogs and wet grasslands encountered range between open and afforested with common vegetation composition consisting of cottongrasses, heathers, sundews and *Sphagnum* moss. Management includes maintaining access to avert pressures on the wider moorland landscape, tree removal of which particularly spruce and ditch blocking to maintain consistent hydrological processes. Once improved hydrology is achieved, bog areas are left to function naturally with no further intervention.



Figure 5: Moorland habitat and blocked forest gully.

In the North Pennines AONB improving hydrological processes for bog functionality is a key step undertaken in the Peatland Programme and is achieved through grip and gully blocking. Furthermore, restoration efforts have evolved from simply blocking moorland drains but to re-vegetating areas of bare and eroding peat.

However, moorland operations differ significantly in nature and scope in the North Pennines due to scale and extent of both peatland habitats and degradation. Unlike the moorlands of the Rhön, North Pennine moors are not afforested bogs, instead are open and exposed landscapes. It is these environmental conditions that influence the nature of the work of the Peatland Programme.

Observations on this topic area:

- The bog systems of the Rhön contain significantly more tree cover than the North Pennines and as a result are a factor of consideration during restoration efforts.
- Wooden dams embedded within the forest floor to slow water flow are common restoration techniques deployed in the Rhön.
- The long term vision is for bogs to maintain themselves post restoration.