

An aerial night photograph of a mountain village. Several tall, stone towers are illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The houses and buildings are also lit up, and the surrounding landscape is dark with some greenery visible. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:  
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain  
Development Series



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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

# Linking actors to promote sustainable development in rural areas: Grosses Walsertal

Armin Kratzer, Nils Unthan and Martin Coy

The Grosses Walsertal Biosphere Reserve in western Austria has gained increasing attention as a model region for sustainable development. Its main objectives are to strengthen cooperation and create joint projects by linking previously isolated rural actors. Working together, municipalities, local businesses and civil society initiatives can develop concerted responses to pressing issues such as nature conservation and rural migration, in a valley facing the challenges of sector dependency and climate change.

View over the deeply incised Grosses Walsertal valley in summer (A. Kratzer)

Located in the westernmost Austrian state of Vorarlberg, the Grosses Walsertal is a long, deeply incised, V-shaped valley, with elevations ranging from 586 to 2 704 m asl. Its meadows and pastures, in particular, are rich in biodiversity. But with industrialization came the region's vulnerability, as people sought employment outside the valley to escape economic dependence on a single sector (agriculture and forestry). The result for the remote valley was poverty – and the need, which still persists today, for inhabitants to commute for work. Cut off from new economic trends, the valley has preserved its rural and peripheral character. But this also has upsides: the valley's cultural and scenic identity can be a unique selling point over modernization at any price, for the 3 400 people living in the six municipalities.

Limited development opportunities and a species-rich landscape (two protected areas already existed in the Grosses Walsertal) led to the idea of becoming a Biosphere Reserve (BR) [1]. In addition to improving the regional economy while preserving natural and cultural landscapes (Box), the UNESCO label would increase visibility and encourage interregional and international cooperation. A mixture of top-down and bottom-up initiatives ensued, leading to establishment of the Grosses Walsertal BR in 2000. The BR's regional planning association (REGIO) is the legal entity of the BR and is comprised of all municipalities and the BR management. It steers the region towards the goals of its regional strategy, which is developed in accordance with UNESCO's general principles. The regional strategy sets out its goals over a five-year period, for a range of thematic fields (e.g. agriculture, environment and energy, the economy), most of which are covered by thematic subcommittees that help to develop new project ideas [2]. A Board of Trustees

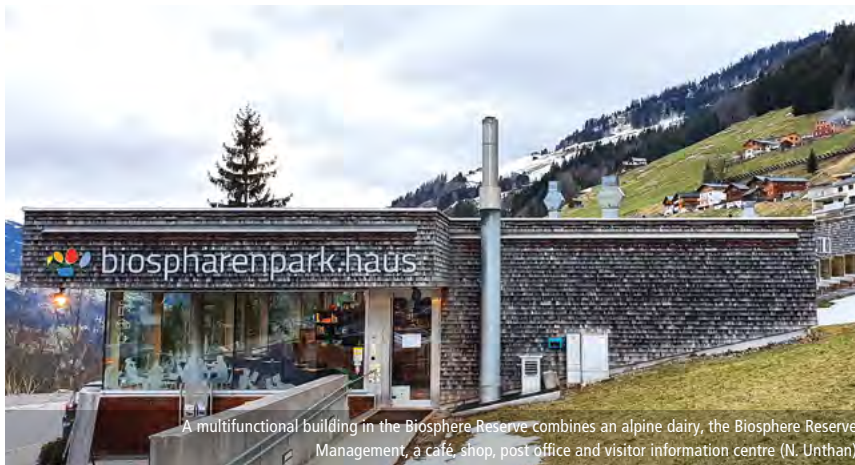


## Biosphere Reserve (BR)

Biosphere Reserves (BRs) are protected areas that go far beyond the usual aim of nature protection. They are multifunctional landscapes designated by UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere programme (MAB) with a conservation (preserve ecosystems), a logistic (support demonstration projects, research) and development (sustainable economic development) function within a "spatial framework" of three interrelated zones [9, 10]. By 2020, the worldwide network comprised 701 BR sites in 124 countries. By 2011, 322 BRs were located in mountain areas [11].



## Lessons learned



- The integrative BR approach of conservation, sustainable landscape use and socio-economic development has led to greater sustainability in the region. It preserves the natural and cultural landscape while simultaneously releasing endogenous potential.
- Through committed management, the Grosses Walsertal BR has been able to increase locally led planning cooperation and broaden funding sources. Their projects and initiatives address global and local challenges alike and lay the groundwork for more regional value added.
- Small regions need strong multilevel networks (see Figure 1) to gather local knowledge and develop robust projects. The BR serves as a platform to support new ideas and coordinate new initiatives.

consisting of two representatives per municipality, regional multipliers (e.g. representative of the Grosses Walsertal economic association) and REGIO's chairperson advises the BR in its strategic planning. The BR has an annual budget of around €225 000, with funding from the Environmental Protection Department of the State of Vorarlberg, the municipalities (€11 per inhabitant per year) and sponsors.

Through the governance model described above, the BR management drives sustainable development by interacting with local people to identify needs and ideas, assisting with the funding application process or connecting applicants to funding institutions (e.g. the European Union's LEADER programme [3]), promoting co-operation among rural actors and helping to solve coordination problems where they arise [4]. By 2020 it had developed and supported a total of 27 projects. Especially in the early phase, "green products and services" were important and resulted in initiatives such as "Bergholz", a cooperation of manufacturers that in 2000 began to use local timber for ecological houses and furniture [5]. Today, "Bergholz" is a certified trademark and involves actors from all municipalities. Innovations gradually became more diverse. For example, "Alchemilla", a non-profit women's initiative that focused at first on herbology and organic cosmetics, is now increasingly engaged in promoting new social practices for resource conservation [6, 7]. Their initiatives include a repair café (up to now, a concept mainly associated with urban areas) and a firewood exchange network that connects firewood seekers and forest owners. In this context, the BR acts as an intermediary platform that connects different actors and institutions (Figure 1). Today, the Grosses Walsertal is well connected and can benefit from diverse networks at various levels. These networks have helped the region to overcome its former peripherality and accelerate the transition to sustainability by aligning innovative practices and testing nature-based solutions to global challenges [8].

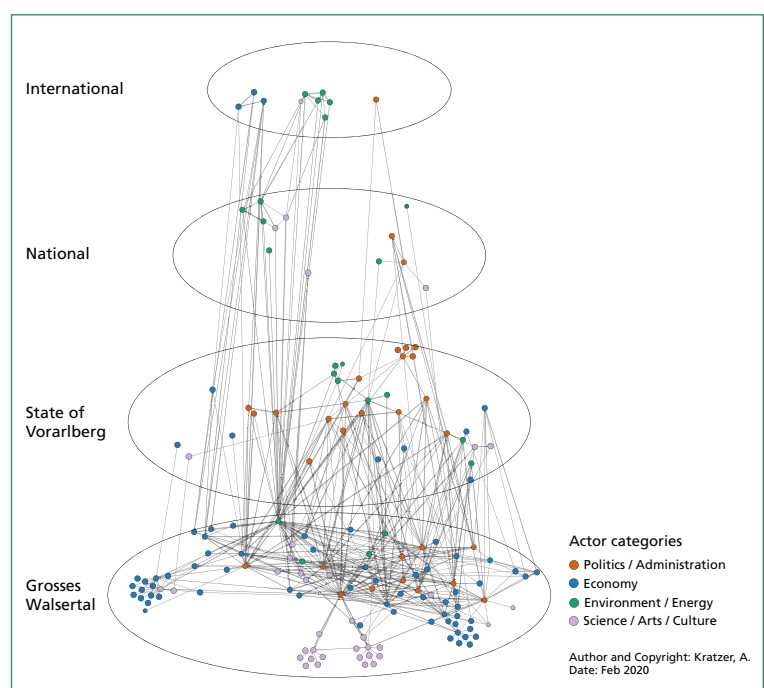
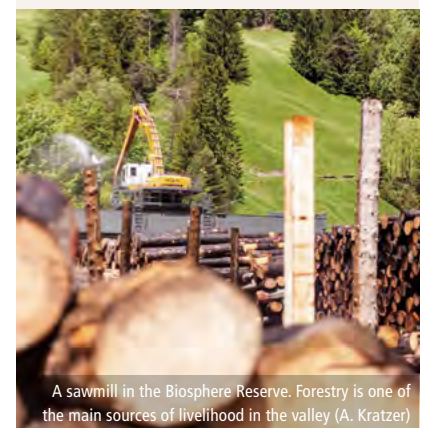


Figure 1. With its governance approach and various projects, the Biosphere Reserve established a multilevel network that connected otherwise isolated actors, increased cooperation and fostered innovations. Source: own data 2018

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Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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