

Wilderness at the centre – The new exhibition at the National Park Centre in Zerne

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Keywords: wilderness, exhibition, national park

Abstract

The Swiss National Park (SNP) was founded in 1914 with the aims of protecting a piece of Alpine nature from human intervention and documenting its natural development. This extraordinary rewilding experiment required intensive public relations work from the outset, as the term *wilderness* did not and does not necessarily have positive associations among the local Alpine population. In order to make the ecological significance of wilderness accessible to the general public in an attractive way, in 2019 the SNP decided to create an extensive exhibition on the topic of wilderness at the National Park Centre in Zerne. Five years passed between the initial idea and the final installation of the new permanent exhibition, involving many phases of development and hurdles to overcome. This article documents the approach, planning and implementation of this important project for the SNP, which was officially opened to the public on 3 June 2023.

Profile

Protected area

Swiss National Park

Mountain range

Alps, Switzerland

Introduction

Pure wilderness is the message of the Swiss National Park (SNP). This is no coincidence: 111 years ago, forward-thinking pioneers conceived the revolutionary idea of a reserve in which all forms of life and natural processes are allowed to develop freely without human intervention (Kupper 2012) – an area where researchers endeavour to document and understand the changes that are occurring, but also where people can discover the importance of wilderness.

The National Park Centre is the ideal place to experience *pure wilderness* and *pure National Park* and actively to reflect on them at the same time. The exhibition aims to showcase the SNP's main themes of wilderness and natural processes, explaining the results of 100 years of research in the SNP and exploring not only the beauty, but also the primal and unforgiving aspects of nature and how we humans perceive them.

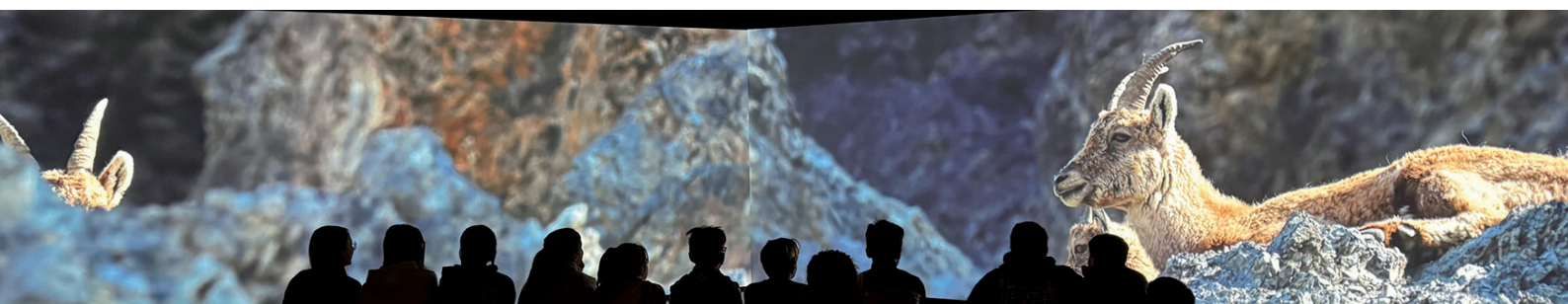
But what does wilderness mean for us as humans? What is our attitude towards it? And if we could personally determine it: how might wilderness evolve? Studies show that around half of the Swiss population have some reservations about wilderness (Hunziker 2000; Bauer et al. 2004; Bauer 2005; Moos et al. 2019). For the SNP and from an ecological point of view, wilderness is a place where nature can experiment and which experiences pronounced dynamics. As the

largest wilderness area in the Alps and a much-visited nature reserve, the SNP is the ideal place to experience the power of natural processes and biodiversity. Given this situation, it seemed obvious to capitalize on the allure of the SNP to develop an exhibition that allows visitors to explore their individual relationships with wilderness, the significance of wilderness (Gürke 2023) and our influences on such areas.

Finding the right partner

The success of exhibition projects depends on having the perfect team to plan and implement something new, spectacular and unique. At the beginning of the planning phase, we looked at the work of various companies and finally invited four of them to Zerne to present the exhibition space to be developed. In a collaborative discussion, the SNP project leaders set out their ideas and desires for the new exhibition, laying the foundation for the further exploration of exciting design ideas. Two months later, the companies submitted their exhibition ideas and presented them in person. Based on these presentations, we decided to work with Groenlandbasel. As part of the competition, their designers developed a convincing idea of how we could make wilderness accessible to all age groups. We also felt that we could work well with this team – a crucial point.

Figure 1 – The Panorama Room allows you to immerse yourself in unspoilt natural landscapes. © SNP, Hans Lozza



In order to develop an initial overview of the subject of wilderness, the SNP organized a wilderness workshop in February 2020. In addition to the SNP and Groenlandbasel, various organizations concerned with wilderness were represented. It soon became clear that we had set ourselves a challenging task, as the term wilderness does not evoke positive feelings in everyone. The importance of wilderness areas as hotbeds of biodiversity and protection of natural dynamics is often unknown. As the largest wilderness area in the Alps, the SNP wanted to raise awareness of this with the new exhibition. In doing so, it wanted to seize the opportunity to lead the wilderness discourse, improve the understanding of wilderness and encourage guests consciously to allow wilderness in their private surroundings. The foundations were now in place to embark on the adventure of a new production.

Target audience and levels of communication

Defining the target audience is central to exhibitions. In the case of the National Park Centre, this target audience is very broad: from small children to the elderly, from families and school classes to professionals. This challenging starting point requires a broad thematic approach with different levels of communication. Children of reading age will find clearly marked stations in the exhibition that invite them to play and discover (level 1). Young visitors aged 5 to 12 can experience the exhibition with a radio play accompanied by Furbina and Ratsch (level 2). The two Nutcracker siblings will keep young visitors busy throughout their visit to the exhibition. Finally, level 3 is for all other visitors. The aim is to offer each visitor a selection of individually appealing elements and let them choose what they want to engage with and in what depth.

To facilitate interaction with the public, a media guide was chosen as a means of communication. All visual and audio information is available in Romansh, German, Italian, French and English. When receiving their devices, visitors choose to follow either the child or adult track. The devices are equipped with headphones that do not touch the ears and thus enable communication with one another, e.g. within the family circle. The interactive device also offers the opportunity to answer questions and give feedback.

Scenography

In order to make the multifaceted SNP themes accessible and tangible, the staging makes use of strong contrasts and a broad spectrum of forms of communication. The sequence of four very different rooms and the personal exploration of the theme of wilderness based on questions builds up excitement. On the one hand, the tour offers immersive spatial displays and emotional experiences that can be shared with



Figure 2 – In the Wilderness Arena, guests are right in the middle of the production. © SNP, Hans Lozza

others. On the other hand, visitors can experience moments of individual contemplation at individual stations. Visitors determine the pace and amount of information for themselves. The content and form of the exhibition are always coordinated in such a way that everyone can quickly access the themes on their first visit, but can also discover something new on a return visit.

Kick-off: panorama and wilderness arena

In the first two exhibition rooms, visitors can immerse themselves in the wilderness and leave their everyday lives behind. The fascination of unspoiled nature and the power of the processes that shape the landscape take centre stage. Intimate moments are mixed with imposing impressions in a way that is designed to awaken personal emotions. Both rooms function as presentation rooms with very different approaches.

In the Panorama Room, guests can expect extraordinary perspectives and large-format snapshots from the wildest corners of the park. The 16-metre-wide screen covers the entire field of vision and allows visitors to dive into wilderness of the SNP. There is deliberately no human presence in the storyline, with the wilderness taking centre stage. The sounds created especially for the images unobtrusively accompany the natural events (Figure 1).

In the wilderness arena that follows, guests suddenly find themselves in the midst of the dynamic natural processes that characterize the SNP – an acoustic and visual spectacle. Whether standing in the middle of a forest fire, witnessing an avalanche or experiencing the spread of mushroom mycelium underground, the immediate proximity should get under your skin.

It was clear from the outset that *big cinema* would play a role at the centre. The previous exhibition had impressively demonstrated the positive impact of large-scale projections on the audience. However, we



Figure 3 – In the Open-Air Laboratory, guests become researchers. © Groenlandbasel, Cornelia Vinzens

also learned that inadequate acoustic separation has a negative impact on the quality of employees' workplaces. This is why the two new wilderness productions are located in soundproofed rooms.

Challenging film shoots

Developments in the video sector have been enormous over the last 15 years. While HD resolution was standard in 2008, today we are talking about 8K, i.e. 8 times higher resolution. For the SNP, this meant that most of the video material for the panorama room had to be reshot. For cost reasons, we decided to purchase 8K equipment and to tackle the filming with our own team and with the help of a dedicated intern. For the landscape shots, we used two cameras mounted on a plate covering a 180-degree angle of view. This resulted in synchronized panoramic shots with a corresponding overlap. The overall image is projected in the room by four projectors, which enables impressive sharpness with the chosen screen size.

By fair means was the basic principle of the production. The use of drones was deliberately avoided in order to minimize interference. For the animal scenes, it was important to us to show the animals in their undisturbed environment. This required large telephoto lenses and patience in order to create familiarity. The next step was to create a rough cut of the film. We discussed and further improved various versions within the exhibition team until we arrived at the final rough cut. The company Tweaklab took on the fine editing, colour correction and mastering, while the company *Idee und Klang* created the soundtrack.

What does the Swiss National Park sound like?

While the visuals take centre stage in the Panorama Room, sound is in the spotlight in the Wilderness Arena. The audience itself stands on the stage – amidst a

backdrop of sculptures made of solid and intensely fragrant Swiss stone pine. Animated projections (digital mapping) play on the scenery, creating a mystical spatial atmosphere. Guests experience first-hand the powerful processes that characterize the SNP. They also realize that they are exposed to these forces and cannot control them. This symbolizes the basic idea of the SNP, which is to allow natural dynamics to take charge and to study their effects. The backbone of the narrative is the multi-layered soundscape composed exclusively from real sounds, such as the rumble of thunder or crackling fire. Contrary to common practice, the soundscape was developed before the visual staging. Only as part of the second step did the three-dimensional, constructed stage develop, together with the plants and animals that appear, as well as the animated visual worlds. This approach challenged everyone involved but ultimately led to the uniqueness of the show's format.

The 16-channel sound in the Wilderness Arena (Figure 2) makes it possible to localize the source of the sound and direct the audience's gaze. As in the theatre, the audience's guidance is also supported by the spatial projections. The difference here is that visitors experience 360 degrees of immersion. The processes work from different directions and make the audience forget time and place.

Open-Air laboratory

After the two experience rooms at the beginning of the exhibition, visitors can look forward to a wealth of interactive stations in the Open-Air Laboratory (Figure 3). These provide insights into selected research projects and invite visitors to slip into the role of researchers themselves and to experiment. For example, it is possible to experience how various creatures such as the ptarmigan or butterflies react to climate change. Another module is dedicated to the effects of climate change on the landscape, for example on the activity of rock glaciers and debris flows. The Spöl module shows how artificial floods influence the dynamics and ecology of the Spöl stream. Here, visitors can trigger a flood themselves and actively experience its effects. In another module, a fence experiment simulates the 6th great extinction of species on earth. Finally, large predators also play an important role in the exhibition. Visitors learn about the methods used to research their impact on the ecosystem and are given the opportunity to try them out for themselves. In addition, a timeline shows the major milestones in park research. Finally, the tool wall presents the tools used by researchers in their daily work. They also talk about their work and their findings in videos.

Perspectives

The perspectives in the final room (Room 4) show how important wilderness is for our ecosystem and

what part we humans play in its development (Figure 4). In a large projection, visitors can experience how their behaviour and views affect the landscape. This is at once playful and realistic. Here we realize that we can make a personal contribution to the promotion of wilderness, even on a small scale.

This is possible thanks to the survey trail, which is a core element of the exhibition. Right at the start of the tour, guests are invited by a fictitious guide, via the media guide, to reflect on their own attitudes towards wilderness. The playful questions function independently of each other in terms of content and are loosely linked to the respective themes of the rooms. Answering the questions is not compulsory, but guarantees a fun personal exploration of the topic of wilderness, which comes to a surprising conclusion in the last room: visitors not only learn which of the five wilderness types they are, but they can directly experience how the SNP and its surroundings would change based on their wilderness type by means of panorama-like hidden object images.

The extensive development of the questionnaire, possible types of wilderness and the corresponding fictitious scenarios were supervised by experts and inspired by models from existing scientific studies (Bauer et al. 2009). The questionnaire was tested on 150 people in the summer of 2021.

Historical trail

Between the 4 rooms, a historical trail provides a central theme linking together the exhibition throughout the National Park Centre. In this vivid journey through time, visitors learn surprising facts about the milestones in the history of the SNP. The large-format illuminated pictures convey a picture of the relevant era and the acoustic presentation allows visitors to immerse themselves in a world that is almost unimaginable today.

Review

The majority of visitors' feedback on the new exhibition has been very positive. The two experience rooms in particular are very popular, but visitors also spend a lot of time in the Open-Air laboratory. There are always people who expect a nature museum to have as many animal specimens as possible. However, the aim of the new exhibition is deliberately to place the theme of wilderness at the centre in an experience-oriented and interactive way, thus distinguishing it from classic natural history museums with their own collections. From the point of view of the SNP and the scenographers, this has been very successful.

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Figure 4 – In Room 4, guests can experience how they shape the environment through their understanding of nature. © SNP, Hans Lozza

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