

The Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park anchored in the region by dedication of all involved

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Abstract

The Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park, situated at the southern end of the Zillertal valley and bordering Italy, serves as an example of long-term protected area management in the Austrian Alps. It was designated a protected area in 1991 and officially declared a nature park in 2001. Alongside the Hohe Tauern National Park, it was the first protected area in Tyrol to introduce its own administrative structure for managing a protected area. This article examines the park's development, its governance model and its current management practices. It highlights the role of local participation, inter-institutional cooperation and strategic communication in fostering acceptance and ensuring long-term success. Key initiatives such as the founding of the Nature Park Association and the establishment of a Nature Park Council; the creation of the Nature Park Centre; and the integration and participation of the local population through the establishment of Nature Park partner schools in the education sector and in partner businesses (accommodation) from the tourism sector have all strengthened the nature reserve's integration into the region at various levels. In recent years, the focus has been on nature conservation and research, thereby significantly intensifying on-the-ground activities and strengthening efforts to document regional biodiversity scientifically, as well as to make contact with landowners and land managers. The paper also addresses current challenges, including climate-related natural hazards and land-use conflicts in Alpine agriculture.

Profile

Protected area

Zillertal Alps High

Mountain Nature Park

Mountain Range

Alps

Country

Austria



Figure 1 – Zillertal Main Ridge. © Andi Neuraüter

Introduction

Since the establishment of the first nature parks in Austria in the 1960s as recreational areas for the people of Vienna, nature parks have evolved into areas in which their four objectives – conservation, recreation, education and regional development – are given equal priority. In Tyrol, an additional objective of research is also included. Nature parks that succeed in developing all these functions simultaneously have the opportunity of establishing themselves as model regions for sustainable development. Sustainable objectives are implemented in nature parks through regional governance involving stakeholders from politics, administration, business and civil society. In this context, regional governance acts as the operational interface through which sustainable development is implemented, ena-

bling the coordination of diverse stakeholder interests and the co-production and realization of the nature parks' objectives.

This paper examines the development and governance of the Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park (Austria) as a long-term case of protected area management in the Alps. Established in 1991 and designated as a nature park in 2001, the park represents one of the first protected areas in Tyrol with its own dedicated administrative structure. Over more than three decades, it has evolved into a multifunctional system that combines nature conservation, sustainable tourism, environmental education and scientific research.

Drawing on document analysis and insights from practitioners and stakeholders, the paper analyses (1) the evolution of the park's governance structures, (2) mechanisms fostering stakeholder participation

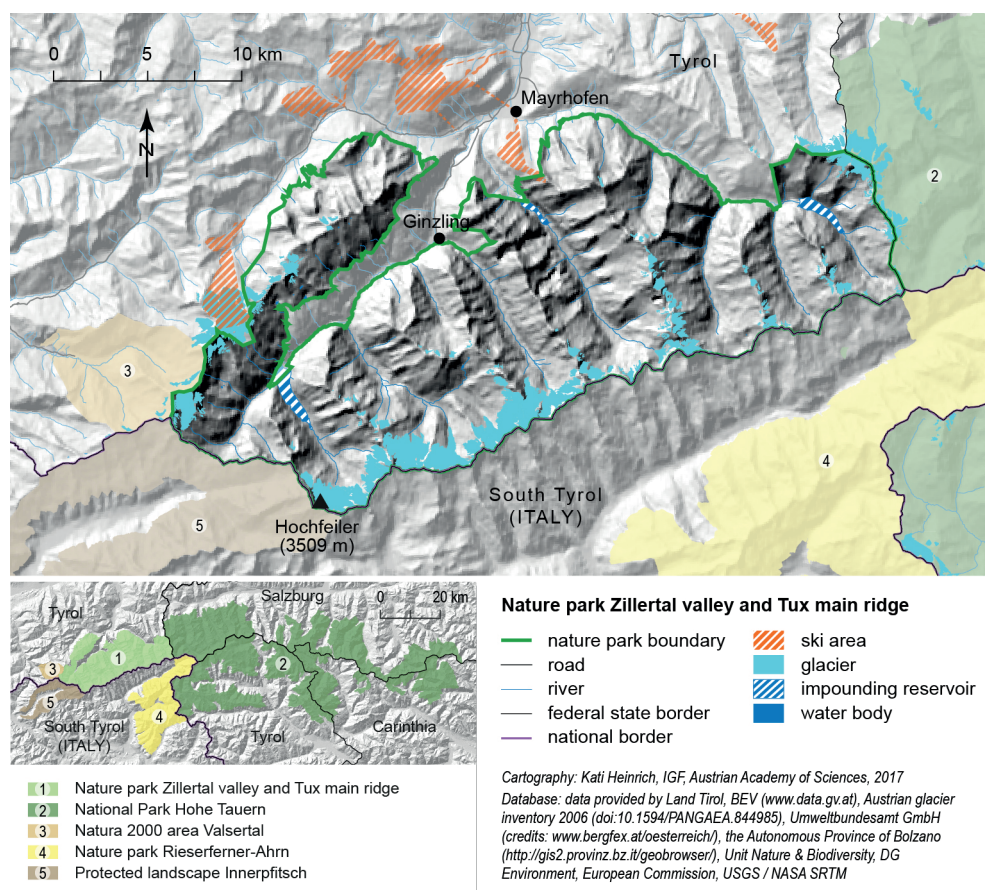


Figure 2— Map of the Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park study area and its adjacent protected areas (Braun et al. 2018).

and regional acceptance, and (3) current challenges related to land use, climate change and long-term funding. By doing so, it aims to identify key factors that enable the integration of conservation and regional development in a high-mountain protected area.

Study area

The Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park (ZNaP) is situated in the southern part of the Zillertal valley (Figure 1 & 2), in the Austrian province of Tyrol on the border with Italy, and spans five municipalities (see Info Box). Three of these five municipalities are heavily oriented towards tourism, with large ski resorts and accommodation facilities, whilst the other two have not participated in this development. In 2025, the population of the ZNaP municipalities was 7,697 with 2,149,080 overnight stays in winter and 1,541,375 in summer (Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung 2026). Ginzling, one of the two less tourism-driven villages, became the administrative centre of the ZNaP in 2008 following the decision to locate the ZNaP visitor centre there. The ZNaP's altitude ranges from 1,000 m asl in the village of Ginzling to 3,509 m asl at the summit of the Hochfeiler. The landscape is shaped by its geological history, which has left behind a mountain range with steep peaks, steep gradients, numerous side valleys in a confined space, a marked abundance of crys-

tals and a juxtaposition of silicate rock and the Hochstegen limestone formation. The landscape was given its final shape by the alternation of several glacial and interglacial periods and the advance and retreat of the ice masses that carved out the valleys (see Figure 2).

The result is a diverse mosaic of habitats, ranging from predominantly agricultural valleys to often steep mountain forests, alpine pastures and alpine grasslands leading up to glaciers and new terrain at the glacier forefields resulting from glacier melt. Among the particularly valuable or protected habitats are floodplains, hillside and ravine forests, mountain hay meadows, moors and wetlands.

The protected area was established as early as 1991 and was additionally designated a Nature Park by the Tyrolean provincial government in 2001. In 2016, large sections of the Tux Main Ridge (Figure 3) were incorporated into the existing ZNaP, which now covers an area of 422 km²; previously, it covered 372 km². Together with the adjacent Rieserferner-Ahrn Nature Park and the Innerpfitzsch Landscape Conservation Area on the Italian side, as well as the Valsertal Nature Reserve and the Hohe Tauern National Park (Carinthia, Salzburg, Tyrol) on the Austrian side, it forms part of Central Europe's largest network of protected areas, covering more than 2,700 km², see Figure 2 (Weiskopf & Seifert 2015; Braun et al. 2018).



Figure 3 – View towards the Tux Main Ridge which was incorporated into the existing protected area in 2016. © Paul Sürth

How it all began

Following the designation by the Province of Tyrol of a regionally recognized protected area known as the *Ruhegebiet* (quiet area), a manager was appointed as early as 1992 to draw up a landscape framework plan with measures for the quiet area. In 1996, a key step was the founding of the Nature Park Association and its Council (Fischer 1992, 1997), see below *Establishment of a Nature Park Council*.

In the early years of the quiet zone, the focus of the management was on working with the local population to strengthen nature conservation efforts and to foster an emotional connection with the area (Konstenzer 1997). To raise awareness among local stakeholders, a symposium organized jointly by the management and the Austrian and German Alpine Associations in 1997 outlined the management's main tasks: landscape conservation, increasing public acceptance, improving the

quality of protection and promoting regional networking (Hasslacher 1997).

One of the initial priority actions was to offer temporary exhibitions in Ginzling. From 1997 onwards, annual exhibitions were held on various themes, such as smugglers and poachers, stories about stones, herbs and alpinism. These exhibitions continued until 2008, when the permanent *Gletscher.Welten* (glacier.worlds) exhibition was set up in the newly built Nature Park Centre. The initial exhibitions were organized and supported by the ZNaP management in collaboration with local residents in the elementary school of Ginzling. This also fostered regional cooperation with stakeholder groups in the early years of the ZNaP.

The Tyrolean Nature Conservation Act of 1997 first enshrined the management of protected areas within contractual nature conservation, but it was not until 2005 that the Tyrolean provincial government adopted a protected area management concept. The regional development strategies provide for *the implementation of the protected area management concept, including the establishment of the protected area platform and a coordination office* (Land Tirol 2007). Protected areas *constitute an essential element of nature conservation work in Tyrol. Therefore, activities in protected areas should be stepped up, particularly in the areas of management, monitoring, public relations, regional development and communication with landowners* (Land Tirol 2007). In 2006, the Tyrolean Protected Areas Coordination Office was established within the Provincial Department of Environmental Protection to implement and strategically align the protected areas.

By 2010, the protected areas in Tyrol were to be more closely integrated within tourism objectives so as to enhance the value of nature whilst ensuring that nature conservation remained the primary objective (Land Tirol 2010). This objective was achieved through efficient protected area management, which created the framework for effective visitor management to *prevent visitors from damaging natural assets worthy of protection* (Land Tirol 2010). By appointing a manager as early as 1992, the ZNaP was ahead of its time.

Infobox

Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park

Nature Park municipalities: Mayrhofen, Tux, Finkenberg, Brandberg and Ginzling (a small village which is part of Mayrhofen).

1991: Established by the Tyrolean provincial government as a Quiet Area covering 372 km².

1992: A manager was appointed for the Quiet Area.

1996: Founding of the Nature Park Association.

1997: Main tasks outlined for the nature park's management.

1997: First exhibitions in Ginzling at the elementary school.

2001: Designated a Nature Park.

2008: Opening of the Nature Park Centre in Ginzling.

2008: Ginzling joined the *Bergsteigerdorf* (Mountaineering Village) network.

2009: The first Nature Park school partnership starts in Brandberg.

2016: Extension of the Quiet Area and the Nature Park. Size since then, 422 km².

2018: A new staff position dedicated to nature conservation and research created as part of the Nature Park's management.

2023: Opening of the Nature Park Centre extension in Ginzling.

From Quiet Area to Nature Park

The term *Quiet Area* initially led to misunderstandings among both locals and tourists. People asked whether they were not allowed to speak there, i.e. whether *peace and quiet* had to prevail there. The regional benefits of a quiet zone were not immediately apparent. It was only with the *Nature Park* label and the new Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park name that a new awareness was created.

Under the Tyrolean Nature Conservation Act, nature parks are publicly accessible (large-scale) protected areas – such as landscape conservation areas, quiet zones or nature reserves – particularly suitable for recreation in the great outdoors or for environmental education, and whose conservation is of particular importance.

Management of the protected area

The protected area has been continuously managed since 1992. In accordance with the ZNaP's mission statement, the administration is responsible for all organizational tasks relating to the ZNaP. The administration consists of a full-time managing director and one other full-time employee. The specific remit of all administrative staff is governed by the statutes of the Nature Park Council, the mission statement in force at the time, employment contracts and by-laws / regulations.

Establishment of a Nature Park Council

In 1996, the municipalities within whose boundaries the ZNaP is located, the Province of Tyrol and the Austrian Alpine Association founded a Nature Park Association who is represented and led by a Council. All its members are rooted in the region (Seifert 2007). The Nature Park Council, which supports the ZNaP was a novelty in Tyrol, as until then staff of the Tyrolean provincial government had been responsible for the protected areas (ibid.).

The number of full members has grown steadily since the Nature Park Association was founded. This is attributable to the ZNaP's greater integration within the tourism sector through tourism associations in 2004 and again in 2008. In addition, cooperation with Österreichische Bundesforste AG (Austrian Federal Forests), the largest landowner in the ZNaP, was intensified from 2011 onwards. Following the expansion of the ZNaP in 2008 and again in 2016 towards the municipal area of Tux, which had not previously been represented in the Nature Park Association due to its lack of a share in the protected area, Tux was now also included. Today, the Nature Park Council is the decision-making body for all important or strategic matters concerning the operational work and development of the ZNaP.



Figure 4 – Volunteer project on an overgrown pasture in the Nature Park region. © Zillertal Nature Park

Funding of the administration

Funding for the ZNaP administration was initially provided by the Austrian Alpine Association (1991). Following the creation of the Landscape Framework Plan (1992), the Austrian Alpine Association and the Province of Tyrol jointly funded the appointment of the first protected area manager. After the establishment of the Nature Park Association, the Association's members increased the budget to fund the administration staff (Fischer 1997). Currently, the Province of Tyrol, co-financed by European Union grants, covers approximately half of the personnel costs for the ZNaP's management; the other half is provided by the five ZNaP municipalities, the Austrian Alpine Association and the two tourism associations of the ZNaP region.

In addition, the Nature Park's partner businesses make a significant contribution to the Association's funding through their financial contributions as part of the tourism services group. About 100 businesses have signed agreements to work closely with the ZNaP. To become a Nature Park partner business, a company must meet various quality criteria, commit to the ZNaP's philosophy, and help to convey the ZNaP's concepts directly to its guests (High Alps Nature Park Zillertaler Alps 2026).

The German Alpine Association (DAV), with its sections active in the ZNaP region, Nature Park supporting members contributing an average amount of EUR 25 and private sponsors also make a valuable contribution to core funding. The ZNaP also receives funding from various national and international project schemes such as LEADER and INTERREG, which is used to cover project-related staff and material costs.

Acceptance

Three acceptance studies have already been conducted (Sandner et al. 1996; Fröhlich & Ott 2008; Mayrhofer 2015), which show that the public's at-

titude towards the ZNaP has become more positive overall and that general awareness of the ZNaP has risen from 78% (1996) to 86% (2015). This was also evident during the expansion of the ZNaP in 2016. During the relevant discussions conducted by political representatives, the chairperson of the Nature Park Association and the managing director of the Nature Park with the landowners, a good general mood and a broad consensus emerged, which had a positive impact on the decision-making process.

The ZNaP team and council have observed that acceptance among landowners and farmers has increased significantly, partly due to several nature conservation and volunteer projects (Figure 4) organized by the ZNaP on alpine pastures and in the mountain forest within the ZNaP. The 2015 acceptance study by Mayrhauser also showed that scepticism on the part of representatives of the agricultural sector has decreased significantly since 1996. However, the defensive stance, particularly among farmers, which is evident in all three studies, as well as their fears of a *restriction of their property rights*, are diminishing but continue to remain a challenge for the administration.

The Nature Park Centre

A milestone for the ZNaP was the opening of the Nature Park House in Ginzling in 2008. The building housed the ZNaP office, the Ginzling local council, the tourist information centre, an exhibition on glaciers, a library and a small shop. Following renovation and extension from 2022 to 2023, the building was significantly enlarged and now houses a new exhibition on the geological history and crystal treasures of the Zillertal Alps, which have been loaned free of charge by numerous private collectors. The integrated café that was also created has proved to be a valuable addition to the visitor experience and has great potential to develop into a social meeting place, also for the inhabitants of Ginzling. A nature garden and a play area with a bouldering block complete the visitor facilities. Half of the funding for the extension came from the region (the ZNaP's municipalities and tourism associations), whilst the other half was financed through various funding schemes, in particular through a substantial financial contribution from the Province of Tyrol.

Bergsteigerdörfer – Mountaineering Villages

The *Tourism and Leisure* Protocol of the Alpine Convention signed in 1998 (Alpenkonvention 1998) aims to strengthen the competitiveness of nature-based tourism and to strike a balance between intensive and extensive forms of tourism. As early as 2001, the first concept paper on *The Network of "Mountaineering Villages" in the Alps* was drawn up on behalf of the Austrian Alpine Association to promote a form of mountain tourism adapted to the region and based on



Figure 5 – Rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*). © Evelyn Seppi

sustainability criteria (Kals 2006). The Austrian Alpine Association and the ZNaP association worked on a concept for Ginzling to improve the Alpine tourism offering and integrate it into this network. Since 2008 Ginzling has been part of the network.

The *Bergsteigerdörfer* initiative, which aims to make nature-oriented and resource-conserving tourism competitive, goes hand in hand with the ZNaP's objectives for promoting regional development. In this way, the *Bergsteigerdörfer* initiative complements and supports the ZNaP's objectives and presents them as a cross-border, cross-regional and cross-cultural network of 43 locations in 5 Alpine countries (Bergsteigerdörfer 2026). In 2016, the initiative was recognized as an official implementation project of the Alpine Convention.

Nature conservation objectives as a catalyst

The development of the nature conservation objectives began in 2018 and was concluded in 2020 with a resolution by the Nature Park Council. During the process, the ZNaP management defined and described the characteristic habitats, along with the measures required to conserve, improve or restore them (Hochgebirgs-Naturpark Zillertaler Alpen 2020). The habitats include mountain forests, wetlands, alpine pastures, alpine grasslands, as well as rocky and high-mountain sites. The formulation of these objectives provided an important impetus for concrete action, such as nature conservation projects in the Glocke Protected Landscape Area, in the riparian forest on the Schwemmalm (an alpine pasture) and in the mountain forest, or various so-called *nature conservation plans in the alpine pastures*.

Mission statement of the Nature Park

The ZNaP Strategy, which serves as a mission statement setting out the direction for the ZNaP's strategic and operational work, was developed jointly by the Nature Park Council and the full-time staff of the ZNaP Management Team. The first edition of the mission statement was adopted in 2014 and remained

in force until 2020. In 2024, work began on revising and reissuing the document, and the process was completed in 2025. The updated mission statement is in force from 2025 to 2032. Key stakeholders such as the Nature Park partner schools, regional producers and the Nature Park's partner businesses were involved in the process. This resulted in the following objectives:

- Sharpen the profile of the ZNaP and document changes in the ZNaP area.
- Conduct more thorough research into the fauna and flora of the ZNaP area and expand species lists.
- Exploit synergies and strengthen cooperation with universities and other institutions.
- Clearly define research objectives and communicate results effectively.
- Collaborate on research beyond the ZNaP's boundaries to preserve the wider ecosystem.
- Establish a better foundation and gain more knowledge about *new territory* released by the glacier.

Nature Park partner schools

In collaboration with the ZNaP, Nature Park partner schools place particular emphasis on teaching nature-related topics. Topics relevant to the ZNaP are taught in separate Nature Park partner school lessons and put into practice in joint projects. Many of the projects taking place at the ZNaP are incorporated within the Nature Park partner schools. The Nature Park partner schools have played a key role in increasing public acceptance of the ZNaP by enhancing its profile and standing among local families. The first collaboration took place in 2009 with the Brandberg elementary school. The school environment offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen environmental education and awareness, as schools where science is taught in a more practical manner produce pupils with a higher level of environmental awareness (Coertjens et al. 2010).

The Nature Park and research

The development of nature conservation objectives and the creation of a new staff position dedicated to nature conservation and research (2018) have given these two areas significantly greater weight within the ZNaP's remit. Due to the high financial and personnel costs involved, as well as the specialist expertise required, the vast majority of research questions are addressed and processed in collaboration with universities and other research institutions. For example, recent projects have included surveys on the spatial behaviour of the Alpine ibex (2016–2020), natural landscape analyses and management concepts for specific valley and mountain forests, as well as butterfly and vegetation mapping in the Brandberg mountain meadows area (2020–2025). In addition, a long-term monitoring programme for the rock ptarmigan was

launched in 2019, and an update of the *Zillertal Alps Glacier Study* was implemented (see Heinen 2026).

Challenges

Agriculture in the Nature Park

In the Zillertal, the cultural landscape is intensively farmed up to an altitude of over 2,000 m asl, often for dairy farming. The alpine pastures have been used by people and livestock for many centuries, and in some cases even for millennia. In terms of area, they account for a significant proportion of the ZNaP and cover around a quarter of the protected area. Some alpine pastures begin as low as 1,200 m asl, as the valleys are very steep and narrow. Cattle are the primary livestock grazed on these pastures, though sheep, goats and horses are also kept (Hochgebirgs-Naturpark Zillertaler Alpen 2020). However, too much fertiliser is used on some alpine pastures, leading to structurally poor, nutrient-rich meadows and the loss of species-rich rough pastures. Another significant problem is rock extraction from alpine pastures. Under the pretext of *improving agricultural infrastructure*, alpine pastures are being cleared of rocks on a large scale using machinery. Diverse, mosaic-like alpine pastures, with distinctive cultural landscape features such as gneiss and granite boulders, are thus being transformed into monotonous alpine grasslands. Another reason for this is the high quality of the rock material, which is in high demand for use in river engineering, road construction, slope stabilization and residential building. Discussions are currently underway between the ZNaP and authorities, politicians and other key stakeholders to reverse this trend and prevent the haphazard clearing of the landscape.

Climate change

Although not directly relevant to the work of the ZNaP, climate change and its associated impacts nevertheless pose a major challenge to the natural environment and various human activities in the region. On the one hand, there are rising temperatures, longer heatwaves and dry spells, greater variability in rainfall combined with increased heavy rainfall, decreasing snowfall, glacier retreat and the thawing of permafrost. On the other hand, there are issues related to agricultural land use, groundwater and drinking water, the safety of alpine infrastructure and, above all, the impact of the changes outlined on flora and fauna. The ZNaP seeks to contribute relevant foundational knowledge through appropriate research and, at the same time, to raise awareness so as to support important transformation processes within society.

Long-term funding outlook

Current developments in the economy, politics and society pose major challenges for non-profit organizations, which are very often heavily reliant on public funds and grants. This is because the noticeable

strain on public budgets, from local authorities right up to the EU level, is leading to a shortage of available funds. This is creating major uncertainties with regard to solid, long-term funding for privately or semi-publicly organized protected area management bodies. This is particularly serious because the quality and success of a protected area management organization's work depend significantly on long-term, stable employment relationships. In the coming years, great attention will need to be paid to maintaining precisely this stability in terms of the solid core funding that has characterized the Nature Park Association to date.

Conclusion

The Zillertal Alps High Mountain Nature Park is a model for protected area management in Tyrol, as it combines nature conservation, education, sustainable tourism, research and regional development. From its beginnings as a Quiet Area to its current role as a nature park, the park has undergone a remarkable transformation, characterized by cooperation between authorities, local communities, the tourism sector, Alpine Associations, the scientific community and nature conservation stakeholders.

A key factor in the park's success is its locally rooted administrative structure, which fosters trust, facilitates cooperation and ensures that nature conservation objectives are aligned with the needs of local residents. The establishment of the Nature Park House, the development of the Nature Park partner schools, research activities and the active involvement of local communities and tourism stakeholders have contributed to the park's visibility and acceptance. The *Bergsteigerdörfer* initiative further strengthens the link between sustainable tourism and regional identity.

At the same time, the ZNaP faces complex challenges – ranging from increasing natural hazards linked to climate change, through tensions regarding agricultural practices and ecological integrity, to securing long-term, stable funding for the protected area staff, who provide the foundation and backbone of the Nature Park Association. These challenges require adaptive management, continuous dialogue with stakeholders and clear communication of nature conservation objectives.

Overall, the ZNaP demonstrates how protected areas can serve as catalysts for both ecological conservation and regional vitality. Its development offers valuable insights into how conservation and use can be reconciled, acceptance fostered and nature conservation implemented in a multifunctional Alpine landscape.

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