

Land Ownership and Park Management:

A Note on the Experience of Tatra National Park, Slovak Republic

The American Model

National parks usually represent the prime examples of each country's natural heritage. Their uniqueness is often the subject of unique legislation and government policy. The main goals of national park designation are to endeavor to protect remnants of nature in its more or less pristine state, to follow international standards for protected areas, and to find a framework for dealing with local people, landowners, visitors, and other park users.

During the emergence of the modern protected area movement in North America, at the turn of 19th and in the early 20th century, planners generally tried to exclude private property from park territory. As this approach developed, the planners very soon found out two things. First, that parks were getting surrounded by private land which complicated or even made impossible the enlargement of the park for ecological reasons (such as to include wildlife migratory routes, or set to the boundary more logically at the limits of a watershed, mountain ridges, rivers, etc.). Second, that creating parks in heavily populated parts of the country would very soon become almost impossible because of a lack of federal property and the unwillingness of private owners to share or sell their rights to the federal government.

The logical solution can be summed up in a single word: "cooperation." Easily said, but hard to do. In the American park model, to cooperate and find compromise was

and still is very difficult. To find an accommodation between the mandate of protecting nature in the park and the desires of landowners—which can usually be formulated along the lines of "Let us do the same things that we were doing before," or, "Let us live the same way of life that we lived before"—is a very, very difficult task.

The Early European Experience

The development of parks in Europe was quite different. The end of the 19th century found Europe with a relatively high density of population and more or less depleted natural resources. But most importantly, Europe largely lacked large, pristine tracts of country, uninhabited and untouched by human activity. The different scale of the continent, the different density of human population, and the much, much more complicated ownership situation were all reasons why it was not possible to simply transfer the American model to Europe.

The first national park in Europe, for example, was the Parc National Suisse, created in 1914 in the Swiss Alps. The park planners chose about 16,800 hectares of community land in a high part of the Alps along the Swiss-Italian border. This land was very heavily used in the past. Most of the native forest was almost gone by the 15th and 16th centuries, having been cut for timbers used in the building of salt mines in Austria and for manufacturing charcoal used in industry.

The Swiss League for Nature Protection, the government, and local communities and landowners signed an agreement for a long-term (25-year) rental of future park territory. Since the park's inception, the land has been left unaltered, giving it a unique chance to recover from prolonged human interference. Underlining this unusual approach was the fact that each Swiss inhabitant donated one Swiss franc as the first rent installment. Since then (i.e., for more than 80 years), the agreement has been periodically prolonged, and the park has become part of local tradition and history—indeed, a part of Switzerland's heritage. From a scientific point of view, the park is a rare place in the Alps where nature has gotten a chance to recover itself.

Tatra National Park in the Slovak Republic

A few years after the Second World War, the transboundary Tatra National Park was established at the northern edge of Slovakia, together

with lands over the Polish side of the border. The idea for an international park dated back to the founding of the modern republic of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I. At that time, a park project prepared by a Czechoslovak-Polish team of experts failed because of a number of complicated issues related to land ownership, such as the fear that a park would mean restrictions on such traditional economic activities as grazing, logging, mining, and hunting. Thus, the idea to transfer the North American park experience to Czechoslovakia failed. It was premature to expect to replicate the Glacier-Waterton experience in the initial Tatra proposal. Land users and landowners simply would not accept the idea of sharing their property and their rights with the general public. In spite of this situation, in the 1930s the Czechoslovak government, looking forward to the day when a park might be created, gradually purchased a few thousand hectares of private and community land in the most valuable parts of the park project area.

The Second World War passed and, in 1947, Communism emerged victorious in Czechoslovakia. At a single stroke the problem of recalcitrant landowners was solved: the new government simply nationalized all the land in the country. Less than a year later, Tatra National Park was established.

Forty years later, after Czechoslovakia was partitioned into the Czech and Slovak republics in the aftermath of the 1989 "Velvet Revolution," the

situation was again turned on its head. The new, democratically elected parliament passed a law dealing with reprivatization of land, thereby returning it to its original owners—including land within the national park. However, the park itself was not disestablished, and the rules and regulations governing land use within Tatra remained intact, applying equally to both publicly and privately held park lands.

Most of the newly repatriated owners had, in the first flush of excitement, some strong ideas about how they should be able to manage their property in the park. Their approach can be simply expressed in one sentence: "This is my property and I can do what I want." The gap in their minds, more than 40 years long, was difficult to overcome. Yet slowly, very slowly, they have changed their attitudes. They have learned that everybody has to respect legislation, not only that which pertains to reprivatization, but also the law creating Tatra National Park. This act means many restrictions for them and almost no compensation (except for tax-deductible ownership status).

After more than 40 years, it was time to change management practice. Park managers had to assume the new task of educating owners, explaining

to them not only about the uniqueness of Tatra's natural features, but also about their rights and, above all, their responsibilities. Today, managers generally look for compromises, but compromises that do not hurt the park. Rangers have become more diplomats than naturalists, interpreters, or managers. Even so, the last few years in Tatra National Park have been harder for owners than for park managers.

But both sides have had to find a way of understanding, of cooperating. In the last year, more and more owners have found that the beauty of the mountains behind their homes attract ever-increasing numbers of tourists every year. They bring money, but more than this they spread news about Tatra's mountains throughout the world. The growing mass of tourists also has brought new troubles—troubles which are very common and well-known in parks around the world. All these troubles can only be solved with mutual tolerance, understanding, and cooperation.

In any event, for the foreseeable future Tatra's managers can only expect more visitors—more and more people who are looking for that relatively pristine piece of nature which is so rare in Central Europe.

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