

**Local Rural Studies in
Františkov/Klikov, Třeboňsko,
Czech Republic**

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Running a Business within the borders of a Biosphere Reserve

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1. Introduction

The village of Františkov/Klikov, the site of our research, is situated within the borders of the Třeboň Basin Biosphere Reserve. As the UNESCO defines it, Biosphere Reserves are: “places that seek to reconcile conservation of biological and cultural diversity and economic and social development through partnerships between people and nature” (UNESCO). Therefore this setting presented us with the opportunity to analyse how a sustainable interaction between inhabitants and their surrounding can be designed.

Placing our focus on local accommodation businesses we met our interview partner – the owner of a local Pension, to learn more about the current understanding of this relationship.

Mainly we wanted to find out what the key sustainability issues concerning tourism, more specific running a Pension, in Františkov/Klikov might be. The lead categories we wanted to discuss with our interview partner were the personal and business history, reasons for setting their business in this location, material and energy use, costs, tourism in this region as well as local and regional aspects of the Biosphere Reserve. We wanted to understand what it means to run a business in this specific setting, how nature gets affected by the operation but also how the Biosphere Reserve retroacts on the business.

Tourism presents the region with additional pressure not only in terms of material and energy flows but also concerning preservation matters. In the context of sustainability we expected the most pressing issues to arise connected to the construction of the Pension, the organisation of the continuous material and energy flows and the logistics related to the tourist business. To be able to collect data we questioned ourselves about the boundaries we wanted to set our analysis in. The Pension and its adjoining facilities, the Pub and the owner’s house are set as the main system but flows from and to the surrounding are being considered.

2. Method

Our interdisciplinary team is formed by students from the Masters Programme in Social Ecology from the University of Klagenfurt, with backgrounds in Geography, Sociology, Cultural Sciences and one student from the Masters Programme in Applied Ecology from the University of South Bohemia, with a background in Landscape Ecology. These diverse perspectives gave us the great

opportunity to view the question of sustainable interaction within the Biosphere Reserve from a multitude of angles.

To conduct the interview we decided on a problem centred interview. “The problem-centered interview (PZI) is a theory-generating method that tries to neutralize the alleged contradiction between being directed by theory or being open-minded so that the interplay of inductive and deductive thinking contributes to increasing the user's knowledge” (Witzel, 2000). This narrative method gives the chance to open a topic very broadly and let the interviewee choose the order of priority.

The interview was held in German and took place in the garden behind the owner's house. The setting was very relaxed and informal. Originally the interview was arranged to be with Mrs. R., but on arrival we learned that her husband would be answering our questions instead. Despite this surprise considering the change of interview partners our interview went very well. The given information might have differed because of the work division within the couple. Her being more involved in the everyday life of the Pension, dealing with the guest and being responsible for the administrative work and him giving more information about regulations, material and technical details of the construction process.

Afterwards we did a collective interpretation of the data collected during the interview and drew conclusions which will be presented as follows.

3. The Informant

Learning about local accommodation business Mr. R. presented us with the opportunity to investigate on practices, possible restrictions and also reasons for settling, within the boundaries of the Biosphere Reserve.

The property owned and operated by family R. can be traced back to the year 1924, when Mrs. R.'s grandfather built the house they are still living in today. Originally the house was designed to give space, not only to the family's needs, but also the blacksmith's shop and the restaurant, which today is run by leaseholders.

Mr. and Mrs. R. grew up near Prague, the place where they met and started a family together. They frequently used the property as a holiday spot until communism was installed. The family lost their ownership rights and the restaurant was partially turned into a grocery shop run by communist authorities, which lasted until 1995.

Mr. R. and his family escaped to Austria in 1982, finding permanent settlement in Upper Austria. After the Velvet Revolution the property was given back into family hands in 1995, but due to poor care a lot of work needed to be done. Threatened to lose the house because of high maintenance and investment costs, Mr. and Mrs. R. decided to take over action. The need to preserve the house was pressing and as the family had noticed the demand for guest housing in the region, the idea to build a Pension was born. Mrs. R., who had worked as a cashier in Austria, permanently relocated to Františkov, taking care of the business. Their grown-up son decided to stay in Austria, and Mr. R., who still owns a car dealing business in Upper Austria, sees himself forced to spend 2-3 days per week in Austria too.

Although Mr. R. himself does appreciate the region's nature, Mr. and Mrs. R. did not deliberately pick the Biosphere Reserve as location to start their accommodation business, but rather took the circumstances presented to them. The fact that the family owned the property in this exact spot and the popularity of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which created a demand for guest housing, determined their choice. Mr. R. likes to adventure bike or canoe trips in the Třeboň area and also regularly organises tours with his friends, but the concept of his surrounding being a Biosphere Reserve didn't seem to be very conscious in his mind or greatly affect his behaviour towards nature.

Starting to build the new housing complex, designed to give room to 40 people, the family saw themselves confronted with legal restrictions, due to the location of the property within the boundaries of the Biosphere Reserve. Three years passed until the building project was approved by the authorities and the work could start in 2008, lasting till the big opening in July 2010. The planning restriction mainly concerned the outside appearance of the building and no additional measures to build in harmony with nature were initiated by the family. Nature preservation and sustainability cannot be identified as key concerns, although environment friendly measures like waste separation or installing a solar power plant in the future are options welcomed by the owners.

4. Findings

4.1. Material and Energy

When questioned about the origin of his building material Mr. R. answered that he got cheaper bricks, floor tiles and doors from Austria. The roof tiles, on the other hand, were bought in the Czech Republic as the transportation costs from Austria would have evened out overall costs from

the Czech Republic. The Pension's furniture is mostly from Ikea and Möbelix.

The walls' isolation had not been planned in the beginning. After some time, our respondent had started to think that polystyrene isolation would keep the houses cooler in summer. However, it became obvious that the rooms were almost too cold afterwards and that this expensive investment would not have been necessary.

One of the couple's biggest problems is the disposal of the Pension's sewage. Although the property is connected to the regional water supply, there is neither a gas line nor a sewer tunnel. Waste is stored in two 20 m³ containers at the corner of the property. When those are full, Mr. R. calls a company in Majdalena, which is about 9 km from Klikov. The containers are then emptied into two faecal sucking trucks and taken to purification plants, where the water is cleaned for reuse. Our interviewee stated that the trucks are needed regularly during the high season and the whole procedure is not inexpensive.

This applies for many of the region's households, as they are not connected to the sewage system. Our respondent informed us that when he started building the Pension, the municipality promised them to construct a sewage canal within three years. This never happened. Instead, the households in the area received a questionnaire, asking them if they opted for the construction of an individual sewage system at high costs. Mr. R. thinks that such an investment just needs to be done for the common good and that households with a connection to incoming water should have an outgoing canal as well.

Some people in the village are still using coal for heating, which Mr. R. calls “stinky” and not really necessary. He is using regional wood for heating their own place but electric heating in the Pension. Our respondent mentioned that he is willing to pay more for having his wood delivered than cutting it on his own. This would involve asking the municipality for an allocation of forest area and bigger time investments for the felling and transportation.

When asked about his plans for the future our respondent stated that he wants to use solar panels in his private home to see how it would work. He can imagine solar power for the Pension but only for heating water. An heat pump would also be a good and less expensive idea. We were informed that they would not get any kind of financial support for changing to solar energy.

4.2. Local and Regional Tourism

The promotion of the Pension via internet is the main driver for attracting Czech, German or English speaking tourists. It lures them to come there by the prospect of beautiful nature, relaxation

and sport opportunities such as cycling, hiking, canoeing, swimming and fishing. Another way to promote accommodation or activities for tourism is offered by the Suchdol Tourism Board. But due to high member contributions, a private website was preferred.

The majority of tourists are families coming from the Czech Republic which make a high proportion of returning guests, but also groups and companies book in. The number of tourists has increased year by year until full occupancy by 2013. In case of overbooking, acquaintances owning a guest house are being contacted. Bookings usually go for one week from Saturday to Saturday. There is no responsibility taken to inform the tourists after their arrival about the biosphere reserve, expected behaviour or any additional information like brochures. After departure, between 10:00 and 16:00 o'clock, two ladies from the village Rapšach are hired to take care of the cleaning; hence additional labour force is offered and needed to maintain the facility. The problem of increasing jealousy of other tourism stakeholders towards the success story of the Pension was being addressed.

The only local-regional communication took place during the planning and building process of the Pension. First ideas were to build single wooden houses, but due to the landscape-planning regulation within the Biosphere Reserve, which aims to maintain the overall cultural and architectural heritage of the area, the plans had to be changed. Certain architectural features that consider the facade of the building (like the angle of the roof, the block bricks or size/form of the windows etc.) had to be taken into account in the architectural plans. After all, it took three years to get the building permit approved.

Even though the season in 2013 runs well, scepticism was still expressed towards the tourism sector. In case their tourist business is of no success, using the Pension as a retirement home is considered to be an option. Without the additional job as a car dealer, ongoing investments for the Pension like building a pergola, benches, renting bikes, etc. would not be possible. So for now, investments avert to completely rely on tourism as the only income.

The biosphere reserve is important in means that nature is identified as a comparative advantage for tourism. Individual led tourism is the preferred way to save costs and have advantages in comparison to the cooperation with other tourism stakeholder. Sustainability issues for the tourism sector are neither being addressed by the regional regulations nor by the local case.

4.3. Community

A community is an important part of a town. In big cities, a person can choose his/her own community consisting of people with the same interest. In a village however, one must get along with different personalities and try to find a common “language”. Each community should have a main meeting place. In Františkov there used to be a sort of functioning square, but nowadays the main meeting point is a Pub next to the Pension which has been standing there since 1924. Even owners of weekend houses visit the Pub and discuss with the villagers.

Although the Pension owner works partially in Austria, he still finds time to be a part of Františkov's/Klikov's community. This is why we regarded him as a good resource of information. He reported “Here everybody knows each other” and proved it by describing his neighbours and their different jobs. For example we were told about a policeman, a car shop owner, a forester and a carpenter. He also informed us that one of his new neighbours, who has recently moved to Františkov, is intending to renovate the old house she lives in. As she is working in an electro-technical engineering factory in Suchdol, she is afraid to lose her job there like so many others. In April 2013 one fifth of the employees were made redundant because the company moved away a part of the production and other dismissals might still follow. The region does not offer many job opportunities. People who know German can work in Austria, but others have to move or try to open their own business, which is also the case of the Pension owner. He has found a business opportunity in tourism, which is a big chance of income in the Třeboň Basin Biosphere Reserve, although money from tourism flows just during a few months.

Even though Františkov belongs to the municipality of Suchdol, it does not get much support for community life actions or the village's infrastructure. Suchdol is mostly using the money for itself and nowadays the biggest investment goes to the construction of a new road in Suchdol. Exceptions may happen, when a bigger part of the village is interested in the same event, for example the decoration of a Christmas tree. But still, the region notices some enrichments of community life – potteries, field trips (canoeing, cycling,...), fishing in nearby ponds, and last but not least Klikov's soccer club, which is supported financially even by the Pension owner, although he does not play soccer.

The appearance of the village is reflected by its community and vice versa the community is influenced by the village's image. Permanent residents having good relationships among themselves

and being engaged in community life will make the village look more appealing, function well and therefore attract tourists or new possible inhabitants.

5. Reflection

Analysing this local rural system with our focus set on local tourism and accommodation business, we have found out that, although the village is set in a Biosphere Reserve, concerns about nature and its preservation were not on the agenda of our informant. Economic factors seem to be the overall determinant in decision making processes, like we learned for example concerning the procurement of building materials.

Nature is recognized as an asset in terms of attracting tourists to the region and personally valued for recreational purposes. Beyond these profits no further thoughts are given to assure a sustainable interaction with the environment.

This might be partially explained by the lack of promotion the Biosphere Reserve Třeboňsko is experiencing in the region. Incoming tourists often pick the region due to its unique natural capital and enjoy their stay taking the various opportunities the area offers them. Amongst inhabitants the concept of a Biosphere Reserve does not seem to be recognized that well. Our informant issued some statements concerning the regulations for his business due to the status of protection the area underlies, but missed to know greater details about it. As stated at the beginning, the UNESCO defines a Biosphere Reserve as a place where nature and inhabitants can exist in harmony, taking in consideration both sides' needs but the local community does not seem to be well informed about this idea. In addition the knowledge of how a sustainable relationship can be designed and the understanding of how such a state would be profitable for all sides is not provided.

In the case of our informant dealing in tourism, a greater awareness not only for the impact he himself has on the area but also the additional pressure the tourists he houses create on the natural system, would be welcomed. The Pension could function as a valuable distributor of information about the Biosphere Reserve.

In respect to the social component of sustainability a greater appreciation for the local environment could also help to antagonise the trend of rural depopulation, the area sees itself confronted with. The scarcity of jobs can clearly be identified as main driver for emigration, but the potential of the location might hold new possibilities in this sector too if utilised right.

The analysis of Františkov/Klikov showed us how complex a local system is organised. With the help of our informant, who provided us with a great insight in local customs, flows and priorities, we got a sense of what the main sustainability issues might be. To better understand the conflicting areas and main drivers further research would be necessary.

6. Literature

Witzel, Andreas (2000), The Problem-Centered Interview., in: FQS Forum Qualitative Research Sozialforschung, Vol.1, Article 22 (access: 08.07.13).

UNESCO (2013), Biosphere Reserves - Learning Sites for Sustainable Development (access: 26.07.13).



7. Appendix

Picture 1: The Pension - Entrance



Picture 2: The Pension



Picture 3: The Pub