

Fractals of Sustainable Development - Results of a session on “Cooperation between biosphere reserves across national and regional borders” at EUROMAB Conference 2022

Barbara Engels and Michael Jungmeier, September 14th, 2022, Bad Kleinkirchheim

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All around the world, biosphere reserves (BRs) pursue the same goals. They are to be "learning" model regions for sustainable development. In very different societies and natural areas, BRs develop as institutions with similar tasks and cultures. They are therefore self-similar structures (fractals) and can thus become the cornerstones of ecological globalization.

Cooperation and exchange are thus constituent elements of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR). In our workshop we wanted to reflect and discuss the possibilities, examples and models of cooperation between BRs. Even before the workshop, participants had taken part in an **online survey**. According to this, the participants represented 13 countries. They were able to contribute on experiences from two planned, eight ongoing and one terminated cooperation. The types of cooperation were diverse, namely two national, six international and three cross-border. In terms of content, the collaborations are very diverse, ranging from ocean literacy to mountain development, from youth fora to large landscape protection. The contents should be explored in the workshop, as well as intentions, triggers and drivers of cooperation as well as hindering factors, barriers and obstacles.

In the workshop, we attempted to systematically record and describe BR's collaborations. For this purpose, we used a **partnership portfolio** (see Figure 1). This assumes that each BR actively pursues several partnerships, which differ in terms of content, partners, formats, and resources provided or contributed. In addition, the development of partnerships goes through several steps, which are also depicted in the portfolio in a generalized form.

The discussion was based on stimulating presentations of different collaborations throughout the EUROMAB region. For example, the USBN (**United States Biosphere Network**) has a mission to "connect people and nature across lands and water" and thus contribute to a world "where humans and wildlife thrive in healthy, connected ecosystems. Collaboration takes place through virtual webinars, capacity building activities, and respectful approaches to include indigenous tribes and First Nations. Another important activity is the offer of transboundary youth internships.

On the basis of the newly established pentilateral TBR MDD (**Transboundary BR Mura Drava Danube** integrating Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia) the importance of natural, cultural and ethnical diversity becomes visible. With a size of one million hectares, the TBR is "Europe's largest coherent and dynamic river ecosystem". Its management requires well-coordinated international cooperation. For this purpose, a governance system has been developed and is being implemented: All state parties are represented in the Steering Committee. Here, strategic decisions are made, which are implemented by a transnational management body as well as by the national managements. In the future,

a stakeholder platform will make it possible to involve relevant interests and groups to a greater extent. Under the brand name Amazon of Europe, initiatives are currently being taken for tourism and regional development.

The management of a common ecosystem is also the focus of the **Biosphere for Baltic** collaboration. The network was founded in 2017 and currently includes nine areas in seven states on the Baltic Sea. The cooperation of the BRs shall contribute to the implementation of SDG 14 life below water. The focus of the cooperation is to facilitate learning and disseminate good practices, for example with junior ranger programs, fishermen's days or coastal clean ups. Among many other outreach activities, there is a joint publication on regional products of the Baltic Sea BRs. In the future, European funding (Interreg) will be increasingly addressed for the activities.

Many collaborations between BRs are project-based. This can be illustrated by the example of the BCHT (**Bio-Cultural Heritage Tourism**) project. In the EU-funded (ERDF) project, two BRs in the United Kingdom and two BRs in France are working together. The four BRs have about 20 million visitors per year. Visitor management measures therefore play an essential role. Accompanied by monitoring of visitor numbers and visitor flows, visitor pressure in sensitive areas is to be reduced. At the same time, efforts are being made to develop suitable tourist products and services in cooperation with local tourism businesses. Along three axes 1.) tourist development and interpretation schemes, 2.) a joint program for awareness raising and activation of tourism providers and 3.) a tool for bio-cultural tourism destinations will be developed.

Cooperations between Biosphere regions can be developed and lived by different regional actors. This is illustrated by a **small project on school twinning** of the BR Wienerwald. In this project, schools from different BRs exchanged information, developed a quadri-lingual exchange platform (Wikispaces) and developed a game. The collaboration has now ended; interesting lessons can be learned from it, which shall be used for future collaborations.

The 53 BRs in Spain cover a total of 13 percent of the country's territory. IBEROMAB, the **Spanish Network of BRs**, is thus the largest national network of BRs in the world. The network is steered by the MAB National Committee, which decides on the approval of new BRs, in the evaluation of BR management and in the prioritization of the MAB program. With the BR Managers' Committee a technical body is available, where the operational responsibility is located. A Scientific Committee is to ensure the connection to the scholarly world and to make policy-relevant recommendations. The performance of individual BR managements in the fields of conservation, development and logistic functions is regularly assessed by an indicator system (10 indicators, 32 variables). The series of joint activities, such as exchange and training, publications, studies and projects, also includes joint representation in "higher-level" networks, such as EUROMAB, Network of Island BR or Network of Mountain BR.

Based on these presentations, on the personal experiences of the attendees and a joint inspirational walk, the participants worked out the following **results of the session** in small groups. These are indicative and are to be consolidated in the course of further work and prepared as a publication.

First, the workshop participants saw the essential **value added of cooperation** in the bundling of (complementary) resources, in enhanced capacities and pooled competencies, in joint learning, reflection and mutual inspiration. In this context, diversity was perceived as a value and as a strength that allows broadening the perspective with additional angles. Collaboration can increase visibility "inward" and "outward" and also allow for improved representation at the international level.

With regard to the **thematic orientation of a cooperation**, it became apparent that BRs allow practically any topic of social, scientific, political, economic, ecological or regional significance to be addressed. However, cooperation is likely to be particularly important and indispensable where sustainable management policies are to be developed for a shared ecosystem (river, mountain, sea, etc.).

In discussing the various **opportunities for partnerships**, it became clear that virtually every BR is involved in multi-level multi-partner multi-purpose collaborations. In this context, the collaboration goes far beyond just other BRs. Partners can be NGOs, schools, regional companies as well as international organizations or academia. The importance of **cooperation with other UNESCO programs** and networks (natural UNESCO world heritage, UNESCO global geoparks, national UNESCO commissions, UNESCO schools, UNESCO chairs, etc.) was emphasized. Cooperation with other protected areas or protected area networks could also be sought more intensively (Ramsar sites, Natura 2000 sites, EUROPARC, EUROSITE, etc.).

As far as **collaboration formats** are concerned, the discussion revealed that there are no limits to the imagination. The possibilities range from low-threshold informal personal contact to complex and long-term governance systems. Formalized collaborations (MoUs, etc.) and projects, however, are frequent and popular formats of cooperation, because they have a mutual commitment and are usually backed by corresponding resources. The attendees saw the possibilities of virtual communication and workshops as a valuable opportunity to maintain a corresponding continuity in the collaboration (for example, through regular meetings). In any case, it is essential, whether a cooperation is based on a long-term or temporary structure (such as a project).

By nature, **resources** are important to collaboration and are often a limiting factor. Here, the discussion shows that first of all personal voluntary commitment and not monetary contributions play an essential role. In addition to national funding, specific financing instruments (e.g. Interreg, Erasmus plus, EuropeAid, Life communication, etc.) are available in the EU countries. These should be increasingly addressed and usually allow to involve non-EU countries in the projects.

The discussion about **supporting and hindering factors for collaborations** showed that very often the same factor can be equally supporting or hindering: Resources, so available are supporting, so lacking are hindering. Without doubt, the people involved are crucial for the success of a cooperation. A stable, continuous core team and an "motor" for the cooperation are needed. Common interests, values and clear goals are also supportive. Concrete results, even small ones, are conducive to motivating those involved. It is about developing collaboration across geographic boundaries across cultural and language barriers. Sometimes prejudices and inequalities have to be overcome. In practical implementation, differences in administrative structures and procedures or even different technical standards or inadequacies often have to be overcome in order to achieve common goals.

In recent years, **negative external factors** such as crises, Covid or war have also had an increasing impact on collaborations. These are beyond the scope of BRs. Perhaps, however, it is precisely in crisis regions that special tasks and necessities for (new) collaborations develop. For example, crisis regions could be jointly developed into "landscapes of hope".

All in all, the results of the workshop showed that different collaborations in different formats and on different topics are an essential task for BR. Therefore, the results of the workshop will be further deepened. We think the results of the workshop can be **summarized** in the words of Ignace Shaps. The awardee of the "Green Nobel Prize" 2008 and former president of EUROPARC put it this way: "All alone we go faster, together we come further".

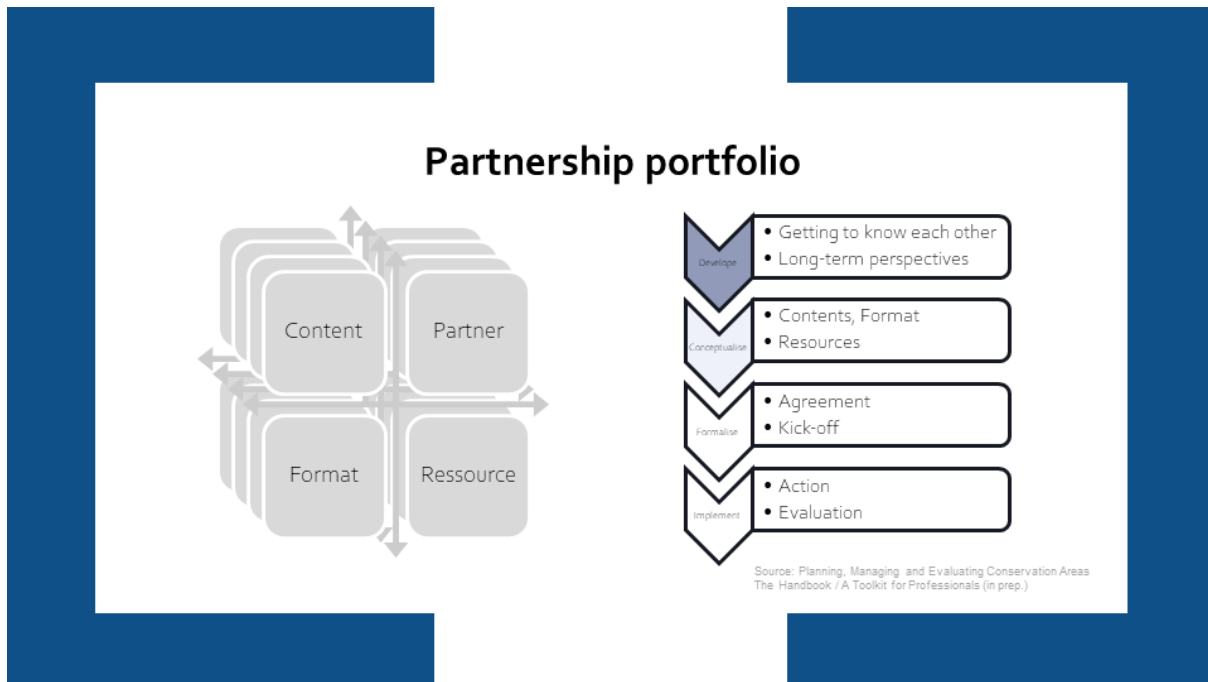


Figure 1: Partnership portfolio. The partnership portfolio is one way of structuring cooperation or making it discussable. It assumes that each BR has several partnerships. These can be characterized on the basis of the partners, the content, the formats and the resources available or contributed (figure on the left). The stage of development can also be described by the steps 1.) develope (initiate), 2.) conceptualize, 3.) formalise and 4.) implement (figure on the right).



Figure 2: Inspired by nature. Under the guidance of knowledgeable ranger, we took the opportunity for a walk in the surrounding nature. We were looking for "cooperations" in nature and found them in symbioses (lichens), reciprocities (plant and pollinator) or interaction in herds, swarms or flocks.