

Martin Kremer

Marketing Local Produce in the Rhön Biosphere Reserve

The Rhön, with its three parts in the three federal states Hesse, Bavaria and Thuringia was designated and honoured as a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1991. The Rhön biosphere reserve, a product of German unification had set itself numerous goals: The marketing of local products; the revival of regional economic cycles and close cooperation with local farms. The focus on regional development was the decisive factor in gaining public acceptance of this initially controversial project.

Close cooperation across the federal states was agreed upon right from the start. Sponsoring agencies have accompanied and supported the governmental participants involved. This is especially the case in Hesse, where a sponsoring agency had already been founded in the very early nineties. As a regional-development-forum attracting European Union subsidies to this day, the sponsoring agency has been able to promote a consistent and focussed regional development with the mission statement "protection through utilisation".

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At the beginning there was the Rhön sheep

One of the first projects, which, looking back was particularly exemplary, was the Rhön sheep project. In the 18th century hundreds of thousands of sheep could be seen grazing in the Rhön; however sheep farming suffered heavy losses after the Second World War. In particular, the small farmed country breeds could hardly compete with the modern meat breeds. Towards the end of the seventies the Rhön sheep was almost extinct. In the eighties private people and the Bavarian nature conservation NGO 'Bund Naturschutz' began to look into the studbook breeding of this robust country breed, which is especially appropriate for landscape conservation. There were also enthusiasts in Thuringia who secured the survival of the Rhön sheep despite the adverse regulations in the former GDR. The Rhön biosphere reserve has been organising extensive marketing measures, culinary events for gourmets, excursions for shepherds and has been in dialogue with retailers since it was founded. Bit by bit the stock of Rhön sheep was able to be increased to about 4,000 ewes. In fact, the Rhön sheep has been the mascot of the Rhön, as well as an advertising icon, for some time.

Rhön sheep flocks are put to use in all three federal states for the purpose of landscape conservation. Locally produced meat is marketed in bio-quality via baby-food manufacturers and chain stores. Also the other sheep-farming businesses in the Rhön have been profiting from a marketing collaboration with the 'tegut' retail chain for quite some time. In 2006, 5,000 animals were marketed with this partner. Today there are 20,000 ewes of

various breeds in the Rhön. Those shepherds, who have committed themselves to ecological animal husbandry, have been able to find important and trustworthy partners via the marketing initiative.

Rhön apple initiative

The 'apple initiative' is another successful project in the Rhön biosphere reserve. Nobody in their right mind would refer to the rather rough mountain range of the Rhön with altitudes of up to 950 metres as an apple-growing region. Nevertheless numerous traditional types of fruit have survived. Pomologists talk of around 400 types of apples. The biosphere reserve recognised this potential very early. During the mid-nineties the Rhön apple initiative, which is an association of apple farmers, started to harvest apples from traditional Rhön orchard meadows and marketed them in bio-quality. Local fruit crushing and pressing plants, like the medium-sized Elm plant, have specialised in the production of top-quality apple juices, cider and sparkling apple wine. Products from the Rhön are already listed in the delicatessens of Berlin and contribute to the economy of the region. The Rhön apple beer, produced by the eco-brewery Rother-Bräu, apple chips from the centre for the disabled Antoniusheim and top-quality jellies from smaller producers represent further products, which emanate from the Rhön apple initiative and are now a standard product in the regional supermarkets.

Protection of the European crayfish

The Rhön biosphere reserve crayfish project, started up as a species protection project in 2000, is supposed to benefit the local catering industry in future. A part of this project was to plot and analyse the watercourse. European crayfish were counted in ten streams. Also present in four of the major stretches of water are American signal crayfish, which may spread the crayfish plague and thus may endanger the crayfish stocks. Currently there is a move towards marketing the American signal crayfish for introduction to the local crayfish trade. At the same time crayfish are being bred in specially designed ponds for future upscale marketing. Stock protection measures carried out annually since 2004 are proving to be successful. Volunteers are involved in the project, which is being implemented

in close cooperation with fishing clubs, the fishing authority and fish farms.

Rhön umbrella brand – top-quality gastronomy

Many further regional development projects can be added. The 'Rhön biosphere cattle' and the 'Rhön goat project' are today promoters of the biosphere reserve. Both projects are also making a significant contribution to landscape conservation. Important markets for these top-class food products could be entered. Similar developments are occurring for rapeseed oil and honey from the biosphere reserve. The brown trout from the Rhön is established as a top-quality product within the local catering industry. Many products from the biosphere reserve, marketed under the 'Rhön umbrella

brand' are either certified bio-products or in other cases certified as corresponding to conventional quality standards.

The biosphere reserve is highly accepted by the local population, which is, in the main, due to the successful marketing of regional products and to the consequent safeguarding of the existence of local farms. The high acceptance is a fact, supported by representative surveys. It is important to be aware that marketing projects take up to ten years in order to establish their niche in the market. Such long-term processes are impossible without motivated partners, creative staff and a great deal of patience. In this way success can be achieved on a much larger scale than initially imagined.

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UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Rhön

The Rhön is representative of the landscape of the low mountain ranges in central Germany. It is situated in the triangle across Bavaria, Hesse and Thuringia and spans around 1,850 km², 42 km² of which comprise the core area and 675 km² the buffer zone. Each federal state has established an administration for its part of the region. The region was designated by UNESCO in 1991.

The isolated location, particular natural features and the firmly rooted agricultural tradition have led to a cultural landscape and rural settlement structures, which are, for the most part, intact still today. The Rhön boasts a variety of landscapes: the 'Hohe Rhön' is a plateau, which was kept open due to traditional human use and is thus covered by 'neglected grasslands'. The extensive views which can be admired led to the tourist slogan 'land of open distances'. The Hessian Rhön is characterised by the striking cone-shaped mountains and a park-like appearance, the Thuringian Rhön by unique lime neglected grassland connected over large areas and by agriculture dominated by large concerns. The Bavarian Rhön is characterised by open, unsettled meadows and a vegetation rich in flowers. Here the predominant occupation is farming, more often than not in the form of a secondary

occupation. The core zone is made up of beech forests and high moors. The diversity of species in the protected habitats is very high; living conditions for many threatened species such as the black grouse, the corncrake, the black stork and the kingfisher, are favourable. The living conditions for black grouse have continuously been improved during the last 25 years in the largest non-alpine nature reserve in Bavaria. This has been achieved by keeping the landscape open by landscape planning, hunting natural enemies and keeping tourists informed.

The three administrations of the biosphere reserve focus on differ-

ent aspects due to their different local structures. They have, however, mutually succeeded in developing the Rhön into a 'role-model' biosphere reserve. The economic and demographic development is better than in comparable areas, the identification with the biosphere reserve is high; the marketing of regional products is an important factor. The development of regional supply chains contributes to the image and creates new jobs in the Rhön. Environmental education and research are a further focus of the work in the biosphere reserve.

Further information:
<http://www.biosphärenreservat-rhoen.de>

Rhön shop selling local ecological produce /Photo © Gertrud Hein

