

## THE "UPPER DANUBE" NATURE PARK

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When the Upper Danube Nature Park was founded in 1980 as one of 65 nature sanctuaries in Germany, there was a great diversity of opinion concerning its intended character. The protected region consists of a geologically outstanding landscape within central Europe. It covers the first 80 km of the Upper Danube, where the young river, shortly after its source in the Black Forest, breaks through the narrow canyons of the Jurassic rock plateau of the so-called Suebian Alps. Also located there is a subterranean passage where the stream is submerged from the surface for nearly ten miles.

Since the purpose of nature preservation, according to German law, is closely combined with the rather contradictory aim of offering an attractive recreational area for modern mass tourism, there are numerous problems which in the course of years have resulted in an intricate pattern of subtle management methods, coping with the growing awareness of the endangered ecological balance.

Besides an outstanding scenic landscape there is also a wide range of other highlights attracting many thousands of visitors at all seasons. Since the natural river bed of the Danube has been extremely shortened and most of the tributaries where the neighbouring wetlands drained were shut off in order to obtain arable farmland, from 1992 to 1993 the so-called Blochingen Project was put into effect, resulting in a reconstruction of the former meanders for a distance of 10 km between Scheer and Hundersingen.

Due to strict nature protection, the complete local flora and fauna is assembled within the park boundaries, covering an impressive amount of the rarest specimens of Central Europe. Another particular feature of the area are its architectural monuments, consisting of a considerable density of medieval towns, castles, monasteries, churches and chapels, most of them representing famous examples within the history of fine arts.

Numerous museums, galleries and other public collections, as well as prehistoric caves and archaeological sites, are providing additional sightseeing items. Since all these localities are linked by traffic routes which on holidays are usually struck by total collapse, the situation is not only marked by lack of parking areas but is also bearing a growing pollution problem. In recent years this dilemma was gradually solved by a considerable limitation of motor traffic and its replacement by special pedestrian and bicycle routes.

On the other hand there is still a rising problem created by the expanding field of sports and other recreational activities caused by many thousands of fans crowding around in the nature park every weekend. As a significant feature, all branches of water sports, with the exception of motor-boating, are most popular in the area, including canoeing, paddling, rowing and rafting, as well as swimming and diving. Still another important attraction is mountain climbing in the considerably rugged rocky landscape.

In winter, skiing is also quite a favourite activity. In recent years hand-gliding has become of growing importance. Above all, hiking is the most popular activity throughout the whole region. One means of managing the immense surge of visitors to the park is by providing adequate lodging facilities. Besides hostels, guest houses and private homes offering bed and breakfast, there are also a lot of camping sites and rest stops. Since there are so many different attitudes towards the main features and beneficial interests of the nature park, especially as far as agriculture and forestry are concerned, a particular Nature Park Association has been founded, with the aim of reducing possible conflicts.

Financially, this association is generously supported by the local government of Baden-Württemberg. To give just an example of the association's many activities, there is the removal of the waste left by the visitors, which requires approximately DM 100,000 every year. Other activities of the association include the supervision and improvement of hundreds of miles of tourist routes, the renovation of bridges, castles, ruins, old farm-houses and other historical buildings, and the administration of a number of museums and collections within the nature park. Thus, a permanent balance is kept between the demands of nature protection and the damaging impact caused by the crowds of visitors being attracted by the slogan of "untouched nature" in this fascinating region of the Upper Danube valley. Looking forwards into the next millennium there is also keen interest in organising professional and interdisciplinary contacts with already existing or planned nature parks in other countries along the entire Danube river.

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