

The border triangle of the Alps-Adriatic region – Where natural and cultural heritage collide

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Abstract

We often interpret borders as a symbol of barriers, separation, or a clash of attitudes and ideologies. The EU and its residents, however, have found that they can also provide an opportunity for mutual benefit and expansion of cultural and social diversity. This is particularly noticeable in border triangles within the EU.

The EU spreads the idea of its motto, United in Diversity, through its Interreg projects which aim to overcome the interpretation of borders as a limiting factor. One example which shows the impact of Interreg and deals with borders as a positive influence is the Interreg-SI-AT-project, Alps-Adria Karawanks. It covers the extraordinary border triangle of Austria-Slovenia-Italy, where the three largest Indo-European language families meet. The showcase aims to visualise different perspectives on the idea of borders. A theme trail reflects on natural, historical and national borders, points out how they apply to plants or animals and that cultural and linguistic borders become indistinct.

Keywords

border triangles, EU, Interreg cooperation, Alps-Adriatic region, Karawanks

Introduction

Situated in the heart of Europe, Austria has eight neighbouring countries – Germany, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. Each of these countries reflects a different historical development, political system, ideology, a specific culture, language and belief(s). Recent, ongoing debates across Europe are trying to generate a picture of insuperable barriers, separation, a clash of attitudes and ideologies that will never fit together. But as many examples show, these limiting boundaries are a product of human perception and have only little to do with actual separation (Wolf 2017, 8f). Borders and especially border areas, such as the Alps-Adriatic region, have a potential and are also examples of mutual benefits and the expansion of cultural and social diversity (Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner 2018, 92).

This paper aims to show how borders add value to a region and how they positively influence regional development, using the example of a very special border triangle – the Alps-Adriatic Region Triangle. The case study of the Interreg-SI-AT-project, Alps-Adria Karawanks, at the border triangle of Austria, Slovenia and Italy demonstrates the impact of transboundary cooperation. At this extraordinary site, where the three largest Indo-European language families meet, different perspectives and thoughts about the idea of borders regarding history, nature, culture and language, are visualised through a thematic trail.

Alps-Adriatic region border triangle

The Alps-Adriatic region describes the area around the border triangle, where the country borders of Austria, Slovenia and Italy meet in the Karawanks, a mountain range of the Southern Alps. This is the area where these three borders meet around the border point (Moritsch 2006: 12). The country borders of the regions Carinthia (AUT), Gorenjska (SVN) and Friuli (ITA) share a common past. A history of separation, deformation, change and finally unification, as the motto of the Alps-Adriatic triangle, Ohne-Grenzen - Senza Confini - Brez Meja (the Austrian, Italian, Slovenian translates as “without borders”), testifies. There, the borders were not always so strict as they are today.

Historians proved that Slavonic natives lived in that area long before the Roman Empire ruled over the continent. 1,200 years ago, the Alps-Adriatic region of today belonged to the Slavonic Duchy, Karantanien (Bogataj 2008: 46f). After years of battles between emperors and the church, the Habsburger came into power in 1359. During the 15th century, the language border we know today slowly developed. But national borders had not yet become clear, because the Austrian-Hungarian Empire divided today's nations into different principalities. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire fought against the Osman Empire for years. These battles finally ended in one of Europe's most brutal wars – World War I (1914-1918). Through the state contract of St. Germain in 1919, today's national borders became obvious.

Following a national referendum in 1920, Carinthia decided that the south of the region should remain in Austria and this aroused discussions about the Austrian Slovenian border once again. This area of Austria was always bilingual, but the stigma of speaking a non-German language remained (Resman 2014: 144f). In World War II, the Nazi regime deported the Slovene minority. Hitler and Mussolini's pact instead settled a German-speaking minority from Italy in this area. After the war, many deported Carinthian Slovenes came back, and it took up to two years for the German minority to leave the occupied houses (Bogotaj 2008: 121ff und Resmann 2014: 222f).

Following World War II, the idea of a multilingual society decreased, and more people became monolingual (Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner 2018, 14f). Numerous initiatives, and especially Interreg projects, are trying to transform these thoughts of separation into a common identity of an Alps-Adriatic region, united under the symbol of the border triangle. This extraordinary space within Austria, Slovenia and Italy unites the three largest Indo-European language families: Germanic, Slavonic and Romanesque.



Figure 2 – Map of the border triangle with its three regions and important landmarks (E.C.O. Institute of Ecology)

Many residents along the border triangle have overcome the subjective language barriers, not least because of the Schengen Agreement. They share traditions and friendships. Children are raised bilingual and learn several languages in school. But still, the regions Carinthia, Gorenjska and Friuli are dominated by the characteristics of their geography and politics. Then, in 2015, because of the migration from Syrian refugees, the border issue raised its head again as it became impossible to cross the border between Austria and Slovenia without a passport or ID control.

A cooperation tool: Interreg

Interreg – European Territorial Cooperation – projects are a tool implemented by the European Union to overcome the interpretation of borders as a limiting factor on different scales. The idea behind Interreg is to provide a framework for the implementation of joint actions and policy exchanges between national, regional and local actors from different states (Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism 2019b). Regional and local governments along borders aim to work together in solving common problems and sharing solutions. Austria currently has seven ongoing cross-border cooperation programmes with its neighbouring countries, three transnational cooperation programmes and four EU-wide interregional networking programmes (Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism 2019a und 2019b).

One specific example which shows the impact of Interreg and deals with borders as a positive influence is the cooperation programme, Interreg V-A Slovenia-Austria. The western region of the Karawanks has big potential for tourism development. But so far, there is no cross-border approach for the development of a sustainable tourism strategy. The Interreg V-A Slovenia-Austria applies this approach with the general goal of sustainable development of an Alps-

Adriatic experience region. Based on a comprehensive analysis, the project will establish a sustainable tourism offer for hiking, cycling and winter experiences. The project, which involves 12 project partners from different nations, is promoted by the European Regional Development Fund. It will run for three years until spring 2020 with a budget of about 2.5 million euros. The Alps-Adria Karawanks project is part of the Interreg V-A Slovenia-Austria.

Interpretive trails

In the municipality of Arnoldstein, (one of the partners in the Interreg project), the focus is on the development and implementation of tourism infrastructure for hiking, focussing additionally on the rich history, borders, culture and people of this special spot through an interpretive trail. These trails, also called theme-, educational-, thematic- or experience trails, are walkways designed for a specific topic (Amt der Kärntner Landesregierung 2003). They guide visitors from point to point and explain certain topics with information panels and interactive elements (Deutscher Alpenverein 2016).

The Palisade Interstate Park in the USA established the first educational trail in 1925 (Erdmann 1975). It was designed to inform visitors about the natural environment and make them more aware of their natural surroundings. Traditionally, educational trails work with their immediate environment and inform about the special features of flora and fauna. Over the last century, the topics and approaches of thematic trails changed and added interactive approaches to make the trails an adventure for visitors of all ages (Eder & Arnberger 2007). Today, the combination of educational trails and environmental interpretation informs visitors about the natural, historical and cultural characteristics of an area through experiences, adventures, sensitivity and compassion.

We must consider various criteria when designing such an interpretative trail — based on fundamental research and literature by Megerle (2002), Wiener (2003), Eder & Arnberger (2007) and Navratil & Picha (2013). The E.C.O. Institute of Ecology developed a set of criteria for the design and the evaluation of thematic trails. The three main criteria are shown in Figure 2 (Kreimer *et al*, 2011).

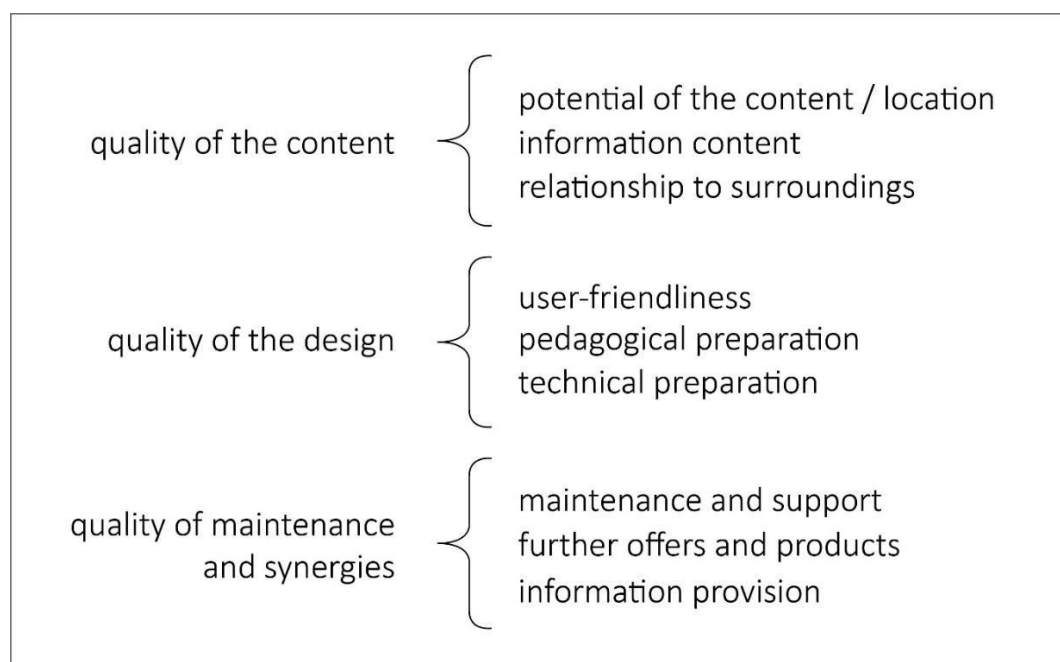


Figure 3 – Criteria for thematic trails (E.C.O. Institute of Ecology)

Heritage interpretation

“[Heritage] Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present,” (Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) 2018). This quote from AHI refers to a certain concept of providing information to visitors of educational, natural or recreational sites. It deals with nature, origin and purpose of historical, natural or cultural resources, objects, sites or phenomena and uses different personal and non-personal methods, such as guided walks, staffed stations, displays, artwork or audio-guides for mediation. With its roots in US nature parks, its goal is to improve and enrich the visitor experience of certain sites by helping them to understand the significance of the place (Tilden 1957; Ludwig 2014).

The Alps-Adria Karawanks project invites visitors, through appealing interactive information along the theme trail, to learn and think about their experiences along the border region. It enables the visitor to establish a connection between the given information and their previous perception.

Interreg-SI-AT-project Alps-Adria Karawanks

In detail, the theme trail of the project visualises different perspectives on the idea of borders. It reflects natural, historical and national borders, points out how they apply to plants or animals and how cultural and linguistic borders become indistinct. Divided into two sections along the theme trail, 12 experience stations with information and interactive tools offer different perspectives on the topic of borders. With a welcoming platform at the beginning, the first part of the trail deals with nature without borders. On different information panels, visitors get to know the animals and plants of the region that do not understand national borders. The Austrian part of the cross-border triangle with landslides and river landscapes is an impressive example. Along with the information on offer, interactive tools invite visitors to experience the topic for themselves.

The second part of the trail deals with borders in the historical and national sense. Timelines explain how border demarcation has changed throughout history, influenced by national takeovers, war and reunion. A viewing window visualises the border line between the countries and shows examples of former smuggled goods. Speech bubbles show words that regions of the border triangle have taken over from the other two language families. The final destination of the trail is the cross-border triangle itself, where impressive outlooks and information about the three regions and relaxing benches invite visitors to spend some time at this extraordinary spot. All in all, the theme trail invites visitors to immerse themselves in the diverse world of borders. A world in which borders do not only stand for barrier and separation, but also for common development, mutual benefit and expansion of cultural and social diversity.

Conclusion and prospect

The Alps-Adriatic region with its very special border triangle represents a unique area that unites three different language families and a common history. The region, with its wide range of traditions and cultural aspects, reflects the potential of diversity. It is essential to communicate these different points of view to local people and visitors to the region. One way is through a theme trail. The Alps-Adriatic Border Triangle attracts both tourists and locals to explore. Now, they can all learn from each other and together. Countries all over the world can take this example and implement it in special places along their borders. It is an opportunity not to forget what has happened throughout history, what has separated the countries, but also to remember that borders are only lines drawn on a map.

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