

The Future of the Three Countries Park (3LP)  
,From quality landscape to landscape of qualities’

Speech Symposium LP3LP by Karl-Heinz Lambertz,  
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May 14th 2014, Maastricht, Province of Limburg (NL)

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank the Province of Limburg and particularly Regional Minister Patrick van der Broeck for the hospitality and generosity for having this conference at the States Council Room. The very room where the Treaty of Maastricht was signed - already twenty-two years ago.

Secondly, I would like to thank ESPON and its director Peter Mehlbye for selecting the Three Countries Park’s project and for his appraisal of the merits of the project. As mister van der Broeck already pointed out this conference wouldn’t have been possible without the support of ESPON. Moreover, I’m convinced that we will need additional support of ESPON to live up to the expectations that arise from this project and to uplift its policy recommendations, from the standardized collection of comparable, homogenous geographical data to the integration landscape policy in other policy domains like agriculture, urban planning, energy, health, etc.

I also would like to congratulate the project group, especially the RWTH Aachen, Wageningen University and the Université Libre de Bruxelles, for their commitment and engagement to organize this conference today. They have presented us the results of their in-depth analysis on cross border and European landscape policy. The report they have elaborated, clearly shows the opportunities of the Three Countries Park and of this Landscape Perspective for other regions in Europe to design, develop and safeguard a “quality landscape”.

Finally, I would like to applaud all speakers for their contribution and you - dear guests - for attending the conference. Your presence is vital for the future of the Three Countries Park. You have the ability to play a crucial role to link our communities to the very idea of Three Countries Park as the “green infrastructure” of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm not going to comment or go in detail about the presentations of the speakers before me. More importantly, I would like to seize the opportunity to share with you, in my position as president of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, a vision for the future of the Three Countries Park and the role of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine.

Let me start with the Euregio's role. Personally, I have always been in favor of a more leading role of the EMR because of the Three Countries Park's location, its governance and its development from Interreg-project into euregional network.

[Location:]

The Three Countries Park is located in the centre of a highly urbanized cross border polycentric metropolitan belt of the Euregio – the cities of Maastricht, Aachen, Liège & Hasselt-Genk – and is considered as its green heart - a common backyard for city dwellers and tourists alike.

[Governance:]

The Three Countries Park is in many ways a small version of the European Union. Multilevel governance giving the involvement of local, regional and national authorities as well as, on project level, multiple organizations in a multilingual region, having to deal with its own distinctive features. It provides the project with a difficult and at the same time challenging institutional environment. This environment is the natural biotope of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine itself, since it came into existence almost 38 years ago.

[Development]:

The Three Countries Park started in 2001 as a project under the third Interreg EMR-program managed by the Euregio Meuse-Rhine. Apart the publication of the Development Perspective as a result of this project, the Three Countries Park has accomplished to persist on own funds and outlive the duration of its own project. A true marker for success, considering the fact that all too often promising Interreg-projects come to a premature end when funding ceases. We owe this to the strong support and enduring commitment of the Benelux and the Dutch Province of Limburg, especially Marc Naessens and Aad Blokland.

The Three Countries Park has succeeded in developing 'spin-off' projects such as the water management project 'Aquadra' and the biodiversity

project 'Habitat Euregio' funded by the fourth Interreg EMR-program. Doing so with a clear focus and enduring persistence, the Three Countries Park has contributed to the practical implementation of its Development Perspective.

The ESPON-project, which we are "celebrating" today, highlights the identity of the Three Countries Park, emphasizing its importance within its cross-border situation as well as its potential within a European context, whereas the Three Countries Park has focused in the past decade on structured cooperation and project development within the Euregional context.

The fact that the Three Countries Park started, like many others, as a project financed by Interreg, but will be led by the EMR proves the sustainability of the Three Countries Park and may be considered an upgrading of its cooperation framework. The project leadership is handed over from one of the partner regions, the Dutch Province of Limburg, to the Euregio Meuse-Rhine as a whole.

Concerning the future collaboration of the Three Countries Park, I strongly believe that the Three Countries Park should focus on "green infrastructure" as its policy framework for future project development. The past few years green infrastructure has become the policy framework of the European Union. If we want to elaborate and develop our strategy into projects for which EU funding will be requested, it is necessary to align our own strategy with the EU's objectives.

Although, I am not an expert, I am convinced that investing in „green infrastructure" can provide many social, economic and environmental benefits, for example water retention and flood alleviation, space for wildlife with access to nature for people, places for outdoor relaxation and improved health and well-being. One of the key attractions of „green Infrastructure" is its multi-functionality, which allows unlocking several benefits on the same spatial area. „Green infrastructure" includes natural and semi-natural areas as well as green spaces, spanning from large reserve forests to small green roofs in rural and urban areas. By enhancing Green Infrastructure, valuable landscape features or „quality landscape" can be maintained or created, which contribute to the delivery of multiple services and thus the creation of a „landscape of qualities".

The concept of "green infrastructure" is not new and across Europe several projects on the ground have been realized - as shown by the ESPON-project. Before it became part of the EU's daily vocabulary, it was

already somehow embedded in the Three Countries Park's Development Perspective. The Development Perspective details the guidelines for a sustainable future for the 3LP in order to maintain the quality of open space in the urbanized area of Maastricht, Aachen, Liège, Hasselt-Genk. These guidelines focus on environmental planning policies, nature development, landscape protection, cultural heritage, water management, agriculture, and how to deal with the pressures of tourism and urbanization. These issues are all elements of the "green infrastructure" concept, which the European Commission elaborated in its Communication last year - being one of the key steps for the implementation of the EU2020 Biodiversity Strategy and specifically Target 2 that requires that „by 2020, ecosystems and their services are maintained and enhanced by establishing green infrastructure and restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems”.

In order to maximize the multi-benefits, long-term commitment is needed in spatial scale and across time. Moreover, integration into other sectoral policies is of great importance. Nevertheless I do think that the Three Countries Park project group in its current composition should concentrate on its core business, namely designing, developing and maintaining the Three Countries Park as "quality landscape" whereas the unfolding of a "landscape of qualities", namely the connection to other policy fields like tourism (for example cultural heritage), energy (for example biomass as a renewable resource) or even economy (business development) can be made through the EMR. This is also one of the advantages of the fact that the EMR itself has taken to lead over the Three Countries Park: from a helicopter perspective instead of a frog's perspective it is easier to link policies, projects and funds.

The latter doesn't imply though that we are able to secure appropriate funding for the Three Countries Park and its subsequent follow-up projects. Financing will definitely be one of the key issues. More effort should also be put into communication, stakeholder involvement and awareness raising activities. The European Commission is currently exploring with the European Investment Bank (EIB) the possible establishment of an EU biodiversity finance facility, and the potential for innovative financial instruments, including public-private partnership approaches, to attract private investments in „green infrastructure” projects. Such investments could for example focus on ecosystem restoration projects as insurance against floods and other natural risks, or to improve water quality. Given the budget limitations of public funds, it would be desirable for the private sector to play a stronger role in financing „green infrastructure” than is currently the case. „Green

infrastructure,, provides the possibilities to be used as an insurance for economic development against climate change effects, in particular as an excellent tool for the green economy and building upon economic advantages of restoration such as the increase in land values of a restored area and its surroundings compared with intensively exploited or degraded agricultural, urban or industrial areas. „Green infrastructure” can also provide financing opportunities linked to innovation such as the design of urban elements enhancing biodiversity, all combinations of technologies enhancing ecosystem services ....

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is clear that the Three Countries Park will remain a continuous work-in-progress and much work has to be done. Challenges and opportunities arising from the Landscape Perspective-project and the Green infrastructure-concept need to be tackled with an open mind.

From time to time the question arises where the Three Countries Park ends or whether the Three Countries Park’s geography should be limited. In order to strengthen and foster the Three Countries Park’s potential and to fully implement both the recommendations of the ESPON-project as well as the EU’s overarching green infrastructure guidelines, I strongly believe that the Three Countries Park needs to connect with neighboring areas like Kempen-Maasland and Eifel-Ardennen. From the very beginning, the Three Countries Park has defined itself as an „open space without borders”.

Last but not least, it is absolutely necessary that we connect with local authorities and civic organizations even more than we have done so far. Their interest and commitment to maintain and develop the Three Countries Park from ‘quality landscape’ to ‘landscape of qualities’ is crucial.

Let us live up to this vision and create more open space in the interest of both nature and our people.

I sincerely thank you for your attention.