

# ***20<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Society and Resource Management (ISSRM), Leibniz University, Hannover, Germany, June 9-13, 2014***

*Session 6: The involvement of stakeholders in ski development and resource management in mountain environments*

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## **Winter Tourism and Protected Areas in the Harz Mts. – History, Problems and Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

The Harz Mts., Germany's most northern low-lying mountain range, were traditionally characterised by long winter periods with good snow conditions. For this reason, winter tourism started as early as 1883 in the area in the year that senior forester Arthur Ulrichs of Braunlage introduced the skiing technique from Norway. Ulrichs later established the first German skiing club in Braunlage in 1892. Cross country skiing dominated the pioneer period of skiing. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nature of the Harz was more and more affected by sleighing, bobsleighing and ski-jumping runs, e.g. in or near Braunlage, Hahnenklee-Bockswiese, and Schierke. This led to the rise of the first conflicts between nature protection and nature usage for winter sports.

The Harz nature is specified by a wide range of landscapes and habitats – from the wavy lowlands around the mountains up to the Brocken summit at 1,141 m a.s.l. Agricultural land dominates the mountain surroundings and parts of the Lower Harz in the eastern part of the area. Spruces and beech trees are typical for the Upper Harz plateau and mountains. Deeply incised valleys form important structural elements. Mining activities are known to have started at least 3000 years ago in the Bronze Age and the resulting ecological effects created problems like residual waste dumps and heavy-metal contamination as well as an interesting cultural landscape. Based on these landscapes and habitats, parts of the Harz were protected as natural monuments and natural conservation areas at an early stage. In the important habitats of the landscape around the Brocken and Torfhaus, a nature conservation area was established in 1937 and 1954, respectively.

After 1945 and the division of Germany into two separate states, a new winter sports boom developed. With growing leisure time since the 1960s, new installations such as ski lifts were built. On the other hand, the western part of the Harz Mts. was declared a Nature Park in 1960s. The historical winter sport areas in Schierke could not be developed further as they were now situated in the restricted zone of the GDR western border. The complex landscape history was thus dominated by the political division of the Harz area into different federal states and since the existence of the Iron Curtain even into two countries. There was a large landscape protection area in the eastern

Harz too, but the Nature Park in Saxony-Anhalt was established only as late as 2003. In Thuringia, the Nature Park Südharz came into existence even later in 2010.

The political borders within the Harz area are also the reason for establishing two different National Parks after 1989. In 1990, the GDR established the Hochharz National Park. In 2001 it was modified at its southern border to find a compromise with plans to re-establish Schierke as a winter sports region. In 1994, the federal government of Lower Saxony created the western part of the Harz National Park. In 2006, both parks were united under the name Harz National Park. It is part of the European nature conservation network Natura 2000 and member of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas.

Due to the increasingly strong effects of climate change on the Harz Mts. – especially the decrease in snowfall – the use of snowmaking systems has become the focus of new debates about the compatibility of mass tourism and environmental protection. Despite a lawsuit brought forward by the NGO BUND Niedersachsen, a snowmaking system was installed at the Bocksberg near Hahnenklee-Bockswiese in 2001, followed by the installation of another such system in Sankt Andreasberg.

The most intense public discussion so far was initiated by the plans for a massive extension and modernisation of the Wurmberg winter sports area near Braunlage in 2012/2013. While several NGOs opposed the modernisation, which also included the installation of snowmaking systems, most inhabitants and tourism stakeholders in the area supported it. In the meantime the new investment has become highly controversial and received broad national media coverage since despite the new technology, most of the winter season had to be canceled due to mild temperatures. Even though this installation has almost been completed by now, similar plans in nearby Schierke continue to stir public discussion.