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Author: Messerli, Paul

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Die Alpen – Geschichte und Zukunft einer europäischen Kulturlandschaft

[The Alps—History and Future of a European Cultural Landscape]

By Werner Bätzing. Munich, Germany: C.H. Beck, 2015. 484 pp. € 38.00. ISBN 978-3-406-67339-9.

Since 1984, five editions of this book have appeared, three of which have been completely revised and expanded. The sequence of titles reveals the direction of these extensions: while the original eco-geographic study of the European Alps focused on the tension between nature conservation and environmental degradation, the latest editions portray the Alps as a unique but vulnerable cultural landscape that is undergoing fundamental changes in the European and global context.

The author and his portrayal of the Alps have appealed to a wide audience for more than 30 years. The nearly unrivalled success of this evolving book is probably due to the fact that it offers a well-documented analysis of the development of the Alps from the early beginnings of human settlements to the present, ending with future prospects. At the same time, it also reads like a great story about the emergence and the subsequent endangerment and destruction of a diverse cultural landscape, which the author interprets as bearing witness to sustainable ways of managing the mountain environment.

Just as climate change announced itself early and visibly in the Alps, their penetration by modernity and the power of free and open markets left early and deep marks. Today, the typical small-scale settlements and economic areas are gradually disappearing as the Alpine landscape is increasingly being divided into favorable areas inviting urbanization and unfavorable areas left to abandonment. This is the image Werner Bätzing portrays and repeatedly reminds us of.

In its intent to systematically describe human responses to and management of the Alpine environment, the book follows the tried and tested chronological structure of the earlier editions. After the object of investigation is defined using political delimitations and cultural representations, the focus turns to the emergence of the traditional rural landscapes in the era of agrarian societies. The great transformation of the Alpine economies and ways of life by the intrusion of modernity (industrialization, tertiarization, and globalization) is then analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively at the level of individual communes and, finally, evaluated according to the 3 objectives of sustainable development. This is followed by an outlook on potential futures for the Alps, all of which lead toward further estrangement from the attractive mountain landscape. The outlook concludes with the author's contrasting construction of a desirable future for the Alps.

For the sake of readability for a wide audience, all technical details are placed in endnotes, including references to the bibliography. The wealth of both the endnotes and the bibliography testifies to the author's unique overview of the literature and the public media discourse on the Alps.

As a grand narrative about the emergence and endangerment of a unique European cultural landscape, the book follows a second logic: it begins by tracing and reconstructing a sustainable land-use system in the past and ends with the question of how to reconcile modern ways of living and working with the principles of sustainable management of mountain resources. Brief summarizing statements throughout the book keep readers tuned in to this narrative, which concludes with a final assessment of the great transformation in the Alpine regions: "The Alps are disappearing as a distinct human habitat in Europe" (p 348). And in the author's view, this verdict also applies to all possible futures as long as the logic of unlimited economic growth remains unbroken. This is the urgent warning with which Bätzing appeals for resistance and a change of course that can enable the Alps to "become, in a new way, an equally valuable diverse and decentralized European living and economic space" (p 9).

What distinguishes this geographic synthesis is that it searches the comprehensive and up-to-date body of knowledge documented in the book for answers to two main questions: What can past institutional, socio-technical, and economic conditions teach us about the sustainable use of the Alpine natural environment? What can we learn from the past in our quest to shape a sustainable future for the Alps? The key messages have remained the same since the book's first edition; but they are increasingly being challenged by recent developments. In accordance with the Marxian thesis that sustainable production presupposes the reproduction of manpower, Bätzing's thesis is that production can only be sustainable if it includes the reproduction of natural resources. The diverse cultural landscapes of the Alps were once each embedded in a particular social, institutional, and economic environment, but these small-scale systems lost their significance in the course of modernization. The inclusion of the various Alpine regions in today's large-scale economic and communicative structures has reshaped and disintegrated the Alpine space into favorable and disadvantaged areas that are mainly defined by topography and their connectivity with the demographic and economic centers outside the Alps. In the "new image of the Alps" that the author draws, the Alpine regions have become functional parts and supplementary spaces of metropolises in the adjacent

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lowlands. As a consequence, they have lost their Alpine specificity and their characteristic diversity of manmade environments and ways of life: these are no longer appreciated in today's globalized economies. This pessimistic diagnosis is also reflected in the various scenarios of possible futures.

With all due respect to this work, I have to add some criticisms. Alongside the author's negative connotations of the "new image of the Alps" there is also "new life in the Alps," which he mentions but fails to portray as a countermovement. This new life, strongly promoted by the temporary or permanent (return) migration of well-trained people and families (new highlanders), comes directly from the urban centers outside the Alps—which have always been the source of predominant images of the Alps. This is also reflected in a new appreciation of the Alps' diverse cultural landscapes (eg for their biodiversity) and their natural resources (eg water), as well as in new political attention to mountain areas among the wider societies of various Alpine countries, such as Switzerland, France, and Italy.

However, there is one point in which Bätzing's pessimistic view of recent developments in the Alps cannot be contradicted. If an Alpine specificity does exist, it is the specific way in which Alpine societies manage their mountainous environment; and that cannot be transferred from the lowlands, as it requires profound local knowledge. Because this mainstay of sustainability is at risk, Bätzing sees the Alps disappearing. His statements at the end of the book relate to the Alps as a whole, while their internal diversity is hardly mentioned. Although this is no doubt a deliberate escalation, such generalized statements can hardly serve as a basis for his "desirable future of the Alps." Bätzing calls for the reconciliation of modern living and economic conditions with environmental responsibility that is rooted in traditions; such a reconciliation must build precisely on the differences and particularities that have survived until today.

The desirable future of the Alps that Bätzing ends his book with is his own, and readers may share it or not. In the end, the future of the Alps has to be crafted by its inhabitants, who have never been more numerous and more educated than today.

AUTHOR

Paul Messerli
mep@giub.unibe.ch
Institute of Geography, University of Bern, Hallerstrasse 12, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

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