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Audits concerning biodiversity

Seminar of the EUROSAI working group for environmental auditing (November 2. - 5. 2004, Sofia)

A) The Austrian Court of Audit

The Court of Audit is the only institution in Austria, including the audit institutions of the provinces (Länder), which is able and allowed to audit all levels of government from national down to local communities, enterprises which are 50% or more state-owned and all grants given by Austrian administrations to private enterprises or persons. Reports are forwarded to the competent legislative body (federal or provincial parliament). These reports are condensed versions of the original reports, which were forwarded to the auditees, which have a constitutional period of three months to give comments on the findings and recommendations. The reports must not be published before they are forwarded to the legislative body.

The department "Comprehensive Environmental Protection" has to audit everything concerning environmental protection (nature protection, waste, water management, international accords, air pollution, sustainable development, biodiversity ect.) all over Austria, including the administration (all ministries) at all levels (federal, provincial, local) and state owned enterprises dealing with environmental affairs.

B) The audits of the implementation of the Ramsar convention

What were the main reasons for choosing this topic?

We wanted to assess, if the federal and provincial juridical frameworks are appropriate to the commitments of the convention. Furthermore we were interested in the financial dimension of the implementation of the convention and we wanted to see, if there is a detectable ecological output concerning biological trends at species and habitats.

What was the scope of the audit?

- a) achieving the goals of the convention, especially article 2, 3, 4 and 5 (nomination, wise use, protection, scientific research, international co-operation).
- b) definition of Ramsar sites (which areas are exactly concerned)
- c) what is the basis for decisions concerning wetlands (biological inventory), are there management plans implemented?
- d) comparison of possibilities for the administration for the safeguarding of areas
- e) national and international funding (especially with the European Union)

The nine different audits covered all eleven Austrian Ramsar sites (1180 km²) in eight States (Länder with own legislation concerning nature protection), at the federal ministry and a national park.

Main findings

Not all Ramsar sites were protected areas.

In some States there was no legal protection for wetlands.

There were different ways to safeguard areas, from public ownership to contracting systems with widely varying costs.

No comprehensive research concept was in place.

At some sites the borders were not clearly defined, there was no comprehensive biological inventory to assist decision-makers.

Due to the splitting of legislative competences there were no standards for protection, which were valid for the whole country.

There were conflicts of use with agriculture, hunting, fishery and tourism, these were different from State to State.

Main recommendations and results

An amendment to the Austrian constitution is needed to enable national standards.

Ramsar sites should at least be nature protection zones.

In the opinion of the Austrian Court of Audit it is better to protect habitats using the legal framework than by contracting. If contracting, it is better to buy the areas than to lease them, because protection and management should be long-term issues.

Six new sites are projected, one of them is already nominated to the Ramsar Bureau. Several new nature protection zones were implemented.

Many legal and ecological measures were taken in order to improve the condition of Austrian wetlands.

Projects partly funded by the EU were initiated.

Concepts for "wise use" were implemented in many sites.

Restrictions on fishery and hunting were put into effect.

C) The audit of the ecosystem lake Neusiedl/Fertö

What were the main reasons for choosing this topic?

We wanted to carry out an audit including all influences on this site and get a comprehensive impression about the national and international efforts on this area. Furthermore it was a co-operation project with the Hungarian State Audit Office.

What was the scope of the audit?

The audit should evaluate the organisation and financing of the measures necessary to maintain the area, including the national park, measures concerning biodiversity, water quality, water management of the lake, traffic systems, waste water management, scientific research, conflicts in use and co-operation with Hungary.

Main findings

There was no exact definition by the exact borders of the pieces of land of the various protected zones.

For safeguarding land 2.47 Mill. EUR were spent annually.

The natural water management of Lake Neusiedl/Fertö is mostly depending on precipitation and evaporation. The largest Austrian surface water discharging into the lake (river Wulka) showed water quality level II to III.

The number as well as the area of the characteristic salty ponds (Lacken) decreased dramatically due to economic use of the Lacken. Consequences were disruption of the natural water management, losses of typical plants and endangering of the typical fauna. Three exotic species of fish were dramatically pushing away the indigenous species. Conflicts of use were existing with agriculture, hunting, fishery and tourism.

Drainage in the interest of agriculture is responsible for the creeping degradation of soil and Lacken due to the continuous loss of salt.

In 2000 two waste water treatment facilities did not correspond to the state of art concerning their technical equipment.

Main recommendations and results

Due to recommended measures concerning the Lacken, there are no more disturbances of their natural water management.

The problem of illegal wells was solved in form of an inquiry of all wells in the region. In the whole “natural zone” of the national park hunting was ceased.

Measures concerning the two waste water treatment facilities in the river Wulka catchment area were implemented, the adjustment to the state of the art was prioritised. The Austrian Court of Audit recommended to develop a concept for research, nature protection and measures of development and to make up a ranking of the planned measures.

The structure of the fishery concerning the lake was changed.

Measures for agricultural downgrading, as implemented in the national park, were extended.

The reports are on the Austrian homepage (www.rechnungshof.gv.at) in German and in a short English version on the homepages of the INTOSAI and the EUROSAI working groups for environmental auditing (www.environmental-auditing.org, www.nik.gov.pl/intosai).

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