



SWISS PARKS NETWORK SWITZERLAND

Dramatic canyon-like gorges stretch up from the river that gives the Doubs Nature Park its name. Amid the highland pastures of Gruyère Pays-d'Enhaut Regional Nature Park that are the source of many fine cheeses, 700 alpine huts can still be found. And in the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch, over a quarter of the park's area is covered with the moors and marshes that make this one of the most significant wetland areas in the world.

These very distinct regions represent just three of the 19 new parks (including the park candidates) created in Switzerland since 2008, all of which have been designated to protect some of the country's best landscapes and to promote sustainable tourism within. Significantly, these parks were not formed as the result of top down government initiatives. In each case, local residents worked together to develop a project



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that would demonstrate the viability of creating a park, which was then submitted to a popular vote among those living there.

Now covering some 15% of the country's landmass, together with one pre-existing park, they form the Swiss Parks Network. The network works together to promote its members through such efforts as a shared 'Swiss Parks' brand, and the development of a tourism app showcasing offers, discounts and itineraries. The aim of these collaboration efforts, however, is to promote the characteristics that make each park unique - whether that is local produce, authentic culture or awe-inspiring scenery. In addition, the network promotes the parks as ideal destinations for educational visits and corporate volunteering. The volunteering programme enables companies to organise team-building events in nine of the parks, where

its staff discover the park's cultural, natural and culinary specialties, while helping towards their preservation. Elsewhere, at places such as the aquatic playground in Diemtigtal, school children can learn about the importance of water management and the various species that live in and around.

All this adds up to a change of fortune for the people who live in and around the new parks. Where the twentieth century saw a gradual decline in the populations of many rural villages as young people left for the cities in search of work, now the many sustainable businesses stimulated by the parks create a reason to stay or come back. As a result, these democratically created parks have become a magnet for opportunity and a symbol of great civic pride.

