

English version of our article in the “Bündner Woche”, September 23, 2020

Research in Graubünden

Research in the Swiss National Park

Let nature do its work and learn what happens



Sonja Wipf taking pictures of plants. Thus, changes in vegetation are documented over time. Image: H. Lozza/SNP

Biologist Sonja Wipf has been head of the Swiss National Park's Research and Monitoring Division since January 2020. Born in Aargau, she had the desire to study biology at an early age: “First I wanted to become a zoologist. But at the beginning of my studies I quickly realized that plants - especially those in the mountains - were my passion.” Wipf explains her change of heart with a wink, “As a research object, plants have several advantages over animals.

They stand still and you don't necessarily have to get up early to observe them, as is the case with birds, for instance.”

“The National Park has three goals”, explains Wipf, “to protect, research and educate. In my area, research and monitoring, I lead a team of five employees and three interns. In addition to our own projects, we coordinate about 80 projects that are carried out by external researchers. The special feature of research in the National Park is that here the development of nature can be studied without the influence of humans. I find this very inspiring: Let nature do its work, observe and understand what happens.”

The outbreak of the corona pandemic this spring also presented an unexpected challenge to the staff of the National Park, but at the same time offered the opportunity for a new research project: “At first we expected fewer visitors. However, our visitor counting system soon showed that twice as many people visited the park as in other years. We therefore created a survey to obtain background information on these visitors. It has already been reported that for some of the visitors it was their first hike in the mountains ever. With the increased popularity new questions arise: Are the

ecosystems suffering from the rush? Do aerial photographs show increased wear and tear on the hiking trails where visitors take short cuts?”

Wipf also uses her senior position to support younger researchers in their career development. She advises young scientists to spend time abroad for research purposes. In this way they broaden their cultural horizons, learn different scientific methods and build up their own networks. Among Wipf's stations are the University of Fairbanks in Alaska and the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Her research results on the distribution of alpine plants have been published several times in "Nature", one of the leading scientific journals.

"If someone feels that he or she is not up to it, I sometimes push a little", explains Wipf. "Women in particular need role models. In 2000, I was offered a position as a research assistant at the WSL Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research SLF in Davos. My supervisor at the time, biologist Veronika Stöckli, was not only a sensational boss, but also a role model in both professional and personal terms. As a woman, I never had the feeling of being disadvantaged until I became a mother. It is strongly anchored in Swiss minds that women take over or manage the family work." She encourages mothers to let go and give their partner space to take responsibility in family work. Also in the career context, she advocates more self-confidence, "Women should not only apply for a job when they think they meet 90 percent of the criteria - while many men feel that the rest can be learned when they meet 50 percent".



Daniela Heinen. Image: N. Willi

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Find out more about research in Graubünden: www.academiaroetica.ch,
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