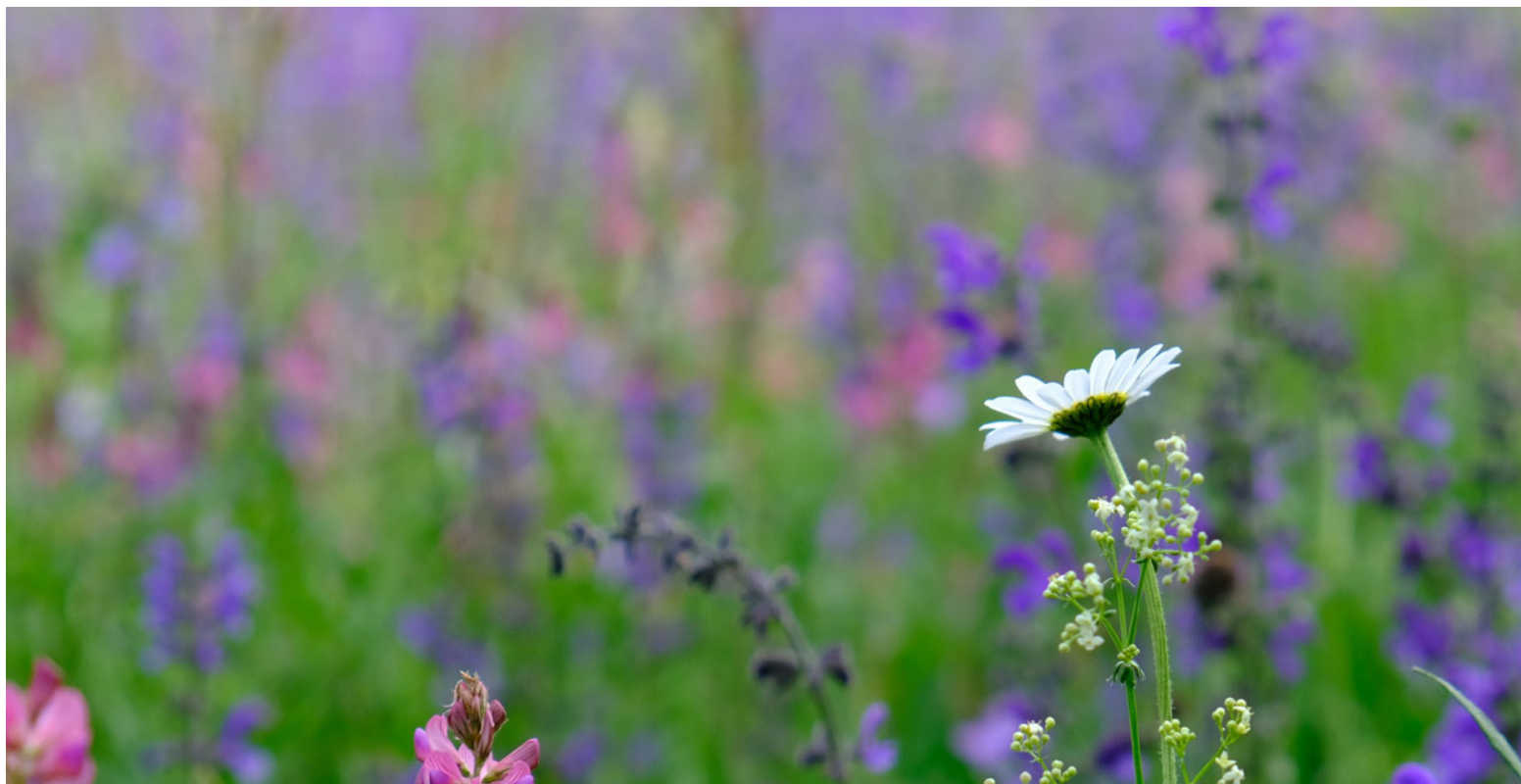




Citizen Biotopes: Strengthening Biodiversity in Tyrolean Communities



**CITIZEN
BIOTOPES**



‘I enjoy being **active together**.
For a colourful and lively **village community**,
where **animals** and **plants** also have a place
alongside us **humans**.’

— A participant in the pilot project
Citizen Biotopes Tyrol



Can joint and practical activities for biodiversity in my immediate living environment improve local habitats, but also strengthen community spirit in our towns? These questions formed the starting point for the development of the pilot project 'Bürger:innen Biotope Tirol' (Citizen Biotopes Tyrol) in 2021.

The project is new and unconventional in Austria because it combines technical goals (stepping stones for rare species, local sites, biodiversity data) with non-technical goals (learning, trust, community, civic engagement). The results so far and extensive local media coverage indicate that both goals have been exceeded in the pilot phase.

Over a period of 30 months, around 100 volunteers created species-rich biotopes in six locations in Tyrol. The commitment of all those involved shows how community activities can heighten our awareness of the uniqueness and beauty of nature right on our doorstep.

Respect for nature and a relationship with all living creatures is lived actively. The process shows us that people in Tyrol are forming new friendships and collaborations and pursue sustainable ideas and business concepts. It becomes clear that each individual can contribute something to strengthening local biodiversity and thus to the livelihoods of our children.

We would like to thank everyone involved, our partners, and the team for their dedication and commitment.

We hope that these positive results will inspire other communities and regions to intertwine biodiversity and civic engagement to strengthen both equally.

Mag. Johannes Kostenzer
Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsman

Stefanie Pontasch, PhD
Project Management



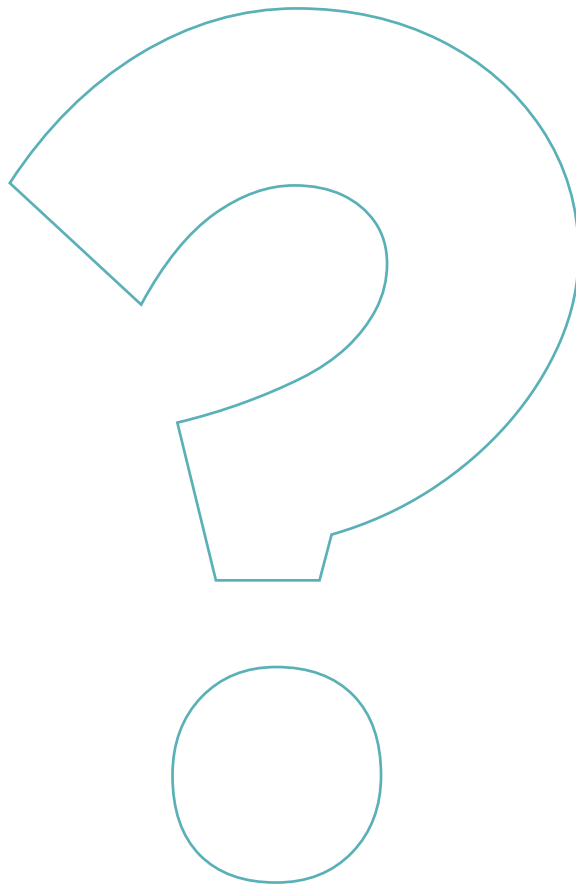
‘It takes **many**
people who take
many small steps.’

— a participant



Discovering the treasures of
your own region's meadows –
as here in the Pillerseetal (left) –
is the basis for joint activities
to foster local biodiversity, e.g.
in the Leutasch area (right).

What are **CITIZEN BIOTOPES**

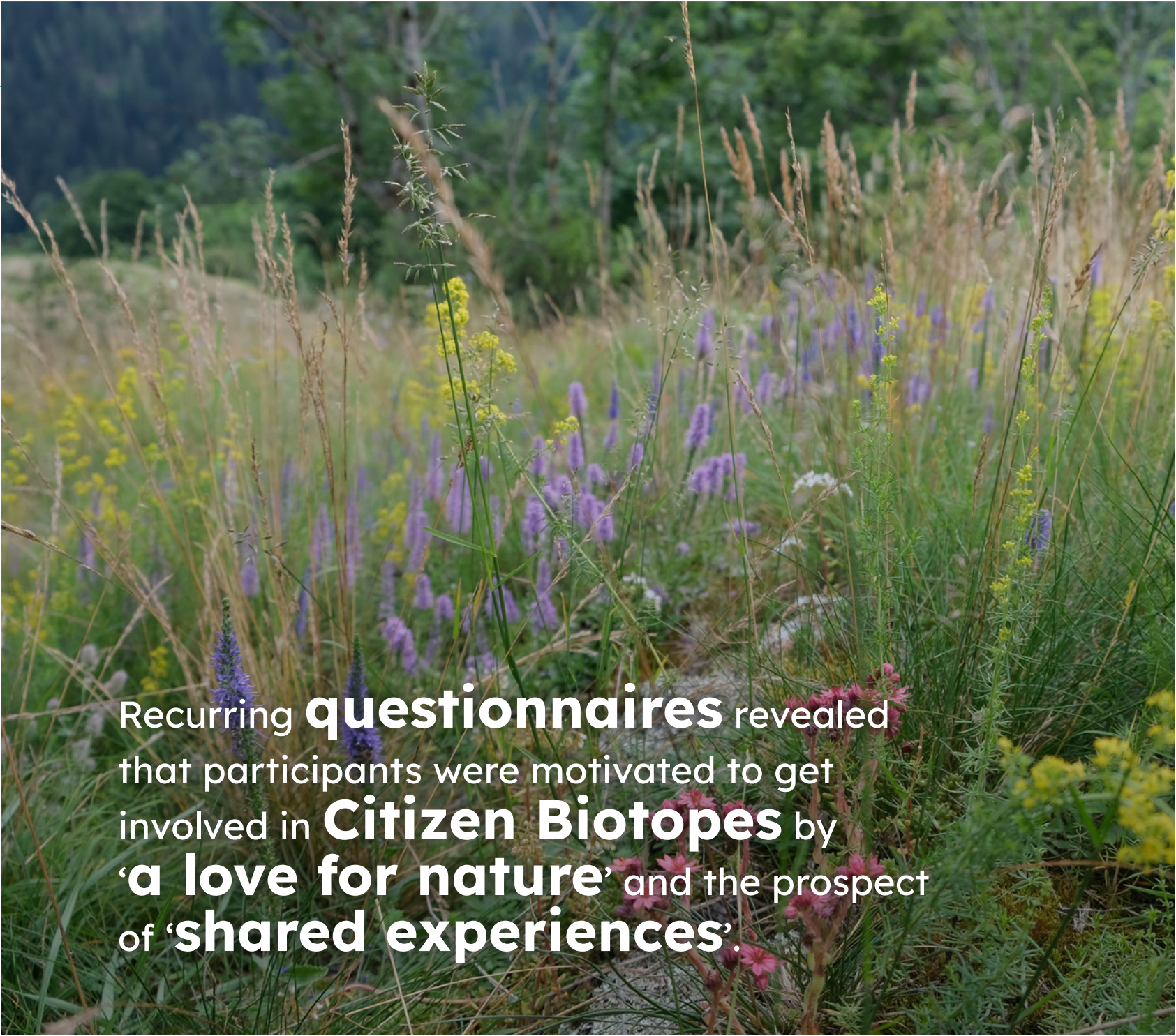


The term ‘Citizen Biotope’ was coined by the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice. It describes both a method and an objective.

A Citizen Biotope is a publicly accessible area in a municipality—e.g. a traffic island or the front yard of a school—that participants in the project select for site-specific biodiversity promotion. With the consent of the landowner, they work on this area together over many months. They prepare the soil, plant native plants, sow locally and self-collected plant seeds, care for and observe the biotope. This area therefore becomes a stepping stone and refuge for endangered species.

The term ‘Citizen Biotope’ also describes a new and special project design, as the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice convenes, mandates, and advises local, mixed steward groups of citizens of different ages and professional backgrounds, municipal staff, and local businesses—farmers, crafts and industry, and plant nurseries. Natural scientists and experts from the ‘partizipation.tirol’ expert collective facilitate on-site meetings and co-create the activities jointly. The vast majority of the commitment to the Citizen Biotores is on a voluntary basis.

Native rough pastures are vibrant habitats for many rare plant and animal species. These ecosystems can serve as models for biotope development, particularly on dry, sunny slopes.



Recurring **questionnaires** revealed that participants were motivated to get involved in **Citizen Biotopes** by ‘**a love for nature**’ and the prospect of ‘**shared experiences**’.

BÜRGER:INNENBIOTOPE —

We foster biodiversity right on our doorstep!

In Tyrol, people from the worlds of science, business, local government, and civil society are transforming green spaces such as traffic islands and embankments into habitats for native wild plants and their pollinators. The results of the pilot phase are entirely positive.



Six alliances in six regions of Tyrol explore, maintain, and promote biodiversity literally on their doorsteps. To this end, they meet regularly on site. Three times in two years, they gather for interactive plenary days in Innsbruck: With the 'Citizen Biotopes', the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice is, for the first time, directly linking the protection of endangered species and activities on green spaces with local cooperation, civic engagement, education, and knowledge transfer.

Volunteers create flower-rich habitats by spreading native wild plants, thereby strengthening biodiversity, as seen here in the region of Hall in Tyrol/Absam/Thaur.



Twelve steps to flourishing landscapes and greater cohesion

STEP 1:

In an intensive preparatory process, the Tyrolean Environmental Ombuds Office selects six regions for the first Citizen Biotopes: Stanzertal, Oberes Gericht, Leutasch, Hall in Tyrol (including Absam and Thaur), the city of Kufstein and Pillerseetal. The coordinator contacts local stakeholders and sends out invitations by post to an initial information meeting.

STEP 2:

A total of sixty curious individuals from the six Tyrolean locations come together for the kick-off plenary session in Innsbruck. This is where the local groups of up to 20 volunteers meet each other for the first time. Although they have different lives and professions, they are united by their love for nature. From now on, they will meet every five to eight weeks, either outdoors or at a venue in their community.



In the plenary session, local politicians—such as Daniel Patscheider, mayor of Ried/ Oberinntal Valley and Katharina Würtl, deputy mayor of St. Ulrich am Pillersee—engage with farmers, scientists, craftsmen, and local entrepreneurs to foster both local biodiversity and social cohesion.



STEP 3:

Natural scientists and citizen participation experts accompany the six alliances on their journey. They support the coordination of activities and facilitate discussions about them, while also documenting the participants' experiences. Meanwhile, the biologists and ecologists collect data on the distribution of rare plant species.



Participants get to explore the insect diversity of the meadows together with natural scientists, using nets.

STEP 4:

Participants explore their local area with their cameras and send the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice more than a hundred suggestions for publicly accessible areas that they would like to enhance, recreate as biotopes, or restore. They also name species-rich meadows in their region that could be suitable as donor areas for wild plant seeds.



Participants discover rare plants, accompanied by botanists.

STEP 5:

In a democratic process, the local community agrees on at least five priority areas that it wants to transform into Citizen Biotopes. The selection is made according to clearly defined criteria. Marion Amort from [partizipation.tirol](#) later reports: 'The participants were surprised that all these decision-making processes were so respectful and uncomplicated. And that their experience in the biotope group, thanks to the moderation, clearly stood out from other experiences, such as in the local council or at work.'



The local action group in Kufstein is pictured selecting Citizen Biotope spots (top) and engaged in planning (bottom). Moderators from [partizipation.tirol](#) ensure that all voices and concerns are heard and taken into account.

STEP 6:

Each community is now beginning to consider specific plans for the individual biotope areas. For each of the 38 biotopes throughout Tyrol, they are planning appropriate measures for soil preparation and maintenance and defining seed and plant material suitable for the location. In some places, they are creating water features for insects, stone piles, or Benjes hedges.



Citizens collect wild plant seeds—as pictured here in the Stanzertal—with the consent of the land managers and landowners and under the guidance of experts.



Students from the Prutz elementary school in Oberes Gericht are re-searching insect diversity in their community.



STEP 7:

Participants learn to assess the quality of the existing vegetation and thus the habitat, to locate pollinators and to harvest, clean and properly store local seeds directly from donor meadows. A selection is handed over to local nurseries, which grow native young plants for reintroduction into the selected Citizen Biotopes.



STEP 8:

During in-depth workshops, participants learn how to handle rare plant species, how to promote pollinators, and the locations in Tyrol where rare early bloomers or endangered plant species thrive. They also learn manual and mechanical seed harvesting methods, as well as how to prick out seedlings and care for young plants until they are ready to be planted in the Citizen Biotopes.



STEP 9:

The groups are now getting directly involved in the new Citizen Biotopes. They are preparing the soil, planting seedlings and sowing seeds, as well as creating biodiversity structures such as hedges.



Seeds are being sown on a traffic island in Hall in Tyrol. The photo shows the seeds being scattered to create a blooming landscape.

STEP 10:

Many participants have started spreading the word about this new, hands-on project to foster biodiversity. They do so far beyond their own village. They present the Citizen Biotopes at markets and village festivals, inviting schoolchildren and residents of nursing homes to visit. This has resulted in extensive local media coverage. More and more volunteers are joining the project and supporting it to the best of their abilities.



As can be seen in the photo taken at a local market in Hall in Tyrol, participants bring the project to the attention of the wider public.

STEP 11:

Ceremonial closing plenary session in Innsbruck, 2025. The questions are: *What have we learned—not only about the local flora and fauna, but also about our fellow human beings and their respective concerns? How do we organize ourselves to continue maintaining the Citizen Biotopes?* The future of the Citizen Biotopes will be placed in the hands of local volunteers. They will continue to organize the maintenance and development of these special places in their local area. The Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice will continue to serve as a knowledge and networking platform, assisting in possible funding applications.

STEP 12:

Now, word about this special experience spreads. Participants tell acquaintances how they got to know neighbours and nature right at home in a new and inspiring way. They encourage the creation of Citizen Biotopes in other towns in Tyrol as well. The Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice, in turn, presents the project's findings to representatives of the political and public sectors, the worlds of business and science.



The participants are extremely dedicated, continuing to work well beyond the project's initial funding period.



According to Verena Ringler from AGORA European Green Deal, a wildflower area in the village delights young and old alike, showing that everyone can contribute to major European biodiversity goals.

‘Through our **joint activities**, I have developed a **connection to the biotope**. Now, whenever I drive past, I think to myself: **We did this together.**’

— a participant



To create Citizen Biotopes such as this one in Prutz, a local plant nursery cultivated young plants from autochthonous seeds that had been harvested by the local action group.

Seeds of native plants – **HARVEST THEM YOURSELF!**

Tyrolean meadows are home to a special treasure: wild plants that have adapted perfectly to their environment. Many of these plants are rare today. In the six biodiversity communities, this treasure is brought back to life. The ripe seeds are harvested by hand or machine and used to create Citizen Biotopes.



Farmers check the quality of the mechanically harvested seeds. Ripe seeds from traditionally farmed and species-rich meadows in Leutasch and Pettneu am Arlberg were harvested with an eBeetle®. The seeds were used in Citizen Biotopes in the respective municipalities.



‘Working **together** with farmers to draw on **traditional knowledge** about seed production and to combine it with new methods is hugely rewarding. In this way, we are helping to preserve biodiversity and **genetic resources**.’

— Stefanie Pontasch, Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice

‘Our goal was to harness people’s **ideas** and **strengths**, and encourage them to **play an active role** in decision-making and shaping the future. By doing so, we could create something that inspires enthusiasm, fosters the sense of **community** and empowers citizens to influence the **future** of their town.’

— Philipp Fromm, partizipation.tirol



Daniela Glos, the founder and operator of the Gartli organic nursery in Pettneu am Arlberg, invites participants to join her in pricking out wild plants that have been grown from native seeds collected by the community.

The seedlings are then planted in suitable locations.

JOY and enthusiasm

According to data collected by participation.tirol, volunteers brought a variety of interests and strengths to the project:

- Scientific and biological interest (species knowledge, documentation)
- Practical and creative interest (gardening, maintenance, seed collection)
- Educational and communicative interest (passing on enthusiasm, raising awareness)
- Socio-political interest (community involvement, participation, local cooperation)

A consistent core group has quickly formed in each of the six regions, which takes care of the organization and communication within the group and enables the ongoing development of the Citizen Biotopes. The participants support each other in carrying out the tasks and demonstrate a very high sense of responsibility.

The participants' conclusion:

- They have changed their view of their immediate living environment in their village or town and are much more aware of the unspoiled environment than they were at the beginning of the project.
- They are aware of their opportunities to shape their social and physical environment (empowerment).
- They have deepened their love for nature even further in this project and at the same time greatly expanded their knowledge and expertise.



Enthusiasm is contagious!





The Innsbruck pasque flower (*Pulsatilla oenipontana*), shown in bloom on the left and with seeds on the right, is found worldwide only in Innsbruck (including Thaur). It is threatened with extinction.



The Carthusian pink (*Dianthus carthusianorum*), shown in bloom on the left and with seeds on the right, is listed as near threatened.

CONSERVATION STATUS

of hand-collected plant species in the Austrian Alps

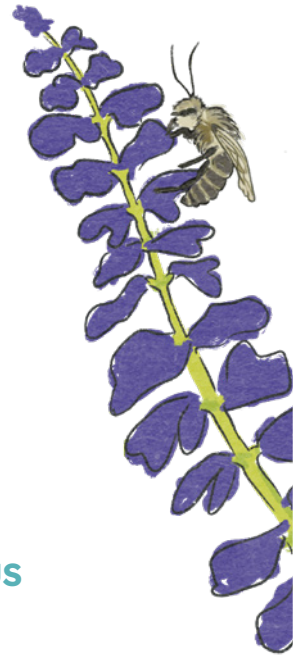
One in three plant species collected is listed as critically endangered (CR), endangered (EN), vulnerable (VU), or near threatened (NT) according to Austria's Red List.

One species is listed as neophytic (n, *Onobrychis viciifolia*). Thirteen species could not be assigned to a subspecies due to their degree of maturity, and therefore their degree of endangerment could not be determined (x).



RED-LIST STATUS

- LC: 44 Species (49.4%)
- NT: 19 Species (21.3%)
- VU: 9 Species (10.1%)
- EN: 2 Species (2.2%)
- CR: 1 Species (1.1%)
- n: 1 Species (1.1%)
- x: 13 Species (14.6%)



‘I had no idea what **special plant species** grow here in Tyrol.’

— a participant



The local action groups explore and survey the diversity of plants in the area. They work together to create new biodiversity areas. This strengthens their knowledge and expertise.

INSIGHTS from the combination of scientific and social objectives

Blossoming flower meadows inspire people of all ages, professions, and religions.

Local participatory projects to promote biodiversity, such as this pilot project, seem particularly well suited in today's world to strengthening not only ecosystems but also local community spirit and democratic culture. "The recipe for success? That we were able to accompany the six communities in this project from the very beginning. This allows the teams to quickly develop and implement their own solutions," emphasizes Melanie Plangger from partizipation.tirol.

Transformative and trans-disciplinary learning right on your doorstep works.

Participants here have gone through a multi-year cycle from site selection and planning to sowing. This new approach represents a further development of existing nature conservation approaches. Because this is about long-term local competencies and networks as well as self-organization.

The Citizen Biotopes project has been successful in two different areas:

Natural and near-natural habitats have been significantly improved ecologically, and rare plant species have become more widespread. At the same time, participants have strengthened their knowledge and expertise (biodiversity literacy) as well as their personal awareness of sustainability (self-efficacy). This fuels the hope of the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice that Citizen Biotopes will inspire other communities and regions in Europe.





‘Europe, environmental protection, our common future —
none of this is imposed on us. Instead, we are the ones we have been waiting for.’

— Verena Ringler, AGORA European Green Deal

RECOMMENDATIONS for the effective strengthening of local biodiversity

1

Austrian Biodiversity Fund

Explicitly incorporate and incentivize pioneering approaches and methodologies such as participation and communication, co-design and co-creation, social and transdisciplinary innovation, and emerging infrastructures such as real-world laboratories for fostering local biodiversity in the funding policy.

2

Regions and EU programmes

In the Citizen Biotopes, representatives from all sectors, interest groups, and age groups work together efficiently, effectively, and joyfully. This shows that the involvement of professionals in the field of participation throughout the entire project period is worthwhile. When experts facilitate meetings, even new and heterogeneous groups can quickly organize themselves. A showcase of empowerment!

3

Building yards, parks departments, road maintenance depots, and municipal gardening departments

Integrate modules on site-appropriate promotion and maintenance of biodiversity into training and continuing education programs.

4

Consumer protection

Awareness raising, information, and, for example, product comparisons of conventional and regionally certified wild plant seeds.

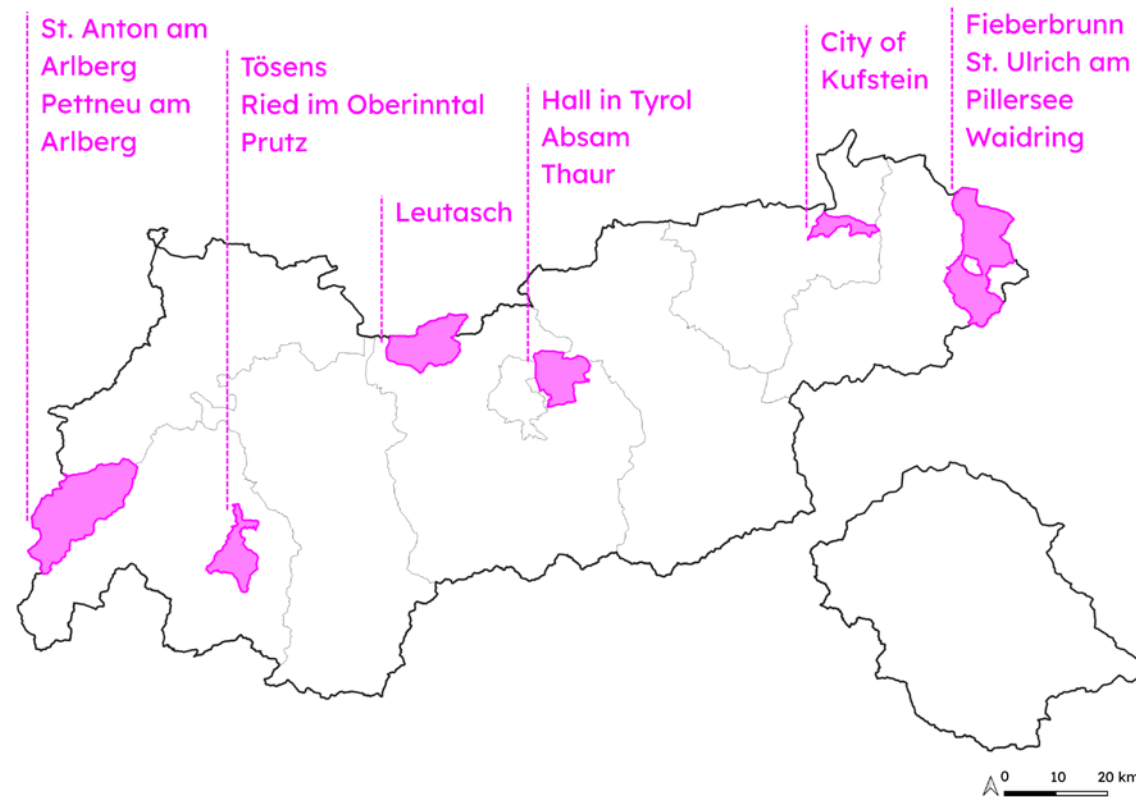
5

Municipalities and town twinning

They seem well suited to implementing this successful concept elsewhere. According to the motto, Citizen Biotopes without borders!

THE PILOT REGIONS

in Tyrol



‘The role of the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice in the Citizen Biotopes project could inspire local and inclusive biodiversity promotion in other European regions. The highly effective combination of centralized management in the provincial capital with the decentralized activities of the actual Citizen Biotopes is important. We also see this success in my community of Pettneu am Arlberg.’

Patrik Wolf

Mayor of Pettneu am Arlberg

CITIZEN BIOTOPES TYROL

at a glance

6

Six local action groups of citizens, natural and social scientists, local politicians and municipal staff, businesses, and farmers have volunteered for many months in the regions of Stanzertal, Oberes Gericht, Leutasch, Hall in Tyrol/Absam/Thaur, the city of Kufstein, and Pillerseetal to foster local biodiversity.

38

During the 2023-25 project period, these local action groups developed 38 Citizen Biotopes spanning 2.2 hectares — equivalent to about three football pitches.

88

Participants collected seeds from 88 native plant species across 26 hectares of donor meadows and sowed them at suitable restoration sites, including seeds of 27 species listed on Austria's Red List according to IUCN criteria. Participants also removed numerous neophytes.

1.250

Participants entered more than 1.250 observations into the digital nature identification platform and the iNaturalist app.

8.000

Around 8,000 seedlings and plants were nurtured by participants, and in some cases grown from scratch.



ADVOCATE AND SERVICE PLATFORM — the role of the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice

- The Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsoffice is leading the project and is liaising with national authorities in Vienna and international organizations.
- It supports and advises the geographically dispersed local action groups in Tyrol. On site, these groups are accompanied by natural and social scientists throughout the entire project period.
- Together with experts from the Tyrolean State Museums, the Office ensures the project's scientific quality and incorporates the collected data into records to inform regional and national developments and strategies.



Johannes Kostenzer,
the Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsman,
gives a voice to nature.



Teresa Müllauer, Stefanie Pontasch, Andreas Hudler, Marion Amort, Philipp Fromm, Verena Ringler, Melanie Plangger, and Eva Hengsberger (the core team of the 'Citizen Biotope Tyrol' project).

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‘The **Citizen Biotopes** show how we can
work together to **protect** our homeland
and **further develop** our location.’

— Johannes Kostenzer, Tyrolean Environmental Ombudsman

