# Hiking Through a Future Sacrifice Zone? A Story of Environmental Justice and Green Growth in the Tyrolean Alps

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Field Notes



The present day Platzertal—a potential dam location. © 2023 Carolin Funcke. All rights reserved.

by Lukas Kunerth & Carolin Funcke

The Tyrolean Platzertal exudes a sense of remoteness like hardly any other valley in the Austrian Alps. Wafts of mist softly envelope the mountain tops as we, two academic researchers who made the trip here from Munich, begin our ascent. A light drizzle dampens the green landscape, which provides a **home for rare plant and animal species**. We are the only human beings hiking on the gravel path that meanders alongside a babbling brook on this cold and rainy June day. It feels as if at every turn a mythical creature could be hiding behind one of the big conifers, silently waiting for us to pass.

This remote landscape and the diverse uses it offers to humans, like traditional agriculture or Alpine leisure activities, attracts not only tourists but also businesses and researchers like ourselves. In addition to the multitude of hiking opportunities, the area is also known for producing clean green energy: the neighboring valley, the Kaunertal, is not only appointed one of the "**Best Tourism Villages**" in the world but also home to one of the **biggest hydroelectric plants in Austria,** a power plant that will become even bigger if the currently debated **expansion plans** are pushed through. This expansion could **more than double the plant's current energy output**, but also turn the Platzertal and neighboring valleys into artificial lakes and dry catchment areas, creating a patchwork of green-energy sacrifice zones.[1]

Sacrifice zones, as the name suggests, are areas that are willfully destroyed to create profit elsewhere,[2] be it financial, cultural, social, or otherwise. These communities and landscapes are actively sacrificed to keep others free from harm. Coal mining towns,

covered in dust and polluted by carcinogens so that places far away have access to heat and electricity, are a traditional example. There are usually large social, political, and economic power differences between the sacrificers and the sacrificees, as well as between the sacrificed area and the beneficiary area, which are intrinsically linked.[3] Decisions about sacrifice zones are often made by outsiders who do not have to live in the affected area.[4] Sacrificing certain areas can be framed as a negative or a positive process, always depending on who are the sacrificer and profiteers.[5] The positions that one takes toward the sacrifice zones, whether one sees them as environmentally just, is in turn based on the relationship one has to an affected area or one's economic interest. The concept of sacrifice zones can thus serve as a helpful tool to explain conflicting narratives, particularly within the political economy of "green energy" in the Global North, and in Tyrol specifically.[6]

As we continue our hike upstream, it almost feels unimaginable that this landscape could look very different in only a couple of years. Ruins of ore-dressing plants give us a glimpse of **how the area had been used by humans in the last 500 years**. Today, we see cows grazing on the lush-green mountain meadows, unbothered by the increasing rainfall that slowly begins to soak our clothes. The wild creek provides them, the pasture landscapes, and the wetlands with fresh water supply.

It is wild creeks and rivers like this one that make the area an attractive sacrifice zone for Tiwag (Tiroler Wasserkraft AG), the energy company running the Kaunertal Kraftwerk, and its sole owner, the Tyrolean state government. To them, building a pump-storage plant in the Platzertal might come with a few disadvantages, while still being a net positive for human needs—necessary even, keeping in mind the fact that the transition to clean energy sources is a **crucial part** of finding solutions to tackle the global climate crisis. Thus, becoming carbon neutral and energy sufficient is a **main target** of the current Tyrolean administration, and increasing hydropower output through new infrastructure and the expansion of preexisting plants is framed as one necessary step.

This target is in line with the idea of a just energy transition, laid out in the European Green Deal: the EU "aims to transform . . . into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use."[7] Aiming to transform the European energy landscape, the EU coincidently emphasizes justice concerns highlighting that "this transition must be just and inclusive."[8]

The focus is put on the needs of local citizens *and* industries, underlining the green-growth paradigm, which shapes European legislation. Other, more radical definitions of a just transition call for economic, social, and political changes to accompany the energy transformation, seeking a "fundamental reimagining"[9] that avoids repeating past injustices and creates a more equitable and just future.[10] Different ideas of what a just transition is supposed to look like clearly depend on different ideas of what justice is in the first place.

Activist groups on both the local, national, and international level tend to align themselves with the latter definition of just transition, arguing that the expansion is **unnecessary for local energy security** and therefore primarily financially motivated. They also claim that local communities have had no role at all in the decision-making process, and that **their vocal resistance had in fact been completely ignored**. Their main argument, however, is one that is barely addressed by the opposing side: the inherent and irreplaceable cultural, spiritual, and environmental value of not only the human but also the nonhuman inhabitants of the areas that would be destroyed.

Following the lively whispering creek, we arrive at a cozy mountain cabin. Just behind this cabin, a massive dam is planned, but for now the hut still welcomes us with its brightly illuminated windows. This Alpine way of life would be impossible to maintain through the time of construction and environmental changes the project would entail—leading to both economic and cultural losses for the area's human communities. The thought that this area would be flooded, drowning out the sounds of cow bells and the merrily babbling brook creates a melancholic atmosphere. In silence, we eat our simple lunch of potatoes, butter, and cheese. Would it be just to sacrifice an ecosystem full of biodiversity like the Platzertal for the global goal of achieving a green-energy transition? And what can the expansion of the hydropower plant tell us about how much we need to sacrifice?

A just energy transition is a crucial undertaking, and the onus is mainly on the Global North to now make necessary sacrifices, given its extractivist and colonial past. The Kaunertal hydropower expansion is supposed to yield economic benefits for the region and to add to the overarching (just) European energy transition based on the principles of green growth. According to Tiwag, the project is absolutely necessary to reach these goals. However, **data from the Tiroler Umweltanwaltschaft** shows a constant surplus of renewable energy production in Tyrol since 2008. Thus, Tyrol already meets the energy-transition goals set by the EU and the Austrian government. Further expansion of

pumped storage plants, **coupled with energy imports from abroad**, might instead lead to Tyrol missing its climate targets. Pursuing green growth might lead to the creation of potentially senseless sacrifice zones.[11] This raises broader questions of *how much growth* is necessary to guarantee a reasonable level of prosperity in the future, and whether green growth even is a suitable paradigm.[12] Not repeating the extreme, localized injustices of environmental destruction and the disenfranchisement of local populations that characterize(d) much of petrol energy production is also a necessity.[13] In its current shape, the Kaunertal expansion appears to fall short of that landmark.

As we begin our descent, the creek is still bubbling, unaware of its potential sacrifice for the sake of green energy—or green growth. The calming soundscape is now accompanied by heavy rain and howling winds, which, together with the thick fog that begins to engulf the still serene area, is preventing a planned WWF photo-op. As similar activist projects look to continue in the near future, the eventual fate of the Kaunertal is still very much up in the air. **A March 2024 study sponsored by WWF Austria** suggests that a similar increase in energy output could be achieved by expanding hydropower capacities in less environmentally destructive sites. In the meantime, the third attempted environmental impact assessment (the expansion was originally supposed to be permitted, planned, and built by 2012)[14] has been **sent back for revisions, the next pending deadline being October 2024**—enough time to maybe prevent this sacrifice, or at least make it more just and worthwhile.

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2. Scott and Smith, “‘Sacrifice Zones’ in the Green Energy Economy.” ↩
3. Juskus, “Sacrifice Zones”; Scott and Smith, “‘Sacrifice Zones’ in the Green Energy Economy.” ↩
4. Scott and Smith, “‘Sacrifice Zones’ in the Green Energy Economy.” ↩
5. Ryan Holifield and Mick Day, “A Framework for a Critical Physical Geography of ‘Sacrifice Zones’: Physical Landscapes and Discursive Spaces of Frac Sand Mining in Western Wisconsin,” *Geoforum* 85 (October 2017): 269–79. ↩
6. Scott and Smith, “‘Sacrifice Zones’ in the Green Energy Economy.” ↩
7. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament: The European Green Deal* (Brussels: European Commission, 2019), 2, **https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3A640%3AFIN**. ↩
8. Ibid. ↩

9. Scott and Smith, "'Sacrifice Zones' in the Green Energy Economy." ↩
10. Christos Zografos and Paul Robbins, "Green Sacrifice Zones, or Why a Green New Deal Cannot Ignore the Cost Shift of Just Transitions," *One Earth* 3, no. 5 (November 2020): 543–46. ↩
11. Dirk Arne Heyen, Luisa Menzemer, Franziska Wolff, Andrea Beznea, and Rob Williams, "Just Transition in the Context of EU Environmental Policy and the European Green Deal," Issue Paper under Task 3 of the "Service Contract on Future EU Environment Policy" (Freiburg: Öko-Institut e.V.), 8, **https://www.oeko.de/fileadmin/oekodoc/Just-Transition-Issue-Paper.pdf**. ↩
12. Martin Pfaffenbach, Tobias Kronenberg, and Wolf Rogowski, *De-growth vs. Green Growth? Let's Focus on the Common Ground to Speed up the Transition to Sustainability!*, Bremen Papers on Economics & Innovation #2207 (Bremen: Insitute for Economic Research and Policy, 2022), **https://media.suub.uni-bremen.de/bitstream/elib/5964/3/2207_IERP_Degrowth%20vs%20green%20growth%202022-05-28_Pfaffenbach_Kronenberg_Rogowski.pdf**. ↩
13. Scott and Smith, "'Sacrifice Zones' in the Green Energy Economy." ↩
14. *Optionenbericht über mögliche Standorte künftiger Wasserkraftnutzung in Tirol* (Innsbruck: Tiwag, 2004), **http://www.dietiwag.at/mat/optionenbericht.pdf**. ↩

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