

September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024

## Resolution for the protection of the karst landscape in the southern Harz



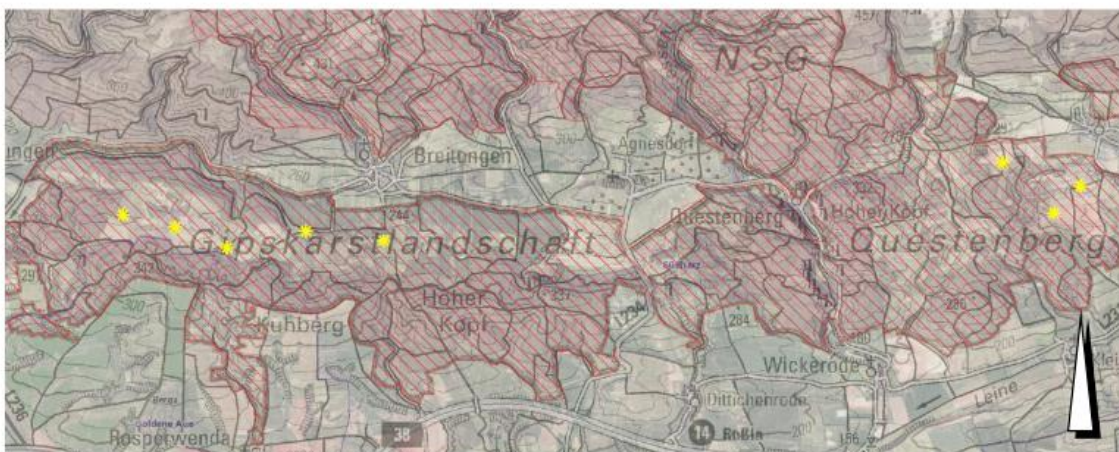
The gypsum karst landscape of the southern Harz is a unique natural area that extends over around 100 km and includes parts of the German federal states of Lower Saxony, Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt. Within this region there are 16 Natura 2000 areas, but also many quarries, which have already destroyed large parts of the landscape.

**Only in the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt is the gypsum karst still completely intact. This area has therefore been designated as the 'Südharz Karst Landscape Biosphere Reserve' by the German federal state Saxony-Anhalt – so far it is the only biosphere reserve in the world in a sulfate karst!**

Despite this outstanding position, central parts of this area could soon be destroyed forever. Citing the coalition agreement of the state government of Saxony-Anhalt, the responsible district of Mansfeld-Südharz plans to approve an application by the gypsum company Knauf to drill **eight exploratory boreholes to explore the local gypsum deposits** in the middle of the **Natura 2000 area 'Buntsandstein- und Gipskarstlandschaft near Questenberg in the southern Harz region (EU code DE 4432-301, national code FFH0101)**. The government of Saxony-Anhalt has reportedly indicated that it would accept quarries if gypsum mining were to be carried out here.

What makes this landscape so important is its special geological situation. In Germany these are the only sulphate (anhydrite and gypsum) deposits of this form and thickness which extend over a large area and are close to the surface. Furthermore, the southern Harz is the only gypsum karst in the world that is richly forested and the combination of remarkable caves, surface karst landforms and their associated ecosystems make this an excellent candidate as a World Heritage Site. If the gypsum is quarried away then the potential World Heritage Site will be lost together with its bio- and geotopes. Caves, springs and underground flow paths as well as gypsum biocoenoses would be destroyed here forever as **it is impossible to restore destroyed gypsum karst areas**.

The drillings were originally planned for 16 September 2024, but environmental associations have now been given until 8 October 2024 to comment. The area of the planned drilling is not only protected by the Natura 2000 Directive but also as a nature reserve and landscape protection area, as well as a nature park. Quarrying would result in destruction of the core areas of the biosphere reserve and if these test drillings are not stopped, a precedent will be set for gypsum mining in almost all forms of protected areas in Germany.



Locations of the 8 planned test drillings (in yellow) of the Knauf company, source: Knauf

Over the course of several 10,000 years, a gypsum karst landscape with extreme karstification intensity, morphological and biological diversity and uniqueness has emerged in the southern Harz. For this reason, it is part of the German Federal Agency for Nature BfN hotspot areas of biodiversity 18 and 19 and is of outstanding importance for numerous bat species, such as the pug bat *Barbastella barbastellus*, the Brandt's bat *Myotis brandtii* and *Myotis mystacinus*, and the mouse-eared bat *Myotis myotis*, to name just a few. The structurally rich landscape also provides a habitat for many amphibians such as the fire salamander *Salamandra salamandra*. Other special features include caves like the Questen cave near Questenberg, the highly fluctuating water levels in large sinkholes and poljes, as well as periodic lakes and karst springs. In addition, the southern Harz is characterised by a particularly rich groundwater fauna and groundwater habitats worthy of protection. In addition to the Natura 2000 habitat types and species, other species with a special protection obligation also occur here. For example, the creeping gypsophila *Gypsophila repens* and the slender cotton grass *Eriophorum gracile* grow here. The slender cotton grass is considered to be threatened with extinction throughout Europe. And the lichens also have something special to offer, such as the colourful soil lichen community or the extremely rare *Psora saviczii*, whose German name 'Gips-Erdschorf' (gypsum soil scab) already indicates the special growing place.

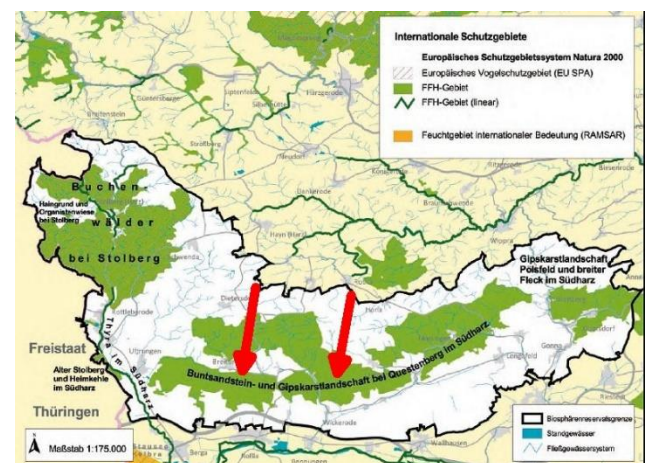
**We vehemently oppose any new mining project in the gypsum karst of the southern Harz region.**

**We assert that:**

- The state of Saxony-Anhalt must recognise and accept its responsibility for the internationally significant gypsum karst landscape in the South Harz and protect it accordingly. Protected areas must be respected, whether under German legislation or the European Natura 2000 directive.
- The state of Saxony-Anhalt should not allow any further destruction of the gypsum karst, not only because of the adverse impacts on biotopes and geotopes but because it will impede future development of the region as a tourist destination.
- The state should instead promote future- and climate-oriented plants and companies that produce alternatives to building plaster. Such building materials made from renewable materials such as plant fibres and recycled minerals have been on the market for a long time.



Questenberg, Foto: Michael Brust



in white Biosphere Reserve,  
in green Natura 2000 area, in red drilling area