

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 26 August 1975

CE/Nat/DE (75) 23

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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Working Party - "European Diploma"

Gran Paradiso National Park
(Italy)

Report on the on-the-spot appraisal

20-21 August 1975

by

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GRAN PARADISO NATIONAL PARKOn-the-spot appraisal

At the proposal of the European Diploma Working Party, a visit was made to the Gran Paradiso National Park, in the company of Mr P. BAUM, of the Council of Europe Secretariat, on 20-21 August 1975. We were shown round by Mr FRAMARIN, the Park Director, to whom our thanks are due for his assistance and friendly reception.

1. General features of the Park

The Gran Paradiso National Park (56,000 ha) was set up by Decree of 3 December 1922 to protect the area's flora, fauna, geological formations and natural beauty. It is also one of the largest Alpine conservation and breeding areas for ibex and chamois.

There are currently 2,760 ibex in an area of some 37,000 ha of scree, boulders and rock faces, or proportionately 3-4 times as many as in the Vanoise, with a total number 9 times as high. The numbers are subject to wide fluctuation: 2,370 in 1922, 3,865 in 1933, 1,630 in 1940, 416 in 1945, 3,297 in 1972 and 2,760 in 1974. Present fluctuations are largely due to natural factors: heavy snowfall and lack of foliage for feeding, avalanches and disease, but there may also be some poaching of animals straying outside the park or seeking refuge near its boundaries in spots that are easily accessible.

There are 5,600 chamois in an area of some 7,000-9,000 ha, proportionately 6-9 times as many as in the Vanoise, with an absolute number almost double. The chamois population is at present stable; annual growth is offset by migration to the outlying area.

These results may be attributed to the protection the Park has enjoyed for the last 50 years and the decline of grazing due to difficulty of access and the relative poor quality of paths, especially on the Piedmont slope. On the Valle d'Aosta slope, there has been substantial rural depopulation.

Mountain walking is much more difficult and dangerous than in the Vanoise because of the terrain and avalanches hazards. Visitors keep mainly to the valleys which can be reached by road. Crossing the ridges demands rock-climbing ability.

2. Legal status

80 % of the park is made up of municipal land still carrying grazing rights. The domestic livestock (about 3,000 sheep and 2,000 cattle) is made up of local herds and summer herds from Piedmont and the Milan region.

12 % of the land has been purchased by the Park from local authorities (Piedmont slope) and 8 % is leased. On this 20 % (10,000 ha) grazing is no longer permitted.

The 5,000 ha of municipal forest are managed according to the usual rules by the Regional Forestry Service.

The Park regulations date from 1935 and were designed to cope with the hazards of that time. They lay down rules governing grazing and prohibit shooting and fishing. The Park authorities are entitled to take whatever steps are necessary to protect flora. No civil engineering works nor any residential building can be carried out without the Park's authorisation.

New, more up-to-date regulations are under consideration. They will also cover the question of tourists development in the Park.

3. Supervision and management

The Park has an establishment of 65 wardens ; 59 of these posts are actually filled at present. Each warden's area covers about 2,000 ha. There are 5 Senior wardens of "valley chiefs" and one inspector. Recruitment has become difficult owing to the working conditions in this difficult terrain. The wardens' main job is to keep a watch on the animals and to look out for shooting offences. There are 32 refuges in which they can spend the night in the course of their rounds, which often take several days.

Management responsibility lies with an independent Administrative Board made up of Ministry of Agriculture and local authority nominees. Its decisions are implemented by the Director, a Civil Servant recruited by competitive examination.

Long walks in the Park itself are difficult and are rightly not encouraged. There are, however, about 10 refuges (bivacchi) with 6-8 bunks and 4 Italian Alpine Club refuges.

The Visitors' Centre at Rhêmes Notre-Dame includes a museum and another at Valnontey has a well laid-out Alpine garden which has an international reputation. The Park's headquarters are in Turin. Illustrated booklets have been produced and also a glossy book on the Park.

The Park has an annual budget of 350m lire, of which 250m comes from the Ministry and 100m from the two provinces of Valle d'Aosta and Turin. Owing to recent economic and monetary trends, the whole of this amount is swallowed up by staff salaries and only exceptional grants remain for operational purposes. It is to be hoped that this unfortunate situation will not last ; at one time, the public funds provided were the same as for the Vanoise.

4. Scientific research

Apart from keeping statistics of the animal population, the Park is currently compiling an inventory of the Park's flora. The first volume of this was published in 1973. Research is also being done on parasitic diseases of the ibex and chamois. A laboratory is being set up at the Valnontey Visitors' Centre and will accomodate 6 research workers (*).

5. Special protection problems

The Park was created in 1922, when socio-economic conditions were very different from today and tourism was almost non-existent. The authorities realise the need to revise the Park's regulations, but they will also have to cope with a number of problems or disputes concerning shooting, development and tourism. In 1950, under pressure from the local authorities, they agreed to a high-voltage power line being run through the Valsavaranche and in 1960 they agreed to a road being built (it is not yet completed) between the Valle d'Orco and the Valsavaranche, via the Nivolet Pass.

a) Shooting and poaching

The Park's rich wildlife is a constant temptation to poachers. In view of the terrain, we believe that most poaching occurs near and especially outside the Park's

(*) Research and experiments on the reintroduction of the lynx and the lammergeier are at present under way.

boundaries, where there is less supervision owing to shortage of staff. Penalties on conviction are severe, but poaching is so well organised technically nowadays that there are few prosecutions. According to the Director, the poachers are mainly not local people, but come from further a field.

It may be assumed that poaching creams off some of the natural growth of the wildlife population and helps keep numbers stable. The greatest fluctuations, however, are due to natural causes.

b) Tourist pressure

Owing to the difficult terrain, tourist pressure occurs only in the valleys, i.e. about in about 10 % of the Park's area. The Valsavaranche, the Valnontey and the Rhêmes Valley are the 3 critical areas.

The Valsavaranche has only a few villages and hamlets (population 150), but accommodates 1,000 tourists in summer (hotels, flats and camp sites). Once the Nivolet Pass road is completed, a massive influx of tourists may be expected. There is some controversy over whether this valley belongs to the Park, as it appears to from some documents, but not from others.

The Valnontey, at the foot of which is the tourist town of Cogne (population 1,800), is swamped by tourists and has become an eyesore of haphazard development (camp sites, hotels and restaurants).

The Rhêmes Valley has preserved its rustic charm, the architecture of its few, small villages blending remarkably with the rural landscape ; but it is losing its population and may soon be spoilt forever by apartment building and tourist development.

These pressures are reinforced by the local communities which see tourist development as a boost to the local economy. This is a problem shared by all of Europe, which can only be solved by means of an overall approach and through greater awareness on the part of the local population and their elected representatives of the exceptional quality of the Park and its environment.

No doubt the Park will soon have to be re-zoned to provide for pockets of controlled development in the critical spots mentioned, under a separate urbanisation plan which will need to be reconciled with the interests of landscape conservation and tourist development.

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It would be a pity to exclude these spots from the Park, as this would condemn them to uncontrolled development. Even the Rhêmes Valley ought to be included and a development plan drawn up for it. The trend of local public opinion is not surprising but it shows that a solution must be found as quickly as possible.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt in my mind that the Gran Paradiso National Park is a natural setting of very high quality and that supervision and the facilities in the Park itself are satisfactory in many respects despite the current budgetary crisis, which has not entirely brought work on facilities to a standstill.

However, the Park authorities now find themselves obliged to negotiate a new contract with the local population and the local authorities for the controlled development of the main valleys, where tourist development must be reconciled with the quality and grandeur of the setting.

We fear that the immediate award of the diploma, which might in many respects be justified, could be construed by the local population as a challenge from the European community ; such interference in their affairs might further complicate the urgently needed negotiations between the Park authorities and the municipalities concerned. Rather than sharpen the opposition, it would be better to hope that agreement is reached between the parties to culminate the 50 years of vigilance and cooperation which the Park authorities and the local authorities have devoted to conservation of the area and which have rarely been emulated in Europe.

It seems to us desirable also that the local and regional authorities be informed of the point of view finally adopted by the European Diploma Working Party.