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## EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Working Party - "European Diploma"

Vanoise National Park  
(France)

Report on the on-the-spot appraisal

18-19 August 1975

by

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VANOISE NATIONAL PARKON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL

At the suggestion of the Working Party "European Diploma", we visited the Vanoise National Park, accompanied by Mr P. BAUM, from the Council of Europe Secretariat, on 18 and 19 August. We were guided round the park and its surrounding area by Mr C. PAIRAUDÉAU and Mr A. MOULIN, the director and assistant deputy director of the park, whom we should like to thank for the welcome and assistance we received from them.

1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARK

As the European interest of the park is acknowledged, we shall confine ourselves to a few additional remarks. Although 82 % of its area is at alpine level proper (2,200 to 3,600 m), the park offers good opportunities of mountain-walking in summer and cross-country skiing in winter. It is, in that respect, a most attractive area (300,000 visitors in 1974), especially in the summer months (90 % of the visits). Its amenities cater for this function.

The park also has undeniable biological interest (flora and fauna). With 28 % of its area covered by almost inaccessible rock and scree, it offers the ibex various favourable habitats : from 50 in 1964, the numbers have risen to 350 and saturation point has certainly not been reached. The vast combs covered with alpine pasture are more propitious to the chamois, whose numbers have risen from 400 in 1964 to 3,000 at present. They exploit the same milieu as sheep and domestic cattle, with which they compete.

The Vanoise Park thus combines two purposes : that of a high quality biological reserve and that of a high altitude recreation area.

2. LEGAL STATUS OF THE PARK

- a. The park proper is formed of privately and communally owned land (10 % and 90 %) respectively. The State in its own right owns only 11 hectares out of the 52,839 hectares of the total area. The owners have placed their land at the parks disposal, on the understanding that they retain their grazing and mowing rights and that they can occupy, maintain and, if necessary, restore existing chalets for grazing purposes.

The same rights will be passed on to their descendants. The park authorities do, however, stipulate that any restoration of the chalets must respect the style of the region and they may partially subsidise the work. The owners have given up their hunting rights in the park in return for annual compensation of 1.66 francs per hectare, i.e. a total of some 100,000 francs per annum. Fishing rights have been retained but they interfere very little with conservation, since the rivers and lakes have already been restocked in the past with existing or new species.

In fact, the park's boundaries were the subject of long negotiations with the inhabitants and local authorities, which explains why they are irregular and rarely natural. In the Maurienne, the boundaries are situated where the alpine level begins, excluding the sub-alpine forests and meadows where hunting rights have been retained. In the Tarentaise, the boundaries have often been pushed back towards the summits (Val d'Isère, the Tignes basin), to exclude winter sports areas. Established by the Decree of 6 July 1963, the existing boundaries cannot, however, now be changed. A recent attempt to take the Chairière glacier away from the park for winter sports use was defeated.

It should be added that the Decree of 6 July 1963 has been supplemented by park regulations which govern farming, grazing and forestry activities, protect all fauna and flora, prohibit camping and low altitude over-flying and make any infrastructure, changes for whatever purpose, as well as any military activities, subject to permission by the park authorities. The park authorities are also empowered to take the necessary measures to channel, control or restrict the movement of visitors. They are legally well-armed.

- b. The area surrounding the park (in French law the "pre-park") is intended to develop economic or recreational activities likely to benefit the region's population). The Haute Maurienne has turned its attention to the promotion of grazing, the architectural restoration of villages and open-air tourism, all activities generally compatible with the role of the "pre-park" as a buffer zone. In the Tarentaise, however, development is centred on urbanisation and a maximum promotion of winter sports. This policy cannot be followed without an appreciable change in the character of the landscape, especially as considerable work has been required in the mountains to protect imprudent extensions of towns in avalanche areas.

The nature reserves established earlier in this area (the Iseran, Grande Motte and Sachette reserves) have therefore lost much of their value ; only the Sassi re reserve will remain intact.

Indeed, the development of the surrounding area, on which the park authorities can only give their advice, is displaying trends that are not wholly consistent with the proper role of the "pre-park" as a buffer zone. Nevertheless, there is a clear dividing line between the two areas and - failing a change in the boundaries laid down in the 1963 decree - the danger of the "pre-park" encroaching on the park is practically nil.

### 3. SUPERVISION AND FACILITIES FOR VISITORS

The park has a supervisory staff of 38 : 30 warden-guides, 6 area heads and 2 inspectors (Maurienne and Tarentaise). Each warden looks after an area of about 2,000 hectares, in which most visitors generally keep to the established paths ; it is rare, either in winter or in summer, to find people straying far from them. The supervisory staff has police powers, but misdemeanours are rare, both as regards poaching or illegal camping and biological protection.

A tremendous effort has been made to provide amenities for the public. 3 "gate-houses", accessible by road, have been built now ; they offer parking and catering facilities and accommodation (204 bunks). About 30 shelters have been spaced out along paths inside the park (16), near its boundaries (10), and in the "pre-park" (6). They offer sleeping accommodation (1,200 bunks in all). Approximately 500 kilometres of tracks have been marked out for walking. Near the Org re (Maurienne) lodge, an ecological itinerary of some 3 kilometres has been marked out in the old natural Org re forest. It is a model of its type for the amount and quality of the information if provided.

The park has its administrative headquarters at Chamb ry and also 7 regional information offices which are at the same time the headquarters of the area heads and inspectors.

The park's management and staff have been very active in the matter of information and cultural animation : 323 lectures between 1968 and 1971 ; 300 guided visits by naturalists in 1974 ; travelling exhibitions ; the production of illustrated brochures and maps, etc.

#### 4. SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

The park promotes scientific studies by granting subsidies and providing accommodation for researching at Collet (Maurienne). The papers are published in the "Cahiers de la Vanoise" (1 volume per year) and mainly concern botany and zoology.

#### 5. MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET

The park is directed by a chief engineer of the Forestry Commission, assisted by a divisional civil engineer and four other staff. Administrative measures are discussed by the park's board of administration, aided by a scientific council, formed of university professors from various fields (geology, hydrology, botany, zoology, veterinary science, geography and town planning).

The park at present has a total budget of 3,700,000 francs per annum financed by the State. 75 % of the budget is spent on staff salaries and 25 % on running costs including contractual obligations (acquisition of hunting rights, depreciation on buildings). The investment budget varies according to the work to be done : it amounted to 1,300,000 francs for 1975.

The amount required for the budget is indeed considerable but it is, nevertheless, too little as far as the upkeep of the gate-houses and shelters is concerned. These buildings suffer greatly from the winter weather and necessitate much more maintenance expenditure than is the role for buildings at a lower altitude. As repairs can only be carried out in summer, it has to be possible to concentrate expenditure into a short period.

#### 6. SPECIFIC PROTECTION PROBLEMS

##### a. Grazing problems

The burden placed on the park by grazing is difficult to evaluate precisely for two reasons : the grazing tracts extend over both the park and the peripheral area : furthermore the livestock includes, in addition to local flocks (7,000 heads) a varying number of transhumant sheep brought from the South in summer (5,000 to 10,000 head). The park's domestic flock comprises between 10,000 and 15,000 head of sheep for some 30,000 hectares of alpine pasture. It is quite a large number but we did

not notice any signs of over-grazing or erosion in the places visited. Moreover, grazing helps to maintain the flora, for undergrazed mountain pastures would develop herbaceous suffrutescent vegetation much poorer in small species.

Cattle are declining steadily in favour of sheep, which demand less work while benefiting from the same mountain farming subsidies (according to the EEC standard : 1 sheep = 0.15 livestock unit). This support mechanism could have the unforeseen consequence of changing the mountain pastures' composition in the medium-term (since sheep are more selective grazers than cattle) and of giving the chamois stiffer competition by pushing its herds back into marginal areas. This is a complex problem of wild-life management which, we think, would deserve an attentive - and certainly original - study, in order to ascertain the best grazing balance in the national park, bearing in mind its own objectives.

Another problem resulting from grazing rights concerns the use of the mountain chalets. Some owners who have ceased to graze stock are trying, nevertheless, to restore and equip their chalets as temporary accommodation suitable for letting to third parties. Through such evasion of the park's regulations there is a possibility of a move towards residential colonisation which, to us, seems incompatible with the park's legal status.

b. The effects of hunting

Hunting continues to be practised in the zone surrounding the park and some areas well stocked with game have deliberately been kept outside its boundaries at the express request of the inhabitants. Although ibex shooting is totally banned, chamois hunting certainly takes its toll on the herds in the park, to the extent that they venture out beyond its limits. This situation may seem unusual to advocates of total protection but it is not illegal and, moreover, does not seem to us to be intolerable. It has not prevented the chamois herds from increasing considerably in the last ten years and, should they become over-abundant, hunting in the "pre-park" would of itself have a regulatory effect. Furthermore, too stringent restrictions or a total ban on hunting in the "pre-park" would certainly encourage poaching. It must be acknowledged that the Vanoise National Park was not set up to study the dynamics of the animal population in strictly natural conditions ; to do that, the park would have had to be enlarged considerably and even closed to visitors, with grazing banned.

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c. The effects of visitors

It seems to us that the Vanoise National Park will receive an increasing number of visitors every year. A certain amount of caution is therefore necessary in the touristic use of the park. We do not think that any additional shelters should be provided inside the park or that the number of bunks should be greatly increased. This is also the view held at present by the park's management. Moreover, the public action must be dissuaded from needlessly disturbing or pursuing wildlife, as keen amateur photographers often do. This can also be done by detecting the "sensitive" spots or areas in the park for large fauna, by re-storing paths and, if necessary, closing some of them, according to the need for good protection. Such restrictions must be carefully explained to the public, if protests are to be avoided.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we feel that we can recommend awarding to the Vanoise Park a European Diploma in category A as defined in the award regulations. The required conditions are met and the continued existence of grazing easements is not a major obstacle, since the lie of the land itself keeps them effectively within bounds. The public is certainly allowed access, but people are channelled along a network of paths during the busiest season. The few cross-country skiers who pass through the park in winter are obliged to use the only tracks which are passable. The erection of shelters in the parks is to be regarded as a safety measure and it is also required for supervision purposes. As things stand at present, it is by no means a touristic venture.

We think that the award of the diploma might be accompanied by two recommendations :

- that the accommodation facilities in the park should not be increased and that the network of paths should be designed primarily to protect "sensitive" zones rather than to facilitate access the gate-houses and the short walks leading from them should be regarded as a means of keeping the majority of visitors within bounds ; their present amenities being well suited to that purpose ;

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- that relations between the Vanoise National Park and the Gran Paradiso Park - which at present are twinned - should be put on a more regular basis, since it would be in the interests of both to compare their administrative methods and conservation problems by periodic contacts and exchanges of information, especially between their scientific and research councils.