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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Select Committee of Experts -
European Diploma

VANOISE NATIONAL PARK
(France)

on-the-spot appraisal by
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We visited the Vanoise Park on 22 and 23 July 1979 in the company of Mr P BAUM of the Council of Europe. We were guided round by Mr MOULIN, the Deputy Head Warden, to whom we extend our warmest thanks. As we had already carried out an on-the-spot assessment in 1975, prior to the award of the European Diploma, our task was first and foremost to look at changes in the park, its state of conservation and its new facilities.

1. Legal status

There has been no change in the park's status or boundaries and it is in no way threatened; acceptance of its special nature has been markedly strengthened. This is all the more remarkable in that the park consists of municipally-owned (90%) and privately-owned (10%) land over which the local people continue to exercise users' rights without challenging the park's status as a nature reserve.

2. Users' rights and conservation

Since hunting is totally banned inside the park, annual compensation of 2.7 FF per hectare is paid to the municipal authorities. Fishing by those who have traditionally fished the area is still premitted, but not much practised except in a few specific places, since the average altitude of over 2,000 metres means that the rivers and lakes contain few fish. A management plan prepared by the park's scientific attaché will take effect shortly.

Pastoralism is on the decline in many sectors, and sheep are progressively taking over from cattle since the flocks can move higher up into chamois territory. Chamois are, however, present in ever-increasing numbers: 400 in 1964, 3,000 in 1975, 4,810 in 1978, as against a total of some 20,000 sheep (0.6 sheep per hectare of alpine grazing). The ibex, which frequents very remote spots, has increased its numbers from 50 head (1964) to 350 in 1975 and 580 in 1979. Other species of fauna are more than holding their own (marmots and birds of prey: 4 golden eagle eyries) and the lammergeyer (bearded vulture) is being introduced.

The ibex enjoys complete protection but the chamois can still be hunted in the peripheral zone for a fifteen-day period each autumn. Some 500-600 of them are killed annually, for the most part young males which have strayed from the park. This cull represents 10-15% of the stock and is lower than the natural rate of reproduction, but it could alter the population pyramid and reduce fertility in the medium term. The current research project on chamois population trends in the Pralognan sector (Tarentaise) will perhaps shed some light on the matter.

There has been no discernible damage to flora or plant cover. In the alpine zone, we found that the decline in grazing had resulted in a remarkable increase in herbaceous species with iridescent flowers. This was particularly evident on the 7,000 hectares of alpine meadow in the Grande Sassi re, on which the park has taken a lease to prevent them from being grazed. In the sub-alpine zone, the decline in grazing of cattle - still not very pronounced in the Maurienne, but a longstanding feature in the Tarentaise - has brought about growth of *Alnus viridis* scrub. The park management has suggested creating a 350-hectare closed-access reserve at Lessonay (Champagny-Haut) to make it possible to follow the evolution of the post-pastoral, sub-alpine alder woods, which are at present some 30 years old and whose development into forest would be worth studying at periodic intervals (in view of the intrusion of maple and then of fir). The setting-aside of a judiciously-selected area as a closed-access reserve (purchased by the state) would therefore be desirable at Lessonay; it would be a highly significant bio-dynamic experiment concerning the evolution over a span of centuries of abandoned sub-alpine pasture.

This experiment and the one being carried out in the Grande Sassi re are perfectly in keeping with a policy of long-term management for the Vanoise National Park.

3. Regulations and wardening

The park authorities have brought in stricter measures to forbid the use of drove roads by private cars as well as camping and bivouacking inside the park. Some municipal authorities also forbid camping in certain sectors of the peripheral zone.

The number of wardens is still the same (30 wardens proper, 6 heads of sector, 2 inspectors). They are sworn in, are equipped with walkie-talkies and can impose on-the-spot fines through a ticket system, which represents a marked step forward as far as the work of the wardens is concerned.

Offences are few and give rise to 40 or so court prosecutions a year, 30-40 tickets and numerous written cautions, by which various means repeated offenders can be discovered. The offences largely involve unauthorised camping, the bringing of dogs into the park, the use of cars on the park's drove roads, poaching (a rare occurrence) and helicopter over-flights in the winter sports season (for transporting skiers).

4. Facilities for visitors

The installation of facilities is proceeding according to plan.

- The number of refuges in the park has not been increased (which is in accordance with the European Committee's recommendation) but they are better and more fully equipped. In summer a number of them supply very cheap meals and over-night accommodation. The 19 refuges in the park and peripheral zone provide, in all, 810 bunks, to which should

be added accommodation available in the 7 French Alpine Club refuges (450 beds) and two privately-run refuges (75 bunks) distributed throughout the peripheral zone. On average, 40% of the capacity is taken up, though there are temporary, unforeseeable peaks when demand cannot be met.

- The park at present has 4 "gatehouses" (2 in 1975), at Orgères and Plan du Lac in the Maurienne sector, Rosuelle and Champagny-Bois in the Tarentaise sector. They too can supply meals and accommodation, which brings the total capacity of the National Park to 1,340 beds.
- The park boundary can be reached by 14 metalled roads ending at well laid-out car parks from which there is access to the park's network of footpaths (500 kilometres of paths unobtrusively marked, with an absolute minimum of direction indicators).
- The park also possesses 4 information centres, at Chambéry, Bourg St Maurice, Pralognan (since 1979) and Lanslebourg (under construction in 1979). They all have an information office and an exhibition area for displays presenting special biological features of the park. The services of a guide are also available for expeditions which require them.
- The Orgères ecological trail (Maurienne), which is exceptional of its kind, is regularly maintained. A second ecological trail has been laid out at Fornet (Tarentaise) to illustrate the contrasting calcicolous and silicicolous flora and vegetation.

It should be added that in the peripheral zone the authorities have pursued a vigorous parallel policy of reviving and maintaining the traditional rural economy (drove roads, renovation of grazing chalets and rural buildings, buildings for cheese making), stimulating summer tourism (camping, picnic and recreation areas) and encouraging village activities. These revitalisation measures are also of great importance to the park: they protect it from too great an influx of visitors and they encourage a positive attitude to the park on the part of the local people.

In 1977 there was a statistical census of visitors to the park proper. It is estimated that the park receives 300,000-400,000 visitors a year (95% of them between 15 June and 15 September) with peaks on certain days of 5,000-6,000. A limited number of visitors undertake long-distance hikes, and overnight stays recorded in refuges come to some 6,000 annually.

The behaviour of members of the public is most satisfactory. That of certain skiers is to be deplored: in refuges not manned by wardens during the winter period it often leaves much to be desired.

Lastly it should be added that the park authorities have an extremely active information policy, and organise lectures (350 in 1978), ecology courses for beginners and temporary exhibitions which constantly stress how the park affects the whole region.

5. Budget

Operating costs have increased from 3,700,000 FF (1975) to 4,600,000 FF (1979), 80% of which represents staff wages and the remainder maintenance of the 48 installations in the park (houses, refuges, information centres), compensation (loss of hunting rights) and the organisation of projects and activities. The park's actual income (from overnight stays in refuges) comes to approximately 300,000 FF.

In 1978 funds available for installing new facilities came to 1,800,000 FF and enabled the new "gatehouse" at Champagny-Bois to be built (cost: 2,000,000 FF). Future resources will mainly be put into the building of 5 more "gatehouses" on the edge of the park.

It should be mentioned that these buildings are in a traditional style and constructed with traditional materials, which explains their relatively high cost. Moreover, building and maintenance in high mountain areas are necessarily expensive.

6. Scientific research

In 1977 the park engaged a scientific attaché to co-ordinate research. The park has part-financed a number of research projects (12 contracts in 1976, 10 in 1977 and 11 in 1978), some of them dealing specifically with problems of management (chamois population trends, a veterinary research project concerning bronchial pneumonia in the chamois, an experimental "larder" for the study of birds of prey, changes in alpine meadows in relation to the amount of grazing, a visitors' census). Between 1975 and 1978, the park published volumes V-VIII of its "Recueils de Travaux" (46 scientific articles)(1). The research station at Col de la Madeleine received visits from 450 research workers in 1977.

7. Grazing chalets

In our 1975 report we drew attention to this question, which is specific to the Maurienne valley. Holders of grazing rights often own grazing chalets inside the park, which are gradually being restored with financial help from the local and park authorities as a means of sustaining the pastoral economy. Many of the owners

(1) Nine volumes in all.

have nonetheless ceded their grazing rights to others but are keen to retain the use of their chalets during the summer, for occupation by themselves or rental to summer visitors. This insidious practice has produced colonies of casual residents. At a pinch, it is legally defensible, but if it were to spread it might damage the special image of the park. The park management is very aware of this and it is to be hoped that the best possible way of preventing abuses will be found. Here, the approach should be to make a point of giving preferential consideration to any resumption of farming activity but turning down anything which could lead to the conversion of former farm buildings into holiday camps, second homes, etc.

8. Conclusions

Our reason for compiling such a detailed report on the Vanoise National Park was that its policy in the protection, presentation and management of flora, fauna and landscape strikes us as being a successful example of how to fit nature protection into an agricultural and pastoral context. Thanks to the unflagging energy of the park administration the park is now acknowledged to be a very special place. Our view is that it thoroughly deserves to be awarded once again the European Diploma in category A.

If we might venture to make some suggestions, we would propose, firstly, that a closed-access area of alder wood should be created at Lessonay (Champagny) similar to the experimental closed-access area of alpine meadow at Grande Chassière, and secondly that a solution should be sought to the problem of residential chalets, mentioned above under item 7.