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Strasbourg 4 March 1994

PE-S-ZP (94) 41

STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION AND
MANAGEMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL HABITATS
(CDPE)

*Group of Specialists on protected areas
(PE-S-ZP)*

23-25 March 1994

APPLICATION OF

*The Wachau Protected Landscape
(Lower Austria)*

for the European Diploma

Appraisal Report

by

*Mr Charles STAUFFER
(France)*

Wachau - Lower Austria

Introduction:

At its meeting in February 1993, the Group of specialists on protected areas examined the application of the Wachau (Lower Austria) for the European Diploma and acknowledged the European interest of the area.

The application was for a category B award.

Mr HACOURT and the undersigned made an on-the-spot appraisal on 24, 25 and 26 August 1993.

Our guides were MM Hannes HIRTZBERGER, Chairman of the Association for the protection of the Wachau, and Mr Ervin NEUMEISTER, Head of the Environment Service attached to the Government of the Land of lower Austria.

During these three days, we encountered some 30 people responsible for various aspects of management in the Wachau.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank our hosts for the excellent way in which our visit was organised.

I do not propose to describe the Wachau in detail: a general idea of the site is given in the report produced in February 1993 (PE-S-ZP (93) 47). My comments will be concerned mainly with four features:

1. The Danube and its flood plain (the association was founded because of concern over engineering work on the Danube)
2. Vineyards and orchards
3. Architecture and planning
4. The valley sides and their woodland

I. The Danube and its flood plain

Between Melk and Krems, the Danube has carved its way through the crystalline rocks of the southern Bohemian plateau, occasionally flowing northwards through geological faults although the river's general course is from west to east.

Because of the steep cliffs and the general layout of the landscape, there are some strongly contrasted microclimates which explain the richness of the Wachau's natural environment.

These special conditions have facilitated human colonisation as far back as prehistoric times, and mankind has been leaving traces on the Wachau landscape ever since.

A channel of communication and navigation, the Danube is the prime feature of this area. The flood plain covers practically the whole valley, which is thought to have been totally wooded in origin; all that is left of this woodland today is 290 hectares of alluvial forest, mainly softwood, the remainder being occupied by villages or under cultivation. The valley sides have been carved with terraces to accommodate the extended vineyards, a feature that we shall be looking at later.

Extensive engineering works upstream of the Wachau have altered the profile of the Danube. It has been suggested that this problem might be overcome by building a network of dams to bring the disrupted profile gradually back to normal.

The development of the Rhine-Main Danube canal obliges the Austrian government to provide international shipping with a permanently navigable channel 100 metres wide capable of handling drafts of 2.3 meters.

Downstream of the Melk dam, the erosion is causing changes in the course of the river. To maintain the channel in a navigable state, deflectors have been installed which increase the rate of water flow in the central channel and will gouge it out in time.

Because of this gouging effect, the river will sink more and more deeply into its bed, and may in time come into contact with the rock. One remedy that has been advocated consists in an intervention on the sills thus denuded. How long will it be necessary to take such action? The question remains unanswered.

The immediate consequence is a lowering of the water table.

In a few decades, the impact on the wet softwood alluvial forests will be catastrophic: it is inevitable that they will gradually develop into drier forests with hardwoods: oak, ash, elm and sycamore.

In view of the possibilities which models now offer, it would be possible this problem in depth: this seems to me the most important, especially as we have no formal assurance that the dam initially planned close to Dürnstein will not be built.

I have deliberately raised this problem at this early stage, since the Wachau is seriously at risk. I hear that the undertakings given by Austria to the other countries using the Danube navigable waterway will be fulfilled whatever the cost.

As a whole the alluvial forest is treated regularly with the Euro-American poplars as the main basis. Recently broad-leaved hardwoods were introduced such as ash, oak and robinia acacia in places, and a gradual change towards irregular stands.

Most of the ox-bows have ceased to communicate with the river, causing rapid silting and eutrophication. A reactivation project is under way.

It is regrettable that the part of the alluvial forest closest to the Melk dam has not been totally encompassed within the Wachau protected area.

Quarries:

The ease of river transport prompted the opening of a number of quarries, the largest of which is the Spitz quarry. Mining is still possible in theory, but the owners' present difficulties suggest that quarrying will soon cease altogether. It remains to rehabilitate the site, which means that part of it will have to be drained.

The immediate need is to remove the metal installations away from the edge of the river.

II. Vineyards and orchards

It was the Romans who first brought grapevines to the Wachau; wine provided the basis for this region's development, and it still does, despite a difficult period after the epidemic of Phylloxera. Today the vineyards occupy part of the former terraces, but are also taking over the apricot and peach orchards that were planted in the lower-lying parts at the end of the 19th century (1890).

In importing the vine, the Romans laid the foundations of a large part of the Wachau's specific culture.

From the 11th to the 13th centuries, the crusades brought large numbers of people to the area, and with the development of river transport traders of all kinds could set up in business, including wine merchants.

In the Middle Ages, the region between Melk and Krems became the property of the bishops of Bavaria, Salzburg and Upper Austria. They set out to take possession of the good vine-growing slopes at any cost. Records dating from 1300 show that 31 convents owned vineyards in the Wachau, together with the buildings necessary for making and conserving wine.

The management of these domains was at first entrusted to monks and later to lay administrators. Their job was to teach the local population about wine growing. Wine-growers from the Rhineland and France entered the Wachau with the crusaders and taught the inhabitants new skills. The wine-growing estates of the religious orders were usually of very tasteful design and served as a model for the bourgeois homes. Under Babenburg rule, wine-growers enjoyed a degree of autonomy and were exempt from compulsory labour. Wine required particular care and attention and those who knew how to provide it were treated with respect, which gave the population confidence and assurance. The inhabitants outdid each other in their efforts to embellish their homes and fortified the churches in order to defend themselves in the name of the Lord. The church tower did duty as a belfry.

The vineyards often came under attack, and the inhabitants not only defended it against the assailants but painstakingly extended it upwards onto the terraces which today give the landscape its distinctive character.

Under the vigilant eye of the bishops, the Danube became a wine thoroughfare. The navigation museum at Spitz commemorates this epic and the towpaths are today enjoyed by cyclists.

When the wine-growers ceased to exploit the terraces at the end of the second world war, it looked as though one of the most beautiful features of the landscape was seriously endangered.

Because of the concern shown by the local community, a ten-year programme was instituted.

Today, substantial aids are available to encourage wine-growers to exploit the terraces and help them repair the stone walls which supported them. After careful study, an admirably designed network of service roads was established. The use of high-grade vines (Riesling) ensures that wine-growing is economic, on condition that the vineyards are well irrigated. Unfortunately, the water pipelines do not blend well with the landscape, and they cannot be buried in trenches for fear of endangering the dry stone walls.

I am convinced that by using the service roads as the main thoroughfare for bringing water to the vineyards, much of this unsightly network, which is of only secondary importance to landscape management, would disappear.

The area covered by the Wachau label of origin is very precisely delimited.

Mention must be made, too, of one or two "Christmas tree" plantations, mainly of the blue spruce *Picea pungens* on some of the terraces not yet recolonised by vines.

These trees are inappropriate and ought not to be grown here.

The Wachau orchards are mainly composed of apricot trees introduced in 1890. Poor sales of apricots caused these orchards to decline and they now occupy only a small area. They have been superseded by vineyards, especially in the lower-lying parts, wherever there is sufficient sunlight.

III. Architecture and planning

Immediately after the last glaciations, mankind occupied the Danube valley which was situated at the northernmost limit of the Alpine ice-cap and south of the vast north-European glacier.

Numerous archaeological discoveries dating back to the Cro-Magnon age bear witness to the human presence.

The Bronze Age and later the Hallstattian period reveal still further evidence of permanent human occupation of the Wachau. The remains have largely been discovered in the loess cover.

The most famous vestige dates from the Stone Age: it is the Venus of Willendorf, a female figure of which some 130 exemplars in oolithic limestone have been discovered in various parts of Europe.

By 5000 BC, man was sedentary in the region (Neolithic). Ceramics provide evidence of his presence in the transition from nomad to farmer.

Thus, all the civilisations - bronze, iron - followed one another at a faster and faster pace.

The first century of our era saw the establishment on the Danube of the northern boundary of the Roman Empire and simultaneously the southern boundary of the Germanic domain. Two different cultures with nothing in common confronted each other here. The northern culture was characterised by the presence of a small number of archaic clans, while to the south the power of Rome with its legionaries (disciplinary battalions) was organising a network of roads, military outposts, fortifications etc. They brought with them civil engineers, road makers, priests, artists and, little by little, civilian dwellings with temples, aqueducts, etc. They also brought the vine.

A large number of remains from this period may be seen in the regional museums.

The domination of Rome was shaken by the advance of the Thuringians, the Vandals, the Alamans and the Heruli, who overcame the Romans under Odoacer's leadership.

For the Wachau, this was the beginning of the sombre history of the Early Middle Ages. Castles were built for purely defensive purposes without regard for artistic innovation. Many of them are examples of how to make the best use of the terrain.

Even the churches were fortified to enable the inhabitants to take cover during the numerous invasions along the Danube.

Romanesque art became established, even in people's private homes, often drawing inspiration from the earliest medieval castles. Some churches and chapels have conserved vestiges of this art, while in others they have been modified and decorated, sometimes with wall paintings of Byzantine inspiration, no doubt executed by artists brought from the east by the Crusaders.

Between the 11th and the 13th centuries, the great monasteries of Melk, Göttweig, Dürnstein, Stein and Krems were founded. They were originally inspired by the medieval designs owing to the fact that in many cases they were built for defence: the Minotitenkirch at Stein is a typical example.

The above description of the rich architectural heritage that developed in parallel with wine growing.

Many of the convents were later redesigned and replaced by Baroque edifices, notably Melk, Dürstein and Göttweig. Many of these possess large numbers of religious art treasures and sizeable libraries.

We do not propose to enumerate all the items of the Wachau's cultural heritage. The ten-year programme was mentioned earlier. The chapter on wine growing also contains a paragraph on architecture and planning.

Just as the vineyards are divided into zones, there is now an urban development plan which foresees the trend in building works in the near future.

To ease the housing situation, provision is made in the programme for heritage architects to help bring the ancient dwellings up to modern standards of convenience; assistance will also be provided for extending and modernising cellars and outbuildings on the wine growing estates.

General programmes, funded in part by the state, have been drawn up for the restoration of streets and neighbourhoods, specifying which restoration techniques to use and what colours to apply. Aid is granted if the work is carried out in the specified time limits; otherwise the owner may do the job at his own expense, to the same specifications.

The original purpose of this exceptional programme was to enable the population to find work locally by promoting tourism so to create an environmentally benign alternative to establishing space-consuming industries which might not be pleasing to the eye.

The last paragraph concerns traffic. The Danube and its valley have always been a main thoroughfare. Because it is so narrow it was decided to ban heavy lorries from the Wachau. A start has already been made, and the ban will very soon be extended to the whole area.

IV. The valleys sides and their woodlands

The forest is the most important surface feature of the Wachau landscape.

There are three characteristic formations:

* the main valley formed by the Danube is steep-sided with only a shallow soil layer so that productive stands cannot develop; for this reason the forest has remained very close to its original state, characterised by mixed stands consisting mainly of broad-leaved species (oak, beech and others) depending on the quality of the site.

Over the centuries, the pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) has become installed and prospered in certain sectors. Attacked by insects and fungus, on account of a water deficit due to the recent periods of drought, the species is dying out leaving some fairly sizeable areas

without tree cover. Local foresters who are aware of the problem take the view that the natural regeneration of oak (Quercus robur) should be encouraged as this seems to be the species best suited to these extreme conditions.

Natural regeneration as a means of maintaining local strains is feasible, but because of the proliferation of boar, the acorns are unearthed before they can germinate, and the few seedlings which do manage to establish themselves are eaten by the wild sheep.

There are in my view two solutions to this problem. Boar population control is an absolute necessity, and one may legitimately wonder whether the presence of wild sheep in this area does any good.

The problem could be partly solved by means of electric fences.

The areas of richer, deep soil are well wooded, and forestry is traditionally practised. At present, forestry methods are perfectly well suited to the type of landscape management that the Wachau needs. The visual appearance of the final cutting needs careful attention.

The foresters must be conscious of the impact of their decisions at all times.

* The river's northern plateau around Jauerling, made up of former pastures and hay meadows, have been heavily planted with spruce in the past 40 years (rural depopulation in the 1950s), especially where forestation campaigns were subsidised by the state.

At present two-thirds of the surface area is under forest.

These woodlands, which do not always join up, give the landscape an uneven appearance: it looks moth-eaten and nondescript.

With the Jauerling nature park it should be possible to halt the phenomenon and in later years to reverse the policy, at least locally, and revert to the former pastures.

The problem then arises of the ownership of the land.

A mention should be made in passing of the exhibition room of the Jauerling refuge. It is fully engaged in educating the public and so constitutes an important link in the information/education chain.

Forest conservation is practised under Federal legislation and under laws specific to the Land. These are additional to the protection measures associated with the granting of protected area status to a region whose surface area far exceeds the limits drawn for the protected area.

Conclusion:

The foregoing arguments show beyond all doubt that the Wachau at present qualifies for the category B European Diploma. However, because of the scale of what is at stake, extreme vigilance is required in regard to the development of the river bed. Protective measures must be taken immediately.

C STAUFFER

Colmar, 26 November 1993

PROPOSALS

The European Diploma, category B, may be awarded:

1. on condition:

that the scheme to build a dam over the Danube at Dürnstein be abandoned once and for all;

2. With the following recommendations:

It is the local population's wish that quality tourism be encouraged and not be allowed to lapse into mass tourism.

* All terraces not yet repaired should be restored and planted with grapevines only.

* The future management committee should endeavour to make accessible all texts which are in any way relevant to conservation in and of the Wachau, by analysing their points of convergence.

Comments by the Secretariat

The Secretariat endorses the consultant's report.

Management of the Wachau protected landscape is governed by Federal legislation, by specific laws of the Land of Lower Austria and by regulations concerning land use. Thus the site is well protected.

Although very earnest guarantees have been given us by the Land authority, it is necessary to make the award of the Diploma conditional upon the abandonment of the scheme to build a second dam, since if such a scheme were carried out, the entire facies of this magnificent landscape would be altogether changed.

We think it necessary to maintain, and even strengthen, all existing measures to safeguard the Wachau's natural heritage, which consists principally of alluvial forests and valleyside woodlands.

We were struck by the local authorities' commitment to maintaining quality tourism and avoiding mass tourism at any cost. In this context, they are helped in their campaigns by the land-use plan, which is very strict where new building works are concerned. For example, there are no large hotels in the Wachau, and a network of cycle tracks totalling more than 100 kilometres has been developed.

As requested by the organisers of the visit, the Secretariat has been informed since our return (letter from the Landerat of 24 November 1993) that on 16 November 1993, the following resolutions were adopted by the Government of Lower Austria:

1. The local and central administrative authority for the zone in which the Wachau protected area is situated shall be The Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung, Abteilung II/3 Naturschutz, Dorotheergasse 7, A - 1014 VIENNA.

2. This authority will have the assistance of the Chairman of the Arbeitskries zum Schutz der Wachau (Study Group for the Protection of the Wachau), A - 3601 DÜRNSTEIN 107, over all problems of development.

3. To carry out its assignments it shall have an annual budget of 100,000 AS.

APPENDIX

Draft resolution

CONCERNING THE AWARD OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA
TO THE WACHAU PROTECTED AREA
(Austria)

The **Committee of Ministers**, under the terms of Article 15a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution 65 (6) instituting the European Diploma;

Having regard to the proposals of the Steering Committee for the Conservation of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE);

Having noted the agreement of the Government of Austria;

Having deliberated,

Formally awards the European Diploma, category B, in accordance with the regulations for the European Diploma (Resolution (91) 16), to the Wachau Protected Landscape;

Places the aforesaid area under the patronage of the Council of Europe until ... 1999;

Attaches the following condition to the award:

that the scheme to build a dam on the Danube at Dürstein be abandoned once and for all, as well as all similar schemes within and immediately downstream of the Diploma holding area;

Attaches the following recommendations to the award:

1. The lowering of the river bed should be kept under observation in order to enable the alluvial forests to conserve their softwood stands. Conservation measures should be taken forthwith;
2. Consideration should be given to the possibility of encompassing the alluvial forest closest to the Melk dam within the protected area;
3. Appropriate measures should be taken to refurbish the quarries, in particular the Spitz quarry;
4. The possibility of re-routing the unsightly network of water pipelines through the vineyards should be explored;
5. The planting of "Christmas trees", especially blue spruce (Picea pungens), on the terraces which are not yet recolonised should be avoided;
6. All unrepaired terraces should be restored and planted exclusively with grapevines;

7. The policy of promoting forms of tourism which respect the Wachau landscape features should be continued;

8. All texts (legislation and regulations) which are in any way relevant to conservation in and of the Wachau should be rendered accessible. The administrative authority should analyse them and see whether they can be combined into a single set of regulations for the Wachau protected landscape.