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Committee of Experts for Protected Areas

VANOISE NATIONAL PARK (FRANCE)

On-the-spot appraisal  
by

Pierre Hunkeler  
(Switzerland)

with comments by the  
secretariat representative

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VANOISE NATIONAL PARK

(FRANCE)

ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL

by

Pierre HUNKELER  
(Switzerland)

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Diploma, category A, was granted to this national park in 1976. It was renewed in 1981 and again in 1986 for the period up to 14 March 1991.

This on-the-spot appraisal has been undertaken with a view to the decision to be taken on renewal of the Diploma for a further 5-year period.

The appraisal was carried out between 17 and 19 July 1990. The expert was accompanied by Mr Jean-Pierre Ribaut of the Council of Europe Secretariat.

The visit took place under the guidance of Mr Claude Pairaudeau, the Park Director. The emphasis was on discussions with the representatives of the local authorities concerned.

Discussions took place with the following:

- Mr Gilbert André, Mayor of Bonneval-sur-Arc;
- Mr André Baudin, Mayor of Tignes, accompanied by his deputies;
- Mr Camille Chedal-Anglay, Mayor of La Perrière, member of the General Council, chairman of the Association of Tarentaise Mayors, chairman of the park's Standing Committee;
- Mr André Degouey, Mayor of Val d'Isère;
- Mr André Plaisance, Deputy-Mayor of Saint-Martin de Belleville and Mr François Gros, manager of the Val Thorens resort;
- Mr Régis Buffier des Aimes, Mayor of Champagny en Vanoise and chairman of the Association of Mayors of the National Park and its surrounding area;
- Dr Paul Liégeois, chairman of the Friends of the Vanoise National Park (APNV); Mr Dominique Rambaud, the association's secretary (and Director of ICALP) and Mrs Marie-Christine Liégeois, APNV representatives.
- Mr Michel Delmas and Mr Jean-Pierre Martinot, scientific officers at the Vanoise National Park.

The discussions took place in a very constructive atmosphere - a point which the expert wishes to stress. He takes this opportunity to thank the people he met for making themselves readily available.

He is also grateful to the Park's Director for the excellent arrangement he made for the visit and for his thorough knowledge of the history and background of the Vanoise.

## 2. SITUATION AND VALUE OF THE PARK

The Vanoise National Park was established in 1963. Situated between the high valleys of the Tarentaise and the Maurienne, it protects an environment of high mountains which rise in ranges from 1 280 to 3 855 m. Its value at European level is widely recognised. It has a 14 km common border with the Italian national park of Gran Paradiso.

The central zone covers 52 839 ha, the peripheral zone 145 000 ha. The European Diploma mainly relates to the central zone but the situation of the peripheral zone, which is essential to the Park's balance and sound ecological functioning, must also be considered.

The Vanoise National Park affects 28 local authorities, 20 of which have part of their territory in the central zone. The local authorities own most of the park (47 610 ha). A total of 5 218 ha are in private hands, while 11 ha belong to the State.

The park's aims are to protect the Alpine landscape with its fauna and flora and to educate the public.

The peripheral zone is undergoing a development programme based on local natural and cultural resources, agriculture and tourism, special events, training and information.

In fact, this zone, particularly on the Tarentaise side, contains France's best ski areas. Prestigious Alpine ski resorts have developed to such an extent that the region now boasts more than 60% of all French ski lift equipment. The Tarentaise can accommodate nearly 140 000 tourists, receiving more than 105 000 people in winter and 55 000 in summer during peak periods (source: the Vanoise National park, appendix to the 1986-1990 development programme. According to 1980 figures updated in 1983, it now has 220 000 beds for skiers).

It is in this special context that the Park should develop its protection activities and special events in the peripheral zone.

## 3. ADMINISTRATION

The Park is administered by a government institution which has its own budget. Its governing body includes representatives of the ministerial departments involved, local councillors, and representatives of socio-professional bodies, scientific bodies and nature conservation associations as well as nominees of the Minister responsible for the protection of nature and the environment. The governing body delegates some of its powers to an 8-strong standing committee.

A 25-strong scientific committee is consulted on every development project, whether in the central or peripheral zones.

The park's staff consists of about 50 people, including 6 heads of sector and 29 wardens. The figure increases with the recruitment of temporary staff, such as receptionists, during the summer season.



#### 4. MANAGEMENT

##### 4.1 Zoning

The park has a central zone with very strict regulations based on the national parks legislation and a peripheral zone, where the park authorities have a say in all infrastructure, planning and capital equipment projects, etc.

There are several nature reserves adjacent to or near the park: the reserves at Tignes (La Sache and La Grande Motte) and at la Grande Sassi re, the Val d'Is re reserve (col de l'Iseran, communes of Val d'Is re and Bonneval-sur-Arc) and the quite recently created reserve of Plan de Tueda (communes of Les Allues).

The situation in these reserves is very varied. The reserves at La Sache and La Grande Motte are the remains of a former more extensive protected area. La Grande Sassi re is a well protected area, whereas the nature reserve of the Col de l'Iseran contains many ski lifts and ski runs.

##### 4.2 Wild fauna

The Vanoise National Park, which was originally set up primarily to protect the ibex, has fulfilled its role perfectly in that respect. The current population is about 800 animals (50% of the French total). Ibex are regularly taken away for reintroduction in other regions. The area in which the species is distributed extends naturally towards the nearby massifs.

There are between 4,600 and 4,800 chamois. Here too the situation is good. The one blemish is still the fact that it is virtually impossible for the chamois to establish permanent viable colonies in the peripheral zone as pressure from hunting is too strong.

Many bird species use the park as a place in which to hunt or bring up their young but nest outside its borders. Examples are the golden eagle and the black grouse, whose survival is dependent on management of the peripheral zone.

##### 4.3 Flora

The park protects a typical and varied alpine flora.

An inventory of the botanical resources of the peripheral region is being drawn up. The initial work has revealed plant groups of great value, which should be protected.

##### 4.4 Forest

There are only 422 ha of forest in the park. The National Forestry Office is responsible for managing them. In one case (the forest of l'Org re) the park bought the area selected for felling by the Office and left the wood standing in order to conserve trees, particularly arollas, that were more than a 100 years old. The same problem is going to arise when felling time comes again in 25 years' time.

#### **4.5 Agriculture**

In the central zone a number of high mountain pastures are still farmed. However, there has been a big fall in the number of cattle, particularly dairy cows, which have been replaced by beef cattle. Sheep, are greatly on the increase and number more than 20,000. This trend, which was already noted during the last appraisal in 1985, is tending to worsen.

In the peripheral zone there is clearly a big move away from agriculture and it is a detrimental development, leading to uniformity of landscape, which is no longer maintained. In the Maurienne, in particular, the rich patchwork of landscape, fauna and flora hay meadows, meadows producing straw, meadows with poor soil, pastures and small plots of open land, growing mainly cereals and potatoes, interspersed with hedges, coppice and outcrops of rock is dwindling.

The measures adopted by the EEC in support of the less favoured regions deserve praise. It is highly regrettable that the National Park was not associated with this initiative. The draft contracts with farmers, for example, contain absolutely no reference to the protection of nature, fauna or flora.

#### **4.6 Cultural heritage**

The park is developing a very active programme for restoration of the cultural heritage, particularly by giving aid for the renovation of typical buildings, for doing up historic buildings, chapels and churches and for the creation of museums.

#### **5. EDUCATION/INFORMATION**

Information is a particularly important feature of the park's activities. The programme includes the production of documents, special events, discovery courses, lectures and the projection of slides/films.

One point, however, is to be encouraged: special events and information around refuges. This is because the efforts made in this field are not yet up to the level of the remarkable investment made in improving the quality of facilities for accommodating and welcoming tourists.

#### **6. RESEARCH**

A regular research programme is being carried out in the national Park and the neighbouring regions.

We would stress the great value of using the findings of a number of programmes to provide information of a high standard both for local representatives and the general public and for the managers involved.

#### **7. RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES CONCERNED**

Relations with the park's local authorities are good. The park is no longer seen as an obstacle to development but rather as an area to be respected and to be promoted as providing the region's brand image.

This development is facilitated by the current options of the local authorities concerned. Expanding winter sports to the limit is a thing of the past. The aim now is rather to consolidate what has been done and to renew or improve existing facilities without opening up new ski areas. The only exceptions are Val d'Isère, still has ideas for expansion, and Saint-Martin-de-Belleville, which still wants to develop the Chavière glacier in the central zone in the interests of the Val-Thorens resort.

In addition to this, very positive initiatives have been taken by some local authorities. For instance, Champagny-en-Vanoise has initiated a site classification procedure for the upper the valley up to the park's borders and wants afterwards to have all the hamlets there registered and so protected architecturally.

## **8. OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS**

### **8.1 Ski lifts/Val d'Isère - Bonneval-sur-Arc link**

This link would pass right through the central zone of the park. Happily, it has been turned down for the third time by the relevant authorities. However, the problem is not resolved. The commune of Bonneval-sur-Arc, which is heavily in debt, cannot meet the cost of renewing its facilities. Val d'Isère is prepared to take them over if a link can be made between the two communes. The possibility of a tunnel link under the park was suggested. It would not damage the central zone and so would be acceptable provided that it did not bring too many tourists into the upper valley of the Maurienne in the peripheral zone.

### **8.2 Ski lifts/développement of the Chavière glacier**

This project, which is limited to three dry lifts, the line of which was drawn on a map of the glacier, was authorised in 1973 before the European Diploma was granted. For various reasons, nothing is currently operating on the glacier but the Val Thorens resort is very keen to develop summer skiing in a natural basin in the central zone of the park.

### **8.3 Ski lifts/Col de l'Iseran nature reserve on the territory of the commune of Val d'Isère**

The situation has deteriorated sharply following the increase in ski lifts and the development of ski runs. The only reasonable solution is that proposed by the park, ie:

- partial declassification of the reserve (702 ha);
- stricter protection of the 321 ha remaining;
- creation of a nature reserve of over 300 ha at La Baïlletaz (which would provide the link between la Grande Sassièrre and the park in an area adjacent to Gran Paradiso).

Appropriate protection would also be need for some remarkable plant groups, which would still remain in the declassified zone.

#### 8.4 Ski lifts/general problem

The network of ski lifts around the park inevitably attracts skiers near it or inside it. It is particularly important, therefore, especially when replacing equipment, to restrict access to the park if necessary by lowering, the terminal pylons. In general, advantage must be taken of improvements to facilities so as to limit impact, as is the case with the new Tignes funicular railway.

A special problem arises in the Gorges de Malpasset which are frequented by skiers using the Col de l'Iseran facilities. Calls for intervention for safety reasons in the central zone of the park have been made. The ideal would be to discourage off-piste skiing in this area, both because of the difficulty of ensuring skiers' safety and in order to protect the fauna (ibex wintering area).

#### 8.5 Water

The park's water is a coveted resource. The proposal for an EDF dam at La Raie has now, happily, been finally abandoned. But development in the peripheral communes requires a lot of water (drinking water and supplies for snow-making machines). There is a danger that pressure on the park may increase in this area.

Moreover, the question of water purification is not fully resolved. The Col de la Vanoise (Félix Faure) refuge is, for example, still a blackspot.

The park is aware of these problems, and has taken the initiative of carrying out a comprehensive assessment of water resources. This study should highlight the questions outstanding and the solutions that are possible if the park is to be respected.

#### 8.6 Management of the points of access to the park and the refuges

While reception management is very well organised, management of some of the points of access to the park and the refuges should be reinforced with information/education activities.

#### 8.7 Agriculture

The considerable increase in sheep at the expense of cattle in the park should be monitored more closely, particularly in connection with possible competition from the park's wild ungulates and in terms of peripheral zone capacity and erosion.

In the peripheral zone, the park should be associated more closely with schemes to counter the move away from agriculture.

The measures proposed or adopted should take proper account of the protection of the landscape and the flora and fauna.

#### 8.8 Land tenure

Government policy is to avoid virtually all land acquisition when setting up national parks. However, exceptions should be possible, particularly as regards private land.



#### 8.10 Relations with the Italian National Park of Gran Paradiso.

The administrative difficulties affecting this park make contacts and co-ordination between the Vanoise and the Gran Paradiso very difficult. It can only be hoped that the situation on the Italian side will improve soon in order that constructive collaboration may again be established, as recent contacts seem to indicate.

#### 9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The situation of the Vanoise National Park is good. The expert recommends that the European Diploma be renewed for a further five-year period.

The Council of Europe would thus confirm the European importance of the park and give recognition to the efforts made by the relevant authorities to preserve its integrity.

In view of the pressures which nevertheless continue to be exerted on this protected area, it is still necessary to reaffirm the general conditions laid down when the Diploma was last renewed:

refuse to agree in the park's central zone to schemes and activities contrary to the objectives and criteria of category A of the diploma regulation (Resolution (73) 4), according to which:

- the essential motivation of places in this category is the protection of the European heritage of flora and fauna, its environment and ecosystem;
- the criteria for protection which these places must meet are prescribed by the need for as stringent biological protection as possible; economic activities such as tourism and industry are not permitted, e.g. ski lifts.

To these conditions should be added a reminder of the inviolability of the park's borders and settlement of the question of the Col de l'Iseran reserve (Val d'Isère commune) in the way proposed by the park.

In addition, the following recommendations are proposed, primarily in order to encourage measures already planned by the park:

- continue, in the peripheral zone, with a systematic policy of drawing up inventories, protecting natural environments and species and monitoring activities which may have an impact on the central zone;
- continue the policy of cultural and scientific events in the peripheral zone, such as the establishment of a museum of religious traditions at Lanslebourg, of a mineralogical and mining museum at Pesey-Nancroix and of an information centre at Tignes;
- reinforce the information and awareness policy at points of access to the park and at the refuges;
- increase the park's commitment to the search for solutions to agricultural problems, particularly in response to livestock trends in the central zone and in connection with measures to counter the move away from agriculture in the peripheral zone.

Comments by the Secretariat

The Secretariat, represented by Mr Jean-Pierre Ribaut, has nothing special to add to the report by the expert, who has given a good description of the existing situation in and around this important protected area.

For the time being, there is no serious threat, partly thanks to increased ecological awareness on the part of the various local authorities and other developers involved. Thus, the general policy of tourist management in the peripheral zone has proved to be the same everywhere:

- no increase in the number of ski lifts, but
- modernisation of existing facilities;
- development of summer tourism, since the winter season is steadily losing its importance as snowfalls diminish.

This re-direction of tourist activities should be monitored with the closest attention: summer tourist pressures must not be allowed to exceed the capacity of the park's various environments.

The Secretariat questioned the possible repercussions on the park of holding the Winter Olympic games in Tarentaise. Admittedly, this whole valley is currently an enormous roadworks, but situated well below the park. However, the information received has been, on the whole reassuring. None the less, considerable vigilance is still necessary, because the adaptation of the Vanoise so that it can host the games is inevitably going to mean an increase in reception and leisure capacity.

Referring to the expert's conclusions and proposals, the Secretariat submits the following draft resolution to the Committee of Experts:

**DRAFT RESOLUTION (91) ...**

on the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Vanoise National Park (France)

(adopted by the Committee of Ministers on ...  
at the ...th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

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 Resolution (76) 14 awarding the European Diploma to the Vanoise National Park;

Having regard to the proposal of the Steering Committee for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (CDPE),

Renews the European Diploma awarded to the Vanoise National Park in Category A until ... 1996;

- Attaches to the renewal the following conditions, failure to observe which may lead to steps being taken to withdraw the Diploma;

1. Prohibition in the park's central zone of schemes and activities contrary to the objectives and criteria of Category A of the Diploma regulations (Resolution (73) 4), according to which:

- the essential motivation of places in this category is the protection of the European heritage of flora and fauna, its environments and ecosystem;
- the criteria for protection which these places must meet are prescribed by the need for as stringent biological protection as possible; economic activities such as tourism and industry are not permitted, eg ski lifts.

2. To these conditions are added a reminder of the inviolability of the park's borders and settlement of the question of the Iseran reserve (commune of Val d'Isère).

Makes the following recommendations to the authorities responsible for managing the area:

- continue, in the peripheral zone, with a systematic policy of drawing up inventories, protecting natural environments and species and monitoring activities which may have an impact on the central zone;
- continue the policy of cultural and scientific events in the peripheral zone, such as the establishment of a museum of religious traditions at Lanslebourg, of a mineralogical and mining museum at Pesey-Nancroix and of an information centre at Tignes;

- reinforce the information and awareness policy at points of access to the park and at the refuges;
- increase the park's commitment to the search for solutions to agricultural problems, particularly in response to livestock trends in the central zone and in connection with measures to counter the move away from agriculture in the peripheral zone.