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STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION AND
MANAGEMENT OF NATURE AND NATURAL HABITATS

Committee of experts - protected areas

ORDESA AND MONTE PERDIDO NATIONAL PARK

On-the-spot appraisal
by
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INTRODUCTION

Spain has submitted an application from the Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park for the award of the European Diploma. The category of diploma requested was not made clear either in the Spanish application (doc. SN-ZP (86) 22), or in the minutes of the meeting which the Committee of experts for protected areas held on 3-4 June 1986 (doc. SN-ZP (86) 44). As the park enjoys statutory protection, it may be assumed that the category in question is A. This report and the recommendations following it are therefore based on this assumption.

At the above-mentioned meeting, the Committee of Experts recognised the European interest of the Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park and decided that an on-the-spot appraisal should be carried out in accordance with Article 3.4 of Resolution (73) 4, adopted on 19 January 1973 by the Committee of Ministers.

In a letter dated 12 September 1986, the Secretariat of the Council of Europe requested me to make this appraisal.

Mr E. Fernandez Galiano, from the Council of Europe's Environment and Natural Resources Division, accompanied me on this visit as Secretariat representative.

The on-the-spot appraisal was carried out from 22 to 24 September 1986, with the participation of Mr F. Rodrigues, Director of National Parks, Mr R. Pascual, Director of the Park and Mr B. Rava, Chief Engineer of the Forestry Commission. I would like to thank them most particularly for their help and cooperation during this visit.

2. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park is situated in the Pyrenees, in the Huesca province of Aragon. It borders the French Western Pyrenees National Park and covers an area of 15,608 hectares. The park, within its new boundaries, forms a geographical whole, dominated on the Spanish side by the Monte Perdido, the highest calcareous massif in western Europe (3,353 m). It includes the Ordesa, Añisclo, Escuin and Pineta valleys which are distinguished by canyons, cirques and karst features. The lowest parts of the park are at an altitude of approximately 700 m. There are three main types of vegetation : Sub-Mediterranean (with Buxus sempervirens and Quercus pubescens), mountain forest (Fagus sylvatica, Pinus sylvestris and Abies alba), subalpine and alpine with a forest of Mountain Pine (Pinus uncinata) then grassland and, lastly, typical scree vegetation. Woodlands make up 18% of the park's area, grassland or alpine pastures 52%, while areas above 2,500 m account for 28%.

The park is uninhabited and there is no economic activity apart from extensive summer grazing. A road runs into the park for a distance of 3 km. It ends at the car park at La Pradera. Another tarmac road follows the Añisclo canyon and leads to the San Urbez church, a major place of pilgrimage situated within the park. The villages of Buerba and Vió may be reached from here by this road. There are plans to close it to cars once a new road has been built to these two villages outside the park. There are few buildings in the park. Some of them, which are ugly and useless, are to be demolished, unlike one or two ruins in traditional materials which will be restored. In places where cultivated areas have been abandoned, nature will be allowed to take its course. No exotic species seem to have been introduced into the park.

3. FLORA AND FAUNA

In the park there are more than 1,500 species of plants, many of which are endemic in the Pyrenees or generally typical of scree or rock walls, such as Ramondia myconii, Pinguicula longifolia, Discorea pyrenaica, etc.

The fauna comprises several endemic species and some rare or threatened species. The most noteworthy endemics are the desman Galemys pyrenaicus, the triton Euproctus asper and the Pyrenean sub-species of ibex Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica, the total population of which (25 to 35 animals) is just about surviving in the park. Among rare species, mention must be made of the otter Lutra lutra, possibly the wild cat Felis sylvestris, the bearded vulture Gypaetus barbatus, at least one couple of which are nesting in the park, the golden eagle Aquila chrysaetos, the peregrine Falco peregrinus and the vultures Gyps fulvus and Neophron percnopterus. There are no bears of the Ursus arctos species. There are plenty of izard Rupicapra rupicapra pyrenaica - some 1,500 to 2,000 head. The marmot Marmota marmota, which was introduced into the French Pyrenees, has now found its way into the park. The capercaillie Tetrao urogallus is not found in the park, but is probably present in the surrounding area.

The ibex population seems to have remained stable ever since the park was set up in 1918. In the Gredos reserve, in the central cordillera, ibex which had almost become extinct have now multiplied to several thousand head, but nothing similar seems to have happened at Ordesa. The conclusion must be drawn that a limiting factor, which is still unknown, is preventing the expansion of the small surviving flock. The park authorities think that competition from the izard could be keeping the ibex out of better grazing ground. Be this is at may, it seems that first the causes of the stagnation in the ibex population must be ascertained and then an attempt must be made to find a remedy before it is too late. Another possible threat to Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica is the introduction of animals belonging to similar sub-species C.p. victoriae and C.p. hispanica, which are native to Gredos and Cazorla, in a region close to the park at Balneario de Panticosa (IUCN/Red Data Book).

In addition, it seems that the possible introduction of ibex native to Gredos is being considered in the French Pyrenees (Alain Daigne "L'univers du vivant", N° 15, Nov. 1986, page 104). There is no need to stress the danger that the introduction of these animals could represent in the longer term to the genetic integrity of the sub-species Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica. It is therefore essential to ensure that animals which have already been introduced cannot find their way into the park and the introduction of any further animals should be banned in the Pyrenees as long as there is any hope of preserving the native sub-species.

Lastly, we should point out that as yet very little is known about the flora and fauna of the park. The list of species in the park is certainly incomplete ; for example, we were able to observe a great spotted cuckoo, Clamator glandarius which is not included on the list. As far as the vast majority of the species on the list are concerned, nothing is known about their numbers in the park or where they live, nor do we know whether their populations are stable, expanding or contracting. As the park has to play the role of an international reserve for the conservation of a large number of endemic species and as it contains several taxa which are endangered in Europe or throughout the world, a precise assessment of numbers and the state of conservation of these species seems to be vital.

4. LEGAL STATUS

The Ordesa Park was established in 1918. It then comprised only the Ordesa valley itself and covered a mere 2,100 hectares. A Law of 13 July 1982, adopted in pursuance of the Protected Natural Landscapes Act of 2 May 1975, conferred a new status on the park and extended its boundaries, bringing its total surface area to 15,608 hectares. No further enlargement is contemplated at present. The 1982 Act also established two peripheral protection areas totalling 19,679 hectares. In accordance with the Act of 1975, it also created a socio-economic influence zone formed by that part of the park municipalities' territory which is outside of the park or in the peripheral area.

In the actual park itself, all activities which might impair parts of the ecosystems or their development are banned, including the prospection for and extraction of minerals, tree felling, hunting and fishing. No building may be done on land in the peripheral protection area and only traditional uses compatible with the purposes of the park may be authorised. On the other hand, in the zone of influence there are no such bans, as the purpose of this zone is to compensate municipalities for the restrictions placed on economic activities after the park was set up, by encouraging certain economic and social investments in the rest of their territory. Under the Royal Decree of 14 May 1982, investments in parks' zones of influence are made by ICONA from its own budget.

As a result of the regionalisation carried out in Spain in recent years, most of the state's responsibilities and especially those of ICONA with regard to the protection of natural landscapes and wild flora and fauna have now been transferred to the autonomous communities. ICONA is still, however, responsible for national parks, which will therefore continue to be administered and managed by the central government. The funding of socio-economic investments in zones of influence has nevertheless been devolved upon the regions. This transfer was made by a Royal Decree of 8 February 1984 in respect of Aragon, where Ordesa is situated. As a result, ICONA funds for the development of the zone of influence are paid to the autonomous community which then distributes them as it thinks fit among the zones of influence, parks and national hunting reserves which are also covered by this special system in accordance with the decree of 1982.

The municipalities own 90% of the land in the central area (of the 15,608 hectares, about 14,000 are municipal land, 700 belongs to the state and approximately 1,000 are private property or belong to village associations). The establishment of the park automatically meant that all the land covered by it was designated as being of public interest and could therefore be expropriated. The state can also exercise a right of pre-emption on land in the park.

The local population has a few rights of user in the park. For example, the picking for non-commercial purposes of mushrooms and particularly the harvesting of truffles and Lactarius deliciosus is permitted. Grazing rights are the most important of these uses. The Act makes express provision for the maintenance of grazing land and of the ecological balance which results from it. About sixty cows graze in the cirque at Soaso in the summer.

The Ordesa Park is a biosphere reserve in UNESCO's MAB programme.

5. MANAGEMENT

The Law of 13 July 1982 on the reclassification and extension of the park stipulates that a master plan on use and management (Plan Rector de Uso y Gestión) must be drafted. This plan should in principle have been approved within one year of the publication of the Act. It has not been approved so far, but we were assured that it was soon to be adopted. As this is done by decree, the plan then has the force of law.

The preliminary draft which we were shown establishes the general aims of the park, its zones and guidelines for the restoration and protection of the landscape, natural resources and the cultural heritage, determines the conditions on which the pursuit of traditional activities, the admission of the public, research and the use of existing infrastructures will be permitted, provides for the drafting of special plans for the rearing of livestock, the protection of genetic resources, use by the public, fire-fighting and the safety of visitors and, lastly, establishes rules for the protection of the landscape and natural resources. As far as zoning is concerned, the preliminary draft maps out an integral nature reserve of 287.5 hectares (1.84% of the total area) which would be closed to the public so as to protect the ibex (Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica). Almost all of the park (98% of its area) will be classified as a restricted use zone, where the public will be admitted but where buildings and roads will be prohibited. Special use zones accounting for some ten hectares in all will be set aside for the car park, access roads and a few buildings. The plan states in this connection that, as far as possible, installations and services must be located outside the park. Some unused buildings will be pulled down.

The plan expressly refers to respect for the process of ecological regeneration, save in places where extensive grazing will still be authorised.

There is no forestry management whatsoever and the forest seems to have recovered from the felling carried out by the villagers when the establishment of the park was announced in 1916. Fallen trees are not touched and so the recycling of organic material can take place normally.

It must however be noted that this plan merely sets out broad guidelines and is therefore only a framework for a more detailed management plan where the requisite research, special protection measures and possible essential action will be listed for each ecological zone of the park.

6. ADMINISTRATION

Since the Act of 1982 reclassifying and extending the park, there has been a spectacular increase in the park's staff and funds. The staff is now made up of a director, three people with higher education qualifications, two foresters, 12 wardens, 23 guides who are responsible for providing the public with information between July and September and two administrative employees. To this must be added 30 workmen and 4 formen who carry out general duties in the summer (clearing up rubbish, upkeep of paths) and 18 firemen. Before 1982,

there were only 4 wardens and a director, admittedly for a much smaller area. The direct investment budget works out at 38 million pesetas to which must be added 15 million pesetas for fire-fighting equipment (lorries, radio, etc).

A very great effort is being made to improve the visitors' service. There is an information office at Torla and another in the old village of Tella in the peripheral area. In the park itself there is a visitors' centre with a little museum. Another information centre is being considered at Añisclo. But the kingpin of the system for receiving visitors and supplying information ought to be and is to be the former parador which is situated in the park not far from the car park. It has not been used for 12 years. This large building would be ideal for housing the park services, the visitors' centre, a museum, etc.

There is still scant information about the park, its aims, importance, fauna and flora. A museum without stuffed animals but with lively displays (if necessary using audiovisual shows) of the different zones of vegetation in the park, their ecology, the species living there and the way they interrelate seems indispensable. Simple, well illustrated information brochures would also be desirable. The park must become something other than a mere trip in the mountains. It must be a means for heightening an awareness and appreciation of nature and its treasures and of the role of national parks in conserving them.

Relations with the local population are good, as the economic and social spin-off from the park is considerable. Thanks to it, unemployment is unknown in the surrounding villages. Furthermore, the visitors bring money to the municipalities and their residents. The licence for the restaurant of the car park at La Pradera has been given to the municipality of Torla. There do not however seem to be any information programmes about the park specially designed for the locals. It might perhaps be worth looking into this idea.

7. THREATS

The Ordesa and Monte Perdido Park is fortunate in that nothing seems to threaten it. There is no likelihood of any public works which could encroach on the park, although it is possible that a trans-pyrenean road and perhaps even a railway might be built in the fairly near future in the Bujaruelo valley, up as far as the French border. This valley, where there is already a high tension power line, would be marred for good. It is outside of the park but, if the road were built, it would be bound to bring more tourists.

Touristic pressure is already heavy at peak periods. At weekends between 25 July and 15 August the average number of visitors per day works out at between 5,000 and 8,000. At the moment, the whole of the restricted activities zone is open to ramblers. If touristic pressure increased, it might be necessary to close sensitive areas or to channel visitors towards less frequented parts of the park.

The car park at La Pradera (which is inside the park at the beginning of the Ordesa canyon) reaches saturation point (1,000 vehicles) on the busiest days. The park authorities are now trying gradually to reduce its capacity and to find other parking places in the park. There are accordingly plans to locate a large car park near the village of Torla which would give local trade a fillip. Visitors

would then be taken by a shuttle service to the start of the footpath. Nevertheless, this solution is likely to prove disastrous for the extremely picturesque countryside in and around Torla where meadows are surrounded by hedges. If the car park could not be put somewhere else (and there are hardly any other suitable sites) the installations would have to be as light as possible, with no hard surfacing, and the hedges should be spared.

Of course, if the transpyrenean highway were built, it would of necessity pass close to the village and unfortunately the protection of the landscape would be much less important. If a small car park were kept at La Pradera, which would make it possible to divide the number of vehicles between the outskirts of the village and the park, it should be camouflaged by planting native species of trees and the restaurant and kiosk ought to be moved to a site outside the park, as too many visitors tend to congregate there.

Nevertheless, the park does not seem to suffer from a surfeit of tourists. One sees no rubbish and most visitors appear to keep to the marked paths.

In the winter, skiing does not seem to pose any problems at the moment. There are no plans to build any ski runs in the park. Cross-country skiing is practised and is bound to develop. Sensitive areas ought perhaps to be delimited and placed out of bounds.

Fire is a serious risk and its consequences could be catastrophic for the park. There are 7 permanent look-out posts, 3 fire lorries and 18 firemen. According to the master plan, a special fire-fighting plan is to be drawn up. A fire broke out on 19 August 1986, but fortunately it was very quickly extinguished. Only 50 m² were burnt and the people responsible have been arrested.

The enforcement of the regulations poses legal problems. Legislation on national parks does not lay down any system of penalties and so the ordinary laws on hunting, shooting, forests, etc apply in the parks. This situation makes it difficult to deal with offences insofar as the law does not recognise that offences are more serious if they are committed in the park. Furthermore, the criminal courts do not always accept the evidence of the park wardens and it seems that they demand a police report.

8. COLLABORATION WITH THE FRENCH AUTHORITIES

Resolution (76) 13, adopted on 15 March 1976 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, awarding the European Diploma to the Western Pyrenees National Park recommended to the authorities concerned that encouragement should be given to the enlargement of the Spanish Ordesa National Park so that it might link up with the French Pyrenees Park. The resolution added that these two parks could be managed by conservation rules of international validity, under the patronage of the Council of Europe. The Ordesa Park was extended by the Act of 13 July 1982. Closer links have still to be forged with the neighbouring French park. Section 8 of the 1982 Act expressly stated that collaboration will in particular be sought with the Western Pyrenees Park. The directors of the two parks held a meeting in July 1986 at which it was agreed that the parks could gradually harmonise their management aims and coordinate activities in the field of development, scientific studies, management of the fauna, visitors'

services, information, etc. There are already plans to exchange information, to set up a discovery trail starting in one park and ending in the other, for the wardens of the Ordesa park to take part in the izard count in the French park and for possible reciprocal attendance of observers at meetings of the respective Administrative Councils. The Nature Protection and Conservation Committee of the International Committee of the Pyrenees has since met in Madrid in November 1986 and has studied the arrangements for the joint management of the two parks. I do not know what conclusions they reached.

Could action be taken on these preliminary decisions in order to give greater effect to the above-mentioned Committee of Ministers' Resolution of 1976 ? Here consideration must be given to several different aspects of possible closer collaboration between the two parks.

Scientific collaboration might lead to the drawing up of a single vegetation map covering the whole of the protected area, the coordination of scientific research, the establishment of joint research priorities, exchange of research workers and the conducting of joint research, etc.

An overall management plan for the whole area of both parks could be drawn up. Each of the national plans would then constitute a more detailed extension of this plan.

The closer administrative cooperation already outlined could be expanded through the laying of paths and tracks between the two parks, the publication of information brochures dealing with both parks, the provision of information about the neighbouring park in visitors' centres in each park, exchanges of park staff and, lastly, consultation when one of the parks takes measures which might have ecological repercussions in the other. Such consultation does not appear to have taken place when marmots were introduced in France.

Is it possible to go further? Could a single set of rules and a single body be set up for the whole of the protected area, as Resolution (76) 13 seems to demand ? Such a decision would obviously raise complex legal and practical issues, especially as there are few precedents which could serve as a basis. It would however be worth the effort, as the merging of these two parks would permit the combined management of a transfrontier ecological entity which could serve as an example for the solution of similar problems in Europe and elsewhere. On successful completion of this merger, a single diploma could be awarded to the two parks together.

If the Diploma is awarded to the Ordesa Park, it might be possible to consider opening consultations between the two countries concerned, on the initiative of the Council of Europe and under its aegis, with a view to determining the forms which a joint body could take and the legal framework (treaty or simple agreement) in which this body could be set up and could operate.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The European interest of the Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park cannot be called into question, given the variety and quality of its habitats, the beauty of its landscape and, more particularly, the presence of rare species, some of which are pyrenean endemics. The protection of the park seems to be certain and no particular threat

could be identified. The complete absence of forestry management and, above all, the fact that fallen trees are left where they are is sufficiently rare in a European protected area as to warrant special emphasis. There do not therefore seem to be any grounds for not awarding a category A European Diploma to the park.

Furthermore it would not seem that any particular condition ought to be attached to the awarding of the diploma, at least for the time being. In the (unlikely) event of the transport infrastructures under discussion (road or railway) encroaching on the park, the situation would obviously have to be reviewed.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Research

1.1 The park ought to be run as a reserve for the conservation of a number of endemic, rare or endangered species. At present, the information available about these species and their presence in the park is generally inadequate. Lists should therefore be made at the earliest opportunity of the species of flora and fauna in the park, including invertebrates and especially cavernicolous fauna, their critical biotopes located, their ecology studied and a detailed vegetation map drawn. The latter operation ought to be carried out jointly with the French Western Pyrenees Park, so that a map can be established on the same bases for the whole of the protected area.

1.2 Particular heed ought to be paid to the need for urgent and thorough research into the reasons behind the stagnation in the population of ibex Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica, as the flock which lives in the park are all that are left. This study should look into possible interaction with herbivores in the park, including domestic animals and into any other factors (disturbance, poaching, etc) which might harm this endemic sub-species.

2. Management plan

The master plan ought to be officially adopted as soon as possible. A genuine management plan should also be worked out on the basis of a vegetation map. It should describe the existing ecological conditions of each type of vegetation and each zone, possible threats and the management measures which might prove necessary.

3. Genetic integrity of Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica

Steps ought to be taken to avoid any contact between the park's ibex and animals belonging to other sub-species which have been introduced into the surrounding area. The introduction of further animals should not be permitted in the Pyrenees so long as there is still any hope of saving the native sub-species.

4. Offences

National laws ought to be revised so as to create a special category for offences committed within national parks. The wardens' powers to note offences and impose administrative penalties ought to be clearly defined.

5. Peripheral area and zone of influence

5.1 As the government's powers have now been transferred to the Autonomous Community of Aragon for all matters not concerning the central area of the park, the latter is now responsible for everything to do with the peripheral areas. It could, for example, set up a regional nature park around the central area in the existing zone of influence and the national hunting reserve, which would constitute a very useful buffer zone.

5.2 At all events, payments to the municipalities in the park's zone of influence ought to be continued and, as far as possible, stepped up. The areas surrounding the park could be recognised as less-favoured areas within the meaning of the European Economic Community and, as such receive special state subsidies.

6. Tourism

6.1 Visitors should gradually be distributed more evenly through the park. At the moment, they are concentrated almost exclusively in the old part, ie the Ordesa Canyon.

6.2 The capacity of the car park at La Pradera must be gradually reduced and car parks created near to other access points to the park but outside of it. The restaurant and kiosk at La Pradera ought to be re-sited outside the park.

6.3 Ecologically vulnerable areas or areas forming the habitat of certain species being conserved by the park ought to be closed to the public once they have been identified.

6.4 The tarmac road to San Urbez, which follows the Añisclo canyon, ought to be closed to cars as soon as possible.

6.5 Information for visitors ought to be improved through the setting up of a museum and an information centre in the former parador and through the publication of brochures or other material which make the aims of the park clearer and which explain the importance of the fauna and flora it protects.

7. Cooperation with the Western Pyrenees Park in France

Consultations ought to be held, under the aegis of the Council of Europe, between Spain and France in order to determine the legal bases and the arrangements for cooperation between the two parks and the form which might be taken by a joint management body for the whole of the protected area.