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Group of Specialists on Protected Areas (PE-S-ZP)

Strasbourg, 6 - 8 March 1996

SEITSEMINEN NATIONAL PARK (Finland)

Award of the European Diploma

On-the-spot Appraisal
by Mr E KUIJKEN (Belgium)

I. Introduction

1. During the meeting of the Group of Specialists on Protected Areas in March 1995 at Strasbourg, the application for the European Diploma was considered for the Seitseminen National Park in Finland. In accordance of the regulations an on-the-spot appraisal must be carried out on this area.

2. In order to enable the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and natural Habitats (CDPE) to advise the awarding of the Diploma through its Group of Specialists on Protected Areas (PE-S-ZP), the undersigned prof. E. Kuijken carried out the expertise.

This took place on 1-2.06.95 in the attendence of dr. Jean Pierre RIBAUT of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe. We are very grateful for his important contributions during this visit and the discussions with several contact persons.

Our sincere thanks go to dr. Martti Helminen, former Director of Nature Protection of the Forest and Park Service, who was delegated by the Finnish Government. He organised the visits to both Seitseminen and Tammisaari National Parks in a most efficient and pleasant way, bringing us in contact with relevant authorities and institutions. His personal knowledge on the ecology of Finnish nature and on the situation of nature conservation in his country was extremely helpful.

3. The staff of the National Park was very helpful in presenting the various aspects of the work on conservation education and research carried out in the protected area and its surroundings. We are very much indebted to all of them, especially to M. Maarit Kyöstilä for the generous hospitality and adequat guidance, dr. Suvi Raivio for scientific comments, Pekka Vesterinen and Yorma Koivorinne.

II. Objectives of the appraisal

4. The experts' visit aims to assess the actual state and ecological conditions of the site as well as the realisations and problems in the fields of management, research education. These are described in detail in the application reports and the excellent National Park Master Plan; some useful supplementary scientific research information was supplied.

Also the regulations concerning land use, tourism, hunting and fishing and the views of authorities responsable for the future development plans of the National Park were discussed.

III. General Situation of the Seitseminen National Park

5. Location, ownership, status and objectives:

Established in 1982, the National Park covering an area of 4170 ha is under the administration of the National Board of Forestry, Parkano Forest District.
It is located in the municipalities of Kuru and Ikaalinen, east of Parkano. The main visitors centre on the Kulamäki hill next to the Länsi-Aure village is the reference point from where the Forest and Park Service (West Finland Park Area) manages the national park.

Before the creation of the National Park, most parts were used for commercial forestry until 1976. Older protected areas existed already before, such as the Multiharju primaeval forest (1910!) and the Kivineva virgin peatland (1964).

The National Park is state owned and preserved perpetually free from economic activities affecting nature; efforts are made to restore the natural state of specific habitats. Also the cultural heritage landscape are protected. Hiking trails, sign-posted paths and accomodation for visitors as camping sites, wood cabins, shelter and fishing facilities aim the recreational use of the Park but this is kept in balance with nature management.

6. Ecological and landscape characteristics:

Situated in the southern part of the middle boreal vegetation zone, the Park is a most representative example because of its large forest cover, the abundance of peatlands, small water bodies and typical landforms such as eskers. The soil is predominantly of moraine type.

The forest structure and composition is the result of all age classes of trees still present and the smaller relicts of old-grown forest that is to be found despite the long tradition of forestry. Most common are Scots pine, Spruce and snags (at some spots also Birch woods occur). Some of the trees are 400 years old and decaying wood covered by a rich vegetation with abundant fern and moss flora is a signal of ecological maturity as an entire system. Unless their limited shape, these small primaeval forests (e.g. Multiharju) function as core areas for the restoration of the surrounding middle-aged woods or younger commercial plantations less than 100 years old. Typical birds breeding in cavities are to be found, with rare species such as Ural Owl (*Strix uralensis*) and Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*). Famous mammal species are Flying squirrel (*Pteromys volans*) and Marten (*Martes martes*). Also the invertebrate fauna is extremely divers as a result of the amount of undisturbed decaying wood. The rich vegetation covers almost the entire soil so exposed bedrock is hardly to be found.

The peatlands cover more than half of the Park; they were representative ecosystems of high conservation value before draining occured on most of them (60%). Plant species diversity of this habitat is well known, with differences depending on acidity and nutrient contents of the fens. In undisturbed or non-managed peatlands ecological succession stages leading to forest development occur in small plots. Typical breeding birds of these open area are Willow grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*), Golden plover (*Charadrius apricarius*) and Crane (*Grus grus*). Along the shores of lakes and fens with *Sphagnum*, *Eriophorum* and *Carex* vegetations the nesting Whooper Swans (*Cygnus cygnus*) can be observed.

Most impressive landforms are the eskers, with differences in vegetation depending on the soil composition and exposition of the slopes, creating interesting supplementary landscape-ecological variety (e.g. fertile herb-rich vegetations with *Hepatica*).

Some parts of the National Park include historic landscapes, where traditional cultivation took place during almost one century (e.g. the crown estate of Kovero). Here, near to old houses and barns, permanent meadows and extensively used or abandoned fields have their own flora and fauna.

To conclude, the variety of landscapes, historic land-use intensity and ecological management (see further) in the Park is responsible for the remarkable diversity of habitats and the occurrence of rare and threatened species.

7. Public access, recreation and use of nature:

Because of the attractive and varied landscape, a network of hiking trails crosses the Park. A number of services such as visitors centres (Kulomäki and ecomuseum of Kovaro), signposted nature trails, fire places, shelters, forest cabins (Pitkäjärvi) and small camping sites have been gradually established in order to canalise the visitors and thus reduce the recreational pressure on more vulnerable zones.

Five separate remote areas (1445 ha) have no constructions for visitors at all to keep the places as wild as possible. Four restricted zones have been designated (546 ha) where access is only permitted along marked trails.

Some roads through the park remain open for motorised traffic, others are closed or will not be repaired. Horse riding and bicycling is allowed along existing roads or some trails.

The important social function of the Park as a destination for hiking and tourism is illustrated by the increasing number of tourists, schools and other groups visiting the centre (actually 35000/y).

The recreational use, however, cannot be raised at higher levels than at present, without risk of dammaging the natural carrying capacity of some ecosystems and landscapes characteristics. Taking over or translocation of some activities in zones outside the park could be a solution.

The use of nature is strictly regulated. Only mushroom and berry picking is freely allowed in accessible parts of the Park. Hunting is forbidden, with the exception of Elk (*Alces alces*) populations that may be regulated by shooting if necessary (open season 1 october - 15 december; 3 permissions for driving out Elk).

One important controversial use is to be discussed in terms of carrying capacity: fishing. This is allowed in most lakes, subject to some limitations. In one lake artificial restocking of fish not capable of natural reproduction is allowed 'when it is not in contrast with conservation purposes'. This is to be investigated carefully. Recreational fishing at Kirkas-Soljanen (with payment automats in the middle of the Park!) is preferably to be relocated outside the boundaries of the protected Park area.

The Park authorities are advised to reduce the number of fishing and walking facilities along the shore of the lakes vulnerable to erosion (duckboards etc.) and to restrict the accessible parts, thus avoiding disturbance of peatland fauna and flora.

3. Education:

The National Park became well known as an area for school education and university training, especially after the main information and visitors centre of Kulomäki was opened in 1989. Well equipped accomodation is available for visitors, seminars and training, as well as for guides, staff and researchers.

The attractive ('interactive') exhibition on natural history of the surrounding landscapes and the necessary instruction materials for different age-classes at schools are regularly improved (nature library, slides, thematic video on forests, maps and booklets).

The historic settlement of Kovero is being restored and hosts an interesting 'ecomuseum' with authentic historical objects illustrating the old traditions. This cultural estate is very well integrated in the surrounding crown forest landscape.
Other historic places with ruins, old dams or mills will be restored as well.
Some smaller information points have been established along the nature trails.

Unfortunately, the education programs have to be limited because of a lack of personnel, especially in the touristic high season, but also during winter (cross country sky trips).
(See also under 10.)

9. Research and nature management:

The opportunities for important ecological research have already been proved by several studies, the results of which can have direct impact on nature management. As an example, the effects of forest fragmentation studied by the Finnish Environment Agency (dr. S. Raivio) are illustrated in the Park. Also the monitoring of water quality in lakes with artificial fish stocking is needed as a basis for habitat and population management. Ornithological censuses and invertebrate studies are carried out by the University of Helsinki.

The Forest and Park service is responsible for basic monitoring of endangered or threatened species and habitats. Monitoring also must include the effects of management and recreation pressure. A network of permanent plots for multidisciplinary analysis of ecological data is to be recommended in order to take profit of the opportunities offered by the extreme biodiversity of old forests and both virgin or disturbed peatlands.

The active nature management of the Park is mainly focussed on restoration of formerly drained peatland. The results differ from one spot to another, but are most promising in general. However, to prevent ruderalisation, these restoration schemes have to be prepared more carefully; previously cutting and removal of all shrub and trees is needed before the filling of ditches with the original peatsoil that was still laying along these small canals (but has mineralised and thus will enrich the oligotrophic system with nutrients) Mechanical methods even when carefully worked out make faster progress but also have compactation of soils and development of more ruderal vegetations as a consequence. Anyway, the first results of restoring water levels by this filling of drainage ditches is of utmost importance for maintaining the biodiversity of the Park peatlands as a whole. The costs are about 300 FM /ha. and the total area to be restored is planned at 1250 ha.

In some raised bogs with spots on mineral soils, 30 year old plantations have been removed (costs 3000 FM/ha); an experiment of burning trees *in situ* after cutting was not very succesful and needs further solutions (natural decaying will be slower as a result of burned stems). Also from aestetic point of view further trials of rehabilitation management are to be argued.

10. Personnel and budget:

The present success of the education and training activities have to be continued and if possible intensified, because this is an important tool in changing the attitude of visitors in relation to nature. With more respect for wildlife and landscape, more disciplined visitors can enjoy the Park without negative side effects. Therefore at least the number of well-trained nature guides and teachers at temporary basis must increase.

The Forest and Park Service is further advised to appoint one single responsable person for the management of each National Park. Having no other protected areas under his/her supervision he/she can pay full attention to 'his' or 'her' Park.

All this of course depends on an increased funding of conservation and nature education efforts by the government. In the total budget for Seitseminen of 1,500,000 FM , administration, guidance and facilities & services represent resp. 250,000, 550,000 and 250,000 FM. The budget for nature management is 350,000 FM and for research only 200,000 FM.

Considering the excellent circumstances and great relevance of scientific investigations that could be carried out on forest and peatland restoration and management, also the increase of funding for research is of extreme priority.

Sponsoring as a supplementary source for the development of Park activities could also be explored.

11. Summarising conclusions:

a. The Seitseminen National Park offers a representative example of landforms, landscapes, forest types and peatlands typical for the southern boreal zone. Its contribution to biodiversity is of international significance, including a variety of both natural and semi-natural ecosystems.

b. recreation interests have been developed so far with respect to nature conservation values: only fishing at one lake cause some controversals to be avoided

c. the well-equipped visitors centre offers good facilities for education, training and research

d. nature restoration of formerly drained peatlands show promising results, but failed rehabilitation trials of some recent plantations to more diversified forests need further solutions

e. the Finnish authorities involved in the creation and management of National Parks merit our sincere congratulations for the manyfold efforts already undertaken and for the National Park Master Plan putting forward future measures and actions.

IV. Proposed recommendations

12. The awarding of the European Diplome could give an impuls to further improvement of the National Park functions when taking into account following principles and suggestions:

a. administration and education

(1) appointement of a leading person (academic degree) with full and specific responsability of one single National Park should be considered

(2) supplementary funding is required to employ more personnel for education (exhibition, guided visits), instruction and training (schools, other teaching), both on permanent and temporary basis (touristic season)

b. research and nature management

(1) the excellent facilities for research (both accomodation and varied study subjects concerning biodiversity and nature restoration) merit further intensification, which needs supplementary funding

(2) rehabilitation trials of plantations on mineral soils need continued efforts aiming a final solution enabling natural processes of forest regrowth;
restoration experiments of drained peatlands need follow-up research and management preventing ruderalisation of vegetations on mineralised peat soil

c. recreation

(1) an increase of the actual level of touristic pressure can only be accepted when the carrying capacity of the Park is duly respected efforts to bring people in contact with nature are still improved and increased guidance and wardening can be guaranteed

(2) concerning the actual fishing practice with artificial introduction and stocking of species such as rainbow trout a solution for relocating this attraction point and activity outside the Park is needed in order to reduce ecological side effects and disturbance of vulnerable lake and peatland landscapes

13. Final conclusion

Considering the outstanding value of the Seitseminen National Park in terms of forest and peatland biodiversity, the presence of undisturbed landforms and historic heritage landscapes with typical semi-natural vegetations, the balance between conservation and environmental education, the required regulations and nature management, we strongly recommend award the European Diploma in category B.

APPENDIX I

Draft Resolution (96) ...

on the Award of the European Diploma to the Seitseminen National Park (Finland)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a 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 and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE);

Having noted the agreement of the government of Finland;

After deliberation,

Solemnly awards the European Diploma, Category ... to the Seitseminen National Park in accordance with the Regulations for the European Diploma (Resolution 91/16);

Places the aforesaid park under the patronage of the Council of Europe until ... 2001;

Attaches the following recommendations to the award:

1. to appoint a leading person with full and specific responsibility for the park;

2. to set aside additional funds for:

   * employing more personnel for education, instruction, and training activities;

   * to step up scientific research principally on biodiversity and biotope restoration;

3. to continue efforts in the following fields:

   * rehabilitation trials of plantations on mineral soils;

   * monitoring the increase in the tourist pressure; guidance and wardening must be guaranteed;

   * finding a solution for relocating the fishing activity outside the park with a view to reducing ecological side effects and disturbances of vulnerable lake and peatland landscape.