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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

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REPORT

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
MERCANTOUR NATIONAL PARK**

(FRANCE)

6-7 September 2017

*Document prepared
by Mr Olivier Biber (Switzerland)*

INTRODUCTION

The Mercantour National Park was created in 1979 with a total surface of 215.000 ha including a core zone of 68.500 ha. It lies in the Departements Alpes-Maritimes and Alpes-de Haute-Provence in the Region Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) and includes large parts of six valleys: Vallée de l'Ubaye, Vallée de la Tinée, Vallée du Var, Vallée du Cians, Vallée de la Vésubie and Vallée de la Roya. Its highest elevation is the Cime de Gélas (3143 m asl); there are six more summits higher than 3000 m asl.

With the adoption of the Law No. 2006-436 of 14 April 2006 on National Parks, National Marine Parks and Regional Natural Parks and the Charter of the Park in 2012, the core zone is now known as "Coeur du parc, aire protégée réglementée" and the peripheral zone has become the "adhesion territory of the municipalities" ("territoire des communes ayant vocation à adhérer à la Charte du parc"). To date, 22 of the 28 municipalities have adhered to the Charter.

There is a strong collaboration between Mercantour National Park and the Italian Parco Naturale delle Alpi maritime, which has been institutionalised since 1987. The two Parks have created the "European National Park".

The Mercantour National Park is famous for its flora (more than 2000 species) and fauna (several hundred species of which 53 are endangered) and also for its pre historic petro graphs as well as historic and cultural heritage.

With respect to the fauna, certain species are in a special focus. The Mercantour National Park is part of the international reintroduction project of the Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) in the Alps. The population of the wolf (*Canis lupus*) is being monitored regularly, including an exchange of data with Italy and Switzerland.

The Park offers many educational activities and numerous publications at all levels, from scientific to educational and touristic relevance, including specific numerical guides and information leaflets.

The budget of the Park comprises EUR 6,5 million from the central government annually and a variable source of contributions depending on activities and projects, which are usually co-financed by the Park and the respective actors.

The European Diploma has been awarded in 1993 (Resolution (93)21), renewed in 1998 (Resolution (98)22), further renewed in 2003 (ResDip (2003)11) and last in 2008 (CM/ResDip (2008)17) without an on the spot appraisal. The description of the Park can be found in <http://www.mercantour.eu/>.

THE VISIT (5 – 7 SEPTEMBER 2017)

The visit started on 5 September with an evening meeting with Mr Laurent Scheyer, deputy director of the Park, and Ms Maya Vitorge representing the Region PACA. Ms Vitorge makes sure that there is a co-operation between the National Park, the Nature Reserves (les réserves naturelles) and the Regional Nature Parks (les parcs naturels régionaux) of the Region.

On 6 September, Mr Laurent Scheyer picked me up at the hotel in Nice to drive to the first meeting of the day at Saint-Martin-Vésubie. Mr Scheyer has prepared and organised the visit and accompanied me during the two full days.

After the visit of the Visitors' Centre (Maison du Parc) and information received from the mayor's representative (adjoint du maire) of Saint-Martin-Vésubie and the Park's guards and guides, we continued to Saint-Étienne-de-Tinée, where we visited the Maison du Parc. The two visitors' centres are very well conceived, with interpretation and permanent and temporary exhibitions. Our next stop is the Auberge of Bousiéyas. Here we were presented the brand "Esprit Parc national", which stands for environmentally friendly accommodations, gastronomy and products on sale.

We were presented a site with a focus on breeding and winter resting of the Black Grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*) where the canalisation of tourists, especially in winter, has successfully been put in

place to avoid any disturbance of the fauna. The protected areas for the Black Grouse are known as “Tétras Quiet” projects.

The special case of a road across the mountain was discussed. This road, “route de la Bonette”, supposed to be the highest altitude road of Europe, is very famous amongst motorists, especially motor bikers. There is a controversy between this very noisy usage and the nature objectives of the Park. The Park is trying to find a way that would allow the road and the part of the core zone of the Park it crosses to remain an adventure for motorists on its own while at the same time diminishing the impacts on nature to the best possible level and aiming at sensitising the motorists’ adepts to the objectives of the National Park (this project is called “Interpretation Bonette”).

We spent the night at the Refuge de Bayasse, a Park owned hostel managed by Ms Magali Dufour and her husband. During the evening, we were presented the association Mercantour-écotourisme, which is chaired by Ms Magali Dufour.

On 7 September, we drove to one more of the total 7 visitors’ centres of the Park, namely the “Refuge de la Cayolle”. A stop at Entraune gave me the opportunity to hear more about the way some people in the park make their livings on different activities, partly linked to agriculture and partly to tourism in the region. We had lunch at Vallberg together with Mr Christophe Viret, director of the National Park, and Ms Nathalie Siefert, head of the “Service connaissance et gestion du patrimoine naturel et culturel du Parc”. Vallberg is essentially living from tourism, especially winter tourism and belongs to one of the municipalities that has adhered to the Charter. We pay a visit to its visitors’ centre with exhibitions on the National Park’s activities.

From here, we headed back to Nice. In the evening, we had a meeting with Ms Laurence Dalstein, representing the “Conseil départemental des Alpes-Maritime”.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE LAST RENEWAL OF THE DIPLOMA AND THE WAY THEY HAVE BEEN OR ARE BEING IMPLEMENTED

- 1) *As part of the tasks entrusted to it under the Law No. 2006-436 of 14 April on National Parks, National Marine Parks and Regional Natural Parks, including contributing to the policy of protecting the natural, cultural and landscape heritage and developing initiatives aimed at gaining knowledge of and monitoring that heritage, pursue the fundamental research programme to assess the impact of predation by wolves on wild ungulates, in co-operation with the different partners concerned.*

The Park is monitoring the population of the Wolf on a regular basis including exchange of data with the neighbouring countries Italy and Switzerland. The Park is also part of the national network related to the Wolf.

- 2) *Draw up the charter provided for by the Law of 14 April 2006 on national parks, stipulating the protection objectives in the park’s core area and the development aims of the “peripheral zone”, now known as the “inclusion area” of the park.*

The Charter has been adopted in 2012. It defines objectives for the protection of the core zone with appropriate specific regulations. Furthermore, it defines the necessary targets including the means to reach them through contracts and partnerships with the stakeholders of the membership area the Park.

- 3) *Maintain the investment of financial and human resources in scientific knowledge and support for research, inter alia capitalising on the data yielded by the different research programmes by networking them and streamlining the existing databases and their use.*

In the context of decreasing means allocated by the State, the Park thrives towards maintaining its objectives through the mobilisation of external funds.

- 4) *Promote the implementation of projects in partnership with local municipalities and stakeholders.*

The Park assists the municipalities with technical and financial means in their tasks related to welcoming and environmental education of the public, its sensitising to the natural and cultural heritage of the Park and ecologically sound and sustainable pastoralism.

- 5) *Pursue co-operation with the Maritime Alps Nature Park (Italy) with a view to establishing protected areas.*

The Mercantour National Park and the Alpi Maritime Nature Park have created the “Groupement Européen de Coopération Territoriale” in 2013 with the aim of conducting common activities including the listing of the area in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mercantour National Park is managed in a very intelligent, effective and efficient way by very competent people at all levels. All recommendations formulated at the point of the last renewal have been addressed and have mostly been fulfilled.

The Park authorities have adequate means to fulfil the Park’s objectives. In spite of decreasing financial inputs from the State, it is successful in raising external funds necessary to accomplish its mission with respect to the management of the core zone, the welcoming of the public, education and awareness raising as well as partnership activities with the municipalities and other stakeholders. Sustained efforts to keep the budget on track are necessary.

Although not all municipalities have signed the Charter to date, and bearing in mind that their territories included in the core zone of the Park are subject to the same regulations as the municipalities that have adhered, and their non-adherence to Charter thus not being detrimental to the objectives of the Park, the Park is working and should keep working on their full inclusion.

The monitoring of the ecosystems and the vegetation as well as flora and fauna of the Park, including the Wolf population and other key species and their habitats is being carried out with the most up to date means and methodologies. Especially the monitoring of large carnivores is crucial notably with respect to their expected ecological impact on the fauna of the Park and on pastoralism activities in the core zone of the Park and should therefore be considered as a key task.

I recommend the renewal of the European Diploma to Mercantour National Park with the following recommendations.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Work towards a full adherence and inclusion of the remaining municipalities that have not yet adopted the Charter;
tenter d’obtenir l’adhésion à la Charte de la part des communes qui ne l’ont pas encore adoptée
- 2) Pursue all possible efforts and explore ways and means to secure the funding to ensure that the management of the Park and activities and projects in the field of scientific research, monitoring, education and awareness raising of the public, partnership projects with the municipalities, all equally important, can be achieved in a harmonious way;
poursuivre les efforts et explorer toutes les voies permettant d’assurer le financement nécessaire à la réalisation harmonieuse tant de la gestion du Parc que des activités et projets dans les domaines de la recherche scientifique, du suivi, des moyens pédagogiques et de sensibilisation du public ainsi que des projets en partenariat avec les communes, tous de priorité égale pour l’avenir du Parc et de sa gestion
- 3) Continue the monitoring of large carnivores and other key species on a regular basis including in concertation and networking with neighbouring regions and countries;
continuer le suivi régulier des grands carnivores et d’autres espèces clé y compris en concertation et en réseau avec les régions et pays voisins
- 4) Seek the best possible solution in the special case of the road of the Bonette pass (“piste de la Moutière » or “route de la Bonette”, the so called “Requalification Bonette”) so as to allow the road and the part of the core zone of the Park it crosses to remain an adventure on its own especially for motorists while at the same time diminishing the impact on nature to the best possible level and aiming at sensitising the motorists to the objectives of the National Park.
chercher la meilleure solution possible dans le cadre de la Requalification et de l’interprétation de la route de la Bonette permettant aux adeptes de la route de continuer à

vivre leur aventure tout en réduisant les impacts négatifs sur la nature au niveau le plus bas possible et en tentant de sensibiliser les automobilistes et motards aux objectifs du Parc national