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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

36th meeting
Strasbourg, 15-18 November 2016

**REPORT
OF THE VISIT OF THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT
TO WELTENBURGER ENGE NATURE RESERVE (GERMANY)
13-15 JUNE 2016**

*Document prepared
by Robert Brunner (Austria)*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The on-the-spot appraisal was carried out in June 2016 for the first time since 2002. The latest Diploma for the Weltenburger Enge has been granted until March 2018 (resolution CM/ResDip(2008)11, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 2 July 2008). Given the number of sites to be evaluated over the next years, the Council of Europe scheduled the expert's on-the-spot appraisal already in 2016. The visit of the area took place from 12 to 15 June 2016 and was perfectly organised by Mr. Michael Littel, Landratsamt Kelheim.

Special thanks go to Michael Littel, Coordinator, Landratsamt Kelheim, responsible for the organisation and the programme, and to Landrat Dr. Hubert Faltermeier for the warm welcome as well as to all other participants who shared their experience during the various parts of the visit. Names and functions of the participants can be found in the programme.

PROGRAMME

12 June 2016

- Arrival at Kelheim
- Evening talks on details of the programme with Michael Littel

13 June 2016

- Introduction to the protected areas at the Danube banks at Kelheim;
- Walking field trip via Befreiungshalle (Liberation Hall) Kelheim to Weltenburg, partly along the left bank of the Danube;
- Meeting with the abbot of Weltenburg, Thomas Freihart, visit to the abbey and the visitor centre, short discussion about visitor numbers;
- Boat trip to Kelheim, discussion on fish fauna, boat traffic in the Weltenburger Enge and rock climbing;

- Participants:

Christoph Stein, Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Umwelt und Verbraucherschutz (Bavarian State Ministry for Environment and Consumer Protection)

Stephan Radlmair, Regierung von Niederbayern (Government of Lower Bavaria)

Franz Paulus, Leiter des Forstbetriebs Kelheim (Bavarian State forest, Head of forest enterprise Kelheim)

Dieter Winterstein, Forstbetrieb Kelheim (Bavarian State forest, forest enterprise Kelheim)

Klaus Blümlhuber, Landschaftspflegeverband Kelheim VöF e.V. (Landcare Association)

Nicole Eberl, Landratsamt Kelheim (District office Kelheim)

Michael Littel, Landratsamt Kelheim (District office Kelheim) and partly

Bertin Schels Leiter der Verwaltung Befreiungshalle (Head of the administration of the Befreiungshalle)

Abt Thomas M. Freihart OSB, abbot of Weltenburg monastery

Karl Stahl Wasserwirtschaftsamt Landshut (Water management office Landshut)

Dr. Stephan Paintner Fachberatung für Fischerei (Expert for fishery)

- Evening talks with representatives of various organisations and NGOs

Peter Michael Schmalz – Kreisvorsitzender Landesbund für Vogelschutz (association for protection of birds)

Christiane Geidel - Uhubeauftragte (association for protection of birds, expert for eagle owls)

Peter Forstner – Kreisvorsitzender Bund Naturschutz (Union for nature protection)

Ingmar Stöckl – Naturschutzreferent Sektion Kelheim (Alpine club)

Klaus Blümlhuber (see above)

14 June 2016

- Visit to the extension areas Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten, forest management and impacts of rock climbing;
- Field trip to the right bank of the Danube, management of rocky habitats and bird protection;
- Final discussion on the 2008 recommendations, how they are being met and possible consequences for the renewal of the Diploma.

- Participants:

Rudolf Habereeder, Forstbetrieb Kelheim (Forest enterprise Kelheim)

Dieter Winterstein, see above

Christoph Stein, BStM. see above

Michael Littel, see above

Susanne Böhme, Landratsamt Kelheim (District office Kelheim)

15 June 2016

- Final talks with the site manager, hike along the Danube to Kloesterl;
- Departure from Regensburg train station.

- Participants:

Franziska Jäger, Gebietsbetreuerin (Site manager)

Michael Littel, see above

AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

Official documents concerning the European Diploma are the expert's on-the-spot appraisal report 2002¹ and the resolutions since 1978. No annual report was delivered in the last three years. The management plan for the NATURA2000 site is available only in German and covers the FFH habitats and species of the Weltenburger Enge and Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten aiming to prevent deterioration. The management plan is appropriate to meet most recommendations of the European Diploma and was sent to the expert in electronic form. Nevertheless, a general management plan covering the full scope is missing.

Other information material like brochures and maps was provided by the representatives of the visited areas.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Designations, boundaries and names

The Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve was awarded the European Diploma the first time in 1978. In 1995, the Bavarian authorities established a further nature reserve, Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten, neighbouring the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve to the North.

In Resolution (98) 16 on the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve the Committee of Ministers, bearing in mind the founding of a new nature reserve in 1995, recommended inter alia that:

¹ Report PE-S-DE (2002)6

The boundaries of the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve should be extended to achieve greater spatial unity. The title of the reserve is to be amplified if appropriate, in that the Danube gorges now represent only a part – albeit the most prestigious and vulnerable – of the protected area.²

Unfortunately, there is no document confirming any extension of the European Diploma to a larger area, and the participants in the recent appraisal were not aware of any change in the European Diploma area. The EUNIS fact sheet still describes the area with 560 hectares, which is identical to the area awarded in 1978. Additionally, there is the NATURA2000 area “Weltenburger Enge und Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten” (DE7136301) comprising both areas with a total size of 934 hectares (560 plus 374 hectares).



Red arrow: Nature Reserve Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten; blue arrow: Nature Reserve Weltenburger Enge; yellow arrow: former Altmuehl river; Nature reserves marked with a red line; Green hatched: natural forest reserve (Naturwaldreservat)

To make the situation even more complicated, the author of the latest appraisal report (PE-S-DE (2002)6) assumed that the enlargement had taken place, but without describing the area either by the new boundaries or by name.

The additional area stretches from Michelsberg in the north east to Klostersal in the south west, and northwards to Altmuehlleiten with the boundaries along the foot of the hill. The Altmuehl, forming the boundary of the extended European Diploma site, was totally changed due to the construction of the Main-Danube Canal in the late 20th century. The Altmuehl itself was turned into a shipping route and is not part of the protected area. Only a section of the original Altmuehl remained in this area. It was preserved and became part of the nature reserve.

NATURE

Geology and geomorphology

From a geological point of view, the narrow valley of the Danube at Weltenburger Enge, breaking through the Franconian Alb, was formed by a smaller tributary to the Danube. Only through erosion was the tributary connected to the Danube about 150.000 years ago. Immediately, the Danube took over the new riverbed through the now so-called Weltenburger Enge. The former bed of the Danube was further to the north following the later Altmuehlal.

² RESOLUTION (98) 16 Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 September 1998 at the 641 meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

The Weltenburger Enge and the adjoining Nature Reserve “Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten” belong to the south-western German cuesta with the low mountain range Franconian Alb as its southern border.



Left: Weltenburg monastery; right: the Weltenburger Enge at high waters

Climate

The average annual temperature is about 8 °C with 35 to 40 days with a minimum temperature of 25°C. The annual precipitation is around 750 millimetres. Because of the larger waterbody of the Danube and the Main-Danube Canal there can be 80 to 100 foggy days per year in the area.

Habitats and species

Both nature reserves are part of a NATURA2000 site. A management plan³ was elaborated in 2011 containing a comprehensive and substantial documentation of the situation and a bundle of management provisions to protect the area and the various species but only those, which are of importance for NATURA2000. If the management follows the principles and provisions of the NATURA2000 management plan in the whole area, it can be assured that the area will be developed in a good way. Only a few additional organisational remarks may be useful.

The main natural feature of the site and a touristic highlight is the Weltenburger Enge itself with impressive cliffs up to 100 meters high forming a narrow gorge. Overall, the area is covered with near natural forests, intersected by only one wider road. The Danube and a small former part of the Altmuehl are the only larger open waters. Periodically, small ponds occur in the forests.

Forests cover about three quarters of the area, inter alia *Asperulo-Fagetum* (beech forests), *Medio-European limestone beech forests of the Cephalanthero-Fagion* and *Tilio-Acerion* (forests of slopes, in screes and ravines). Other priority habitats are the *Subcontinental peri-Pannonic scrub*, the *Rupicolous calcareous or basophilic grasslands of the Alysso-Sedion albi* and the *Medio-European calcareous scree of hill and montane levels*.

Several rare and endangered species can be found, such as the *Cochlodina orthostoma* (closing mouth snail), the *Yellow-bellied toad (Bombina variegata)* and the *Bechstein bat (Myotis bechsteini)*.

In unwooded areas, the habitat type *Calcareous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation* is of particular importance, e.g. with liver moss (*Mannia triandra*), a type of hawkweed (*Hieracium scorzonrifolium*), *Primula auricula* and the buckler sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*). Because of their size, lowland hay meadows (*Alopecurus pratensis*, *Sanguisorba officinalis*) are also notable.

A remarkable variety of birds live in the protected areas, as well as important fish species like *Zingel zingel* (common zingel) and *Zingel streber* (zingel nerd).

³ Regierung von Niederbayern (2011), Managementplan – Fachgrundlagen für das FFH Gebiet Weltenburger Enge und Hirschberg mit Altmuehlleiten

Monuments

Upstream, the Weltenburg monastery is a remarkable cultural monument. Founded in 617 by Iro-Scottish missionaries, the monastery faced prosperous and difficult times through the centuries and finally closed down in 1803, but was reconstituted in 1842. The monastery and its attached visitors' facilities are a main tourist attraction in the region. Regularly at risk of floods, a flood protection system was implemented a few years ago, invisible for visitors, but most effective, as the abbot explained.

Another important monument at the lower end of Weltenburger Enge is the Befreiungshalle at Kelheim, built in the 19th century in commemoration of the Napoleonic wars. The impressive building lies within the nature reserve together with other tourist infrastructure like a restaurant, parking lots and signposts. Requests by various groups to cut trees to make the monument more visible from Kelheim should be ignored.

Kloesterl between Weltenburg und Kelheim goes back to a hermitage of 1454. The later monastery was dedicated to Saint Nicolas, patron of the skippers. It is privately owned and accessible only during the opening hours of the attached beer garden.

Finally, the Keltenwall (Celts' wall) is the remain of a Celtic settlement dating back more than 2000 years. The Keltenwall is exposed to erosion through hiking and mountain biking, and should be better preserved.

LAND USE INFRASTRUCTURE

Forests and agriculture

Both nature reserves are forest areas with most of the forest owned by the Bavarian State Forest (Bayerische Staatsforste), and deciduous wood dominates. The forest is commercially used according to the provisions of the decree. Some areas are designated as natural forest reserves (Naturwaldreservate). A development towards more and strictly protected natural forest reserves is desirable as well as an increased support for older trees and a higher percentage of dead wood in the whole area. Heavy machinery should be used only in exceptional cases.

According to the NATURA2000 management plan forest interventions are aiming to restore the local Luzulo-Fagetum, Asperulo-Fagetum, Cephalanthero-Fagion and Tilio-Acerion in their near-natural quality in particular in formation and age classes. A reasonable proportion of larger standing and lying dead wood is recommended to provide habitats for birds and other species. Conservation and restoration of alluvial forests and hardwood floodplain forests should be foreseen. As laid out above, a consequent implementation of the management plan and its measures will guarantee the introduction of a development in line with the principles of the European Diploma. This should be the case not only in the FFH habitats, but also in the whole area.

Some areas are used extensively in the frame of the agro-environmental scheme. Others are now included in contract conservation, and some are maintained by the Landschaftspflegeverband Kelheim VöF e.V. (Landcare Association).

Boat traffic

Although a restriction for large boats on the Danube was recommended in various European Diploma resolutions in the past, such constraints must be rated as unrealistic as a boat trip through the gorge is a highlight for visitors. Even a limitation linked to a higher minimum water level can hardly be achieved. The main problem of larger tourist boats is the wave disturbance at the river edges, which is stronger at low water. Further research of wave disturbances on selected species like fish, freshwater molluscs and dragonflies would help to develop criteria for the number of boats as well as for other limitations (speed, minimum water flow, etc.). If the large boat traffic and its effects on the environment are then assessed as incompatible with the European Diploma, limitations of the number or size of boats or a withdrawal of the diploma could be considered.

Beside a limited number of motor barges, which have a license to carry people through the gorge but not downstream to Kelheim, the number of leisure boats like canoes, kayaks or rafting boats has increased significantly especially on sunny summer weekends. As it is easy to reach attractive spots by boat, damage can occur also in remote places. Whereas the left river bank features a hiking route, the right bank is just barely accessible on foot, but can be reached by boat. It is therefore necessary to assess the possibilities of a restricted access to the right bank of the Danube, at least between Weltenburg and river kilometre 2416.

Leisure activities

As for many other regulations in both nature parks, their surveillance is limited by the number of professional and voluntary guards or site managers. It is also a fact that regulations and prohibitions in the nature reserves differ. For example mountain-biking is limited to marked routes in Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten Nature Reserve, but not in Weltenburger Enge. It is therefore required to harmonise at least those determinations relating to leisure activities.

Gravel banks in the Danube, visible only at low water, are a perfect bathing place and invite to stay overnight in tents or sleeping bags. Campfires occur from time to time also on rocks and in other attractive spots. These activities have an impact mainly on the fauna but also on the vegetation. To limit disturbances, legal provisions should be considered to ban such activities or at least limit them in time, and to stop overnight camping in the whole area.

In 2010 the German Alpine Club in cooperation with responsible authorities and NGOs published a climbing concept⁴ for Altmuehltal and Weltenburger Enge that describes in detail the rules and routes in both nature reserves. If carefully observed, negative impacts on rocky habitats can be limited. Again, surveillance is important.

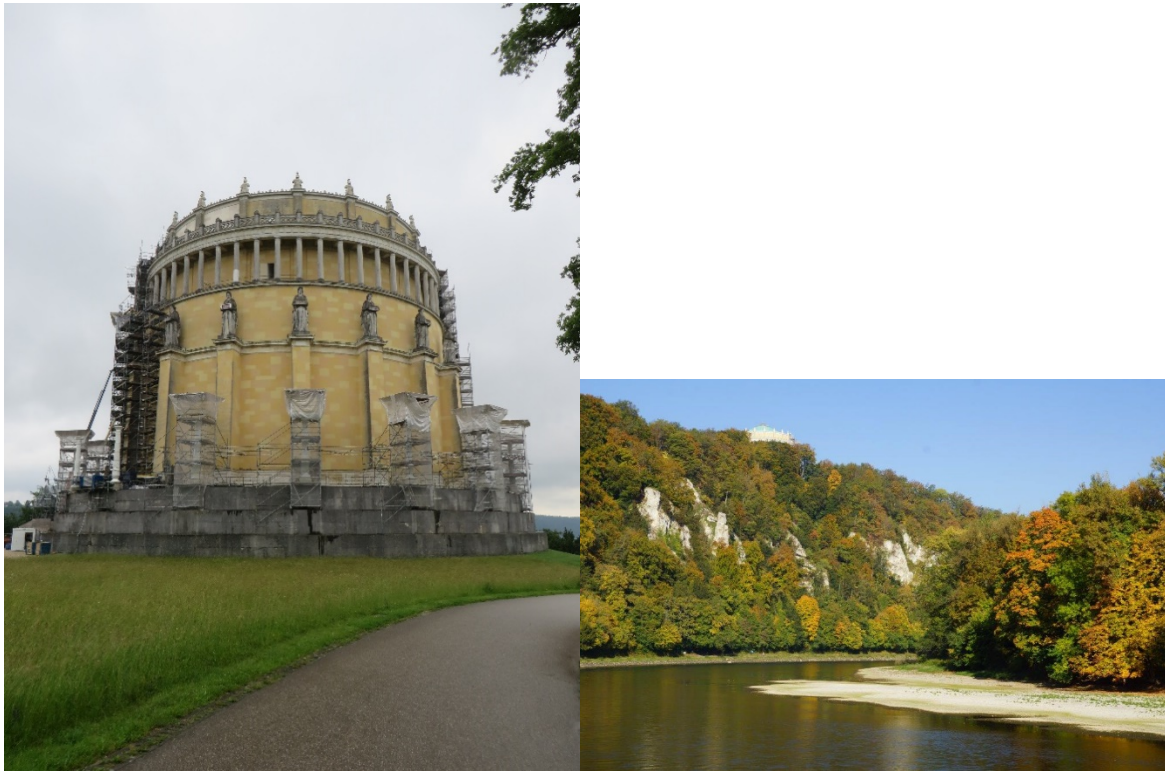
Tourist infrastructure

Many tourists just visit the Befreiungshalle without approaching the nature reserve. The facilities are appropriate including a visitor centre and a restaurant. The meadow around the Befreiungshalle is a *Salvia Arrhenatheretum* meadow, which is important because of its size and nature. This should be taken into consideration in any touristic development concepts. Plans to cut trees to make the Befreiungshalle more visible and create a better view of the town should not be considered.

Several organisations have shown interest in these two sites and have set up various signposts in the field. Hardly any of them bear the European Diploma logo and none describe the Diploma itself, which should be adapted according to the general rules of the European Diploma. Some poles are overloaded with hiking route marks, which should be reconsidered.

Various brochures and programmes are available edited by the City of Kelheim or the Landschaftspflegeverband Kelheim VöF e.V. (Landcare Association) and others. Some of them contain detailed information about the European Diploma, some only the logo. It would be an incentive to complete all information material of official and public organisations with the European Diploma logo.

⁴ Deutscher Alpenverein und IG Klettern (2010), Kletterkonzeption Unteres Altmuehltal und Donaudurchbruch



Left: Befreiungshalle Kelheim under renovation: Right: Gravel banks at low water level invite for a sunbath

Visitors' management

Although the number of visitors (Weltenburg approx. 500,000, Befreiungshalle approx. 100,000) is high, many arrive by bus in Weltenburg and go down the Danube by boat so that the frequency of visitors in the forest is moderate, except on the hiking route along the left side of the Danube. Nevertheless, a guiding infrastructure is recommended to avoid uncontrolled off-road access and damage to specific sites. Attention should be paid to outlooks, which lately seem to have become uncontrolled without any concept. Less and secured viewpoints could help to channel the visitor flow. The cultural monument Keltenwall (Celts' Wall) should be better protected to avoid erosion. In general, tracks and paths, which are not marked and therefore at least in the extension area officially closed for visitors, should be blocked either by trunks or official barriers.

Other points of interest

Kloesterl, a former hermitage and later an abbey, is not in the best condition. As it is privately owned and regularly exposed to floods, renovation and conservation works might be difficult to organise.

The outlook at the so-called Wieser Kreuz offers an impressive view of the Danube. The spot is fenced to avoid people climbing on the rocks. It can easily be reached from the parking at the cemetery. The boundaries of the Nature Reserve Weltenburger Enge near the Kelheim cemetery look strange. Obviously due to an enlargement of the cemetery, it might be the only nature reserve to include part of a churchyard, meaning that the European Diploma also extends over a few square metres of cemetery.

COMMENTS ON THE 2008 RECOMMENDATIONS

All comments provided by Michael Littel and discussed during the appraisal.

1. Devise and implement maintenance procedures to control the increasing growth of bushes on outcropping rocks, resulting in a reduction of the extent of xerotherm rock locations and the adapted species inhabiting them;

The progress can be seen on the spot. Most xerotherm rock locations have been cleared of bushes and only little additional maintenance work needs to be done in 2016. This resulted among others in a larger number of Burning Bush (*Dictamnus*) but not of Turban Lily (*Lilium martagon*). A documentation of the evolution of vegetation and the snail fauna (*Gastropodae*) was compiled in 2015.

2. Maintain strict control over boat traffic, particularly on the right bank of the Danube where numerous private boating tourists land on the exposed gravel banks during the summer months, when water levels are low;

This situation is still the same and obviously the result of some weakness in the legislation. As can be seen below, a new condition is to be imposed to clarify the legal possibilities and implement a subsequent strategy. Problems with private boats, swimming and camping occur mostly on sunny summer weekends. At present, there is obviously no legal basis to stop or minimize leisure activities. Furthermore, the possibilities for surveillance are limited. Most guards work on a voluntary basis.

3. Monitor the effects of boat traffic on the aquatic fauna;

In line with the NATURA2000 management planning a study was carried out on the fish fauna. The monitoring of specific fish fauna is carried out in line with a power plant 25 km upstream of Weltenburg.

4. Encourage the extensive use of fields and meadows, particularly by farmers and private owners;

Some parcels in the area are managed extensively according to the agro-environment scheme. The Landschaftspflegeverband Kelheim VöF e.V. is involved in several spots. One field was bought and turned into extensive grassland.

5. Conduct regular audits of management effectiveness for biodiversity conservation and tourist control in the reserve;

The evolution of flora and fauna and impacts caused by tourism are carefully monitored by the site managers. Tourist infrastructure is evaluated and maintained as necessary.

The 2008 recommendations can be seen as fulfilled. It only has to be mentioned that more attention should be paid to the annual reports.

CONCLUSIONS

The visit was accompanied by numerous representatives of various organisations, experts, managers and staff. All people working in any form either in or for the nature reserve are motivated and dedicated to the aims of protected areas. The management plan for the NATURA200 site, comprising both Nature Reserves Weltenburger Enge und Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten, is comprehensive and adequate to meet the objectives of the European Diploma. Provided that the management plan is fully implemented and similar management principles compulsory for the whole European Diploma area, and if the progress is monitored, the protection of the area and of species will be secured.

However, the landscape is not only famous for its natural characteristics. Remains of former colonisation and land use are found particularly on the Hirschberg. Later in 617, monks founded the Weltenburg monastery, a cultural monument of international renown. About 250 years later, Kelheim was mentioned for the first time in a charter. Finally in 1863, the Befreiungshalle was inaugurated.

Exceptional natural features combined with a long history and remarkable monuments attract a large number of tourists to the site, and this can create problems. Nevertheless, no relevant problems could be identified that would lead to a refusal to renew the European Diploma.

European interest

The Weltenburger Enge and surrounding landscape look back at thousands of years of history. It is a crossroad of old commercial routes. The Celts and the Romans had their settlements here. The Weltenburg monastery at the beginning of the Danube gorge is a landmark and so is the City of Kelheim, which represents the profane power, accentuated by the romantic Befreiungshalle. The

nomination as NATURA2000 site underlines the value of the landscape, its habitats and its importance for protected species. All these determinants lead to a great interest in this area. The high number of visitors demonstrates the importance of the site for tourism. It is a challenge for the management to handle these various interests and avoid conflicts. However, no serious problems occurred so far.

Renewal of the Diploma

It is recommended to renew the European Diploma to the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve until 2028, assuming that annual reports documenting the progress made will be delivered regularly in future, and to link the following six conditions and six recommendations to the renewal. It is further recommended to formally extend the European Diploma area northwards to the adjoining Nature Reserve “Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten” under the new name “European Diploma area Weltenburger Enge, Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten” with boundaries identical to the NATURA2000 site.

Conditions (6)

- (1) Formally realise immediately the extension of the European Diploma area to 934 hectares, change the name to Weltenburger Enge und Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten and adapt as soon as possible all signposts, brochures, maps and leaflets to the new area, and issue an overall management plan in addition to the existing NATURA2000 management plan by 2023.
- (2) Conduct an expertise on legal options to stop or at least regulate disembarking of private boats on the right bank of the Danube between the Weltenburg landing place and river kilometre 2416, and to ban overnight camping and campfires in the whole European Diploma area and report to the Council of Europe latest by 2023.
- (3) Start further research on the effects of wave disturbances of larger boats on the river bank and on selected and relevant species, especially fish, freshwater molluscs and dragonflies, and report to the Council of Europe within five years.
- (4) Extend, wherever ecologically and touristy worthwhile and as soon as possible, the stricter regulations of the decree on the Nature Reserve Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten⁵ to the area of the Nature Reserve Weltenburger Enge to make the rules more comprehensible for visitors and supervision more effective, and to underline the togetherness of both sites as an ecological entity.
- (5) Take more responsibility for the preservation of the archeologic monument Keltenwall (Celts' wall) and stop further damage and erosion through visitors' management or appropriate installations to limit hiking and mountain-biking on the monument, in cooperation with the government agency for monument conservation.
- (6) Consider a harmonisation of information boards to stop their uncontrolled number and different layouts and add the European Diploma logo at least to those boards containing information on natural and cultural highlights within the European Diploma area. This includes the information point at the landing place in Kelheim. Immediately add information about the role of the European Diploma on information boards, at least those at the main access routes.

Recommendations (5)

- (1) Conduct more and efficient control of illegal mountain-biking off the official mountain-bike routes.
- (2) Carefully examine the opening of official viewing points taking into consideration the natural value of the specific site, and close down a number of uncontrolled and unsafe spots.
- (3) Put an emphasis on the natural succession of forests and the development of more natural forest reserves in the total area and avoid clear cuts of any size, minimize commercial

⁵ Verordnung über das Naturschutzgebiete Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten vom 7. Dezember 1995 (RABl Nr. 23/15.12.1995) (Decree on the Nature Reserve Hirschberg und Altmuehlleiten)

exploitation of forests and stop the use of heavy machinery in forestry management. Thoroughly weigh up any intervention in the forest around the Befreiungshalle and refrain from any forest management that cannot be considered ecological.

- (4) Recognise the need for a professional on-the-spot supervision of the area including fieldwork by professional and permanent staff and envisage an increase in capacity of permanent supervision staff.
- (5) Assess the technical possibilities and financial support for restoration of the cultural monument Klosterl.