



## Arbeitskreis Wachau

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# ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2013

## Site of the European Diploma for Protected Areas by the Council of Europe Wachau, Austria

**State:** Austria, Federal State of Lower Austria

**Name of the area:** Wachau

### Central authority concerned:

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## I. GENERAL INFORMATION

### 1. Natural heritage and status of conservation

#### 1.1 Environment

##### Nature protection projects

As for the LIFE+ project "Living Space in the Rivers of Mostviertel-Wachau" (2009 to 2014), all single projects proposed along the Danube and the Pielach river are on track. The projects near Schönbühel and Dürnstein have already been finished, the side branch reconnection near Schallemersdorf and the new mouth for the Pielach river near Melk will be finished by the end of the year.

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die ländlichen Gebiete.

The amount of areas kept by professional landscape conservationists stayed comparatively low due to the ongoing financial cutback in public households also in Austria, but remained constant compared to 2011 and 2012.

Also this year, a summer volunteer camp was held within the Leader project “Wachau Volunteer – Youth for Natura 2000”. We are about to receive grants again for this project until the end of 2014. The project was awarded as a “Decade Project” within UN’s current decade for education for sustainable development. The award-giving ceremony was held at Pömling, within the European Diploma site.

The new LIFE project proposal called “Auenwildnis Wachau” (not translated in the project proposal) was submitted to Brussels but unfortunately not chosen as an eligible project in the first run in 2012. The project proposal was therefore slightly modified and re-submitted for selection in June 2013. This time, at least so far, it looks better that the project might be chosen. In case this happens, we will have significant financial support a.o. for creating ponds for amphibians and rests for sea eagle nests and for planting some hectares of typical alluvial forest, focusing on the Black Poplar.

## **1.2. Flora and vegetation**

No changes recorded.

## **1.3. Fauna**

For the first time since decades, the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) has been spotted around the Jauerling, near Emmersdorf, and opposite the Danube in the so-called Dunkelstein forest. Recently, an awareness raising campaign has been started to make sure that the lynx might settle down permanently in the region.

In summer, a dead cat was found close to a road near Weißenkirchen which might turn out to have been a wildcat (*Felis silvestris*). According to our friends in the European Diploma site Thayatal National Park, who specialize on the wildcat, the corpse of the cat has been deep-frozen, and tissue parts have been sent to Germany to be checked if the cat really was a wildcat. In case this proves right, it would mean the southernmost spotting of a wildcat in recent times.

For the first time, the Spined loach (*Cobitis taenia*) has been found in a part of a side-branch of the Danube which was reconnected to the river during the first LIFE Nature project.

## **2. Cultural heritage and socioeconomic aspects**

### **2.1 Cultural heritage**

#### **2.1.1 Changes affecting the cultural heritage**

##### Townscape, landscape and monument protection

The Interreg IVc project “ViTour Landscape” has ended with the issuing of the so-called “European Guidelines for Wine Cultural Landscape Preservation and Enhancement”. They may be downloaded at [http://www.vitour.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=35&Itemid=45](http://www.vitour.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=35&Itemid=45) and have been issued in English, German, French and Italian.

The initiative elaborating ways on how to use certain legislation concerning the building plans in Lower Austria to steer the townscape development in the core parts of the historic villages and towns has continued its work. The first binding plans are about to be sketched, the public in the pilot villages where the tool is checked out first has been informed.

## **2.2 Socioeconomic context**

### 2.2.1 Changes affecting the socio-economic context

#### Leader projects

Since the current programme period of the European Union is about to end, not a lot of new projects were funded by the Leader programme. In the end, Leader has financed about 300 projects in all parts of the Leader region (of which most is also located within the European Diploma site) with a total project volume of 30 mio. EUR and a total funding volume of 10 mio. EUR.

Like in the last years, a focus is put on supporting agricultural farms, most of all wine growing estates which produce wine on the steep dry stone terraces, tourism projects, educational projects, and projects dealing with renewable energy.

#### The flood in June 2013

In the beginning of June, the site was hit by the second-worst flood in recent history. Only 11 years after the centennial flood in 2002, another centennial flood was caused by enormous rainfall in the Alps. In the end, the flood stayed slightly below the flood marks from 2002 but took about double as long – around 4 to 5 days – from the start until its end. This is probably due to the fact that this time quite some part of the flood was created by melting snow compared to the flood in August 2002, which was caused by rainfall both in the Alps and locally.

One of the main differences compared to 2002 is that a number of villages had already finished building flood protection systems around the built areas. Luckily, all of them worked very well during the event. On the other hand, quite a number of villages without such a protection system still suffered severe devastations. Now that the protected villages have stayed unharmed, the plans to build such flood protection systems also in all the other villages have been speeded up by regional politics.

Now, only a few months after the event, the site has almost totally recovered from the devastations. Alarm plans for floods along the Danube are close to perfect now, the forecasting system implemented after 2002 working very well, all citizens of those houses which were, unfortunately, still flooded had enough time to prepare themselves for the inevitable, and the support in cleaning up and renovating after the flood was extremely generous and was very well organized.

#### World Heritage and European Diploma site management strategies

The concept for creating a management plan for the World Heritage site Wachau is finished. Currently, negotiations with the Federal Ministry for Education and the Lower Austrian State Government about the financing of the plan are in their final phase.

Work on the plan is supposed to start soon, to make sure that the key contents of the plan are done in time to organically become part of the new Leader strategy which has to be submitted by August 2014.

Wachau Youth Forum, an initiative to involve young citizens of the region into the drafting of the new strategies, has already started as a Leader project.

### **3. Education and scientific interest**

#### **3.1 Visitors and information policy**

##### **3.1.1 Arrangements to welcome and inform the public**

The tourism signage system is about to be completed now. The basic elements of the information system have been put up over the summer, partly also delayed by the flood. The single signposts for tourism enterprises are currently printed and will be put up soon by the municipalities.

A plan for a visitor trail on and around the Jauerling summit in the Nature Park Jauerling-Wachau was presented to the public recently and is supposed to be built until the end of 2014.

Following the results of the evaluation, a plan on how to integrate resting and information facilities into the hiking trail system "World Heritage Trail" has been finished. So far, the region is still discussing on how to implement the new facilities into the trail.

Next year, the World Heritage Trail will be amended with 9 additional stages through the forests south of the Danube, in the so-called Dunkelsteinerwald.

##### **3.1.2 Visitor numbers and visitor behaviour**

By August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013, the 13 municipalities of the region recorded a decrease in guest arrivals by 8.1 % and a decrease in overnight stays by 6.1 % compared to the same period of time in 2012. The main reasons are probably the loss of tourists caused by the flood in the beginning of June and the extreme heat in July, which probably prevented a number of cyclists to visit the region.

Currently, the region is working on a study researching the outlook for the different types of accommodation businesses in the region and the effect of an overaging population on the future of the business. There is some reason to fear that the ongoing loss of small-scale private B&B owners already contributes to an overall loss of visitor numbers to the region, whereas the top class hotels seem to gain from the various quality management projects put into action during the last years by the regional management.

##### **3.1.3 Special visits**

The flood in June brought along visits of almost all important politicians on the federal level and the federal state level.

Apart from the UN Decade Project award ceremony, which was already mentioned, also the annual meeting of all nature parks in Austria took place in the European Diploma site this year.

We took the opportunity to present our work, with a focus on the issue of voluntary commitment, at a Visegrad Four meeting in Cracow, Poland, in June. In November, we will attend a conference at the Uni-

versity of Oslo where we will deliver a presentation about the significance of international networking for managing a World Heritage and European Diploma site.

### **3.2 Scientific Research**

The project actively managing research requests from universities mentioned last year has started now. We currently work on a project in connection with the World Heritage Management Plan and wait for the results of a study on day-care for elderly people needing 24/7 assistance in parts of the European Diploma site.

## **4. Description of region (vulnerability, conservation status, ownership and documentation)**

### **4.1 Legislative changes**

### **4.2 Changes in ownership**

### **4.3 Expansion or conversion**

No changes to the previous year.

## **5. Site management**

No changes to the previous year. Also the representative from the municipality of Krems stayed the same.

## **II. Impact of the award of the European Diploma for Protected Areas**

The ongoing strategy development process will also deal with the role of the European Diploma for the future conservation and development strategy of the region. The process will foster discussions about the future financing of the necessary staff and projects also from the point of view of the European Diploma.

## **III. Recommendations for the renewal of the award**

### **Guarantee for the sustained conservation of the Jauerling-Wachau Nature Park**

Current projects and meeting were already mentioned in the chapters before. The current financing of the park's management could be prolonged until the end of 2014. Discussions on the time after have already started.

### **Maintenance of the current state of the Danube and conservation of the floodplain forests**

Currently, no risk concerning the recommendation can be identified, although two project proposals in this field have failed to be chosen for financing, unfortunately.

### **Restoration of the terraces and integration of the irrigation devices**

No changes to the previous year.

### **Strict standards for river cruise tourism**

No changes to the previous year.

### **Solution to the Spitz quarry problem**

This year, it looks better than in the previous years that a solution for the problem might be found. Negotiations with the Environmental Advocate (Umweltanwalt) of Lower Austria about widening the tunnel under the railway in front of the quarry have taken place. This is necessary to allow trucks to enter the quarry to take away the produced material.

At the same time, a potential exploiter has shown up. Negotiations about the plans on how to stabilize the quarry by additionally exploiting it will take place in December.

### **Control of the moufflon population**

No changes compared to last year. The agreements found in 2010 are executed as planned.

### **Conservation of the apricot orchards**

No changes compared to last year.

### **Flood protection in consultation with local authorities**

As mentioned, all flood protection systems built so far have worked fine during the centennial flood in June 2013. This is why the so far unprotected villages will soon start drafting their respective plans for building similar devices. Since it is the local municipalities who are in charge of drafting these plans, it is assured that all flood protection devices can only be built with a strong link to the needs of the local people.