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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND
NATURAL RESOURCES

Select Committee of Experts - European Diploma

CAMARGUE NATURE RESERVE (France)

On-the-spot appraisal

by
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CAMARGUE Nature Reserve - October 19791. INTRODUCTION

I, the undersigned, was appointed as a consultant, with the task of making an on-the-spot appraisal with a view to guiding the European Committee on the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Camargue Nature Reserve in 1966. This diploma was renewed in 1971 and 1976, and should be extended for a further 5 years (1981-85).

I was accompanied by Mr Jean-Pierre RIBAUT, and met and guided round by MM BOITARD (Nature Conservation Directorate at the Ministère de l'Environnement et du Cadre de Vie, Paris) and Eric COULET, Director of the Camargue Nature Reserve. The programme was as follows:

Monday 22 October 1979:

Arrival at Arles by train towards the end of the afternoon. Information and discussion meeting.

Tuesday 23 October:

Visit to "la Capelière", the "Salin de Badon" and the neighbouring sectors as far as Ulmet-Amphise in rainy weather; tour by boat and on foot of the "Bois des Rièges".

Wednesday 24 October:

Visit to the information and reception Centre at Ginès (regional Nature Park), the administrative centre and the Camargue Museum at Rousty, also in rainy weather. Tour of La Gacholle and the sea dike.

Thursday 25 October:

Departure from Arles in the morning.

The on-the-spot appraisal took place almost entirely in rainy weather. Despite the conditions, Mr Eric Coulet, director of the Reserve, did his utmost to make our stay and work agreeable, and gave us all the information we required in a very objective manner. We have pleasure in offering him our sincere thanks.

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2. APPRAISAL

2.1 Present general situation

The Camargue Nature Reserve (hereinafter referred to as "the Reserve") is the property of the state, which handed it over for management to the Société Nationale de Protection de la Nature (hereinafter referred to as the "CNPN") and finances it through the Ministère de l'Environnement et du Cadre de Vie (Ministry). It is worth while recalling that this Reserve was originally set up by the SNPN in 1928. In 1975, the French state took it over again by buying up the land, which had hitherto been ceded, and increased the total area to 13,117 ha by new purchases (see previous reports). Control over the land is thus firmly established.

Furthermore, the Reserve is included in the Camargue Regional Park (hereinafter: "the Park"), which covers 85,000 ha, ie the delta between the two arms of the Rhône. It was officially set up in 1972. The Park comprises vast agricultural areas (rice fields, vineyards and other crops, grazing land etc) and built-up areas. The Park's administration is independent of the Reserve (and vice versa).

The Park is thus a priori a peripheral area well suited to preserve the regional equilibrium against the influx of tourists and industrial development. In addition to the Reserve, it includes the departmental "Réserve des Impériaux" (2,200 ha) at Stes Maries, the domain of La Tour du Valat (2,000 ha), administered by a foundation, and the "domaine des Salins" to the south-east - all of which are important sectors for fauna and not accessible to the public.

The Reserve's legal status has not changed. Accordingly the institution is well established and provides an ideal conservation guarantee for the natural environment and its fauna and flora. It should be added that in December 1978, the Camargue Reserve and the Djoudj National Park in Senegal were officially "twinned" in that country.

2.2 The present state of conservation

The quality of the natural environment remains outstanding. The salinity of the Vaccarès appears to have been stabilised (5-8 gms of salt per litre) and the extension of the reed-beds seems to have been halted, apart from in the south. We were able to see for ourselves that the Phoenician junipers in the Bois des Rièges are in good condition and regenerating. The flora in the dunes has become much more flourishing now that strict measures have been taken to prevent tourist encroachment.

The wealth of bird life remains stable and some species are even increasing. In actual fact, the colonies of birds are to be found outside the Reserve in the salt marshes and the Tour du Valat, where they are protected and encouraged. For instance, an artificial islet has attracted about 100 pairs of gull-billed terns; a dozen pairs of slender-billed gulls also nest in the salt marshes, not to mention the flamingos, of which about 7,000 pairs breed successfully every year. In summer, up to 20,000 flamingos settle in the Camargue. They are beginning to frequent the rice fields and this has led to complaints ... The Reserve serves as a migration and wintering point for 60% to 80% of the ducks which have settled in the Camargue. Bi-monthly counts have been made on foot and from the air between August and March since 1967 and confirm the importance of the area for these birds in Europe. It should be mentioned at this stage that hunters on the outskirts of the Reserve benefit almost too generously from this by shooting about 150,000 ducks annually!

The annual reports of the Reserve for 1977 and 1978, which were made available to me, contain various details about the development of the fauna and the related studies. I should merely like to refer to one item: namely that the prohibition of hunting in the recently incorporated "domain d'Amphise", has multiplied the number of ducks and coots wintering there by 20: about 10,000 specimens in 1978! (See also 2.2.)

Lastly, the Reserve is an outstanding nature sanctuary and the neighbouring research centre (biological stations of the CNRS and the Tour du Valat) permit permanent scientific studies in which the staff of the Reserve co-operate.

2.3 Effectiveness of protective measures

The staff of the Reserve are constantly out on patrol to ensure that the protective regulations are complied with. Thanks to their ability and devotion, and in spite of their small numbers, they succeed in doing this very adequately, both in respect of the large numbers of tourists in the summer season and huntsmen. That is indeed a feat if we bear in mind the facilities available, the extent of the territory and the pressure to which it is subjected.

The prohibition of motor-car traffic on the sea dyke, which came into force in 1976, has been most effective in putting an end to trespassing and damage on the south side of the Reserve (in 1975 there were as many as 5,000 cars a day).

Another means of dissuasion was created on that side by digging a canal between the sea beach and the dunes. This obstacle, which has to be re-dug every year, prevents intrusion, camping etc in the sensitive environment of the dunes. Actually, the beach itself is invaded in the summer by hoards of trippers who could otherwise not be held back: 20,000 to 25,000 visitors, who pay a tax of five francs to the municipality of Stes Maries to go there by car ...

It was possible to restrict hunting between 1976 and 1978 at Amphise (recently purchased by the state) by interventions and repeated charges for minor offences which led to court cases won by the SNPN (but the fines and compensation totalling 300,000 FF have not yet been paid to the SNPN ...). The last critical aspect is the dispute with the former farmer who persists in grazing his bulls (10 to 15) on the Reserve, despite the fact that his lease has expired. As a result of this protection, the number of ducks at Amphise rose immediately (see 2.2).

On the Mornès peninsula, another recent purchase, systematic charges for minor hunting offences virtually put a stop to the practice in 1978. Nevertheless, 600 ha are still used for grazing.

Thanks to these three important actions and the vigilance of the Reserve's staff it is fair to say that the protective measures are extremely effective.

2.4 Budget

Under the Agreement of 19 March 1979 between the Ministry and the SNPN, in 1979 the latter was to receive a total of 648,050 FF for the management of the Reserve.

The staff comprises the director, a secretary/accountant, four wardens and one temporary employee.

Operational expenditure in connection with the staff (heating, lighting, uniform, travel) is budgeted at 19,000 FF.

Upkeep, running expenditure and replacements are estimated at 99,000 FF - ie 75,000 FF for the vehicles, 10,000 FF for sundry equipment, 4,000 FF for livestock, 10,000 FF for the upkeep of buildings and roads etc.

Sundry expenditure and services account for 67,000 FF, ie 30,000 FF for the office, 20,000 FF for the administrative headquarters, 5,000 FF for information material, 1,500 FF for entertainment, lawyers etc, 3,500 FF for sundry and unforeseen expenditure.

These figures show that the budget covers only a strict minimum; that a ridiculously small amount is set aside for information and upkeep and that no provision is made for the replacement of equipment.

Even then, the sums allocated should be paid when due and regularly, and that was not the case in 1979. It is quite wrong that the director should have to pay advances on wages out of his own pocket whilst waiting for the state to make over the funds to the SNPN. Lastly, the equipment is becoming completely inadequate and that state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue any longer.

2.5 Buildings, equipment

It should first be recalled that the director, Mr Eric Coulet, was seriously injured on 23 July 1976 by a former employee who had been dismissed the previous year. The latter committed suicide.

Less tragic no doubt, but none the less an act of violence, was the fire started by a criminal in the buildings at La Capelière on the night of 11-12 March 1979 which seriously affected the Reserve. These premises had just been totally renovated and turned into offices, a reception room and living accommodation. Despite the assurances given in official quarters, the fire raiser has so far not been traced or arrested. I saw for myself the deplorable state of the building seven months later: the director's office was exposed to water dripping in from holes in the roof and the repair work proceeding very slowly ... It is essential for reconstruction to go ahead more rapidly.

The other buildings at the "Salin de Badon" house the only living accommodation at present available for a warden on the Reserve, and there is no water or electricity.

The rest of the equipment is in the same sad state:

- two motor-cars in working order (for six men);
- one remaining horse, aged 22;
- one engine for a boat (the boat itself is on loan!);

- three pairs of binoculars (for six) of very poor quality;
- radio equipment destroyed in the fire.

Therefore it is urgent that appropriations be made available without delay to restore the offices at La Capelière, the premises and the audio-visual material, and for the purchase of horses, a boat, binoculars, a telescope, radios etc; this equipment is the minimum for such a large reserve.

2.6 Minor improvements

Despite their discouraging situation, the Reserve's staff have installed two observatories at the "Salin de Badon" and one near the La Gacholle lighthouse, the latter equipped with fixed binocular glasses (sabotaged twice). The visit itineraries have been kept up, together with a few local experimental operations (clearing of wetlands, grazing area for the horse in the reed beds) in the La Capelière sector, outside the Reserve. Measures to restrict the number of herring gulls have been continued.

2.7 Public visits

In principle, the public does not have access to the Reserve, apart from the sea dyke (motor-cars excluded). Visitors have to report, explain their reasons and ask for permission. In 1977, 1,098 visitors were recorded, including 738 in groups (from France and 14 other countries), in 1978 there were 1,520 visitors (1,073 in groups) from 12 countries. The reason for visits is usually ornithology. Furthermore, the wardens supply between 1,500 to 2,000 people with information about the Reserve, and this burden is considerable at the height of the season in view of the limited means available. It is doubtful whether the staff would be able to cope with a larger number of group visits.

3. PROSPECTS

The Reserve could be extended further here and there. In particular, it would be highly desirable for the lake at Le Fournelet, which is outstanding, to be classified and protected from hunting. In other sectors, to the west of the Vaccarès, plans should be made for shelters which are lacking in this region.

However, any extension should include provision for a marked improvement in the equipment and doubtless one or two extra wardens.

It is essential to develop public information which is so useful for nature conservation by using more adequate means. There is no lack of ideas!

4. THE PARK AND THE RESERVE

I was struck by the "hiatus" between these two institutions, although, in principle, they are complementary.

The lack of proportion between the means available to each one is obvious: in addition to the costly investments at Ginès and Rousty, whose luxurious and extravagantly large installations admittedly make an impression; if I am not mistaken, the Park receives, in principle, four million francs per annum. But everything is static and to all appearances the atmosphere is one of peaceful "hibernation": in short, it is a display for tourists. There is one positive aspect: excellent information leaflets. There are very few exhibits connected with nature at the Park Museum, which is itself a fine achievement, and the Reserve is scarcely mentioned. It is permissible to ask whether there is not a certain amount of contempt for the pitiful "natives" who, for their part, courageously spare no efforts on the ground (and are in no way jealous: they prefer open-air patrols to working in the office).

And yet the Reserve is renowned throughout the world, and its task, although different, is incomparably more stimulating. Whilst it must undoubtedly preserve its independence, it could and should be treated with greater consideration by the Park.

5. CONCLUSION

I recommend that the Camargue Nature Reserve's European Diploma be renewed.

I would urge the committee to take action in order to ensure that the Reserve's material requirements, particularly in the form of equipment, be satisfied without delay and provided for on a regular basis.

Lastly, I should like to express my admiration for the director of the Reserve and the staff who, although working in difficult circumstances and subjected to revolting attacks which have remained unpunished, have not lost heart - but are continuing their task with conviction and devotion.

Geneva 17 December 1979

(signed) P Geroudet