

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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# CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS - PROTECTED AREAS

Application of the Montecristo Island  
Nature Reserve

Expert's report  
prepared by the Secretariat

Secretariat memorandum  
prepared by  
the Directorate of Environment  
and Local Authorities

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## Introduction

The Italian authorities have presented the application of Montecristo Island for the award of the European Diploma. The Committee of experts for protected areas examined this application at its meeting in June 1986 and agreed that, from a scientific standpoint, the area, already protected by Italian law, was of European interest. The next stage, according to the regulations for the European Diploma, was an on-the-spot appraisal.

This task was entrusted to Professor Noirfalise, who for many years has headed the Belgian delegation to the CDSN ; also Prof. Noirfalise and I had been to Montecristo in June 1986, and have been following the changes in its management for over a decade. I accompanied him when he visited the island from 8 to 11 October 1986.

## History

Montecristo Island lies in the Tyrrhenian Sea, to the south-east of the island of Erba. It is 1,031 ha in area and has some 16 km of coastline. It is now a nature reserve.

The document submitted with the application includes full details for assessing the importance of the reserve. I propose, however, to summarise the main landmarks in the island's history.

- i. It is clear from numerous vestiges (ruins of the monastery, ruins of a watermill, terraces formerly used for cultivation, etc) that several centuries ago the island had a comparatively large population in relation to its surface area.
- ii. In the 19th century, it became the property of the royal house of Italy and was turned into a hunting ground (royal villa with outbuildings - cages for rearing game animals etc).
- iii. Until 1971, the island was the headquarters of a company which used it for hunting and inflicted severe damage on the fauna and flora.
- iv. On 21 May 1971, the management of the island was entrusted to the national authority responsible for the administration of state forests. In the Ministerial Decree of 4 March 1971 declaring Montecristo Island a nature reserve, it is stated that "access shall be authorised only for research purposes, for nature study excursions and for the management, supervision and re-establishment of the natural equilibria, to the exclusion of all other human activities".

## European Diploma

The Montecristo nature reserve complies with two major criteria for the award of the European Diploma :

- i. It is undoubtedly of European scientific interest : it provides a habitat for 477 animal species, including 25 endemics, and for 837 species of flora including Quercus ilex (oak) on granite, something quite exceptional in the Mediterranean region. Moreover, the island is surrounded by a marine reserve extending 500 m out to sea, where fishing and tourism are prohibited. The original natural environment is being reconstituted there in a typically Mediterranean insular habitat.

- ii. It is adequately protected by regulations (Ministerial Decree of 4 March 1971 - Ministerial Decree of 5 April 1979 - Ministerial Decree of 2 April 1981) and by its situation which offers very few mooring facilities for boats except at Cala maestra, the site of the royal villa and the houses of the two wardens who are the island's only inhabitants.

In conclusion, the expert will recommend that the European Diploma be awarded subject to a number of recommendations designed to help the authorities concerned with their task of reconstituting a balanced natural environment.

#### Recommendations

Where management is concerned, Montecristo Island may be divided into three parts :

- i. The area of Cala maestra with the valley leading to it : this is a man-made, artificially landscaped zone comprising the royal villa and its outbuildings, the wardens' housing, a museum with a biological research laboratory, a landing stage, the historic ruins (the monastery, the mill and the "Saint's cave") and introduced vegetation (numerous traces of terrace-grown crops, eucalyptus, ailantus, pine and large numbers of exotic species). This zone must be considered as a managed nature reserve.
- ii. The remainder of the island, which has all the characteristics of a strict nature reserve.
- iii. A 500 m wide marine belt, which is a biological reserve for the protection of the marine fauna and flora,

It is proposed to recommend as follows :

1. that the repair work be completed on the existing buildings that provide accommodation for authorised research workers and for the wardens ; that an appropriate method be found for ridding this part of the island of the rats which proliferate there; and that the conversion of the museum and the laboratory be completed ;
2. that the work of eradicating the ailanthus, which is extremely invasive, continue ;
3. that the existing oaks, the saplings especially, be protected against goats (by erecting wire fencing around certain patches). The eucalyptus has ceased to throw out new shoots and will therefore disappear naturally.
4. that the goat species typical of Montecristo be restored. There are too many goats for the island to accommodate (over 400 have been counted) ; all hybrid individuals will have to be eliminated (ten were killed in September 1986 and this goat population control campaign will continue in 1987) ;
5. that research work on the marine fauna and flora begin and then be developed. The Minister for the Merchant Navy, who has competence in the matter, has agreed in principle to extend the marine protection zone from 500 to 1,000 m. This measure would greatly benefit the subsequent reintroduction of the Mediterranean monk seal, although we have discovered that there are only limited possibilities for this ;

6. that a specific research project be conducted, with a view to reducing the ever-increasing rabbit population ;
7. that a new permanent system of beacons be set up in order to keep private yachts away from the island's approaches (the official navigation manuals for this region explain that Montecristo is a nature reserve and that landing there is prohibited) ;
8. that the historic heritage (monastery, mill, Saint's cave) be restored ;
9. that guided tours be organised. Parties of visitors will be taken only to the Cala maestra area (the zone designated as a managed nature reserve). About 1,000 visitors were admitted in 1986. For political reasons, these visits cannot be discontinued. The conditions are very restrictive : only one shipping company is authorised to bring visitors and these have to have special authorisation and be accompanied by foresters. The route they follow is carefully demarcated and includes only the historic heritage and the museum. The visitors return to the boat immediately after the guided tour. We have been over the route and can say that these tours will not impair the vegetation or the fauna. They operate from the end of June until October.
10. The work of the island's staff (two full-time wardens plus two extra wardens during the touristic season) is organised satisfactorily. Experience of organising guided tours suggests that it may be necessary to reconsider this problem in the near future.

### Conclusion

The European Diploma would, if awarded, be extremely timely, since the Italian authorities concerned, in particular the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, have sufficient financial resources and are ready to invest some of these in the island's management. The Diploma and the recommendations of the Council of Europe would be of great help to them.