Strasbourg, 14 March 2024 **T-PVS/DE(2024)12**

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas

Council of Europe, Palais, Room 16
20 – 21 February 2024

MEETING REPORT

Document prepared by
the Secretariat of the Bern Convention

The Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas met in Strasbourg on 20 and 21 February 2024. The Standing Committee/Bureau is invited to:

- Take note of the meeting report of the Group of Specialists;
- Consider expanding the target 1.3 of the Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 regarding formal protected areas to the European Diploma and using the assets of the European Diploma, namely the management and governance of protected areas for raising awareness about conservation within the frame of the implementation of the Strategic Plan;
- Welcome the application of the Sierra Nevada National Park for the European Diploma;
- Consider forwarding the draft Resolutions renewing the Diploma to 7 areas (see document T-PVS/DE(2024)03) to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption;
- Take note of the 2 on-the-spot appraisal visits to be carried out in 2024;
- Welcome the preparations of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma and thank the Spanish authorities for their invitation to host a celebratory event.

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1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

The meeting was opened on Tuesday 20 February 2024 by the Chair of the Group of Specialists, Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic). He welcomed the new member of the Group of Specialists appointed by Luxembourg and the experts attending the meeting for the first time, and apologized the members nominated by Germany and Georgia. He thanked all contributors to the European Diploma for Protected Areas: the experts, Secretariat, site managers and other stakeholders.

2. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

The Group adopted the draft agenda (see Appendix 1)

3. GENERAL INFORMATION ON ACTIVITIES PRESENTING AN INTEREST FOR THE WORK OF THE GROUP OF SPECIALISTS

3.a Short presentation of the report of the meeting of the group in 2023 and of the activities undertaken during the last year

The Chair briefly wrapped up the outcomes and conclusions of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists, elaborated further in the next point.

3.b Follow up by the Secretariat on the conclusions of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists

The Secretariat reported that 6 on-the-spot appraisal visits including a combined one took place in 2023. Their format had been slightly adapted so as to associate senior experts together with experts who had less experience with the European Diploma in order to enlarge the number of experts in capacity to carry out on-the-spot appraisal visits and to ensure the renewal of the pool. 5 out of the 7 visits involved 2 independent experts.

The Secretariat informed the participants that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the Resolutions renewing the European Diploma of 7 areas on 14 June 2023.
The Secretariat further reported that it followed up bilaterally with the managers of several areas identified in 2023 as requiring special attention. Further details could be found under item 6b of the meeting report.

Finally, the Secretariat informed that a concept note regarding the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma to be celebrated in 2025 had been prepared and would be presented and discussed under agenda item 8.

3.c Consequences of the cessation of the membership of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe and of the freeze of the technical cooperation with Belarus

The Secretariat reported that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided on 14 June 2023 that its Resolution ruling the European Diploma for Protected Areas (Resolution CM/ResDip(2008)1) would not apply anymore to the areas holding the Diploma located in Belarus and in the Russian Federation until further notice. (See decision CM/Del/Dec(2023)1469/9.1b)
As a consequence of this decision, the 2 areas located in Belarus and 4 areas located in the Russian Federation had been removed from the list and map of the Diploma holding areas and from the Dashboard of the European Diploma.

3.d Vision and Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030

The Secretariat informed that the 41st Standing Committee to the Bern Convention adopted in 2021 a Vision for the period to 2030 (T-PVS(2021)14) and in 2023 the 43rd Standing Committee complemented it by adopting a strategic plan (T-PVS(2023)18).

The moto of the Vision was that "*By 2030, declines in biodiversity are halted, leading to recovery of wildlife and habitats, improving the lives of people and contributing to the health of the planet.*"

The Strategic Plan provided a guiding framework for the programmes and activities that were needed to achieve the Vision. The core of the Plan was a set of 5 agreed goals and 11 targets to be achieved by 2030.

While the European Diploma was not specifically mentioned in the Strategic Plan, Goal 1 referred to protected areas and read:

GOAL 1: The area, connectivity, integrity and resilience of natural and semi-natural ecosystems is increased, including through protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures covering at least 30% of the land and of the sea areas.

The implementation of the Bern Convention´s Strategic Plan is a contribution of the pan-European region to meeting the goals and targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The members of the Group of Specialists welcomed the Vision and Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention but regretted that the European Diploma was not referred to in the Strategic Plan and wished that the target 1.3 regarding formal protected areas was expanded to the European Diploma.

Members further noted that the asset of the European Diploma, namely the management and governance of protected areas should be valued within the Strategic Plan and used for raising awareness about conservation within the frame of the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

4. APPLICATION OF THE SIERRA NEVADA NATIONAL PARK (SPAIN) FOR THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS

Mr Francisco de Asís Muñoz Collado, Director of the Sierra Nevada National Park presented the Application of the National Park.

The national park contained the Mulhacén peak, the highest mountain of the Iberian Peninsula. It had many national and international designations (National Park (IUCN category II), Ramsar site, Natura 2000 site, IUCN Green List, etc.). It was considered as a hotspot for biodiversity hosting many endemic species, 48 species protected under the EU Birds Directive and 15 plant species listed in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive.

There was a strong cooperation between the management of the national park and the scientific community within the frame of an Observatory of Global Change.
The national park was a vulnerable area subject to climate change, desertification, reduction of hydric resources, wildfires, touristic pressure, economic interests, etc.

The conservation and management of the Sierra Nevada National Park was grounded on a robust statutory legislation at regional, at national and at international levels.

A Participation Council was involved in the management of the area. It was a participatory organ with an advisory role, in which all sectors of the Administrations, stakeholders, NGOs and Municipalities were represented.

Management plans were in place for the different protected entities.

The members of the Group of Specialists welcomed the application of the Sierra Nevada National Park and considered that the area was of exceptional European interest justifying the award of the Diploma.

The Group of Specialists declared the application admissible and entrusted the Secretariat to undertake an on-the-spot expert appraisal to confirm the European interest and assess the effectiveness of existing conservation measures.

The application should be re-examined in 2025 in the light of the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal visit.

5. RESULTS OF THE ADVISORY VISITS, DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS TO THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

5.a Seitseminen National Park (Finland)

The independent expert, Mr Maurice Hoffmann, presented the outcomes of his on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Seitseminen National Park to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)08). Based on his findings, he suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Seitseminen National Park for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent expert for his presentation and endorsed a draft resolution attaching 8 recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Seitseminen National Park as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

5.b Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari) (Finland)

The independent expert, Ms Blanca Ramos, presented the outcomes of her on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)04). Based on her findings, she suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent expert for her presentation and endorsed a draft resolution attaching 9 recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

5.c Peak District National Park (UK)

The independent expert, Mr Michael Schimek, who carried out the on-the-spot appraisal visit together with Ms Blanca Ramos, presented the outcomes of their on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Peak District National Park to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)05). Based on their findings, he suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Peak District National Park for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent experts for their presentation and endorsed a draft resolution attaching fifteen recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Peak District National Park as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

5.d Muddus, Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks (Sweden)

The independent expert, Ms Cigdem Adem, who carried out the on-the-spot appraisal visit together with Mr Pierre Galland, presented the outcomes of their combined on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Muddus National Park and to the Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)06). Based on their findings, she suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Muddus National Park and of the Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent experts for their presentation and endorsed draft resolutions attaching eleven recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Muddus National Park and of the Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

5.e Siebengebirge Nature Reserve (Germany)

The independent expert, Mr Peter Skoberne, who carried out the on-the-spot appraisal visit together with Ms Renata Krzyściak-kosińska presented the outcomes of their on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)09). Based on their findings, he suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent experts for their presentation and endorsed a draft resolution attaching 9 recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

5.f Kuşcenneti National Park (Türkiye)

The independent expert, Mr Peter Skoberne, wo carried out the on-the-spot appraisal visit together with Mr Luc Hoogenstein presented the outcomes of their on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Kuşcenneti National Park to the members of the Group of Specialists (report T-PVS/DE(2024)10). Based on their findings, he suggested the renewal of the European Diploma of the Kuşcenneti National Park for an additional period of 10 years.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the independent experts for their presentation and endorsed a draft resolution attaching 7 recommendations to the renewal of the European Diploma of the Kuşcenneti National Park as reflected in the document T-PVS/DE(2024)03.

The Group of Specialists paid tribute to Mr Tansu Gürpınar, former director of the Kuşcenneti National Park and outstanding conservationist, who initiated the application for the European Diploma and who passed away in 2023.

6. PRESENTATION OF THE REPORTING RESULTS BY THE SECRETARIAT AND THE GROUP OF SPECIALISTS

6.a Analysis of the annual reports

The Secretariat recalled the objectives of the annual report and the Group's mandate, which are defined by the Resolution CM/ResDip(2008)1 on the revised regulations for the European Diploma for Protected Areas. It also highlighted that conditions and recommendations of each area had been integrated in the nominative reporting templates which were shared with area managers individually. This approach helped site managers to address key information and meet the reporting expectations and therefore will continue to be used in the future.

In 2023, the number of annual reports received increased from 60 in 2022 to 63 out of the possible 66 areas considered for the 2023 reporting. The Secretariat recalled the scoring system used for the European Diploma Dashboard, which has been updated following the reception of the 2023 reports. The scoring system currently acknowledges the extent to which areas are meeting reporting obligations. The Secretariat reported a significant improvement of the scores. There was no area with a red flag anymore and there were only 4 remaining areas with orange flags.

Following the request of the Group of Specialists to look into the possibility to assess the quality of the reporting, the Secretariat introduced in 2021 a scoring system whose implementation was lacking on criteria. In 2022 a traffic light system indicating whether the fulfilment of the conditions/recommendations attached to renewal of the Diploma was achieved, underway or not yet started replaced the scoring system. At the request of the Group of Specialists a methodological note on the use of the assessment forms of the annual reports (T-PVS/DE(2024)02) has been shared with the Group of Specialists.

As in previous years, members of the Group of Specialists had been involved in the assessment of the annual reports by using the assessment forms. The document T-PVS/DE(2024)11 provided the conclusions of the Group for each Diploma holding area. The Group discussed key overall findings of their assessments and highlighted challenges and gaps in the implementation of the recommendations and fulfilment of the conditions attached to the European Diploma. The Group expressed concern regarding the construction of a new nuclear reactor in the vicinity of the Minsmere Nature Reserve (UK), the approval of an application for a physical extension and extension of operation at Swanworth Quarry in Purbeck Heritage Coast (UK) and the budget reduction in Store Mosse National Park (Sweden).

Overall, the Group of Specialists found the annual reporting of a good quality, although it was highlighted that some of the reports included the same text as in previous years and lacked specific information to address the recommendations/conditions. The Group of Specialists also noted significant variation of quality of the reports and regretted that some reporters used acronyms without defining them.

Regarding the assessment forms, the Group of Specialists acknowledged the need to extract from the reports a few elements to justify the extent to which the recommendations and conditions were complied with and the colour of the flag. The Group of Specialists pointed to the difficulty to evaluate the degree of implementation of transitive or continued actions.

Considering the lack of information reported on the logo of the Diploma, the Group of Specialists suggested to send Diploma holding areas managers the logo of the Diploma as well as a gentle reminder that the display and use of the logo is required.

To address the lack of specificity and scarce information of certain reports, the Group of Specialists suggested to provide managers with guidance on how to fill in the reporting templates.

The Group of Specialists also suggested to add to the assessment forms the reason of the award of the Diploma.

Finally, the Group of Specialists suggested to assess whether an online reporting tool could improve the quantity and quality of reports received.

The Group of Specialists welcomed the results of the 2023 annual reporting and thanked the managers of the Diploma holding areas for complying with the reporting obligation, as well as the members of the Group of Specialists and the Secretariat for their contribution to the analysis of the reports.

The Group of Specialists particularly thanked the Ukrainian authorities for complying with reporting requirements despite the on-going war.

The Group of Specialists invited area managers to improve the quality of their reports when possible, ensuring that all the elements included in the recommendations/conditions are fully addressed with sufficient level of detail.

The Group of Specialists mandated the Secretariat to liaise with the managers of the Minsmere Nature Reserve (UK) and the Purbeck Heritage Coast (UK) to obtain more details on the possible impact of the construction of the Sizewell nuclear reactor and the extension of the Swanworth Quarry on the Diploma holding areas and to report back to the Group of Specialists in 2025.

6.b Follow up on the areas identified in 2023 as requiring particular attention:

- **Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve (Germany)**

Last year members of the Group of Specialists had been consulted in writing regarding the construction plans of wind turbines in the vicinity of the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve.

The Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas expressed its deep concerns regarding the construction plans of windfarms in the vicinity of the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve. Already in 2019, within the frame of the discussions regarding the renewal of the European Diploma of the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve, the members of the Group of Specialists flagged the threats of possible infrastructure constructions on the hills surrounding the Diploma holding area. Their concerns were reflected in the sixth recommendation attached to the Resolution of the Committee of Ministers renewing the European Diploma to the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve (Resolution

CM/ResDip(2019)2) which reads: “preserve the integrity of the landscape around the basin of Bad Wurzach and avoid the construction of technical infrastructure on the hills and hilltops in the visual range of the Wurzacher Ried.”

The Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas believed that the protection of the ecological integrity of the landscape, mentioned in the above recommendation, not only refers to the conservation and maintenance of the significant or characteristic features/scenery of a landscape as defined in the Council of Europe Landscape Convention, but also to the preservation of the ecological processes and the ecosystem integrity of the species and habitats in the region and in the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve itself.

Mr Siegfried Roth, manager of the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve informed members of the Group of Specialists of the ongoing construction plans and their possible impact on the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve.

Germany aimed to become climate neutral by 2045. To achieve this goal, 2% of the land area in Baden Württemberg was to be secured as priority zones for wind energy production (1.8 %) and open space photovoltaics (0.2 %).

In order to define the location of these zones, the regional planning authority is currently drafting a regional energy plan. Public consultation is currently open until the end of April 2024.

After all the twelve regional planning authorities in Baden-Württemberg have finalized their plans, it will be checked if the twelve plans jointly fulfill the 2 % goal defined for Baden-Württemberg. If yes, wind power projects could only be planned in designated priority areas located outside the Wurzach basin, but they do not have to undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment anymore. In the case the twelve plans jointly do not reach the 2 % goal, the construction of wind farms could take place outside the foreseen priority areas even in sensitive places.

The Federal, regional and local authorities wished to secure the award of the European Diploma. A protection zone whose boundaries were aligned with the Wurzach basin had been topographically defined.

While no wind energy priority zones had been planned in the Wurzach basin protection zone itself, part of the wind turbines would nevertheless remain visible from the nature reserve.

Investigations revealed that no breeding bird species would be affected by wind farms in the surrounding priority zones and no wind energy priority zones would be located within the migratory bird corridor/flyway.

There were currently three wind parc projects. Two of these sites (“Osterhofen” and “Alttanner Wald”) were located outside the Wurzach Basin and in a planned wind energy priority zone.

The third site (“Hummelluckenwald”) was not included in a planned wind energy priority zone in the current designation process due to the expected environmental impact and its location in the Wurzach basin protection zone. As approval for this site had already been submitted prior to the designation of the priority zones, it had to be dealt with separately and an Environmental Impact Assessment would need to be carried out.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked Mr Siegfried Roth for his presentation and took note of the information provided.
Considering that the Wurzach basin was designated as protection zone and that the draft subregional Energy Plan excluded wind energy priority zones located within the protection zone, noting that, according to studies, birds would not be affected by the wind turbines located in the priority zones, noting also that in case the subregional Energy Plan would not be approved, wind farms could be constructed even in the Wurzach basin protection zone, the members of the Group of Specialists agreed with the delineation of the Wurzach basin protection zone. Furthermore, to be consistent with the sixth recommendation attached to the Resolution of the Committee of Ministers renewing the European Diploma to the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve (Resolution CM/ResDip(2019)2), the members of the Group of Specialists requested the competent authorities to relocate the wind turbines planned at the Hummelluckenwald in a wind energy priority zone outside the Wurzach basin protection zone.

- **Scandola Nature Reserve (France)**

The Secretariat recalled that in 2020 the Group of Specialists recommended unanimously not to renew the Diploma to the Scandola Nature Reserve, due to the considerable lack of progress and minimal attempts of communication with the Secretariat, despite several warnings by the Group over the past years. The Group of Specialists mandated the Secretariat to monitor the area, where possible in liaison with other organisations such as UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, and to report annually at the Group of Specialists meeting.

For the first time since 2020, the authorities have submitted and annual report.

In 2020, the regional authorities had agreed to initiate a process for the creation of a Nature Reserve of Corsica which would encompass Scandola. This would result in the need to revise the decree creating the Scandola Nature Reserve.

In order to control the tourism frequentation, the managing authorities had requested a ban of anchoring and jet-skiing in the entire Scandola Nature Reserve.

Moreover, since 2021, the Maritime Prefecture had issued orders prohibiting the passage, anchoring and mooring of any vessel near osprey nests during the breeding season.

The Management Plan adopted in 2017 had come to an end in 2022 and the new one would be elaborated once the decree creating the nature reserve would have been revised.

In September 2023, the World Heritage Committee examined the situation of the Scandola Nature Reserve.

The Committee took note that:

- over-tourism had an increasingly negative impact on biodiversity, due to the disturbance by motor vessels on the maritime front of the Scandola Nature Reserve during the peak tourist season, resulting in poor nesting success of the resident population of ospreys, and to the serious impact of mooring of recreational boats on the Posidonia seagrass beds.

- a comprehensive Management Plan including a sustainable tourism strategy was still pending.

and requested the authorities to:

- urgently implement the climate change monitoring and adaptation measures foreseen in the draft Management Plan.

- include in the revision of the decree of the Scandola Nature Reserve adequate measures to address tourism pressure and limit visitation and provides for the expansion of the National Reserve to include a larger marine component.

- include in the planned regional marine nature reserve in the north-western maritime zone of the island, the extension of the marine zone of the Scandola Nature Reserve.

- take immediate and urgent measures to regulate mooring and the number of vessels permitted in the maritime part of the Scandola Nature Reserve in order to reduce significantly the disturbance and impacts of mooring.

The Group of Specialists thanked the managing authorities for submitting a report in 2023 and encouraged them to speed up the revision of the decree of the nature reserve, to create as soon as possible the regional terrestrial and marine nature reserve and to develop without delay the management plan with a special emphasis on a sustainable tourism strategy.

- **Doñana National Park (Spain)**

In 2020, the Group of Specialists decided to postpone the renewal of the Diploma of the Doñana National Park and to seek information on the legal proceedings engaged by the European Commission and on the findings of a reactive mission of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre.

The Judgment of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued on 24 June 2021 states that Spanish authorities have failed to adopt appropriate measures to prevent the deterioration of the natural habitats and the habitats of species located within the protected areas of the Doñana region. It further states that overexploitation of the Almonte-Marismas aquifer has led to desiccation of the peridunal lagoons of the Doñana National Park and, as a result, to the deterioration of the protected natural areas which depend on that aquifer, including several natural habitats and habitats of species protected by the Habitats Directive.

The Report of the Joint WHC / IUCN / RAMSAR reactive monitoring mission to the Doñana National Park which took place from 25 to 28 February 2020 resulted in 15 recommendations inviting the Spanish authorities to, inter alia, ensure the accelerated and urgent closure of all illegal water wells, to implement the Special Management Plan of the Irrigation Zones and to ensure the recovery of the aquifers to good status by no later than 2027, to ensure that any new development projects are properly assessed, and to encourage sustainable agriculture practices.

In 2022, the Group of Specialists had called on the relevant authorities to comply with condition No. 2 attached to the 2013 renewal of the European Diploma (Resolution CM/ResDip(2010)13) and to

report to the Group on how they intend to address the ECJ judgement and the recommendations of the World Heritage Centre, IUCN and Ramsar Convention.

In the annual report of 2022, the managing authorities elaborated extensively on the extent to which they complied with condition No. 2. The 2023 annual report was unfortunately mostly copied from 2022.

The highlight of 2023 has been the signing of the agreement for Doñana between the Junta de Andalucía and the Government of Spain, which was a very important step forward in the protection of this National Park.

It represented a massive financial investment of more than €1 400 million to ensure the conservation of Doñana, promote sustainable development models in its area of influence, reverse the environmental degradation of this emblematic area and recover its ecological functioning, to the sustainable management of water resources and the conservation and restoration of biodiversity divided as follows:

- An Action Framework for Doñana mainly focusing on the management of water resources and eco-hydrological and biodiversity restoration with a budget of 350 M€.

- An Action Framework for sustainable territorial development of the areas of influence of the Doñana natural area, completing the previous one and focusing on the social and economic dimensions of sustainability with an additional budget of 350 M€.

- An Action Framework for the territorial development of the area of influence of the Doñana natural area, financed by the Junta de Andalucía with more than 700 M€ for hydraulic works, support for the fishing sector and aid for the transformation of crops to forest land.

Unfortunately, there was again no information in the annual report on actions undertaken or planned to address the concerns of the EC and of the World Heritage Centre.

Following the Joint WHC / IUCN / RAMSAR Reactive monitoring mission of February 2020, the managing authorities have reported to the World Heritage Centre and the report was examined at the 45th World Heritage Committee meeting in September 2023.

The reported efforts to reduce groundwater usage from the Doñana aquifer, including through continued inspections, closures of illegal wells and illegally irrigated farmlands were appreciated. The substantial increase in resources for the Guadalquivir Hydrographical Confederation including the confirmed relocation of the most eastern wells were particularly welcomed. However, despite these efforts, the fact that three underground water bodies have remained overexploited since 2020 remained a reason for concern, especially considering the still unresolved scientific uncertainty regarding the extent to which groundwater abstraction impacts the property's OUV. Despite the assurance provided by the authorities in their letter received on 13 June 2023 that no additional water rights would be conceded from the aquifer in the future, the legislative change proposed by the Parliament of Andalusia to legalise existing illegal wells was of significant concern, as this was contrary to the recommendations of the 2020 Reactive Monitoring mission and the commitments and efforts of the authorities to close illegal wells, which was crucial for preserving the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property.

Noting that the Hydrological Plan for the Guadalquivir basin (2021-2027) was expected to be finalised by the end of 2022, the authorities should confirm whether this Plan has been approved, and

whether it was informed by the Strategic Environmental Assessment, including an assessment of the cumulative impacts of water use, and agricultural, industrial and commercial development occurring at present on the Guadalquivir River Basin.

The potential impacts of the ongoing major drought that are compounded by the above challenges were of serious concern. Two of the five major habitats (marshes and lagoons) have almost disappeared in 2022.

The area could face not only the potential danger of groundwater over-extraction but also an ascertained danger if drought would become a more permanent condition, including as a result of climate change. This emphasizes the need to continue to urgently implement the recommendations of the 2020 mission and reduce groundwater usage, increase resistance/resilience in ecosystems there and address scientific uncertainties.

Noting that the environmental assessment procedure for the reopening of the Aznalcóllar mine was ongoing, authorities were invited to prepare a clear risk preparedness plan and establish rapid emergency response capacities.

The authorities were invited to submit a new report on 1st December 2024.

The members of the Group of Specialists regretted that no dedicated report on how the authorities will address the European Court of Justice judgement and implement the recommendations of UNESCO´s World Heritage Centre, IUCN and Ramsar Convention was received. They nevertheless acknowledged the information provided as part of the annual report and in the report submitted to the World Heritage Centre and took note of the measures planned.
The members of the Group of Specialists mandated the Secretariat to continue monitoring progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the World Heritage Centre, IUCN and Ramsar Convention and on the follow up given to the ECJ judgement. It further requested the authorities to report in detail on how the huge financial resources provided by the 3 Action Frameworks will be used and to share with the Secretariat their report to the World Heritage Centre expected on 1st December 2024.

- **Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve (Germany)**

In February 2019, because of the very dry and hot 2018 summer, the authorities of the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve were envisaging to excavate a gravel bank to allow safer ship manoeuvres in low water times on the Danube which would constitute a threat to rare fish species and wildlife species living on the banks.

While no excavations took place in 2019, flood water altered the gravel banks. In addition, clear cuts had been made both within the Diploma holding area as well as in the nature protected area recommended to be included in the European Diploma holding area following the on-the-spot appraisal visit carried out in 2016.

Considering the breaches of several recommendations (1 and 6) attached to the renewal of the Diploma in 2017 the Group of Specialists mandated an extra-ordinary on the spot appraisal visit before the situation deteriorates further and more forest is cut down and assess the extent to which the recommendations attached to the last renewal are complied with.

The Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve benefited from an extra-ordinary on-the-spot appraisal visit in 2021 and the Group of Specialists called on the managing authorities to implement without delay conditions and recommendations grounded on the findings of the extra-ordinary on-the-spot appraisal in addition to those attached to the renewal of the Diploma in 2018.

Despite the request of the Group of Specialists and the letter of the Secretariat addressed to the managing authorities to report on the implementation of both sets of conditions and recommendations, the reports of the last 2 years focused only on the implementation of the conditions and recommendations of the renewal of the Diploma in 2018.

In 2023, the managing authorities have reported on both sets of conditions and recommendations. In addition to the completion of the planned extension of the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve by adjoining the Nature Reserve Hirschberg and Altmuehlleiten to the already protected Danube gorge (already referred to in the 2022 annual report), the implementation of almost all the conditions and recommendations was underway.

Resulting from the merging of the nature reserves “Weltenburger Enge“ and “Hirschberg and Altmühlleiten“ stricter rules applied to the entire merged area. It was now forbidden to camp, stay overnight or make fires in the entire area. Moreover, walking was prohibited on the right riverbank between the Weltenburg landing place and river kilometre 2416, and also on large parts of the left riverbank. In 2023 appropriate prohibition and information signs were set up on paths and gravel banks.

It was forbidden to walk, ride or drive on the southern end of the Celtic wall, which was inside the core area. The entire length of the Celtic wall was also marked as unsuitable for cycling. Furthermore, navigation was regulated, 2 wardens had been hired, access to roads and paths was restricted, controls were reinforced, etc.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the managing authorities for reporting on both sets of conditions and recommendations, appreciated the progress made and encouraged them to continue their efforts and to report back the same way in 2024.

- **Krimml Waterfalls Natural Site (Austria)**

The Secretariat of the Bern Convention had been alerted that the regional government of Salzburg decided to take steps towards building retention basins and dams in the valleys of the Hohe Tauern National Park overlapping with the Diploma holding area and Natura 2000 sites. These infrastructures were aimed to prevent floods downstream in the future.

The Group of Specialists mandated the Secretariat to monitor the situation and to report back in 2024.

The Secretariat liaised with the managing authorities. According to them, there was still no official project concerning flood prevention in the Salzach Valley. Therefore, the authorities could not provide detailed plans and descriptions of the project neither could they elaborate on the impact of these flood prevention measures could have on the Krimml Waterfalls.

According to the information publicly available, a single large retention basin in the Krimmlerachen-valley was planned. This basin would be used to reduce the peak water flow during a flood event of extraordinary magnitude. In past decades a large part of the precipitation felt as snow. This meant that part of the precipitation was retained naturally and steadily released over the next days and therefore

the peak water flows were reduced. Due to the rise of temperatures during the winter and to the lack of snowfall in the cold period of the year, severe floods were now more common than ever. The planned retention basin supposedly mimics the effects snowfall had in past decades, as the floodgates would only be partially closed if the flood prevention measures in the Salzach Valley were no longer capable of preventing severe damage to infrastructure and settlements during floods of extraordinary magnitude.

According to the information available, the Krimml Waterfalls should not be impacted except during major flood events, which could be compared to the impact snowfall had in past decades.

The recommendation of the Secretariat is to continue monitoring the situation and once more official information becomes available, to assess the possible impact this planned retention basin on the Krimml Waterfalls.

The members of the Group of Specialists thanked the managing authorities for the information provided and mandated the Secretariat to continue monitoring the situation, and once more official information becomes available, to assess the possible impact this planned retention basin on the Krimml Waterfalls, and to report back to the Group of Specialists in 2025.

7. On-the-spot appraisal visits in 2024

The Group of Specialists supported the organisation of an on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Sierra Nevada National Park (Spain) to confirm the European interest, assess the effectiveness of existing conservation measures, and obtain any additional information it may need to decide whether to award the Diploma.

It also mandated an on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Regional Park Gallipoli Cognato (Italy) to assess the opportunity to renew its European Diploma for the first time.

8. Preparation of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma

2025 will mark the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma. In December 2023, the Spanish authorities informed the 43rd Standing Committee their preparedness to host a meeting bringing together the managers of the Diploma holding areas back-to-back with the annual meeting of the Group of Specialists in the Sierra Nevada National Park.

A concept note presenting the proposed celebratory activities had been shared with participants (T-PVS/DE(2024)01).

It was proposed to revise and update a publication on the highlights of the European Diploma which was produced for the 50th anniversary.

It was also proposed to renew the experience of a round table with the managers of all the Diploma holding areas which would aim to discuss transversal maters such as climate change, the touristic pressure or the development of green energy infrastructures within or in the vicinity of Diploma holding areas.

Finally, it was suggested to design a communication and awareness campaign on the achievements of the European Diploma during 60 years of existence and its contribution to human wellbeing and to human rights protection.

Participants welcomed the activities proposed as part of the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma. Upon suggestion of the Director of the Sierra Nevada National Park, the Secretariat informed that the meeting of the managers of the Diploma holding areas could be held during the second half of May 2025 in Granada.

The members of the Group of Specialists also welcomed the possible participation of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and of the Minister for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge of Spain. They further supported the involvement of the authorities of Andalusia which have the responsibility of protected areas as well as the participation of the managers of the all the Spanish national parks.

Finally, the Group of Specialists was supporting a press conference and issuing a press release.

9. Any other business

No other business was raised.

10. Date and place of the next meeting

The Secretariat informed participants that it was planned to hold the 2025 meeting of the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma back-to-back with the meeting of the managers of the Diploma holding areas in the Sierra Nevada National Park. In the light of the outcomes of the discussions under agenda item 8, the meeting could therefore take place in May 2025.

11. Conclusions of the meeting

The Chair thanked the members of the Group of Specialists, the independent experts, the management authorities of the European Diploma holding areas and the Secretariat for their huge efforts throughout the year and lively discussions and declared the meeting closed.

Annex I: Agenda of the meeting

		Documents	Expected results
Tuesday 20 February			
9.30	**1. Opening of the meeting** *Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic), Chair of the Group of Specialists*		
	2. Adoption of the agenda	Meeting agenda T-PVS/Agenda(2024)02 **For adoption**	Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the aims of the meeting and adopt the agenda.
	3. General information on activities presenting an interest for the work of the Group of Specialists		
	3.a Short presentation of the report of the meeting of the group in 2023 and of the activities undertaken during the last year *Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic), Chair of the Group of Specialists*	Report of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas T-PVS/DE(2023)11 **For information**	The salient points of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists are recalled.
	3.b Follow up by the Secretariat on the conclusions of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists *Presentation by the Secretariat*	Extract from the list of decisions and adopted texts on the European Diploma for Protected Areas, at the 43rd meeting of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention	Members of the Group of Specialists take note of the follow up given to the outcomes and decisions of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists.

	Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the follow up given to the conclusions of the 2023 meeting of the Group of Specialists and of the decisions of the 43rd Standing Committee regarding the European Diploma.	T-PVS/DE(2024)07 List of resolutions renewing the Diploma adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2023 CM/Del/Dec(2023)1469/9.1a **For information**	
	3.c Consequences of the cessation of the membership of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe and of the freeze of the technical cooperation with Belarus *Presentation by the Secretariat* *Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the consequences on the European Diploma of the exclusion of the Russian Federation from the Council of Europe and of the freeze of the cooperation with Belarus.*	Decision of the Committee of Ministers on the European Diploma for Protected Areas in the Russian Federation and Belarus CM/Del/Dec(2023)1469/9.1b **For information**	Members of the Group of Specialists take note that the Resolution of the Committee of Ministers CM/ResDip(2008)1 on the revised regulations for the European Diploma for Protected Areas is not applicable anymore in the Russian Federation and Belarus.
	3.d Vision and Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 *Presentation by the Secretariat* *Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the Vision and Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 and invited to reflect on how the monitoring of the European Diploma can contribute to the achievement of the Strategic Plan.*	Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 T-PVS(2023)18 Vision for the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 T-PVS(2021)14 **For discussion**	Members of the Group of Specialists take note of the Vision and Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030 and identify the targets of the Strategic Plan to which the monitoring of the European Diploma could contribute to.

	4. Application of the Sierra Nevada National Park (Spain) for the European Diploma for Protected Areas *Presentation by Mr Francisco de Asís Muñoz Collado, Director of the Sierra Nevada National Park* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss whether the Sierra Nevada National Park meets, in principle, the requirements of the European Diploma and to exchange views on possible follow up.*	Application of the Sierra Nevada National Park Application form	Follow up on the application of the Sierra Nevada National Park for the European Diploma is agreed on. An on-the-spot appraisal visit could be mandated to verify the application and assess the opportunity to award the European Diploma to the Sierra Nevada National Park.
	5. Results of the advisory visits, discussion and proposals to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe		
	5.a Seitseminen National Park (Finland) *Presentation by Mr Maurice Hoffmann* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.*	Report on the assessment visit to the Seitseminen National Park T-PVS/DE(2024)08 Draft resolution regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Seitseminen National Park T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution renewing the European Diploma to the Seitseminen National Park which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.
	5.b Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari) (Finland)	Report on the assessment visit to the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari)	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution renewing the European Diploma to the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari)

	Presentation by Ms Blanca Ramos *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.*	T-PVS/DE(2024)04 Draft resolution regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Ekenäs Archipelago National Park (Tammisaari) T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.
	5.c Peak District National Park (UK) *Presentation by Ms Blanca Ramos / Mr Michael Schimek* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.*	Report on the assessment visit to the Peak District National Park T-PVS/DE(2024)05 Draft resolution regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Peak District National Park T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution renewing the European Diploma to the Peak District National Park which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.
	5.d Muddus, Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks (Sweden) *Presentation by Mr Pierre Galland / Ms Çigdem Adem*	Report on the combined assessment visit to the Muddus, Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks T-PVS/DE(2024)06	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on the draft resolutions renewing the European Diplomas to the Muddus, Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.

	Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the combined on-the-spot appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.	Draft resolutions regarding the renewal of the European Diplomas for Protected Areas awarded to the Muddus, Sarek and Padjelanta National Parks T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	
	5.e Siebengebirge Nature Reserve (Germany) *Presentation by Mr Peter Skoberne / Ms Renata Kosińska* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.*	Report on the assessment visit to the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve T-PVS/DE(2024)09 Draft resolution regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution renewing the European Diploma to the Siebengebirge Nature Reserve which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.
	5.f Kuşcenneti National Park (Türkiye) *Presentation by Mr Peter Skoberne / Mr Luc Hoogenstein* *Tribute to Tansu Gürpınar* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the conclusions of the on-the-spot*	Report on the assessment visit to the Kuşcenneti National Park T-PVS/DE(2024)10 Draft resolution regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the Kuşcenneti National Park	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution renewing the European Diploma to Kuşcenneti National Park which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.

	appraisal visit report and to exchange views on possible follow up.	T-PVS/DE(2024)03 **For discussion and decision**	
	6. Presentation of the reporting results by the Secretariat and the Group of Specialists		
	6.a Analysis of the annual reports *Introduction by the Secretariat* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to share their comments on and discuss the outcomes of the annual reports and exchange views on possible follow up.*	2024 Compilation of the analysis of the annual reports T-PVS/DE(2024)11 2023 Compilation of the analysis of the annual reports T-PVS/DE(2023)09 Methodological note on the usage of the assessment forms of the annual reports T-PVS/DE(2024)02 Link to the dashboard of the European Diploma for Protected Areas **For discussion and decision**	The compliance of the Diploma holding areas with the conditions and/or recommendations attached to the award/renewal of the European Diploma is assessed and possible areas at risk requiring a closer monitoring or even an exceptional on the-spot appraisal visit are identified.
	6.b Follow up on the areas identified in 2023 as requiring particular attention: • Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve (Germany) ➢ Presentation by Mr Siegfried Roth, manager of the Nature Reserve ➢ Letter of the Ministry of the Environment, Climate Protection and the Energy Sector	2024 Compilation of the analysis of the annual reports T-PVS/DE(2024)11	Follow up on the monitoring of Diploma-holding areas requiring particular attention is agreed on.

	➢ Annex 0 Letter of the Regionalverband Bodensee-Oberschwaben ➢ Annex A3 Demarcation of the wind energy priority zones ➢ Annex B Maps • Scandola Nature Reserve (France) • Doñana National Park (Spain) ➢ Judgment of the European Court of Justice of 24 June 2021 ➢ Report on the Joint WHC / IUCN / RAMSAR Reactive monitoring mission to Doñana National Park, Spain (25-28 February 2020) • Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve (Germany) • Krimml Waterfalls Natural Site (Austria) *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to exchange views on the situation of Diploma holding areas identified as requiring closer attention and to agree on follow up actions in the light of the 2023 annual reports and the information received by the Secretariat.*	**For discussion and decision**	
	7. On-the-spot appraisal visits in 2024 *Presentation by the Secretariat* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to exchange views on the on-the-spot appraisal visits to be carried out in 2024*	List of areas which could benefit from an on-the-spot appraisal visit in 2024 T-PVS/DE(2023)13 **For discussion and decision**	Diploma holding areas whose Diploma is due in 2025 and for which an-the-spot appraisal visit is to take place in 2024 are identified.

	8. Preparation of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma *Presentation by the Secretariat* *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the concept note presenting the celebration activities of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma and to exchange views on its follow up.*	Concept note on the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma T-PVS/DE(2024)01 **For discussion and decision**	Members of the Group of Specialists provide the Secretariat with guidance for the preparation of the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the European Diploma.
	9. Any other business		
	10. Date and place of the next meeting		
	11. Conclusions of the meeting *Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the contribution of the meeting of the Group of Specialists to the achievement of the Strategic Plan of the Bern Convention for the period to 2030.*	**For discussion and decision**	Members of the Group of Specialists agree on the extent to which to meeting of the Group of Specialists has contributed to the targets of the Strategic Plan.
13.00	***Wednesday 21st February*** **End of the meeting**		

Annex II: List of Participants

CHAIR OF THE GROUP OF SPECIALISTS	
Czech Republic	**Mr Jan PLESNIK** Advisor to Director Nature Conservation Agency

SPECIALISTS/SPECIALISTES	
Luxembourg	**Mr Christian KAYSER** Director Nature Park Our
Spain	**Mr Pep AMENGUAL** Head of Research Service Conservation, Monitoring and Programmes of the Network Autonomous National Parks Organisation Ministry for Ecological Transition

EXPERTS	
Austria	**Mr Michael SCHIMEK** Schimek plant, Ingenieurbüro für Raumplanung und Raumordnung
Belgium	**Mr Maurice HOFFMANN** Research Institute for Nature and Forest
Germany	**Ms Bečka PAVEL** Nature conservation officer Bavarian Forest National Park Administration
	Ms Carol RITCHIE Executive Director EUROPARC Federation
Poland	**Ms Renata KRZYŚCIAK-KOSIŃSKA** Biologist, Nature Conservation Specialist Institute of Environmental Protection
Slovenia	**Mr Peter SKOBERNE** Independent consultant
Spain	**Ms Blanca RAMOS** Independent consultant
Türkiye	**Ms Cigdem ADEM** Researcher Middle East Technical University

INVITED SPEAKERS	
Germany	**Mr Siegfried ROTH** Representative of the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve
Spain	**Mr Francisco De Asís MUÑOZ COLLADO** Director Sierra Nevada National Park

COUNCIL OF EUROPE SECRETARIAT	
Directorate of Social Rights, Health and Environment **Bern Convention**	**Mr Mikaël POUTIERS** Secretary of the Bern Convention
	Mr Marc HORY Project Manager
	Ms Marta MEDLINSKA Administrator
	Mr Michaël NGUYEN Administrative and Project officer