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**COMMITTEE FOR THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COUNCIL
OF EUROPE IN THE FIELD OF BIOLOGICAL
AND LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY**

CO-DBP

**Group of Specialists - European Diploma
for Protected Areas**

**Vanoise National Park
(France)**

RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS

On-the-spot appraisal

**by Mr Geko SPIRIDONOV
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The European Diploma (category A) was awarded to the Vanoise National Park in 1976 and has been renewed regularly since then.

The expert was not accompanied by any members of the secretariat on his visit to the park.

Resolution (96) 26, which was adopted for the previous renewal of the Diploma, appears in Appendix I. Appendix II contains a draft resolution drawn up by the secretariat with a view to extending the validity of the Diploma for a further five-year period.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Diploma, category A, was awarded to the Vanoise National Park in 1976 and was renewed in 1981, 1986, 1991 and most recently in 1996 for the period up to 19 June 2001.

This on-the-spot appraisal was assigned to the expert in accordance with Article 9 of the Regulations for the European Diploma for Protected Areas. It was carried out from 25 to 27 June 2000.

The basic documents were provided by the Council of Europe expert. A great deal of important information was supplied by the Park's management, supplementing knowledge of the park and its outstanding problems. The visit took place under the guidance of Mr Emmanuel de Guillebon, the Park's manager. It was well organised and enabled the appraisal to be conducted properly.

The following sites, which face serious problems, were visited:

- The Orgère Forest: discussion and visit of the forest with Mr Jackie Bellissand, Mayor of Villarodin-Bourget, Mr Jacques Perrier, Park area manager, and Mr François Manuel, forestry officer;
- Champagny le Haut: discussion with Mr Régis Ruffier des Aimes, Mayor of Champagny and Chair of the Park's governing board; visit of the site with Mr Pascal Langer, Park warden/instructor;
- Prariond site and refuge: climb up to the boundary between the French National Park and the Italian Gran Paradiso National Park with Ms Danielle Hacquard, Park warden/instructor; discussion with Mr François Bois-Marriage, refuge warden;
- Val d'Isère-Maurienne: discussion with Mr Alain Peaquin, Mayor of Termignon and President of the Association of Mayors of the Park, and Mr Guido Meeus, Park area manager;
- Chambéry: discussion at the Park headquarters with Mr Jean-Pierre Viguié, the Park's deputy manager, Ms Veronique Plaige, chargé de mission for flora, and Mr Jean-Pierre Martinot, chargé de mission for fauna.

The expert would like to take the opportunity to thank all the above-mentioned people for co-operating so fully with him. He also thanks the Park's manager for the excellent organisation of the visit and his help at all the meetings and on-site visits. He would also like to congratulate the Park's manager and his staff for their devotion to the protection of nature.

II. SITUATION AND VALUE OF THE PARK

The Vanoise National Park was established in 1963. It is located in the département of Savoie, in the centre of the western part of the Alps, between the Tarentaise and Maurienne high valleys at an altitude of 1 280 to 3 855m.

The Vanoise is one of the few national parks to protect the wealth of flora, fauna and habitats in the alpine, subalpine and nival levels of the Alps. The Park ensures the long-term preservation of representative examples of the biome of central European complex-zoning mountain systems. It is part of the Nature 2000 Network, further proof of its value at European level.

The central zone covers almost 53 000 ha. A large peripheral zone of 145 000 ha contributes to maintaining the ecological balance in the Park. The Park shares a 14km border with the Italian Gran Paradiso National Park. Together, the two parks make up one of the most spacious and precious transfrontier protected areas in Europe.

Part of the territory of twenty municipalities lies within the central zone. These municipalities own 47 610 ha of the Park; 5 218 ha are privately owned and only 11 ha belong to the state.

The peripheral area contains 60% of all France's ski lifts and can accommodate more than 200 000 skiers. This is the context in which the Park carries out its activities in the peripheral zone.

III. QUALITIES AND PROTECTION SYSTEM

1. Administration

The Park is run by a state establishment which has its own budget. The governing board is made up of representatives of the ministries concerned, local councillors, representatives of professional and scientific organisations and nature conservation associations, and persons appointed by the Minister for Regional Planning and the Environment. The governing board is assisted by an eight-member standing committee. The scientific committee, comprising 25 members, is an advisory body which is consulted on spatial planning matters in the central and peripheral zones.

The Park has a permanent staff of 52 people (53 at 1 October 2001): 35 area managers and warden/instructors and 18 persons at the Park headquarters in Chambéry. Three more permanent posts were once again requested, and rejected, in 2000. These three posts are essential if the Park is to be run properly as they would enable very important new directions to be taken in the field of conservation: an agricultural officer; a technician responsible for the natural reserves managed by the Park administration; and a computer operator responsible for the databases and managing the computer network. A fourth and just as important permanent post of botanist will be requested in 2001.

During the summer season, the staff is augmented by a number of temporary receptionists.

2. Management

2.1 General points

The management of the components of the biological and landscape diversity, as well as of the whole of the protected zone and human activity within the zone, is based on the sustainable and unhindered conservation of the European wildlife heritage and its ecosystems, the primary objective of the national parks that have been awarded the European Diploma, category A. Vanoise National Park's membership of the Natura 2000 Network is in keeping with the requirement to establish the strictest possible conservation systems within its boundaries. The peripheral zone must be managed in such a way as to ensure sustainable development that is compatible with its proximity to a protected area of international importance.

2.2 Zoning

The Park comprises a central zone, which is governed by strict regulations based on the Law on National Parks, and a peripheral zone, in which the Park has no formal right to intervene. However, the Park acts as an adviser in nature conservation matters through a charter which governs relations between the Département of Savoie and the Park, and the funds provided by the Park, the département and the state for inventories and applied studies.

The Park is also responsible for the management of 5 natural reserves that are either located nearby or share boundaries with the Park: La Sache, La Grande Motte, La Grande Sassière, the Plan de Tueda reserve (responsibility shared with the National Forestry Office) and the Col de l'Iseran, which is in the process of being declassified.

The draft decrees declassifying the Col de l'Iseran nature reserve and establishing the 45 ha Bailletaz nature reserve have already been signed by the Minister for Regional Planning and the Environment. By order of the prefect on 12 May 2000, biotopes of major conservation interest are to be preserved over an area of 205 ha of the declassified reserve, and a hunting preserve was set up over an area of 461 ha of the same reserve.

2.3 Management plan

The management plan covers the period 1997-2001. It is a weighty document that has been carefully prepared and contains the activity programmes which contribute to reaching the Park's strategic objectives: to optimise the biodiversity through protective management of the heritage; maintain the present landscape balance; raise the region's inhabitants' and visitors' awareness and understanding of the Vanoise heritage; and affirm the Park's special place in the regional management networks.

2.4 Wild fauna, flora and habitats

The management plan divides the species of fauna that need the most protection into three priority groups. The population of the ibex, the Park's emblem, has risen to over 1 900 individuals, an increase of more than 650 over the last five years. For the same period, the chamois population has risen from 4 700 to almost 6 000 individuals, despite pressure from hunting in the peripheral zone. The question remains of how much grazing the grasslands can bear, given the competition from a high population of marmots and cattle and sheep.

According to the plan, several observation, study and specific management programmes are being conducted in the Park and the peripheral zone on priority species and groups of species: the ibex, bearded vulture, ptarmigan, varying hare, rupicolous birds of prey, forest avifauna, rock partridge, black grouse, bats, hay-meadow insects, and so on. The bearded vulture's successful reintroduction into the Alps and its increasingly frequent presence in the Park, and the high population of golden eagles, deserve particular attention.

As long as almost all the woodland lies in the peripheral zone, problems may arise regarding the conservation of three-toed and black woodpeckers, and pygmy and Tengmalm's owls, which depend greatly on extensive, old natural forests.

The return of the wolf to the region marks a new stage in the re-establishment of natural ecosystems and particularly of relations between ungulates and large predators. The strict protection of the species and the presence of ungulates in very high numbers are factors which will contribute greatly to increasing its population. It is expected that in just a few years, there will be around ten families of wolves, and this will cause problems to hunting. At the same time, there will be problems with stockbreeders and in the upper mountains. Controlling the wolf population is the sole means of reconciling the region's inhabitants with the large predator and enabling it to fulfil its irreplaceable role in natural and semi-natural ecosystems. The lynx's reappearance led to similar, but less serious problems.

Forty-two species of vascular flora are grouped into three categories according to their priority and are subject to stational monitoring, management action being taken with regard to the most endangered species. The inventory of 170 other species of heritage interest is being pursued.

About 30 habitats of community interest, 5 of which are considered as having priority, have been identified in the Vanoise National Park.

2.5 Forests

The wooded part of the Park's central zone covers 422 ha, less than half of 1% of its total area. Under French law, forests are managed by the National Forestry Office and a certain amount of development is planned even in the central zone. The case of the Orgère Forest provides a good illustration of the difficulties the Park's management has to overcome in order to optimise the sustainable conservation of the forest zone. There should be a moratorium for a few years so that studies can be carried out to prove how important it is to conserve some 19 ha of centuries-old Siberian pine forests with a mixed undergrowth of rhododendrons and larch trees. This forest, which is of complex composition and contains trees of over 500 years old, is a sample of natural forest through which a nature trail winds.

2.6 Agriculture

Agricultural and grazing activities are freely carried out in the Park's central zone, but under the document establishing the Park, the manager can limit the number of sheep and goats in each Alpine pasture and even prohibit herds and flocks from municipalities outside the Park from entering it.

The approximate number of domestic animals grazing in the central zone is known, and it is to be noted that the number of sheep is still on the increase. The need to know how much grazing the Alpine pastures and grasslands can bear before their vegetation begins to deteriorate has been mentioned above (section 2.4). This is a very complex task, as any study must include the ibex and chamois populations, not forgetting the marmots and wild boar, which cause problems to agriculture. At the same time, marmots are the principal prey of the golden eagle and vital for its survival. Neither should the priority species of flora and grassland invertebrates or ground-nesting birds be forgotten. The management plan development programme provides for the maintenance of sustainable grazing and a coherent document was adopted by the governing board at its meeting on 30 March 2000. This document is a good starting point for developing a sufficiently full practical programme and also provides for action to be taken with regard to the installations, agricultural buildings and relations between agriculture and tourism.

The return of the wolf means that new consideration must be given to grazing practices that were abandoned when the predator disappeared in the first half of the century. Sheepdogs are a problem insofar as they are turning out to be predators of wildlife and domestic animals.

2.7 Tourism, facilities and visitor reception arrangements

The importance of the Vanoise region, especially the Tarentaise area, for the development of Alpine skiing has already been emphasised. The ski lifts are located outside the central zone. Some of them almost reach the Park's boundaries, which makes off-piste skiing possible in some areas of the central zone. This practice has given rise to the most difficult problem that needs to be solved, that of the Val d'Isère - Bonneval-sur-Arc link. The effects of off-piste skiing on the fauna in four other sites must not be

underestimated. The project to set up summer skiing installations on the Chavière glacier has been abandoned because the conditions are unsuitable for skiing.

Mountaineering and rock climbing are regulated by a charter adopted by the governing board in 1999 and signed by all the partners with the exception of the Compagnie des Guides.

The high season for tourism is July and August. A survey on the frequentation and image of the Ecrins, Pyrenean and Vanoise National Parks was carried out in 1996 and further developed in 1997. A number of important lessons can be learned from this survey: the visitor reception policy should focus on the peripheral zone; the Park should be more active in this zone; the Park should publicise itself more outside the Vanoise region. The development programme takes the results of the survey into account. A study carried out in 1999 shows that about 900 jobs in the Vanoise area are generated by the Park.

A general plan of the Park's footpaths was drawn up in 1996 and officially adopted in 1997. In the same year, all of the Park's 17 refuges were inspected by the départemental safety committee. Work is continually being done to maintain the refuges and bring them up to health and safety standards. The Park is improving the information and awareness-raising system at the Park's entrances and in the refuges. The house in the Plan de Tueda reserve was inaugurated in 1999, and the one in Termignon will be opened in September 2000. The signposts marking the boundaries of the Park and the nature reserves have been renovated where necessary.

2.8 Communications and publications

Since the last renewal of the European Diploma, the Park has taken a great leap forward in this field: books, films, atlases, brochures, technical booklets, posters, a series of postcards and dozens of leaflets are all available and exhibitions are organised.

2.9 The built heritage

The inventory of the cultural heritage made under the auspices of the Park lists 786 items, including houses, hamlets, churches, chapels, bridges and fountains, details of which are given on fact sheets. Every year, the Park subsidises owners who wish to roof their houses or other buildings in the traditional Vanoise style and gives its support to a policy on the restoration and renovation of the architectural heritage.

2.10 Scientific research

Research was carried out on about ten subjects in 1999 and 2000, including the ibex, the ptarmigan, the extension of green alder groves, the alpine sea-holly, plant diversity, the cartography of grazing environments and the typology and dynamics of grazing vegetation. The Park always sets up thematic groups comprising researchers and field officers, thereby ensuring that research has a solid scientific grounding and that the results are properly applied.

2.11 Relations with local and national authorities

A number of municipalities no longer consider the Park as an obstacle to development. One major exception is the Park's relations with the town council of Bonneval-sur-Arc, which would like to improve its difficult financial situation by building a link to the Val d'Isère ski resort, even if this means violating the Park's integrity.

The Park has built up constructive and close co-operation with the farmers in the central and peripheral zones based on sustainable development compatible with the conservation of the biodiversity.

The Park has longstanding partnerships with the départemental veterinary laboratory, the Savoy Natural Heritage Conservatory, the National Forestry Office and the National Hunting Office.

2.12 International relations and networks

The neighbourhood charter between the Park and the Gran Paradiso National Park, signed in 1991, provides for joint action to build closer relations between the institutions and the regions' inhabitants, management techniques and promoting quality green tourism.

The Park is also in contact with the national parks of Bieszczady in Poland and Berchtesgaden in Germany and the Swiss National Park.

The Park belongs to the Alpine Network of Protected Areas and has joined the Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe.

III. OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS

The expert has organised this section according to the progress made in fulfilling the conditions and recommendations contained in Resolution (96) 26 on the renewal of the European Diploma to the Vanoise National Park, the annual reports made from 1996 to 1999, the Park's management plan, the action taken by local elected representatives and municipalities on various matters and reports on it in the press, and also his visits to the sites and the results of his discussions with the Park manager and his staff and representatives of the municipalities with whom he was in contact.

1. Ski lifts and the Val d'Isère - Bonneval-sur-Arc link

The idea of linking these two municipalities has once again raised its head following Mr M Bouvard MP's question to the government. The minister responsible for the environment has so far rejected every proposal to install ski lifts in the Park and modify its boundaries, as well as the project to build a tunnel linking Bonneval-sur-Arc with the Val d'Isère.

The inviolability of the Park's borders and the refusal to operate ski lifts are clearly set out in the conditions to which the renewal of the European Diploma in 1996 was subject.

Once in service, a tunnel would increase the number of off-piste skiers and lead to ungulates abandoning their best wintering grounds in the Vanoise region. The results of the Observatory set up in 1998 following a request by the Minister for Regional Planning and the Environment already show the negative consequences of off-piste skiing on the wildlife on the southern slopes of the Col Perse. Disturbance to wildlife caused by off-piste skiing is a problem in itself and also deserves attention in the other sites in the central zone where skiing takes place: Fond du Fours, the Palais and Pramecou sites and the La Sache nature reserve.

2. Risk of avalanches on the RD902 road

This problem was brought to the fore by Mr Bouvard following a study carried out by CEMAGREF (National Centre of Agricultural Mechanisation, Rural Engineering, Water Resources and Forests), which showed that the RD902 could be made safe by using gazex systems to start artificial avalanches. In March 2000, the Minister for Regional Planning and the Environment requested that a study be carried out to assess the effects of the noise made by gazex systems on the fauna and neighbouring snow layers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Vanoise National Park is managed in accordance with the main objectives of a protected zone, category A. The conditions set out in the previous Committee of Ministers' resolution renewing the European Diploma have been met. Obvious progress has been made in the activities recommended in this resolution, particularly with regard to scientific research, monitoring and the strengthening of the information and awareness-raising policy at the Park's entrances and refuges. The efforts made by the authorities responsible for the Park's management should be recognised. The expert recommends that the European Diploma should be renewed.

In view of the pressure which continues to be exerted on the Park's central zone, the general conditions set out in the previous renewal should be upheld:

- the inviolability of the Park's borders should be maintained and no schemes or activities should be accepted that are contrary to the motivation, the objectives and the criteria of category A under the Regulations for the European Diploma, in particular skiing installations.

The proposed recommendations are either of a general nature or aimed at supporting the measures and activities already under way or planned in the Park:

1. For scientific, educational and aesthetic reasons, the Orgère natural forest covering 20 ha in lots 11 and 12 of the canton of Orgère should be preserved, without any form of forestry management, as an example of primary forest.
2. In the peripheral zone, the policy of making inventories, protecting biodiversity and species and monitoring activities which are liable to have an impact on the central zone should be pursued.
3. The information and awareness-raising policy at the Park's entrances and in its refuges should be continued.
4. The staff and budget required by the park in order to carry out the steadily increasing tasks connected with the proper maintenance and management of its heritage should be maintained.
5. The grazing capacity of the Alpine pastures and grasslands should be studied, the acceptable number of domestic animals and wild ungulates that can cohabit should be determined, and the overall biodiversity in the high mountain should be maintained.
6. Studies on the effects on the wildlife of off-piste skiing should be continued and the Observatory's scope of action should be extended to other skiable sites, particularly in the central zone.
7. Steps should be taken to prepare the local inhabitants for the return of the wolf and a plan for the ecological management of the wolf population should be drawn up.
8. A flexible policy for conserving forests and restoring them to their natural state in the central and peripheral zones should be developed.

APPENDIX I

A P P E N D I X I I

Draft resolution

On the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to the Vanoise National Park (France)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the Regulations for the European Diploma of Protected Areas;

Having regard to Resolution (76) 14 awarding the European Diploma to the Vanoise National Park;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the Activities of the Council of Europe in the field of Biological and Landscape Diversity (CO-DBP);

Taking into account the expert's report as presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas held on 1 and 2 March 2001,

Renews the European Diploma awarded to the Vanoise National Park until 18 March 2006;

At the same time, subjects the renewal to the following conditions and recommendations:

Conditions

The inviolability of the park's borders shall be maintained and no schemes or activities shall be accepted that are contrary to the motivation, the objectives and the criteria of category A under the Regulations for the European Diploma, in particular skiing installations.

Recommendations

1. For scientific, educational and aesthetic reasons, the Orgère natural forest covering 20 ha in lots 11 and 12 of the canton of Orgère should be preserved, without any form of forestry management, as an example of primary forest.
2. In the peripheral zone, the policy of making inventories, protecting biodiversity and species and monitoring activities which are liable to have an impact on the central zone should be pursued.
3. The information and awareness-raising policy at the Park's entrances and in its refuges should be continued.
4. The staff and budget required by the park in order to carry out the steadily increasing tasks connected with the proper maintenance and management of its heritage should be maintained.
5. The grazing capacity of the Alpine pastures and grasslands should be studied, the acceptable number of domestic animals and wild ungulates that can cohabit should be determined, and the overall biodiversity in the high mountain should be maintained.
6. Studies on the effects on the wildlife of off-piste skiing should be continued and the Observatory's scope of action should be extended to other skiable sites, particularly in the central zone.
7. Steps should be taken to prepare the local inhabitants for the return of the wolf and a plan for the ecological management of the wolf population should be drawn up.

8.A flexible policy for conserving forests and restoring them to their natural state in the central and peripheral zones should be developed.