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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION  
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

GORGE OF SAMARIA NATIONAL PARK  
(Greece)

ON THE SPOT APPRAISAL

by

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GORGE OF SAMARIA NATIONAL PARK

On-the-spot appraisal

Introductory remarks

I would like first of all to thank the Directorate of Environment and Local Authorities for entrusting this on-the-spot appraisal to me. For a good number of years I have during my holidays visited parks or nature reserves which have received the European Diploma. I was all the more happy to be able to do so this year in an official capacity.

I would also like to thank all the people who have helped me in this task, especially Mr J-P Ribaut.

Terms of reference

- a. to study the present state of the park and assess whether it has remained stable, improved or worsened since the Diploma was issued or last renewed; to verify whether the recommendations made at that time have been applied;
- b. to analyse the state of conservation of flora, fauna and the landscape (development or regression of species);
- c. to examine any changes (material or legislative) made or in the process of being made;
- d. to study the impact of the public on flora, fauna and countryside and to make proposals for improving the situation;
- e. to study the budgetary resources allocated to management of the area.

Date:

The on-the-spot appraisal which had had to be postponed several times because the only passage across the Gorge of Samaria was flooded, finally took place from 27 June to 3 July 1983 (including travelling time).

Results of my investigation:

Point a. of the terms of reference: There can be no doubt that the award of the European Diploma to Samaria National Park has considerably increased the number of visitors to the park including tourists. All the travel agencies on Crete - at least all the ones I saw - advertise excursions to Samaria National Park. This makes it all the more surprising to find the protected area in perfect order. I did not see the slightest sign of degradation of the site nor the least disorder. Inside the park I saw neither tins, nor empty bottles, nor papers or plastic bags dropped by visitors. The tourists are very disciplined in leaving all their litter in the bins provided along the path through the park. I have rarely seen a protected zone so heavily used and at the same time so clean! Not even in the Swiss National Park, which is itself renowned for good order and cleanliness, have I seen so few sweetpapers dropped along the way. I did not see any tourists leave the path or smoke, except in the places where smoking is specifically permitted. I did not see a single tourist taking flowers or chasing butterflies.

Point b. of the terms of reference calls for far more detailed examination than is possible in a visit lasting only one or two days when the flowering season is almost entirely over. Nevertheless I can honestly say that I did not have the impression that the flora had suffered since the Diploma was awarded.

As for the fauna, it is absolutely impossible to make a judgment on the basis of my own observations. (The local representatives did not mention any deterioration.)

What I can say is that domestic goats have not been entirely eliminated from the park. I saw them twice, once near the ruins of Samaria, the second time two or three kilometres lower down. It seems to me that more rigorous measures should be taken to eliminate these undesirable animals.

Point c. of the terms of reference: since the award of the Diploma a number of changes have taken place. They are mentioned in the annual report.

I have already referred to the litter bins and picnic areas where smoking is allowed. Fire prevention and firefighting equipment is exemplary.

At the entry to the park large notices inform the visitors about what is permitted or forbidden. From this point of view progress has been made since the Diploma was awarded, but in my opinion there is still scope for improvement. I will make some proposals at the end of this report, but only as an appendix, since even if these improvements are not carried out this would not in my view justify refusal to renew the Diploma.

In Samaria a house has been well restored for use as a shelter and dormitory for wardens and staff.

Point d: I have already mentioned that according to my own observations, and to those of friends who go to Crete often and visit the gorge of Samaria virtually every year, neither flora, fauna nor landscape have deteriorated in recent years.

I also mentioned the presence of domestic goats. If the gorge of Samaria were the only region where the wild goat, the Agrimi or Cri-Cri (*Capra aegagrus cretica*) still survived, draconian measures would be absolutely essential to prevent interbreeding between the Agrimi and the domestic goat. Luckily for some years the Government has been taking measures to ensure that the Agrimi survives in the pure state, and one population now has a secure refuge in islands to which domestic goats - and tourists - have no access.

Point e. of the terms of reference: financial resources. I feel that for the time being it is not very helpful to talk about the financial resources allocated for management of the protected zone. The nature protection service of the Athens government had been reorganised shortly before our arrival on Crete. But to judge from our conversations with the people in charge of the park, the financial situation has not worsened and nothing indicates that it is likely to worsen. For example, the number of wardens and park employees is unchanged.

#### Conclusions:

It follows logically from the foregoing that the European Diploma should be renewed.

A P P E N D I X

This firm recommendation does not prevent me from suggesting some improvements and making certain criticisms concerning the national park and its immediate surroundings.

1. At the southern end of the park, near Aghia Roumeli - one might almost say at the exit from the park, since practically all visitors enter at Omalos and from there go down towards the sea - the boundary of the national park is practically visible to the naked eye. As soon as one has left the park one is struck by the incredible number of empty tins and bottles strewn on the ground, on and beside the path. Aghia Roumeli is a small tourist resort which is developing rapidly, entirely because of the national park's success in attracting tourists. It seems to me that waste disposal facilities would be fully justified.
2. In the course of conversation I learnt that the Chania authorities are wondering whether to charge for entry to the park, which would in my view be wholly regrettable.
3. In document SN-ZP (81) 18, paragraph 2.3 mention is made of a study on extending the park to take in two other gorges as well as the coastal area adjacent to Aghia Roumeli. The people we spoke to in Greece did not mention this plan. In my opinion the two gorges would represent a considerable improvement to the park, but I would be very cautious about adding the coastal region adjacent to Aghia Roumeli.
4. Document SN-R-DP (79) 19 recommends (page 5, item 6) publishing a leaflet on the park in Greek, English, French and German. The leaflet has been produced, but without a German text. It seems to me that there are enough German-speaking visitors to warrant explanations in their language.
5. I am sure that the great majority of visitors would be happy to find various explanations along the course of their walk of the kind one sees on nature trails. (The example of the Swiss national park proves amply that visitors appreciate this kind of information.)

Of course, visitors can read in the leaflet, or at the entry to the park, that the gorge contains plants (both trees and flowers) not found on the mainland, but in most cases they cannot recognise these plants.

The leaflet also mentions impressive geological formations - and they really are impressive ! But would it not be possible to explain them to the public? (see photograph no 18 for instance.)

There are three small churches in the park. They, together with the ruins of Samaria, bear witness to a historical and cultural past. Would it not be worth the trouble to maintain them in better condition and to explain their historical role to visitors?

To sum up: I am convinced that the tourists who cross the Samaria National Park from end to end would be happy to find historic, cultural, botanical and geological explanations along their route.

Appendix

## List of photographs available from the Secretariat:

- No 5A: Fire-fighting equipment.
- No 6A and 7A: Views towards the higher areas of the park.. The oleander is still in full bloom.
- No 9A: Beside the path, but invisible to tourists, there is a small rubbish-dump, which is well maintained and clean.
- No 10A Picnic area with drinking water fountain.
- No 16 and 17: Two views of the lower part of the park.
- No 18: Impressive geological formation.
- No 22A and 24: The «Iron Gates» at the way out of the park.

Willy A Plattner