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STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT
OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL HABITATS

Group of Specialists - "Protected areas"

1-4 February 1993

APPLICATION BY

Mercantour National Park
(France)

for the European Diploma

Expert report

by

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(Belgium)

Given the lack of contact on the ground, especially concerning management problems, the Secretariat representative fully agrees with the expert that the award of the European Diploma should be postponed. If the Group of Specialists comes to the same conclusion, it should inform the CDPE of its position and state its reasons.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Group of Specialists on "Protected Areas" examined the application submitted by France, recognised the European value of the Mercantour National Park (PNM) and decided that an on-the-spot appraisal should be carried out in accordance with the regulations governing the European Diploma (Resolution (91) 16).

The appraisal took place on 5-7 August 1992 in the presence of Mr H HACOURT, Principal Administrator Officer in the Environment Conservation and Management Division of the Council of Europe.

The representatives were able to meet and hold talks with the following people:

- Mr D GRANDJEAN, Director of the Park;
- Mr P PFEFFER, Chairman of the Scientific Committee, Director of Research of the Natural History Museum;
- Mr DESTAUDON, Prefect of Alpes Maritimes and member of the Park's Governing Board;
- Mr FRANCO, Mayor of St Martin de Vésubie, département councillor and member of the Park's Governing Board.
- Mr R SETTIMO, associations official, member of the Scientific Committee, member of the Park's Governing Board;
- Mr L GODEFROY, head of the Park's Communication and Activities Department
- Mr O CARLOTTI and Mr J L PARDI, respectively head of the Haute-Vésubie and Haut-Verdon sectors, and Mr A LANTERI-MINET, assistant head of the Roya-Bévéra sector and Mr G ROSSI, warden of the same sector.

The delegation was unable to meet the Chairman of the Governing Board who was otherwise engaged.

The visit programme was as follows:

5 August: visit to the Vallée des Merveilles

accompanied by MM PFEFFER, GODEFROY, LANTERI-MINET and ROSSI; meeting over dinner with Mr DESTAUDON, Prefect, and Mr D GRANDJEAN, Park Director.

6 August: visit to the Vésubie sector

accompanied by MM GRANDJEAN, PFEFFER, GODEFROY, SETTIMO and CARLOTTI; meeting over dinner with Mr FRANCO, Mayor of St Martin de Vésubie.

N.B.: the staff held a demonstration to show its opposition to the Park directors management.

7 August: visit to the Lac d'Allos

accompanied by: Mr J L PARDI; Mr GRANDJEAN, Park Director cancelled his appointment.

As can be seen from this timetable, the expert's visit did not take place in the usual way. For information purposes, we met the trade union delegation at the demonstration of 6 August and took note of the comments made by members of staff present.

To draft his report, the expert referred to the following documents:

1. Administrative documents

- Decree of 18 August 1979 establishing the PNM
- Annual Governing Board reports: 1988, 1989 and 1990,
- Memorandum on the enquiry carried out in various European parks on new sports activities (undated),
- Internal memorandum regulating sports activities in the PNM (6 July 1992),
- Memorandum on forest management and environmental protection (April 1992),
- Exchange of correspondence between staff, management and the Chair of the Scientific Committee (July and August 1992) relating to management of the PNM,
- Application by the PNM for the European Diploma, presented by the French Government (3 December 1991)

2. Scientific and technical documents

- "Etude de la valorisation et protection de la vallée des Merveilles" by J VALENTIN (1990)
- "Protection de la vallée des Merveilles", by L GODEFROY in Archeologia, No. 281, July-August 1992,
- Bull. du Serv. de la Recherche, des Etudes et du Traitement de l'Information sur l'Environnement du Ministère de l'Environnement, No. 37, April 1992 on the databank for management of natural habitats and its specific preparation in the case of the PNM.

3. Information documents

- "Paysage et végétation" by J L LAURENT, Ed. Parc National du Mercantour, 1988,

- "Souvenir de la vallée des Merveilles", 1988, (album comprising the 12 panels of the information circuit),
- "Souvenir du sentier de découverte du lac d'Allos" (album comprising the 12 panels of the information circuit),
- CAIRNS discovery booklets in the series "Promenades et Randonnées dans le PNM":
 - the Roya-Bévéra valleys,
 - the Haut Verdon valley.
- PNM brochure "Faits et Chiffres" (facts and figures).

After a recap of some of the features of the Mercantour National Park, we shall look at the questions of the quality of protection and management, the main focus of the on-the-spot appraisal.

2. THE MERCANTOUR NATIONAL PARK

2.1 GENERAL FEATURES

Situated at the tip of the Alpine range on the Franco-Italian border, the PNM measures approximately 100 km from West to East, varying in breadth from 10 to 50 km approximately (figure 1) - it is made up of mountain peaks and valleys. The PNM proper covers an area of 68,500 hectares while the peripheral area covers a further 150,000 hectares. Only the central area is being considered for the award of the European Diploma. Administratively speaking, the central zone is divided as follows: three quarters fall within the département of Alpes-Maritimes (22 communes) while the remaining quarter belongs to the département of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence (6 communes); it is bounded by the high border mountain-range, many of whose peaks exceed 3,000 metres' altitude. To the West and South the park is drained by the upper or middle valleys of the Ubaye, Verdon, Var, Tinée, Vésubie and Roya, forming distinct regions with highly individual characters.

The sub-strata are of remarkable diversity: granites, gneiss and migmatite in the Argentera-Mercantour, schists and red pelites of the Permian period, marlstone and limestone with varying deposits of Secondary magnesium limestone. Tertiary (so-called 'Annot') siliceous sandstone, layers of scree and glacial or fluvial alluvium deposits, etc.

This diversity of sub-strata together with varying climatic influences explains the enormous biological richness of the PNM (see chapter 2.2.3).

2.2 THE PARK AUTHORITY

2.2.1 Organisation and functioning

Staff

Director: Mr Denis GRANDJEAN

Deputy Director:

Permanent staff: 56 members

38 staff covering 7 sectors - 18 staff at the Nice headquarters

Seasonal staff: receptionists, maintenance workers, trainees, conscientious objectors.

The institutions

Governing Board:

38 members appointed by the Minister of the Environment

- 18 councillors and mayors for the duration of their period in office
- 7 civil servants appointed for 3 years
- 13 individual members appointed for 3 years

Chairman: Mr Charles GINESY, Senator of Alpes-Maritimes, President of the département Council, Mayor of Péone-Valberg
Government commissioner: the Prefect of Alpes-Maritimes.

The Standing Committee

13 members elected by the Governing Board including:

- 7 mayors/councillors
- 2 civil servants
- 4 individual members

Chairman: Mr José BALARELLO, Senator of Alpes-Maritimes, département Councillor, Mayor of Tende.

Scientific Committee

20 members appointed by the Minister of the Environment
Chairman: Mr Pierre PFEFFER, Director of Research at the National Natural History Museum

1991 budget: 20 million francs

The budget is made up as follows: just over half of expenditure on staff (11 million francs), just under a quarter on running costs and logistics (3.5-million francs), a quarter on investment and local activities (5.5 million francs).

Almost all funding comes from the State budget, Ministry of the Environment (Directorate of Nature Protection).

2.2.2 Functions

Decree No. 79.696 of 18 August 1979 creating the PNM is divided into 4 chapters and 65 articles. The park's functions are not made explicit in this document. Apart from the main objective of a National Park, ie protection of the natural habitat, the institution's tasks are presented as follows in the information brochure on the PNM.

Knowledge, understanding and enrichment

By:

- making inventories, carrying out censuses, carrying out censuses, carrying out specific studies of both animal and plant species and habitats
- studying the heritage value and participation in the advancement of scientific knowledge
- working out and disseminating methods of managing the natural environment
- reintroducing species (ibex, bearded vulture project).

Welcoming the public and raising their awareness

The park is a special area open to everyone. The challenge it faces is to encourage the discovery and knowledge of this heritage, while raising public awareness of the need to protect it for us and future generations.

In this context, we should point out the recent opening of a new 'Park House' at St Martin de Vésubie (in June 1992). It is a quality shop-window open for large numbers of visitors to whom it presents information and documentation (publications, maps and the library) and offers activities such as videogames, audiovisual presentations. It also houses an exhibition of wooden sculptures, offering both a realistic and poetic image of the park by means of an original and attractive artistic presentation.




Contributing to local development

The presence of an exceptional area protected as a National Park is a valuable asset which a region should make the most of. The National Park gives technical and financial backing to a number of projects in the peripheral area.



ITALIE



-  Zone centrale (65.000 ha)
-  Zone périphérique (145.000 ha)
-  Sièges des secteurs et centres d'information du Parc National

0 10 20km

2.2.3 The European value of the Park

The scientific value of this southern outpost of the Alps could be termed as "legendary". Since the mid-19th century it has seen a considerable number of works on flora and fauna, concerning both species and associations. Time and time again emphasis has been laid on what is for Europe and such a small area an exceptional degree of diversity of species and endemistic phenomena. Moreover, this is a bio-geographical crossroads where the climatic influences of Northern Europe, Provence and Eastern Europe meet.

1. Research policy

The PNM European value is described in detail in the application presented by the French Government. This 31-page document quite rightly emphasises the research policy deployed in the PNM. Only the most significant items need be mentioned here. The scientific tasks are based on:

- an inventory of established knowledge
- systematic mapping (on the scale of 1:/25,000) of the central area habitats and those of the neighbouring regions (over approximately 100,000 hectares) based on continuous observations and returns by the wardens.

In 1983, the Scientific Committee adopted a set of guidelines with two fundamental objectives:

- answering questions raised by the PNM's management needs and those of the peripheral area;
- including the park in a general approach to take the environment into account in regional planning.

To this end, two main priority areas were defined:

- inventing tools for investigating the territory covered by the park and to enable officials to take management decisions regarding protected species and areas;
- to attempt an improvement in use of data concerning natural habitats when establishing general regional planning policies and, more particularly, those for risk areas outside the park boundaries.

For the purposes of storing and processing information emphasis was placed on computerisation.

This approach meant that first of all, all species to be found in the Park had to be listed (inventory phase); this knowledge then had to be developed and integrated for the purposes of better understanding of the functioning of different types of ecosystem, for the purposes of research management and education.

The pioneering role played by the park researchers in developing this computer tool is significant, as the approach adopted was intended for extension to all French national parks.

2. Reintroduction of species and monitoring of populations

In 1987 the Alpine ibex was reintroduced for the first time. This species is particularly symbolic of high mountain areas. This project was carried out in close co-operation with the Park of the Argentera.

Since the park was created, the evolution of large ungulate populations (chamois, wild sheep, ibex, red deer and roe-deer) has been satisfactory. The same is true of birds of prey (golden eagle, peregrine falcon, eagle owl); the evolution of black grouse populations is also monitored.

3. Use of high-altitude pasture

Several studies have been carried out into the multi-species use of high-altitude moorland and grass by wild and domesticated ungulates as well as the dynamism and multi-use of larch forests.

This work has made it possible to work out a management plan for the use of upland pasture on an experimental basis and the launch of a campaign for systematic diagnosis of the conditions of use of pastoral units situated in the National Park.

4. Participation in regional, national and international research programmes

a. The Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) covers three National Parks, a Nature Reserve and three Regional Nature Parks.

It is in the context of these natural spaces opened up to other institutions that PNM has been entrusted with the following tasks.

- To oversee and rationalise the collection of information for the ZNIEFF programme (area of ecological, fauna and flora interest) on the Alpes-Maritimes (1990);
- to create a "PACA Environmental Cartographic Information Databank" covering all départements in the region (in progress);
- to draw up a map of land occupation by classification based on LANDSAT satellite pictures of the whole PACA region;
- to help compile a file for creating new regional natural parks in the PACA region (1989);

- to help draw up a 'red list' of endangered plant species in the PACA region (in progress).
- b.** The PNM is taking part in 7 major national actions:
 - studies of black grouse populations;
 - study of the typology of mountain lakes;
 - working out a standardised data collection method for the study of flora and fauna of protected areas;
 - co-ordinated study programmes of alpine pasture formation, which received the MAB award;
 - the eco-ethology of the ibex;
 - the study programme concerning the Corsican wild sheep, to allow observation of the evolution of the Mollière population nucleus, the only French wild sheep population not at threat from hunting.
 - the monitoring programme covering the Alpine ibex which have been reintroduced into the Mercantour, Ecrins and Vercors Parks is unique in Europe; special research is carried out to investigate the individual colonisation strategies of Alpine ibex (reproduction, eco-ethology, sociology of populations) as soon as they are set free, including work on monitoring methodologies adapted to the animals' behaviour and the restrictions of the sites chosen for reintroduction.
 - ungulates have been observed by means of the ARGOS satellite tracking device
- c.** The Italian Regional Parks of the Argentera and Alte Valle Pesio were created in the same year as the PNM.

The PNM and the Argentera Nature Park share 30 kilometres of frontier peaks. Together these two areas which protect an unbroken area of around 100,000 hectares, contain one of the last remaining ancient Alpine ibex populations.

Technical exchanges based on close co-operation have taken place since 1982, initially to monitor ibex populations but gradually extending to other subjects: the most recent action to be undertaken is a project to reintroduce the bearded vulture.

Since 1990, the PNM has also stepped up its relations with the Nature Park of Alte Valle Pesio since plans were begun in France to create the Marguareis Reserve which would share a common border with that park.

Finally, in the framework of the bearded vulture reintroduction programme, the PNM and Berchtesgaden National

Park will be pooling their experience in satellite observation techniques.

Apart from these different aspects, demonstrative of its scientific value, the PNM is aesthetic, cultural (Vallée des Merveilles, chapter 3.1) and recreational values for the whole of Europe should not be overlooked.

3. PARK MANAGEMENT

3.1 LA VALLÉE DES MERVEILLES

The Vallée des Merveilles, situated in the Roya-Bévéra sector, is world famous for its Bronze Age petroglyphs. The Park is responsible for the protection of these petroglyphs in conjunction with the Directorate of Cultural Affairs and the Departmental Architectural Service, as the Vallée des Merveilles is listed as an historical monument and site of outstanding beauty. Given the need to protect the site without disappointing the public, in conjunction with its partners the Park has adopted a policy aimed at reconciling both objectives.

Until recently access to the whole Merveilles site, which actually includes roughly the Vallée des Merveilles and Fontanalbe, had remained completely free. Since the summer of 1989, the Park has restricted access in the Fontanalbe sector to special routes. Visitors may, however, stray from the authorised routes provided they are with approved guides. In 1990, this arrangement was partially extended to the Vallée des Merveilles, regulating access to the area situated to the east of the Pas de l'Arpette. The visitors' circuit (Grande Randonnée - GR) as well as the Bicknell path are still completely free of access. They allow visitors to discover the Altar Slab, the "Christ", the carvings on the Tribal Chief Slab and others which are just as significant albeit less prestigious. On the other hand the "Wizard" and the "Primordial Couple" standing-stone also known as the "Man with the zig-zag arm" standing-stone are now within the regulated area.

Seasonal workers provide information and guard the site during the summer season, together with the permanent staff. As for the official guides entrusted with taking visits to see stone-carvings in the regulated areas, an agreement was reached with one of their associations "Destination Merveilles" so that they can offer a permanent guiding service to the whole site during the tourist season.

It is however necessary to put in place a lasting arrangement for protecting and making full use of the Merveilles site and access to it.

To this end a study was carried out in 1990 by J VALENTIN, an architect with experience in the development of archaeological sites. On the site itself, the author

recommended improvements in sign-posting, explanations and protection of the stone-carvings.

In the surrounding area, a coherent information system about the Merveilles should be created, including information about the natural and cultural heritage attractions of the region so that not all attention is focused on the Merveilles site. This should be done without improving vehicular access so that the influx of visitors is not excessively increased. It is with this in mind that plans to create a museum mostly about the Merveilles site, in Tende, should be implemented; it will also help to improve information about this prestigious cultural heritage.

On the spot, we were able to discover for ourselves the first steps taken to improve information while channelling the flow of visitors where necessary. Mr GODEFROY explained to us the further measures due to be taken following Mr VALENTIN's study in order to improve the current arrangements. For the approaches to the Merveilles refuge, (and, then, on to Fontanalbe) a sign-posting system will be set up along the **discovery path** which skirts the protected area, backed-up by explanation panels which would be properly integrated into the site.

A leaflet called "La vallée des Merveilles - Monument historique" is widely available at the various information points around the park; it is designed to inform visitors about the protection measures and new regulations on the site.

NB: a negative point is the presence on the site of the French Mountaineering Club (CAF) refuge, which is very popular in season. The approaches to the refuge, sanitation and other facilities are not up to the standards expected in a National Park. Obviously, most visitors make no distinction between what is managed by the French Mountaineering Club and by the Park, so that these negative aspects are likely to impair the PNM's good image.

3.2 HUNTING AND FISHING

Under Article 15 of the Decree, hunting is banned in the PNM. However, fishing is authorised and is governed by the Rural Code provisions.

With the exception of some small mountain lakes, most of the water-courses and lakes in the PNM are regularly restocked with river trout, because of heavy fishing.

As the mountain lakes and water-courses are high-quality ecosystems, it would be desirable, short of being able to abolish fishing in the PNM, to strive towards a practice of high-quality angling, ie a type of fishing which is more responsible vis-à-vis the park's nature conservation objectives.

3.3 FOREST MANAGEMENT

Under the park regulations, projects for major works and forest management are submitted for opinion to the Park Authority.

In addition to the protected forests, which account for 85% of the woodland in the PNM, there are three categories of industrial forests for whose economic management the National Forestry Authority (Office national des Forêts - ONF is responsible). The economic use of this forest, inter alia, includes laying new tracks which may have a considerable impact on the environment and landscape.

As we were unable to meet any ONF official, we could not discuss the issue of an alternative ecological management approach to the forest which would be more in keeping with the Park's objectives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our visit to the PNM took three days in all.

On the first day we were able to gain a reasonable understanding of the arrangements in place to protect the Merveilles site. The measures taken and those planned are quite positive; they display a desire for efficient management of this exceptional heritage by the PNM.

Unfortunately, the well-structured information and enlightening discussions which took place on the first day were followed on the second by trade-union action in the shape of a one-day strike and staff demonstration. The arrival of the Council of Europe delegation gave the staff an opportunity overtly and spectacularly to demonstrate its opposition to the management's methods. This action had nothing to do with working conditions but the way in which the parks aims are currently being met and, in particular, its scientific objectives especially since the park's principal scientist had left.

We were handed an open letter to the Director of the Mercantour National Park; it details the various points being criticised in respect of the Park's functions: planning, communication, public activities and scientific remit.

It is not for us to comment on this note or the letters later sent to the staff by Mr PFEFFER and Mr GRANDJEAN, respectively Chairman of the Scientific Committee and Director of the Park. However, this incident revealed the differences between staff and management which could subsequently influence the running of the Park; on this score, we felt the issue was important.

Our visit was obviously cut short on the second day because:

- comments made on both sides in this confrontation made matters worse;
- time was wasted on details and in dwelling on the past;
- the Director left us alone with only a sector manager, on third day at Allos.

As a result, the expert is not sufficiently well informed to make a judgement on the basic question, the major problems of management and content or, at least, the main options of a development plan which currently is lacking.

Unfortunately, he was unable to meet everyone he wished to, in particular those in charge of forest management, and major problems such as grazing, which does not seem to have been controlled were neither demonstrated nor discussed during the three-day visit.

By way of conclusion, whereas the PNM's European value is undeniable and its main duty of protecting the environment is met, the expert can only conclude, on the basis of information gathered on scientific management, that he is unable to recommend the award of the European Diploma and validly to set out the conditions and/or recommendations which might go with such an award.

He therefore suggests that the award of the European Diploma be postponed until the application can be properly re-examined.