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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF
NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Committee of Experts for Protected Areas

KRIMML FALLS
(Austria)

Category C

ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Diploma, Category C, was awarded to the Krimml Falls in 1967. The validity of the Diploma expires in 1987, and according to current regulations (Ref. 5.1), a new on-the-spot appraisal must be made. By a letter of 7 June 1985, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe assigned this task to the author of this report, who was accompanied on his visit by Mr P Baum from the Secretariat.

The on-the-spot inspection took place on 19 and 20 June 1985 in the company of Mr J Fischer-Colbrie, nature protection officer at Pinzgau, Mr H Emberger from the Zell am See District Council nature conservation department, and Dr K Breiteneder, former nature protection officer for the Land of Salzburg. Sincere thanks are expressed to all these persons for their invaluable assistance during the on-the-spot appraisal.

The appraisal was based on the general conditions in section 1.5.4 of the regulations governing the award of the Diploma and in Appendix II concerning Category C (Ref. 5.1), and on the recommendations contained in Council of Europe Resolution (82) 1 concerning the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Krimml Falls natural feature adopted on 3 June 1982 (Ref. 5.4).

2. RESULTS OF APPRAISAL

2.1 General remarks

This is the fourth time that the expert has been invited by the Council of Europe to give his opinion on the case for renewing the Diploma for the Krimml Falls. In 1972, after consultation with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, an additional appraisal was made for the Land of Salzburg. As a result of these studies detailed knowledge has been acquired of the protected site and it has been possible to monitor its development since the first on-the-spot visit in 1971. He is thus in a good position to have a clear idea of the current state of the site in question, and to appreciate the progress that has been made in the meantime in nature conservation, to assess it and take it into account when making his conclusions.

It is important to reiterate the value of the protected site as was originally stated in the first report of 1971: "The Krimml Waterfalls are undoubtedly of supra-national and European importance".

- because of the extraordinary quantity of water which in summer falls from Krimmler Achenal to the bottom of the valley, approximately 400 m below, this being not an isolated mountain valley, but an inhabited valley which is open to tourism now that there is a good road;
- because the water falls in stages and over a terrain which is very broken up, thus offering endless possibilities for the play of water and spray and producing breathtaking effects;
- because the falls are situated in the midst of woodlands resembling virgin (spruce) forest whose shady green lines enhance the primitive beauty of the waterfall (based on descriptions contained in the writings of Adalbert Stifter).

The importance of the Krimml Falls is further emphasised by its position in the list of the highest waterfalls in the world drawn up by H Russegger, Krimml:

1. Angela Falls, 1100 m, Venezuela
2. Yosemite Falls, 740 m, United States
3. Sutherland Falls, 580 m, New Zealand
4. Mardalsfossen, 505 m, Norway
5. Krimml Falls, 400 m, Austria
6. Staubbuch Falls, 300 m, Switzerland
7. Gersoppa Falls, 253 m, India
8. Triberg Falls, 163 m, Germany
9. Victoria Falls, 110 m, South Africa
10. Iguacu, 64 m, Argentina-Brazil
11. Niagara Falls, 48-60 m, Canada-United States
12. Rhine Falls, 21 m, Switzerland. (Ref. 5.2)

It is thus beyond all doubt that the Krimml Falls, with their immediate surroundings, merit protection. The expert, supported in this by the Council of Europe, has always been at pains to recommend - and has pointed out that this is essential - extending the protected area of the Falls, that is to say, up to the limits of their natural space and including their region of origin, the Achental.

The article "Krimmler Wasserfälle geprägt von Keeswasser des Krimmler Achentales" which appeared in a recent publication echoes this view (Ref. 5.10).

In the same order of ideas, the following extract on the Achental is taken from the 1971 report:

"Achental:

This high valley is particularly striking for the wildness of its scenery: small-scale Alpine economy, an unassuming small village with an old inn, a few chalets, spruce and arolla (pinus cembra) forest, pine plantations, mud avalanches, the winding course of the Krimml, cattle-paths ideal for family outings and high mountains forming a backcloth. Improved access would be unlikely, in the long run, to stop the decline of the Alpine economy, nor is it an absolute necessity for non-industrial forestry, which in order to preserve the beauty of the scenery is the only system permitted. Moreover, better communications would undoubtedly make the area accessible to tourist car traffic and result in the random construction of holiday cottages. Not only would these buildings be exposed to the definite threat of mud and snow avalanches but the valley would lose everything which today makes it worthy of conservation." (Lit 5.2).

What is the current situation regarding the effective protection, advocated so many times before, of this single natural landscape unit formed by the two sections: "the Krimml Falls" and "Krimmler Achental"?

In 1983 the Land of Salzburg promulgated an Act on the creation of the "Hohe Tauern" National Park, a full two years after the Land of Carinthia (Kärnten), whilst the Tirol has not yet come to any decision. The first efforts to establish this park date back to 1909 and the original stimulus came from the setting up of national parks in the United States (Ref. 5.10).

In principle these efforts merit recognition and support at European level although, as a whole, it is still too early to make a definitive judgement on the solutions opted for.

Why refer to the national park in this context?

According to their current legal status, the Krimml Falls are a protected natural feature in the area surrounding the national park which also includes the Krimmler Achental. The measures taken are not, however, an adequate response and there is an urgent need for a specially protected area to be set up, the limits of which would include the entire natural area (see Conditions, 4.1). The original 200 m limit fixed on both sides of the Falls is devoid of all logic from the point of view of protecting the landscape for a site which has a European Diploma, not to mention a Category C, and, as such, is intolerable.

At this point it is necessary to point out one fact which particularly highlights the need for more effective protection. During the on-the-spot visit, we were able to observe that there had been clear felling in the intervening period in the Achental and this included felling in virtually virgin parts of the forest. The value of these typical forests for the landscape, and their protective function call for greater restraint in forestry activities (selective felling only, see 4.4), indeed for a total ban. Along the footpaths, near the falls, the selective felling of trees ought to be carried out as a safety measure only, in view of their function as an integral part of the landscape. The authorities ought to realise that this ban is of a very minor scale given that sizable areas of forest in the Land of Salzburg and throughout Austria are available for forestry purposes.

2.2 Construction and improvement of the Krimmler Tauernweg

It was by no means a lack of understanding for the problems of supplies, domestic refuse disposal and discharge of sewage either along the Falls (especially as regards the Schönangerl restaurant) or in the Achental (in particular for the Krimmler Tauernhaus), nor a failure to appreciate the requirements of this recreation area, which caused the expert and the Council of Europe to question the wisdom of this project. It was with reference to the principles of category C of the European Diploma governing the protection of such areas that they expressed doubts on several occasions. Experience has shown that the construction of a road, such as the one proposed, gradually leads to the development of tourist activities in general with a corresponding increase in motorised traffic which then becomes difficult to control. Not to mention the likely damage to a particularly vulnerable landscape from the mere building of the road itself. It was for all these reasons that specific conditions were stipulated in Resolution (82) 1 of the Council of Europe concerning the latest renewal of the Diploma on 3 June 1982 (see 4.1).

Fortunately, not only have the fears regarding possible damage likely to be inflicted on the landscape by the construction of the road proved unfounded, but there is some justification for describing the section between Gerlosstrasse and the Tauernhaus as an achievement which may serve as an example for the construction of other Alpine and forest roads with regard to both the chosen layout and the landscaping aspects.

In this connection and irrespective of the new Tauern road, special attention should be drawn to the publications by Dr R Sieber, project director and site manager ("Erfahrungen im landschaftspfleglichen ländlichen Strassenbau") and Dr K Breiteneder ("Der neue Krimmler Tauernweg - eine echte Naurschutzaufgabe") included among the documentary literature on the building operations provided by the Forestry Commission of the Land of Salzburg (Ref. 5.7), which describe the lessons learned during the work under consideration.

The writer nevertheless feels obliged to raise certain questions regarding the use of the new road, which seems to be encouraging the undesirable tendency feared at the outset by boosting the use of motorised vehicles. For example, private cars were seen parked at the beginning of the carriageway leading from the Gerlos road displaying the following announcement: "car for hire to visit the Krimml Falls"; some vehicles without access plates were also encountered. In addition, there is a notice board near the Tauern restaurant stating: "Please apply to kitchen staff to order a taxi" and indicating the relevant tariffs.

The expert believes it is imperative to allow no derogations from the conditions laid down by the Council of Europe (Ref. 5.4) regarding the layout of the road and the use to which it is put. The current rules for use (see Appendix) must not be allowed to be interpreted in such a way as to permit taxis to come and go regularly, to an extent unrelated with the demands of farming or forestry, delivering supplies, discharging sewage or removing household refuse. Such a taxi service would privilege some people and would no doubt pave the way for the unrestricted use of the road by motor vehicles. The current regulations should therefore be strictly adhered to and the regular circulation of cars for hire prohibited (see 4.2).

This point of view is borne out, moreover, in the ideas of Dr K Breiteneder, as expressed in his publication (Ref. 5.7), where he states that: "any intensification of road traffic in excess of the existing number of priority users, would cancel out the desired effect and might lead to the immediate withdrawal of the European Diploma".

2.3 Schönangerl Restaurant

Under this heading, we refer first of all to the Council of Europe Resolution (Ref. 5.4): "plans shall be drawn up and systems installed for removing effluent and household refuse from the Schönangerl restaurant".

The building of the Krimmler Tauernweg has in our opinion solved the problem of removing the household refuse. As for the effluent, the restaurant proprietor is required by the competent authorities to have an evacuation system installed beneath the buildings by 30 October 1988. To justify the lack of other sanitation measures, the proprietor has pointed to the absence of electricity. His proposal for the construction of a local small-scale hydro-electric power station is unacceptable from the landscape conservation point of view. As discussed in the on-the-spot appraisal, the necessary electric current should be supplied by underground cable from Krimml; advantage should be taken of this work to put the telephone wires, which are at present carried through the air on poles, underground as well. At the same time, consideration should be given to laying the effluent discharge pipe from Schönangerl to the Krimml in the same trench, thereby making it superfluous to install the proposed small discharge plant near Schönangerl, a solution which might well cause problems in the long run.

For the time being, plans for sanitation work now exist and visible improvements have already been made to the outside of the buildings since the last appraisal.

It would nevertheless appear essential for the authorities responsible for protecting the landscape to support the proprietor actively during the entire duration of the sanitation work, in order that the necessary measures described may be carried out as quickly as possible and convincing results achieved from the functional and conservationist points of view (see 4.3).

2.4 Buildings

The considerable value of this restaurant and of the accompanying farm in the Achenal has been amply described in the publication: "Wasserfallweg - Krimmler Wasserfälle" (Ref. 5.10). The generally attractive appearance of the buildings is however rather spoilt by the caravan-like annexe. The proprietor himself is keen to rebuild this annexe, mainly for commercial reasons. Here again the competent authorities should endeavour to give active support to this project, in order to find a solution which harmonises with the main building (see 4.3). The various improvements to buildings already carried out under their auspices, including the reintroduction of traditional fencing in the Achenal, are evidence in favour of this procedure.

2.5 Tourist facilities between the Gerlosstrasse and the area of the Falls

According to the conditions laid down in this connection by the Council of Europe when the Diploma was last renewed: "no new tourist facilities (kiosks, restaurant) shall be allowed within the limits of the protected area, and the two existing kiosks shall be removed" (Ref. 5.4).

There has been no change in the outward appearance of the restaurants. The mobile vans selling chips have disappeared. Work to improve the sanitation of the building on the land belonging to the Richter building has been authorised.

These conditions therefore seem to have been fulfilled, but care should be taken to ensure that they are respected as fully in the future.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Account has already been taken - above all since the last renewal of the Diploma - of certain conditions laid down by the Council of Europe several years ago. The competent authorities and private individuals who have taken the necessary steps deserve sincere thanks. There is obviously a sincere desire to fulfil the conditions of entitlement to the European Diploma in category C.

This being so, the expert recommends the renewal of the Diploma, while specifying that its award should depend on the following conditions:

4. CONDITIONS

4.1 By the next renewal date for the Diploma, a special protection area, incorporating the site of the Krimml Falls and the Krimmler Achenal should be created, ensuring the effective and permanent protection of these natural features.

As part of the general conservation specifications, special attention should be paid to planning the future exploitation of the forest in accordance with the principles described above (see 2.1, last paragraph).

4.2 The traffic regulations now in force, described in the Appendix to the report, should be strictly enforced, and a regular taxi service prohibited. All motor traffic in excess of the justified requirements of authorised persons for purposes of farming, forestry and supplies should be restricted to cases of emergency (see 2.2).

4.3 The authorities competent for landscape protection should energetically support the plans for the sanitation work or improvements proposed in connection with the Schönangerl restaurant and the Krimmler Tauernhaus, in accordance with the proposals made in paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4 of this report, and the necessary work should be completed by the time the Diploma becomes due for renewal.

5. REFERENCES

5.1 Regulations for the award of the European Diploma. Resolution (73) 4 of 19 January 1973.

5.2 Reports of the visiting expert concerning the renewal of the European Diploma for the Krimml Falls natural feature (Austria) of 1971, 1976 and 1980.

5.3 Consultant's report to the government of the Land of Salzburg concerning the construction of a supply road in 1972.

5.4 Resolution (82) 1 of the Council of Europe concerning the renewal of the European Diploma awarded to the Krimml Falls natural feature, 3 June 1982.

5.5 Annual reports on the Krimml Falls natural feature for 1983 and 1984.

5.6 Recent decrees affecting the natural feature.

5.7 Krimmler Tauernweg. Amt der Salzburger Landesregierung. Baudokumentation der Landesforstdirektion 1/1984.

5.8 Nationalpark Hohe Tauern. Gesetzliche Grundlagen und Ziele. Schriftenreihe des Landespressebüros. 1984.

5.9 Nationalpark Hohe Tauern. Wanderkarte 1: 50,000. Westteil: Salzburg. Tirol.

5.10 Wasserfallweg/Krimmler Wasserfälle. Naturkundlicher Führer zum Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, Band 3. Österreichischer Alpenverein. 1985.