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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

"European Diploma" Working Party

Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve
(Federal Republic of Germany)

ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL

14-15 September 1976

Report

by

Dr Willy A. PLATTNER
(Switzerland)

47.696
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Subject : Renewal in 1977 of the period of validity of the European Diploma awarded to the Lüneberg Heath Nature Reserve. On-the-spot appraisal carried out on 14 and 15 September 1976.

Summary

The terms of reference given to me were designed mainly to ascertain whether the state of the site had improved or deteriorated since 1972, date when the European Diploma was last renewed. The results of my investigation are clear-cut and unequivocal : the area awarded the Diploma presents a far more favourable aspect than it did four years ago. The conclusion is therefore inescapable : the European Diploma should be renewed.

Preamble

In the following pages, I shall provide detailed answers to the different points included in my terms of reference, which were :

1. studying the present state of the site and thus ascertaining whether it had improved, deteriorated or remained static since the date when the Diploma was awarded or since the date of the initial renewal ;
2. analysing the state of conservation of the flora, fauna and landscape (progression or regression of species) ;
3. examining alterations (material or legislative) already completed or in progress ;
4. studying the impact of the public on the flora, fauna and landscape and making proposals for improving the situation ;
5. studying the budgetary resources assigned to the management of the park ;
6. studying grazing of the pastures by moorland sheep and its effect on the heath ;
7. studying the prospecting operations of the Deutsche Mobil Oil AG in their search for oil-fields and natural gas deposits ;
8. studying the work involved in building waterworks to supply drinking water to the Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

At first sight, it would seem to be impossible to carry out such an ambitious programme in such an extensive and varied area in the space of two days. My study was made possible partly by the many forms of help I was given by the Verein Naturschutzpark (VNP) and partly because of the many visits which I have paid to the Lüneburg heath during the past ten years ; as a consequence I know this area well and observe its progress with the greatest possible interest.

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Historical background

I recognise that all those concerned are aware that the heathland in the Lüneburg region consists in semi-natural plant life, which can only be maintained through certain artificial or agricultural measures. Now the abandonment of old pastoral methods makes it absolutely necessary to step in with the appropriate means. Towards the end of the last century, plantations of pine and spruce - more profitable than oak or beech, which covered the region in the distant past - gradually replaced the heathland. It was in order to save the latter, or what remained of it, that a nature protection association was set up at the beginning of the present century. It should be recalled that at this time it was generally believed that nature conservation consisted in leaving it entirely to its own devices. Little by little, it was recognised that active steps had to be taken to preserve the heathland. This is what happened in the case of the Lüneburg Heath.

The European Diploma was awarded to a "Nature Reserve", classified in category C. In this case, the aim is to associate the social and recreational amenities with the biological or aesthetic character of the territory under consideration.

Remarks concerning points 1 to 8 of my terms of reference

1. studying the present state of the site and thus ascertaining whether it has improved, deteriorated or remained static since the date when the Diploma was awarded or since the date of the initial renewal.

Here, it is very easy to provide the answer : the site has not merely remained static, but has shown very considerable improvement.

2. analysing the state of conservation of the flora, fauna and landscape (progression or regression of species).

2.1 Flora

The heathland has undergone spectacular improvements since 1972, the date when the European Diploma was renewed. Efforts to combat the invasion of birch trees have met with remarkable success through the employment of a new method of destroying young trees. The method in point is a mechanical one and not one that involves destruction by means of chemical products. The chemical campaign has, in fact, been relinquished although the immediate results were very encouraging and effective ; but uncertainty about the long-term results led to abandonment of the chemical campaign.

Besides the young birches and some conifers, a relatively large number of old trees were removed. In many places, heather has reappeared and is in process of regaining ground in others.

The author of the on-the-spot appraisal with a view to renewal of the European Diploma in 1972 wrote in 1974 :

"after the extraordinary efforts made by the VNP in 1972 to restore the reserve, the Lüneburg Heath has today been saved and is more beautiful than ever." I associate myself fully with this view.

2.2. Fauna

It is hardly possible to form a valid opinion of the way in which fauna have developed in the course of a short stay. I did, however, observe a number of significant facts, which were confirmed by Mr Lux, the administrator of the VNP properties and the author of several books on hunting. The number of roe-deer has increased slightly. I saw a great many fresh fox tracks, and some tracks of red deer and wild boar. It seems to me that there were fewer rabbits than on my last visits. These variations are, however, of no great importance, since animal populations sometimes change very fast.

Black grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*) are on the increase. This year about two hundred cocks were counted. Curlews (*Numenius arquata*) have been nesting in the reserve for the past two or three years, but outside the part awarded the Diploma. In fact, a recently acquired piece of land near the Piezmoor has been cleared of its bushes and scythed. Curlews and plover (*Vanellus*) have settled there. Since the drainage channels of the Piezmoor - or to be more precise, their extremities - have been blocked up through the efforts of the VNP, the water level has risen significantly. Aquatic avifauna have rapidly taken possession of stretches of water protected from the public. That, too, represents a major enrichment. This peat-bog, known as the Piezmoor, is, however, located in the north-west of the territory occupied by the British Army and is not included in the perimeter of the Diploma area. We may ask ourselves whether there is not a case for reviewing the limits of the area to which the European Diploma was awarded. This would appear all the more desirable since another part of the Diploma area, consisting of a small wetland dale lying near Wehlen, will probably to some extent dry up during the coming years. I shall revert to this under point 8. However that may be, the acquisition of the Piezmoor represents a very considerable gain to the region and more specifically to the reserve. In the Diploma area, I observed a peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), which is nesting in the reserve, a Montagu's harrier (*Circus pygargus*) and a goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*). According to the administrator, Mr Lux, the long-eared owl (*Asio otus*) and the short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) are not uncommon. Among fairly recent visitors, mention should be made of the raven (*Corvus corax*), which I saw for the first time this year.

On the other hand, I have so far never observed any magpies (*Pica pica*), although there are plenty of jays (*Gerrulus glandarius*). This list comprises only a small selection of the avifauna in the reserve.

3. Examining alterations (material or legislative) already completed or in progress

3.1.1. Recent alterations of a material nature are on a very large scale. Indeed, since 1972 more than 300 hectares have been acquired by the VNP (through purchase or renting) ; and stretches of country - heathland which had been ill-maintained or forests of conifers planted during the past few decades - have been turned over to heathland or are scheduled for such conversion.

3.1.2 Particular care - and particularly expensive care ! - has been devoted to roads and byways.

Since the number of visitors is very considerable - the authorities reckon with between 3 and 4 million each year - adequate protective measures have to be taken. Of course, many excursioners come on foot, many more in horse-drawn vehicles and many others still on bicycles. Lastly, riders are not uncommon. Furthermore, a number of motorists have permits to drive inside the reserve. (This applies to tradesmen, doctors, workers and the like who have duties to perform in the reserve, but not tourists or holiday-makers).

Hikers have needs which differ from those of horsemen and motorists. The VNP has taken account of these by providing about 300 kilometres of tracks within the reserve set aside for horsemen and a similar number for walkers. Neither of these two categories is used by motor traffic. Where the footpath crosses the heathland, a barrier approximately 30 cm high, made from trunks of pine or spruce, shows hikers that they must remain on the path. These barriers are very often used by walkers to rest, which was not possible with the pre-1972 fencing, since it was made of wire stretched between posts about 30 cm high. The footpaths are for the most part clearly sign-posted. Walking on them is very pleasant, since the ground is neither too hard nor too soft. The paths are relatively broad. Two couples can meet and pass without being obliged to draw aside to let the others go by. Infant carriages (perambulators) are to be seen with increasing frequency, since the parents are able to take a stroll even with very small children.

The tracks for riders are sandy and very soft.

3.2 Acts

Among the numerous Acts or ordinances passed since the renewal of the European Diploma which closely or distantly concern nature conservation, two texts in my view assume a certain significance :

- a) The destruction of the heathland is now prohibited ;
- b) Everyone enjoys free access to forests.

I consider that these two new features of German legislation represent very important progress. The first text mentioned is designed to ensure the lasting survival of heathlands and the second serves greatly to enhance the recreational role of the forests.

4. Studying the impact of the public on the flora, fauna and landscape and making proposals for improving the situation.

The impact of the public on the flora, fauna and landscape no longer plays the pernicious role - far from it - which it still played only ten years ago! It is undoubtedly thanks to the laying of paths and also the many facilities provided for resting - since besides the barriers mentioned above, the VNP has placed about 600 benches in the reserve - nearly all the visitors keep to the paths set aside for their use. The numerous scars left behind by the earlier public, who walked about anywhere and everywhere, are healing. The paths laid on sandy soil, from which the heather had disappeared, are for the most part again covered with vegetation.

Approximately 1000 receptacles for litter invite visitors to the reserve to throw their waste paper, bottles and other rubbish into them. The footpaths are kept surprisingly clean. The great majority of the public therefore recognises the intentions of VNP just as if regulations existed prescribing certain conduct under threat of fines or other penalties. But regulations prohibiting one thing or another are not displayed at every cross-roads. I am inclined to believe that the visitor finds what he is looking for in the reserve and consequently feels no need to do anything else.

It goes without saying that the litter receptacles are periodically emptied. In these circumstances, it is not easy to put forward proposals designed to improve the situation, as I am asked to do by the terms of reference given to me.

I should, however, be very glad if the VNP could find some way of making hikers aware of the "heathland life": birds, insects, plants and the like, and not only of former human cultures. Indeed, at Wilsede, in the centre of the reserve, a small museum exists in which human activities from the settlement by the Celts up to the most recent past are exhibited and explained, but in which nature is hardly represented at all.

5. Studying the budgetary resources assigned to the management of the parks.

During the past two decades, the reserve has benefited from donations amounting to more than 30 million Deutsche Marks. Road-making, the purchase of further pieces of land - among them the Piezmoor - efforts to keep down birch trees, building new sheds for sheep (of which there are at present 23) and the provision of modern living quarters for the shepherds have cost considerable sums of money. These projects are more

or less completed. From this, I conclude that even if the donations were to dry up, the VNP would be in a position to maintain its activities for the pleasure and benefit of the public.

6. Studying grazing of the pastures by moorland sheep and its effect on the heath

If it is to be successfully revived, the heathland requires sheep. (Of course, there are methods of upkeep for heathlands - cutting, burning and so forth - but in the Luneburg region it is sheep first and foremost that have created the heath and the task of maintaining it above all devolves upon them.) We know that their numbers fell after 1940 to a point where the growth and renewal of heather was no longer assured. The VNP is fully alive to this situation. At present it possesses 9 flocks, each composed of about 350 ewes and a few rams. If the heathland is to be properly maintained, we must reckon with about one ewe for every hectare. This figure has currently been attained in the reserve.

7. Studying the prospecting operations of the Deutsche Mobil Oil AG in their search for oil-fields and natural gas deposits.

Some borings have been made, the regional political authorities having authorised this action. The borings have not yielded any positive results - from the standpoint of Mobil Oil, that is. The VNP has opposed boring operations on its own territory. It is accordingly too early to speak of these prospecting operations having any sort of impact on the Lüneburg Heath reserve.

8. Studying the work involved in building waterworks for the supply of drinking water to the Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

Since the political authorities have given permission for the drinking water provided by the rainwater falling on part of the reserve to be tapped, we must expect a certain lowering of the water table in the Wehlen region.

Professor Buchwald of Hanover Technical University (who gave us his services as guide on the first day of the on-the-spot appraisal) is studying the case. Monitoring devices have been installed at the most vulnerable points. They should make it possible to follow developments, i.e. in variations of the water level, very accurately.

The water table with which Hamburg is concerned supposedly lies between two impermeable strata at a depth of a few metres. If that is so, the surface water of the Wehlen Dale would not suffer any change. It is, however, probable that there are holes in this impermeable stratum. In that event, the surface water would flow away and disappear into deep ground if the level of the water table tapped by the City of Hamburg were to drop.

In Professor Buchwald's opinion, we must reckon with a lowering in the level of the surface water table by approximately one metre. The effects would only make themselves felt after several years had elapsed. The forest would doubtless suffer from a shortage of water and would, in time, be replaced by heathland. The appearance of the small marshy dale to the north of Wehlen would then be changed.

In my view, the loss of a wetland site, although small in size, would be regrettable. Nonetheless, the acquisition of the Piezmoor by the VNP and consequent action to conserve it goes very far towards offsetting the probable loss of the small Wehlen Dale.

By way of conclusion:

After thus reviewing the 8 points in my terms of reference, I would repeat what I wrote at the outset :

The state of the reserve has very decidedly improved since 1972, the date when the European Diploma was renewed. The conclusion is accordingly very simple : I propose a further renewal coupled with congratulations on the remarkable rehabilitation work which has been accomplished. This does not mean that the "region" cannot be further improved, or that it has reached the highest standard that can be hoped for.

The VNP has certainly exerted considerable efforts to :

- improve and extend the heathland ;
 - improve the footpaths ;
 - provide a network of tracks for riders ;
 - root out the birches ;
 - replace the forest of conifers destroyed during the storm of November 1972 by a forest of oak and beech ;
- to mention only the most spectacular achievements.

A large part of the area that was awarded the Diploma, however, belongs to the state, whose efforts have not been on such a large scale as those of the VNP. The state, too, has converted some forests destroyed in 1972 into oak woods, but other stretches of woodland were reafforested with conifers.

In its annual reports, the VNP repeats its complaints every year regarding the heathland damaged by the tanks of the British Army.

The European Committee for the conservation of nature and natural resources has taken cognizance of the reports, without initiating any follow-up action on the remarks made, alleging that this affair was no concern of the Committee, since the land did not lie within the perimeter of the area to which the European Diploma had been awarded. Not so long ago, I shared this opinion.

In the summer of 1976, I paid a visit to the site and took due note of the report by Mr Ipsen, a lawyer. The terrain used by the British Army belongs to the VNP. The state, however, owns stretches of country close by, which are earmarked for the Army, but which it does not use. It accordingly seems to me that, with a certain amount of good will, it would be possible to give the VNP back its land and to place the areas which are set aside for the Army, but are not being used by it, at the disposal of the British Army. This territory does not lie hundreds of kilometres away, but in the immediate neighbourhood of the Lüneburg Heath. The country at present being used by the British Army - albeit in very small numbers - would be allowed to revert to heathland, and heather would soon flourish there anew. Would the European Committee not be prepared to initiate action along these lines ?

It only remains for me to thank all those who helped me in the course of my on-the-spot appraisal, including both the representatives of the VNP and also Mr Ribaut.

(signed) Willy A. Plattner