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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

41<sup>st</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 30 November - 3 December 2021

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**Group of Specialists on the  
European Diploma for Protected Areas**

24<sup>th</sup> February 2021  
(*virtual meeting*)

**MEETING REPORT**

*Document prepared  
by the Directorate of Democratic Participation*

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## REPORT OF THE MEETING

The Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas (EDPA) met virtually on 24 February 2021. The Standing Committee is invited to:

- Take note of the meeting report of the Group of Specialists;
- Take note of the revised draft renewal resolutions concerning De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve & Weerribben-Wieden National Park ([T-PVS/DE\(2020\)11rev](#)) and consider forwarding them to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption;
- Express its concern regarding the unresolved situation in the Scandola Nature Reserve (France), and note the Group of Specialists' recommendation to maintain the postponement of renewal of its Diploma;
- Express its concern regarding the situation in the Doñana National Park (Spain) and note the Group of Specialists' recommendation to maintain the postponement of the renewal of its Diploma;
- Consider forwarding the draft Resolution exceptionally extending the validity of the Diploma to 11 areas until 2024 due to the impossibility of carrying out on-the-spot appraisals (see document [T-PVS/DE\(2021\)04](#)) to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption;
- Welcome the scenario discussed and supported for carrying out virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits in order to keep monitoring the European Diploma;
- Take note of the ordinary and extraordinary on-the-spot appraisal visits planned to be carried out in 2021 subject to the restrictions due to COVID-19, and take note that an online element may be added to each on-the-spot appraisal;
- Welcome the ongoing updates of the dashboard and the database of the European Diploma and the mapping of the multiple designations/certifications held by Diploma awarded areas;
- Welcome the Communication Strategy and related initiatives planned for this year and beyond.

## **1. WELCOME AND OPENING OF THE MEETING**

The meeting was opened on Wednesday 24 February 2021 by the Chair of the Group of Specialists, Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic), via video-conference. He welcomed the participants and introduced the new Secretary of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention). He thanked all contributors to the EDPA: the experts, Secretariat, site managers and other stakeholders.

## **2. ADOPTION OF THE DRAFT AGENDA**

The Group adopted the draft agenda (see Appendix 1)

## **3. GENERAL INFORMATION ON ACTIVITIES PRESENTING AN INTEREST FOR THE WORK OF THE GROUP**

### **3.a Short presentation of the report of the meeting of the Group in 2020 and of the activities undertaken during the last year**

The Chair briefly wrapped up the outcomes and conclusions of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists, elaborated further in the next point.

### **3.b Follow up by the Secretariat on the conclusions of the 2020 meeting of the Group of specialists**

The Secretariat gave an overview of the conclusions of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists. 15 resolutions had been adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in September 2020 for the renewal of the diploma to 14 areas as well as the award to the Regional Park Gallipoli Cognato (Italy). The Committee had also confirmed the recommendations of the Group of Specialists not to renew the European Diploma to the Scandola Nature Reserve (France) and Doñana National Park (Spain) until threats to the sites would be addressed and integrity of the areas restored.

The Secretariat recalled that out of the 13 on-the-spot appraisal visits pending since 2020, 11 were ordinary visits, while 2 were extraordinary visits. The methodology and the opportunity to carry out these visits in 2021 would be addressed later under agenda item 5b.

The Secretariat also informed that continuing improvements had been made to the website dashboard, while the database of European Diploma holding areas which had been created in 2020, had been shared with the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre with a view to display the European Diploma holding areas on the website Protected Planet.

Finally, in relation to the visibility of the European Diploma, the Secretariat informed participants that, following the creation of the slogan for the European Diploma last year “an award for exemplary management of outstanding European natural heritage”, the Secretariat had approached site managers across the network and translated the slogan into every language of countries hosting the European Diploma.

The Group of Specialists took note of the information.

## **4. PENDING DRAFT RESOLUTIONS FROM 2019**

### **De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve & Weerribben-Wieden National Park**

The Secretariat introduced the discussion by recalling that a combined on-the-spot appraisal visit to both areas had taken place in 2018 (appraisal reports [T-PVS/DE\(2019\)11](#) and [T-PVS/DE\(2019\)09](#)) and the approval of the draft resolutions (document (document [T-PVS/DE\(2020\)11](#)) for renewal had been given at the meeting of the Group of Specialists in March 2019. However, prior to their adoption at the Committee of Ministers level, the Dutch national authorities had requested that the resolutions be removed from the agenda in July 2019, in order to reassess the conditions. The Dutch authorities were concerned that the conditions could not be met due to recent changes in Dutch law and wanted them to be modified or removed.

Following the Group of Specialists meeting last year and in the intervening period, the Secretariat, Chair of the Group of Experts, independent expert, Dutch authorities and site manager had coordinated to find a compromise in the wording of the conditions. These conditions concerned the possible development of Lelystad airport which may affect the two sites; and the management of large herbivores (related only to the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve). The Secretariat presented the reworded conditions, which included the transformation of the two conditions concerning management of large herbivores into recommendations.

The representative of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality again expressed the regret that the national authorities had not been included in the appraisal visit in 2018, especially as the condition concerning Lelystad airport was out of the mandate of the site itself - it was an issue of national level. She assured that the threat of the airport on Natura 2000 sites and the 2 diploma holding sites had been treated carefully and provisions embedded in the national legislation, thus there was no need for such conditions to be included in the draft renewal resolutions. Furthermore, following the postponement of development of the airport last year, there were even doubts as to whether the project would go ahead. Nevertheless, the Dutch authorities were tentatively in favour of the reworded conditions, pending a final approval from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

The Site Manager of the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve clarified that the threats of development of the airport on nature had been investigated carefully in the country, and agreed with the reworded condition. Concerning the two conditions which had been transformed into recommendations on the management of large herbivores, she explained that while the Reserve takes efforts to use a non-intervention management policy with the herds when it can, this is not always possible and so this had to be taken out of the list of conditions. She further suggested that the new recommendation regarding eco-corridors be modified slightly to improve its scope.

The independent expert agreed with the reformulations, but stated for the record that the inclusion of the condition concerning the airport had been made to guarantee the protection of the areas from potential changes in government or policy over the 10-year renewal period - thus it was not a criticism of the current government and its procedures. He also recalled that it was not within the capabilities of the Group or Secretariat to ensure that every relevant stakeholder was present at appraisals; this responsibility must lie with the site manager who knows the situation and can recommend which parties should be invited. Several relevant authorities had been present during the mission.

Concerning the conditions related to management of large herbivores, he recalled that one of the main reasons the Diploma had been initially awarded to the site had been because of its original non-intervention approach to management of these herds. However, he was aware of changing circumstances and was content to compromise and allow it to be a recommendation. He also supported the proposal of the site manager to modify slightly the recommendation concerning eco-corridors.

During the discussion, there was support of the independent expert's long-term approach when formulating conditions and recommendations, as political will could change quickly and within the 10-year renewal period. The general process of conducting appraisals, drafting the report and conditions and adoption at the Committee of Ministers was also reflected upon following this complex case. However, it was recalled that in the vast majority of cases, there were no such problems. It was suggested that if conditions would require a mandate at a higher level than of the site itself, the relevant authorities should be involved. Finally, better follow-up between the key parties following the OSA should be ensured to allow a good collaboration.

The Group of Specialists thanked the Dutch representatives, independent expert and Secretariat for their efforts to find a compromise in the wording of the three concerned conditions. The reformulation as found in the document [T-PVS/DE\(2020\)11rev](#) was approved and the Group of Specialists entrusted the Secretariat with the follow up on the endorsement of the draft resolution by the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention and its possible official adoption by the Committee of Ministers in 2021.

## 5. CONSEQUENCES OF THE POSTPONEMENT OF THE ADVISORY VISITS, DISCUSSION AND PROPOSALS TO THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

### 5.a Extension of the validity of the European Diploma to 11 areas

The Secretariat explained the proposal in the draft resolution ([T-PVS/DE\(2021\)04](#)) which was to exceptionally extend the validity of the Diploma to the 11 sites to which an on-the-spot appraisal visits had been postponed last year. The proposal was to extend them exceptionally until 2023, and the hope was that some visits could take place at some stage this year and the remaining in 2022. The proposal was included in one single draft resolution for ease of reference, and if the Group agreed, would be submitted to the Committee of Ministers for its possible adoption.

During the discussion, several participants proposed to amend the proposal to extend the validity to 2024 to give extra leeway as it seemed that even this year appraisal visits could be difficult to organise. However, it should be made clear that the extension was strictly provisional, and that once an on-site visit could take place and pending a positive outcome, the renewal period would revert back to the original calendar, i.e. those sites which were due to be renewed to 2031 and whose validity would be extended exceptionally until 2024, would be renewed until 2031 following the on-the-spot appraisal. The concerned sites should not feel that this was an opportunity to disregard their commitments towards the European Diploma.

Furthermore, it was emphasised that the extraordinary visits mandated last year should be prioritised.

More generally, there was a proposal to envisage two experts per OSA, one of whom may be a local expert who knows better the particular situation on the ground. However, it was warned that the total impartiality of the independent expert was a key factor in ensuring a professional and independent outcome, not to mention the potential increased costs. Related to this, it was suggested that a new generation of experts was needed for OSAs, and that they could accompany the usual expert to gain experience.

The Group of Specialists thanked the Secretariat for preparing the proposal on an exceptional extension of the validity of the European Diploma to 11 areas. It agreed to the proposal as lengthening the extension to 2024 as presented in the document [T-PVS/DE\(2021\)04rev](#). It recalled that concerned sites would still be expected to fulfil their commitments during this period, and that the eventual renewal period would remain within the current 10-year benchmark.

The Group of Specialists entrusted the Secretariat with the follow up on the endorsement of the draft resolution by the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention and its possible official adoption by the Committee of Ministers in 2021.

Furthermore, the Secretariat was mandated to prioritise organising, where possible, the extraordinary on-the-spot appraisal visits, and to consider during the year which visit from 2020 could take place within the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Group also took note of the proposals to involve two experts per visit, one of whom may be a new, less-experienced expert in order to transfer skills and knowledge to the next generation of experts.

### 5.b Alternatives to physical on-the-spot appraisal visits

The Secretariat recalled that 22 on-the-spot-appraisal visits were due in 2021 - 13 pending since 2020 in addition to the 9 visits scheduled for 2021. As the opportunity to conduct site visits in 2021 remained uncertain, to ensure continuity of the European Diploma monitoring and reduce a backlog of visits, the Secretariat had taken the initiative to propose an alternative temporary approach to on-the-spot appraisal visits, consisting of two phases and outlined in document [T-PVS/DE\(2021\)02](#).

The first step of this approach would envisage online meetings between the independent expert, site manager and relevant stakeholders, with the Secretariat participating as moderator. Based on the outcome of this meeting, the independent expert would draft a preliminary report and propose provisional conditions and/or recommendations.

The second step would consist of a short field visit aimed at finalising the preliminary report and, if needed, adjusting the recommendations/conditions (Scenario A).

However, should COVID-19 related travel restrictions impede the field visit, the Secretariat would propose that the Group of Specialists examine the preliminary report and, when relevant, renew the diploma for a limited period of five years, pending an eventual OSA (Scenario B).

The Group of Specialists discussed the proposed temporary approach to on-the-spot appraisals and agreed on the added value of holding online meetings with managing authorities and other relevant stakeholders ahead of the physical visit to the site. In fact, the Group suggested including preliminary online meetings as a standard procedure to complement site visits, even beyond the pandemic.

In relation to the second phase of the on-the-spot appraisal, the Group of Specialists stressed the importance and necessity to physically visit sites. All participants agreed that restricting the physical visit to one day would be extremely limiting, especially for visits to large sites. Finally, the physical visit had proven in the past a great opportunity to remotivate site managers and other stakeholders and demonstrate that the European Diploma was more than just words on paper.

The Group of Specialists agreed to adopt the alternative temporary approach to on-the-spot appraisal visits as proposed by the Secretariat, provided that the time limitation for the visit will be extended to a minimum of 2 days. Scenario B shall be adopted only when travel will not be possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Group of Specialists agreed to pursue the idea of online meetings with managing authorities and other relevant stakeholders ahead of the physical visit to the site as a standard procedure to complement on site visits even beyond the pandemic.

The Group, however, stressed that physical visits should always remain the standard procedure of the European Diploma monitoring mechanism, which was one of its key strengths.

## **6. PRESENTATION OF THE REPORTING RESULTS BY THE SECRETARIAT AND THE GROUP OF SPECIALISTS**

### **6.a Analysis of the annual reports**

The Secretariat recalled the objectives of the annual report and the Group's mandate, which are defined by the Resolution CM/ResDip(2008)1 on the revised regulations for the European Diploma for Protected Areas. It also recalled that conditions and recommendations of each area are integrated in the nominative reporting templates which are shared with area managers individually. This approach helps site manager to address key information and meet the reporting expectations and therefore will continue to be used in the future.

In 2020, the number of annual reports received increased from 62 in 2019 to 70 (out of the 73 areas currently awarded with the European Diploma). The Secretariat recalled the scoring system used for the European Diploma dashboard, which has been updated following the reception of the 2020 reports. The scoring system currently only acknowledges the extent to which areas are meeting reporting obligations; however, the Secretariat indicated that additional criteria with indicators could be added to the scoring system in the future. In general, reporting numbers, as well as quality was continuing to show a positive trend this year.

As in previous years, members of the Group of Specialists had been involved in the assessment of the annual reports by using the assessment forms. The document [T-PVS/DE\(2021\)05](#) provided the conclusions of the Group for each Diploma holding area. The Group discussed key overall findings of their assessments and highlighted challenges and gaps in European Diploma reporting. Overall, the Group found annual reporting of a good quality. A common challenge identified concerned recommendations, which often are not adequately addressed. A proposal was to introduce a quantitative assessment to measure compliance against recommendations, which could either take the form of a self-assessment by the site manager or a score to be assigned by the experts in charge of the assessment.

Another common challenge concerned visibility, as the majority of the reports had presented little or no information in this regard. To improve this, the Secretariat suggested including a visibility recommendation in all future resolutions on the renewal of the diploma, as at the moment, it was included only in the preamble of the award/renewal resolutions.

Members of the Group requested that the Secretariat provide guidelines or samples of assessment reports to enable a harmonised reporting layout. It was also proposed that each year's reporting template should

include a section on the achievements, shortcomings and conclusions assessed the previous year, as otherwise there was no concrete follow-up to these.

Finally, the initiative proposed in the Vision document of the previous year regarding better information sharing for and amongst site managers was recalled. This could involve organising online networking and knowledge-sharing meetings for site managers of similar areas, and a platform dedicated to advertising relevant seminars and workshops, whether organised by the Council of Europe or other external actors.

The Group of Specialists welcomed the results of the 2020 annual reporting, highlighting the positive submission trend and thanked the managers of the Diploma holding areas for complying with the reporting obligation, as well as the members of the Group of Specialists and the Secretariat for their contribution to the analysis of the reports.

Various suggestions to improve future reporting and further enhance the visibility of the European Diploma were discussed and noted.

## **6.b Follow up on the areas identified in 2020 as requiring particular attention**

### **• Scandola Nature Reserve (France)**

The Secretariat recalled the particular situation of the Scandola Nature Reserve, reminding that following the independent expert's on-the-spot appraisal in 2018 (report [T-PVS/DE\(2019\)2](#)) and related conclusions, the Group of Specialists in 2020 had recommended to not renew the Diploma to this area due to the considerable lack of progress and communication of the stakeholders with the Secretariat. It had mandated the Secretariat to continue monitoring of the situation. In September 2020, the Committee of Ministers had followed this recommendation and did not renew the European Diploma.

The recommendation of the Group of Specialists and subsequent decision of the Committee of Ministers had led to a large public debate on the situation, with the press, local and national authorities and even members of the European Parliament getting involved. While initial steps, at least in writing, had been taken by the regional authorities to extend the protected area, to regulate the frequentation of pleasure boats overnight, to define quiet zones around some of the osprey nests, there still appeared to be very little progress on the ground and no comprehensive strategy for a sustainable tourism put in place to mitigate the risks to the existing protected area.

The Group of Specialists took note of the situation since last year, and called again on the national and regional authorities to fulfil the conditions and recommendations contained in Resolution CM/ResDip(2010)11 and reiterated in the expert report [T-PVS/DE\(2019\)2](#), in particular to ensure the protection of the area by extending the Nature Reserve and creating a marine park.

It once again mandated the Secretariat to continue the monitoring of the area, where possible in liaison with other organisations such as IUCN and UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, and to report back to the Group of Specialists.

### **• Doñana National Park (Spain)**

The Secretariat recalled that at last year's meeting, the Group of Specialists had recommended to the Committee of Ministers to postpone the renewal of the Diploma to this Park due to the perceived negative situation there, including the fact that it is undergoing legal proceedings by the European Court of Justice (ECJ), and had been subject to a World Heritage Centre reactive monitoring mission conducted jointly with IUCN and the Ramsar Secretariat in 2020. The report of this meeting had not yet been released, but it was hoped that both this report and a judgement from the ECJ could be expected in the near future. In the light of the 2020 IUCN World Heritage Outlook, the conservation of the area is of significant concern. The Doñana National Park is threatened by a significant number of issues, the most serious being the long-term and continuing reduction in water quantity and quality within the site. Therefore, a further recommendation of the Group should await these important elements of information in order to form a coherent response.



The Group agreed to wait at least for the report of the monitoring mission in order to be in line with conclusions of the other relevant environmental organisations in their conclusions. However, it was cautioned against waiting for too long, as the EDPA had to stand ready to make timely and independent decisions. Depending on the supplementary information obtained, an extraordinary online meeting of the Group of Specialists could be raised.

The Group of Specialists expressed again its concern regarding the situation at the Doñana National Park and urged the relevant authorities and stakeholders to ensure the proper management of water and other environmental issues in and in the surroundings of the Park.

The Group looked forward to accessing the eventual conclusions of the joint World Heritage/IUCN/Ramsar monitoring mission as well as hearing of the eventual decision of the European Court of Justice on its proceedings.

- **Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve (Germany)**

The Secretariat recalled that the Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve is under scrutiny because the regional authorities (Landkreis Heidekreis) are planning building the Volkwardingen Wind Park which would spoil the unique landscape and biodiversity of Lüneburger Heide, block an important migration corridor for the black grouse and black stork and destroy an important habitat for bats and birds.

It recalled that, in 2020, the Group of Specialists had mandated an extraordinary on-the-spot appraisal to re-establish the dialogue and reassure the managing authorities of the support of the Group of Specialists. As all visits had been postponed last year due to the pandemic, it will be as a priority rescheduled hopefully for 2021, including a first virtual phase.

The Group of Specialists expressed again its concern regarding the still existing plan for a wind energy park. It supported the Secretariat in organising the on-the-spot appraisal as a priority this year conditions permitting, including a possible online element.

- **Abruzzo Lazio and Molise National Park (Italy)**

The Secretariat recalled that the main issue of this site continues to be the official adoption of a new management plan which was due in 2013, and the management and monitoring of the Marsican brown bear. While the Group of Specialists had year after year urged the managing authorities to adopt the management plan, the last annual reports had informed that the management plan was still pending the approval of the authorities of all three regions. In 2020, an agreement had been reached between the three regions to move forward with a common procedure, but no actual progress on the plan itself had been seen.

Regarding the Marsican Brown Bear, genetic monitoring had continued in 2020, and analysis of 2019 data had been completed and revealed the presence of 37 individuals. In general the population appeared to be expanding year on year, and females were exploring and expanding their territory/home range, a key factor in the positive trend.

During the discussion, it was highlighted that the adoption of the management plan by the three regions was the key issue explaining the delay, but hopefully this new agreement on a common procedure could finally pave the way for progress. Nevertheless, it was deemed that eight years was too much of a delay in its adoption, and it was stressed that during the upcoming on-the-spot appraisal visit to the Park in 2022, the independent expert should look carefully at the adoption process, and reflect on this in his/her conclusions if there has still been no progress.

The Group of Specialists expressed once more its concern regarding the delayed adoption of the management plan which had been due for adoption in 2013. It warned the concerned authorities that a continuing lack of progress could lead to a possible non-renewal of the Diploma which is due in 2023.

On the other hand, the Group welcomed the positive trends in the monitoring of the Marsican Brown Bear, and encouraged continuing efforts from the Park authorities.

- **Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve**

The Secretariat recalled that in the beginning of February 2019, because of the very dry and hot 2018 summer, the authorities of the Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve were envisaging to excavate a gravel bank to allow safer ship manoeuvres in low water times on the Danube which would constitute a threat to rare fish species and wildlife species living on the banks. While no excavations took place in 2019, flood water altered the gravel banks.

Furthermore, clear cuts had been made both within the Diploma holding area as well as in the nature protected area recommended to be included in the European Diploma holding area following the on-the-spot appraisal visit carried out in 2016. The Group of Specialists in 2020 had mandated an extraordinary on-the-spot appraisal visit to evaluate the situation on the ground and assess the extent to which the recommendations attached to the last renewal of the Diploma were being complied with.

As in summer 2020 tourist trips abroad were limited due to the pandemic, more people visited the Weltenburger Enge, causing more pressure mainly through illegal landing and camping on gravel banks or intensive mountain biking. Regarding the large tourist ships, the regulations (minimum water flow) seem to be neglected both by the authorities and the ship owners.

In 2020 some parts of the diploma holding area including the Danube were declared a Nature Monument of National Importance, though the legal order does not consider the recommendations attached to the last Resolution renewing the Diploma.

It was further informed that the regional authorities were preparing a new legal order for the status of the area, which might not make reference to all recommendations attached to the 2018 resolution renewing the European Diploma, including the key issue of navigation in the Danube.

The Group of Specialists again expressed its concern with this situation and the information that a legal order is being prepared without taking into consideration the recommendation attached to the recent renewal of the European Diploma. It urged the relevant authorities to not approve such an order before the extraordinary on-the-spot appraisal visit has taken place, and to subsequently ensure that recommendations of the Diploma are taken into account in the order.

The Group supported the Secretariat in organising the on-the-spot appraisal as a priority this year conditions permitting, including a possible online element.

- **Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve**

The Secretariat reported to the Group of Specialists that in February 2020 they had been informed that a solar panel farm was planned in the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve. No reference to this project had been made in the 2019 annual report. The Group of Specialists had expressed its concern regarding the infrastructure development plans within the Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve and requested the managing authorities to provide comprehensive and detailed information including maps on the proposed solar panel farm.

A specific request for information was recently addressed to the authorities as the annual report received did not provide details regarding any infrastructure developments.

The Secretariat had received, just a day before the meeting, information on the proposed solar panel farm to be developed.

The solar farm project is planned to be developed along a road and rail network which meets the requirements of the energy policy objectives of the Federal Government and corresponds as well with the objectives of the Ministry for the Environment, Climate and Energy Management of Baden-Württemberg. The location is about 1.4 km from the Reserve boundary, the farm would cover 2.7 hectares and only the rear or narrow sides of the plant would be visible from the planned tower at Wurzacher Ried.

The municipality of Bad Wurzach informed that the European Diploma is of absolute high priority and that the solar plant should neither question the award nor the future renewal of the European Diploma. The municipality further informed that the Federal Government was intending to create a protected landscape in the Wurzacher Ried.

The Group of Specialists took note of the request of the local municipality concerning the compatibility of a solar panel farm with the provisions of the European Diploma, but it recalled that the Group does not have the competency or mandate to respond to a request such as this, especially with limited information.

The Group of Specialists encouraged the local municipality to conduct an environmental impact assessment in line with national and EU regulations. The Group would remain alert to any projects which may harm the integrity of a Diploma site or breach the conditions and/or recommendations attached to the European Diploma.

## **7. ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL VISITS IN 2021**

The Secretariat referred to the document [T-PVS/DE\(2020\)20](#) presenting the Diploma holding areas whose Diploma is due in 2022 and could therefore benefit from an on-the-spot appraisal visit in 2021. For the current calendar year, and as already discussed under agenda item 5, it was suggested to prioritise visits scheduled in 2021 and if possible undertake some of the visits initially scheduled for 2020, to a maximum of fifteen/sixteen total visits.

The Group of Specialists agreed to prioritise conducting visits scheduled in 2021 and, if possible, to undertake some of the visits initially scheduled for 2020, with the extraordinary visits receiving a high priority. All visits were subject to the ongoing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an online element should be envisaged for each visit.

## **8. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA**

The Secretariat informed the Group that following the Vision document discussed last year, a communication strategy for the European Diploma was in elaboration by the Secretariat. Thanks to growing general awareness of environmental issues in the Council of Europe, the Directorate of Communication had agreed to assist with this strategy. The Strategy aims to draw on lessons learnt due to the circumstances imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to focus on positive messages of the benefits and values of nature on society for both the general public and the target groups. As well as the Bern Convention communication channels, the main Council of Europe accounts, which have an existing large audience, could be exploited. The Strategy will aim to map existing resources, identify potential network partners, and target both the dedicated stakeholders as well as general public.

At the occasion of the World Forum for Democracy scheduled in November 2021 on the theme “Can democracy save the Environment?” two diploma holding areas will be showcased. Of these two areas, the Khosrov Forest Reserve (Armenia) and the Burren Region (Ireland), the latter was planned to already be featured during an online forum talk on 22 April 2021. A new website linked to these and other initiatives of the Bern Convention as a whole was also in elaboration.

During the discussion, support was expressed for these initiatives, and the importance of the positive influence of nature, including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic was highlighted. Visibility of the European Diploma was crucial, especially as it was “competing” with other international awards, and so any opportunity to showcase it, including possibly at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in September 2021, should be taken.

The Group of Specialists thanked the Secretariat and expressed its strong support for this communication strategy ([T-PVS/DE\(2021\)03rev](#)), as visibility of the EDPA was crucial for its long-term effectiveness and sustainability. It also welcomed the fact that the strategy was being elaborated with professionals of the field.

## **9. CREATION OF A POOL OF INDEPENDENT EXPERTS**

To comply with the Council of Europe internal regulations, a call of interest was being prepared to create a new pool of independent experts. The call would be launched in the coming weeks and disseminated through the existing network, with the aim of having a pool of experts by summer this year. This call of interest would be an opportunity to enlarge the pool, include newcomers and support the increasing number and backlog of on-the-spot appraisal visits. The Secretariat confirmed that the Group of Specialists and the current independent experts can continue their work until the pool will be established.

The Group of Specialists took note of the information.

## **10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

It was informed that the Sierra Nevada National Nature Park in Spain was preparing an application for the European Diploma. The Group of Specialists expressed its appreciation of this effort from Spain and looked forward to analysing the application in the near future.

## **11. DATE AND PLACE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The Secretariat, in liaison with the Chair, will notify members of the date of the next meeting in 2022, although an extraordinary meeting during 2021 is not to be ruled out.

## **12. CONCLUSIONS OF THE MEETING**

The Chair thanked the representatives from Austria and Georgia whose mandate as members of the Group of Specialists has come to an end for their dedicated work and their support to the European Diploma, the members of the Group of Specialists, the independent experts, the management authorities of the European Diploma holding areas and the Secretariat for their huge efforts throughout the year and lively discussions and declared the meeting closed.

APPENDIX 1 – AGENDA

		Documents	Expected results
<b>Wednesday 24 February</b>			
<b>9.30</b>	<b>1. Opening of the meeting</b>  <i>Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic), Chair of the Group of Specialists</i>		
	<b>2. Adoption of the agenda</b>	Meeting agenda T-PVS/Agenda(2021) 1  <b>For adoption</b>	Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the aims of the meeting and adopt the agenda.
	<b>3. General information on activities presenting an interest for the work of the Group of Specialists</b>		
	3.a Short presentation of the report of the meeting of the group in 2020 and of the activities undertaken during the last year  <i>Mr Jan Plesnik (Czech Republic), Chair of the Group of Specialists</i>	Report of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2020) 18</a>  <b>For information</b>	The salient points of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists are recalled.
	3.b Follow up by the Secretariat on the conclusions of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists  <i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i>	Extract from the list of decisions and adopted texts on the European Diploma for Protected Areas, at the 40th meeting of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 01</a>	Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the follow up given to the outcomes and decisions of the 2020 meeting of the Group of Specialists.

		<p>List of renewal resolutions adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2019  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2020) 21</a></p> <p><b>For information</b></p>	
	<p><b>4. Pending draft Resolutions from 2019</b></p> <p><i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to exchange views with the authorities of Netherland regarding their concerns on the conditions attached to the draft Resolutions renewing the European Diploma to the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve and to the Weerribben-Wieden National Park</i></p>	<p>Report on the assessment visit to the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2019) 11</a></p> <p>Report on the assessment visit to the Weerribben-Wieden National Park  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2019) 9</a></p> <p>Draft Resolutions regarding the renewal of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve and to the Weerribben-Wieden National Park discussed in 2019  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2020) 11</a></p> <p><a href="#">Background paper from the Dutch authorities</a></p> <p><a href="#">Netherlands' comments</a></p> <p><b>For discussion and decision</b></p>	<p>Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a revised wording of the conditions attached to the draft Resolutions renewing the European Diploma to the De Oostvaardersplassen Nature Reserve and to the Weerribben-Wieden.</p>
	<p><b>5. Consequences of the postponement of the advisory visits, discussion and proposals to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe</b></p>		

	<p>5.a Extension of the validity of the European Diploma to 11 areas</p> <p><i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the exceptional extension of the validity of European Diploma of 11 areas for which the on-the-spot appraisal visits were postponed because of the pandemic.</i></p>	<p>List of areas whose Diploma should be renewed in 2021  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2020) 19</a></p> <p>Draft resolution extending the validity of the European Diploma for Protected Areas awarded to 13 areas pending an on-the-spot appraisal visit  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 04</a></p> <p><b>For discussion and decision</b></p>	<p>Members of the Group of Specialists agree on a draft resolution on the exceptional extension of the validity of the European Diploma of 11 areas which will be sent to the Committee of Ministers for formal adoption.</p>
	<p>5.b Alternatives to physical on-the-spot appraisal visits</p> <p><i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss alternatives to physical on-the-spot appraisal visits in order to ensure the continuity of the monitoring of the European Diploma.</i></p>	<p>Scenario for virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 02</a></p>	<p>Members of the Group of Specialists mandate the Secretariat to revise the scenario for virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits (T-PVS/DE (2021) 02) along the outcomes of the discussion and to further explore the feasibility of carrying out virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits with a sample of Diploma holding areas.</p>
	<p><b>6. Presentation of the reporting results by the Secretariat and the Group of Specialists</b></p>		
	<p>6.a Analysis of the annual reports</p> <p><i>Introduction by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to share their comments on and discuss the outcomes of the annual reports and exchange views on possible follow up.</i></p>	<p>Compilation of the analysis of the annual reports  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 05</a></p> <p><a href="#">Link to the dashboard of the European Diploma for Protected Areas</a></p> <p><b>For discussion and decision</b></p>	<p>The compliance of the Diploma holding areas with the conditions and/or recommendations attached to the award/renewal of the European Diploma is assessed and possible areas at risk requiring a closer monitoring or even an exceptional on-the-spot appraisal visit are identified.</p>

	<p>6.b Follow up on the areas identified in 2020 as requiring particular attention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scandola Nature Reserve (France)</li> <li>• Doñana National Park (Spain)</li> <li>• Lüneburg Heath Nature Reserve (Germany)</li> <li>• Abruzzo Lazio and Molise National Park (Italy)</li> <li>• Weltenburger Enge Nature Reserve</li> <li>• Wurzacher Ried Nature Reserve</li> </ul> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to exchange views on the situation of Diploma holding areas identified as requiring closer attention and to agree on follow up actions in the light of the 2020 annual reports and the information received by the Secretariat.</i></p>	<p>Compilation of the analysis of the annual reports  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 05</a></p> <p><b>For discussion and decision</b></p>	<p>Follow up on the monitoring of Diploma-holding areas requiring particular attention is agreed on.</p>
	<p><b>7. On-the-spot appraisal visits in 2021</b></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to exchange views on the on-the-spot appraisal visits to be carried out in 2021</i></p>	<p>List of areas whose Diploma should be renewed in 2022  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2020) 20</a></p> <p><b>For discussion and decision</b></p>	<p>Diploma holding areas whose Diploma is due in 2022 and for which an-the-spot appraisal visit is to take place in 2021 are identified.</p>
	<p><b>8. Communication strategy for the European Diploma</b></p> <p><i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are invited to discuss the communication plan for the European Diploma and exchange views on the possible follow up.</i></p>	<p>Draft Communication plan for the European Diploma  <a href="#">T-PVS/DE (2021) 03</a></p>	<p>Members of the Group of Specialists agree on priority actions for promoting the European Diploma.</p>



	<p><b>9. Creation of a pool of independent experts</b></p> <p><i>Presentation by the Secretariat</i></p> <p><i>Members of the Group of Specialists are informed of the preparation of a call for manifestation of interest to constitute a pool of independent experts.</i></p>	<p><b>For information</b></p>	<p>Members of the Group of Specialists take note of the information provided.</p>
	<p><b>10. Any other business</b></p>		
	<p><b>11. Date and place of the next meeting</b></p>		
	<p><b>12. Conclusions of the meeting</b></p>		
<p><b>17.00</b></p>	<p><i>Wednesday 24 February</i></p> <p><b>End of the meeting</b></p>		