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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

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Strasbourg, 3-6 December 2019

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**REPORT**

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE  
WACHAU PROTECTED LANDSCAPE**

**(AUSTRIA)**

10-11 September 2018

*Document prepared  
by Mr Peter Skoberne (Slovenia)*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was awarded to the Wachau Protected Landscape in 1994 and renewed in 2009 along with the initial condition and 8 recommendations. For the next renewal an on-the-spot appraisal was undertaken in 2018.

I visited the area from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> September 2018. The visit was extremely well organised by the World Heritage Municipalities Wachau Association (Verein Welterbegemeinden Wachau) which is responsible for site management, in particular by the manager Dipl.-Ing. Michael Schimek. That was very important as the time for the visit was limited, unexpectedly the vintage started earlier, so it was really a success to assure presence of all key representatives at the site (Annex 1 - programme of visit). Representatives were all very competent and keen to help me to understand issues about the protected area.

I would like to thank all organisers of the visit for the helpful, enthusiastic and very open assistance during the on-the-spot-appraisal mission, and all experts and representatives I met during these 3 days: Bgm. Erich Polz, DI Michael Schimek, Ingeborg Hödl, DI Elisa Besenbäck, Mag. Hannes Seehofer, Josef Hutschala, Franz Kiwek, Hermann Miedler, Dr. Elfriede Mayrhofer, Karl Salzer, Mag. Theresa Reichel, DI Markus Perschl, Mag. Tom Hansmann, DI Dr. Erwin Huter, Ing. Harald Aufreiter, Mag. (FH) Eveline Gruber, Mag. (FH) Michael Wagner, Mag. Franz Maier, Bgm. Edmund Binder, Dr. Birgit Habermann, DI Brigitta Mirwald, LAbg. Josef Edlinger and Bgm. Dr. Andreas Nunzer.

In particular I would like to thank DI Michael Schimek for the really in-depth presentation of the area, not only because of his astonishing experience and knowledge of the area being Director of the management office for 15 years, but above all for his dedication to nature, culture and history of Wachau.

My thanks to the family Polz for their hospitality in the hectic days of early vintage.

During the visit on several occasions the importance of the renewal process of the European Diploma as a help and support to the managers was stressed, as well as regret that the review (on-the-spot appraisal) of the Wachau area was not realised for such a long time was expressed.

As an expert I found very useful to follow the checklist document (T-PVS/DE (2018) 7). Not only that it helped me to carry out the on-the-spot appraisal visit efficiently and prepare the report, but it is more likely that consequent reports will be more harmonised and will enable tracking development of the area in a more consistent way.

## 2. EUROPEAN INTEREST

The Wachau area (about 70 km west of Vienna) is an about 36 km long valley cut through Bohemian massif between Melk in the west and Krems in the east. The integral part of the area embraces also the hillsides visible from the Danube, including the eastern slopes of the Jauerling facing the Danube at "Spitzer Graben".

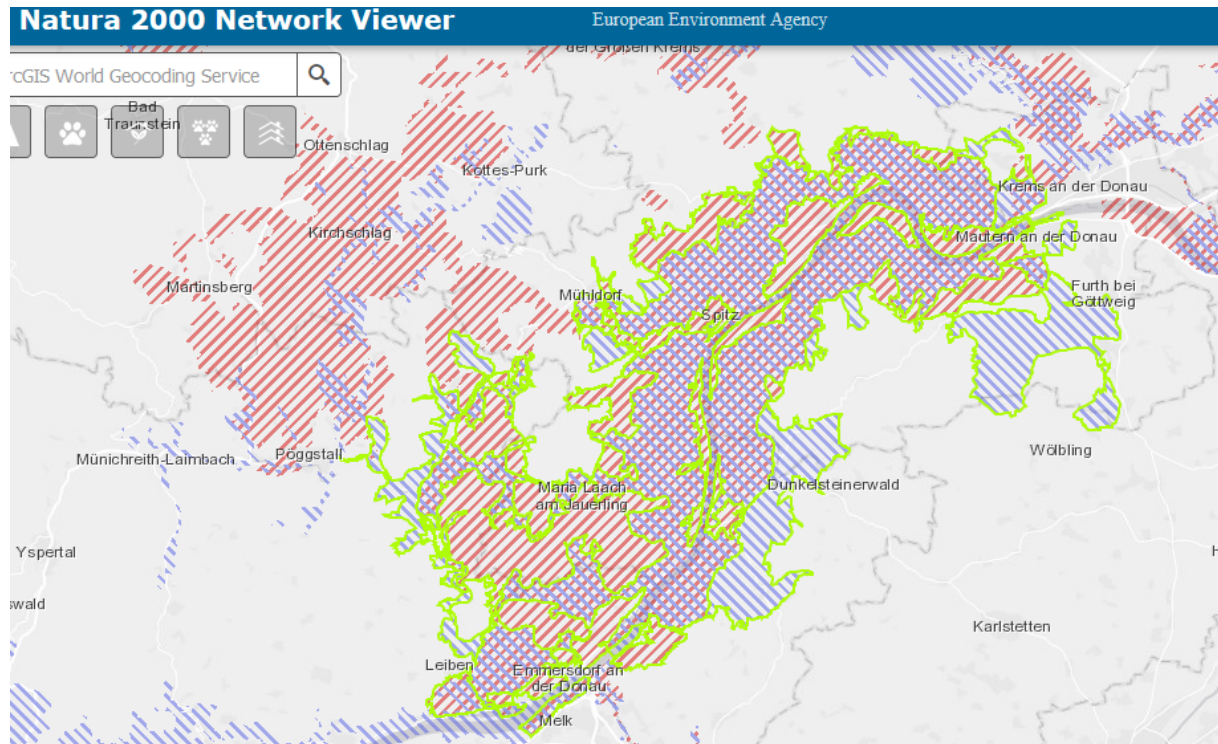
The geological and geomorphological features are basis for rich biodiversity echoing biogeographical position of the area. Outstanding for Lower Austria are steep sunny slopes that host thermophilic species of the Pannonian zone as well as typical thermophilic species like the green lizard (*Lacerta viridis*) and the praying mantis (*Mantis religiosa*). The thermophilic character is also typical for dry grasslands

The Wachau area has strong human influence, as there was continuous development from Neolithic period. However, people living in this area adopted to the given natural conditions and created a harmonious landscape, predominantly wine yards. As the sunny slopes are very steep, a sophisticated terrace system was developed.

The Danube was and is still an important transport route and the Wachau canyon is a strategic area for controlling the river traffic. That is reflected in architecture (monasteries, castles, ruins), urban design (towns and villages) and agricultural use (wine yards and orchards).

The final result of this long historic development of this riverine landscape bordered by mountains is a synthesis of natural landscapes and urbanisation, an ensemble of highly unusual, unmistakable character survived to a remarkable degree.

Wachau is included into the European ecological network Natura 2000 (Wachau - AT1205A00; Wachau – Jauerling - AT1205000, Kamp- und Kremstal - AT1207000, Niederösterreichische Alpenvorlandflüsse - AT1219000, Tullnerfelder Donau-Auen - AT1216000, Pielachtal - AT1219V00).



<http://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/>

The exceptional value was reconfirmed in the year 2000 when the area of Wachau was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

**Conclusion:**

**The Wachau Protected Landscape is of exceptional European significance and importance for the conservation of biological diversity, cultural landscape and cultural heritage.**

**3. CONSERVATION MEASURES**

**Legal protection status**

As in Austria international obligations are of federal competence, whereas actual implementation is of competence of federal units (Länders), different laws and regulations are implemented by several bodies at Federal, State, and Municipal levels, which contribute to the protection and conservation of the area.

The key law at provincial level is the Nature Protection Act (Niederösterreichisches Naturschutzgesetz, LGBl. Nr. 111/2015). Wachau and Jauerling protected areas were designated according to this law. Additional protective measures regarding conservation areas as well as the designation of the Wachau as part of the Natura 2000 network influence its conservation.

**Conclusion:**

**Existing legal regulations are considered as a solid basis for the future conservation and sustainable development of the Diploma holding area.**

**4. MANAGEMENT**

**Institutional arrangements**

Different levels of governance are therefore responsible for the conservation and sustainable development of the site. For the protected areas (nature conservation areas, natural reserves, natural monuments, landscape protection area), the responsibility for the overall management remains with the

Amt der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung (Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government). This body also has the overall responsibility for the European Diploma Area. The provincial government is also in charge of general development outlines, such as settlement of development limits, and supports the local authorities in implementing local and regional strategies through expertise and public funding. The Bundesdenkmalamt (Federal Office of Historic Monuments) maintains a complete inventory of historic monuments and ensembles situated in the Wachau.

At local level, the Wachau is mainly managed by the 15 communes (Gemeinden). The institution in charge is the association World Heritage Municipalities Wachau (Welterbegemeinden Wachau), which also runs a private limited company called “Arbeitskreis Wachau Dunkelsteinerwald Regionalentwicklungs GmbH” (The Office). All matters regarding nature protection are usually dealt with by the association, though, mainly for fiscal reasons. This body has an office in Spitz and employs experts in charge of projects connected to the conservation and sustainable development of the Cultural Landscape.

The Office is the key “motor” for the management. It is a small team of 4 people, financed mainly through projects. The team is very well trained in project management and in key technical areas. The results of their work in this very challenging environment is amazing, but in the same vulnerable in a long run, mostly because of the type of financing. Project financing could be unsecure and does not guarantee long-term sustainability.

But the core part of the World Heritage/European Diploma management of the Wachau does not rely on European money anymore and is therefore more stable, even if the office has to apply for grants every year. This was one of the main reasons for all the organisational restructuring that went on during the drafting of the management plan.

A lot of projects, such as all key nature protection projects, but also the nature park Jauerling, at the moment mainly rely on European grants. With them, there might be difficult times ahead, since the current EU financing period ends in 2020, and there will be no chance to apply for new grants in 2021, 2022 and maybe 2023. So if the government will be interested in keeping up those structures that were built up with European money, it will need to step in for some years in financing them.

At the time of the visit the Director of the Office changed. At the same time most of the financial mechanisms were coming to an end and the preparation of tenders for the next financial period was on-going. Regarding the type of financing a challenging period is ahead.

## **Management Plan**

The Management Plan for the World heritage Site Wachau (Managementplan Welterbe Wachau) was adopted in March 2017. It is the result of an impressive active stakeholders exercise. It is a key document for the co-ordination and streamlining of the rather challenging future development of the area in the frame of natural and cultural assets. It is drafted based on UNESCO World heritage principles and guidelines, taking into account international and national legislation in the field of natural and cultural heritage. The Management Plan sets general goals for the future of the area and defines a more detailed perspective in 6 policy areas:

- nature conservation and landscape protection,
- cultural heritage (including sustainable way of urbanism),
- agriculture, forestry and landscape care,
- tourism in the world heritage site,
- art & culture, crafts and science,
- common living, identity, communication.

Accordingly, there is a section on guidance for organisational, financial and monitoring set up of the implementation of the plan.

The Management Plan seems to be solid, realistic and flexible enough to follow changes and aspirations of the stakeholders as well as mechanisms for its monitoring, evaluation and redefinition are embedded in the system. However, the managing personnel set up does not allow long term security for the Management Plan implementation.

### **Financial matters**

In the period 2003 – 2018 584 projects implemented in the area (60,65 Mio. €). The Province and State are co-financing the projects, but there is no core budget for the managing authorities in the Wachau and Jauerling protected areas.

### **Research and monitoring**

Most research is applicative and very targeted towards challenges of projects. The same is about monitoring. It focuses on species and habitat types of European importance (e. g. Annexes of the Habitats Directive) and specially connected with project results: to see whether applied measures have positive effects. Results are publicly available, but scattered. I haven't noticed any central database system.

### **Natural resources management**

The authorities of the protected area do not directly manage natural resources, but through the Management Plan they have possibility to influence the planning and implementation of natural resource management (e. g. forestry, flood control, water management, management of wild ...).

#### **Conclusion:**

**Management is in place and it is functioning. However, the organisational set of management is very light and project depended, but efficient and results are visible. The Management Plan is well designed, realistic and includes participative instruments for its implementation and updating. The weak side of the light management structure is its dependence on project funding.**

## **5. REVIEW OF THE RENEWAL ASSETS**

The following documents were considered:

- Application of The Wachau Protected Landscape (Lower Austria) for the European Diploma, presented by the Austrian Government, Council of Europe, 1993, document PE-S-ZP (93) 47.
- Application of The Wachau Protected Landscape (Lower Austria) for the European Diploma, Appraisal Report by Charles Stauffer, Council of Europe, 1994, document PE-S-ZP (94) 41.
- Le Paysage Protege de la Wachau (Autriche), Renouvellement, Rapport d'expertise par M. Charles Stauffer, Conseil de l'Europe, 2004, document PE-S-DE (2004) 8.
- Annual Reports from 2013 – 2017.
- Resolution CM/ResDip(2009)11 on the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas awarded to the Wachau Protected Landscape (Austria), Council of Europe, 2009.

### **Review of the condition and recommendations of the Resolution of the Committee of Ministers in 2009:**

#### **Review of the condition**

The initial condition: *“that the scheme to build a dam on the Danube at Dürnstein be abandoned definitively, as well as a similar scheme within and immediately downstream from the area covered by the diploma”* is now out of any discussion. However, for precautionary reasons it is suggested to keep this condition in future, as dramatic change of the Danube character in this area would influence assets of the awarded site.

#### **Review of the recommendations (2009):**

***The existence of the Jauerling protected zone should continue to be guaranteed***



Jauerling – Wachau Naturpark was established in 1973 and is member of the Austrian Naturpark Association (Verband der Naturparke Österreichs).

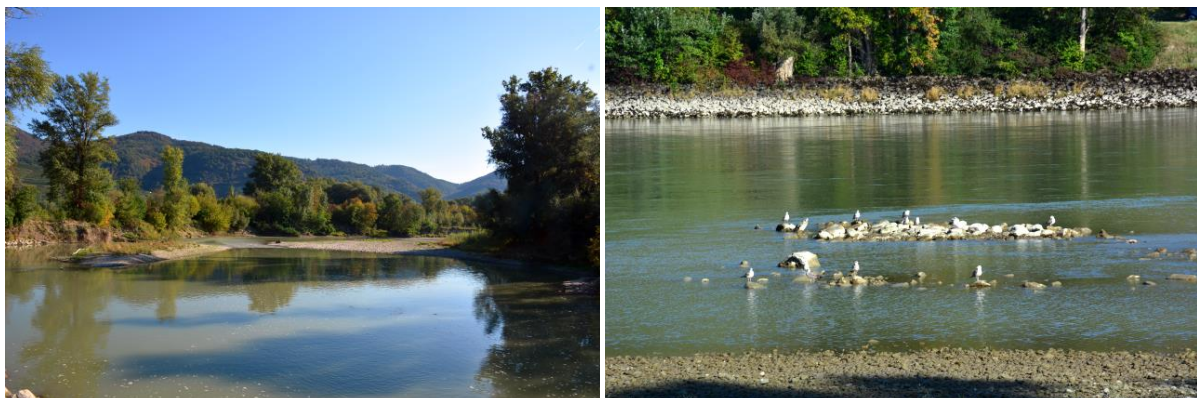
The Naturpark is locally very active, with an information office at Maria Laach. Similarly to the Wachau Landscape Park, the management is project-driven. The provincial government is co-financing projects. This light structure enables flexibility and is dependent on broad partnerships which lead towards good participatory approach in management. The concept of Nature parks is very broad. It is based on 4 pillars: nature conservation, recreation, education and regional development.

Jauerling – Wachau Naturpark is closely linked to local stakeholders through projects and working mostly towards the direction of education and supporting local tourism branding connection of nature and local agriculture. For instance, they maintain about 350 km of trails!

As the management depends on projects the period between multiannual financial programmes is the most vulnerable period, as they have to secure their future existence. It should be desirable that local communities and the provincial government support by minimum means the sustainability of the core administration.

<http://www.naturpark-jauerling.at/>

***The river should be maintained at its present level, guaranteeing the survival of the last alluvial forests.***



The Danube is representing the main ecological emphasise of the valley. As the threat of ideas to build a dam at Dürnstein is not realistic at the time being (but this shadow is the reason for maintaining the initial condition), a lot of restoration work was done, mostly though LIFE projects to support Natura 2000 target species (mostly bird and fish species) and habitats (e. g. alluvial forests). Not only that restoration work was successful in favour of many species and habitats, some examples of good restoration practise were developed. Behind the restoration work there was a lot of networking and

communication with stakeholders, especially with landowners, which, in the end in most cases resulted in positive attitude to naturalised banks of the Danube. New habitats are not only for nature, but they are more and more attractive to visitors. On some parts infrastructures were built for walkers and nature watchers (information points), as well as for bikers.

The reasons for the dam not being built were ecological, and that stable navigability conditions might be ensured also without a dam. But as this fact made restoration actions possible, on the other hand all activities are subordinated to navigation conditions (e. g. minimum water level). Heavy traffic of cargo and tourist boats have constant influence on habitats and species, but it seems that maximum fair compromise has been reached. The Management of the park has good and tight relations to the water and navigation authorities.

***Work on restoration of the terraces and integration of the irrigation network should continue***



Wine terraces with dry stone walls at steep southern slopes are the most characteristic landscape feature of the Wachau area. The wine tradition is centuries old, many of the best known names of wines can be traced back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition is literary seen in the landscape. Through ages people cultivated every suitable part of the steep slope, building terraces and kilometres of dry stone walls to prevent erosion and to dedicate soil for wine yards.

How deep the wine making tradition is present in Wachau is expressed in a very unique way. Wine makers were able to resist the modern economic trends of commercial winery and remain loyal to the local experience. In 1983 local winemakers in the Wachau wine-growing area founded The Vinea Wachau (Vinea Wachau Nobilis Districtus) association. They dedicated to completely natural and local wine production under the Codex Wachau. They pledged to uphold this character by voluntarily relinquishing their right to buy in grapes or wine from other regions or cultivate vineyards elsewhere. The trademarks Steinfeder®, Federspiel® and Smaragd® are thus a declaration of dedication to natural wine production and the strictest control. By using these names, the members commit to a wine style which reflects regional typicity: dry white wine, made without the addition of sugar, or detectable wood influence. Beyond the strict control there is even stronger guarantee for quality: proudness and honesty of wine makers!



<https://www.vinea-wachau.at/en/vinea-wachau/idea/>

The region is still characterised by small wineries and vineyard holdings, despite economic pressures from the global market. Variety of small holdings is reflected in diversity of the landscape picture, as wine yards are sensitively following natural conditions (relief, geological features, steepness...).

As dry stone walls are the best way to cultivate such steep slopes, wine makers are paying special attention to their maintenance in an old fashioned way. They are organising special education sessions to learn traditional skills and ensure that this special knowledge is not lost. These walls are constructed from natural rock and rubble without the help of cement mortar and have to be set up manually with experience and sensitivity.

But beside the traditional knowledge winemakers are innovative and try to adapt to the climate changes especially to dry periods when grapes need constant moisture. They developed a sophisticated, science based irrigation system, using water in a reasoned way, regarding time of irrigation and quantity of water needed. So, the concerns expressed in the recommendation that the irrigation system with huge pipe system could influence aesthetic view of terraces are not relevant any more.

Mentioning dry stone walls we should not forget their importance as a special habitat type, mostly for thermophilic species of insects, small mammals and reptiles.

That is a perfect example of good practice and evidence that the only really working way to preserve a special type of cultural landscape is that reasonable agricultural activity is in place. As the costs of cultivating wines on the terraced slopes are much higher than on the valley floor such a system can only work if quality, exclusivity, tradition and a very good story are met!

***Strict standards should be imposed on river tourism traffic, to ensure that it meets appropriate quality requirements for the Wachau***



River tourism traffic is busy, especially during the summer season. The river traffic impacts the water level conditions which are regulated by the river transport legislation. The Office is in regular contacts to water management and tourism authorities, seeking for best possible compromise.

In fact, river traffic is just one aspect of the much more complex issue of tourism in Wachau. Designation of Wachau as an UNESCO World Heritage Site increased the number of visitors. In the area there are about 27.000 inhabitants, while the estimated number of visitors in one year is about 2 Millions. The main problem is the seasonal concentration of visitors at touristic hot spots. A good example for this is Dörenstein – medieval town. Inside the town walls (5 ha) 93 people are living. The results of a study counting of visitors showed that on a single day in the high season (15 August) between 8:00 and 18:00 there are about 4600 visitors and local inhabitants. At the same day day counted 1500 bicycles! It is obvious that river tourism cannot be separated from other touristic activities. There is a strong need to address visitors' management according to the Management Plan.

In the Management Plan directions are set to deconcentrate visitor spots in time and place, using different possibilities for mobility (public transport: bus and train, bikes, hiking) and develop infrastructures accordingly. A lot of activities are already in place, like: hiking trails (different hiking routes, the most well-known is the 180 km long Wachau World Heritage Trail), bike routes (e. g. very popular Danube Bike Trail), rental service for electric bikes, organising events that are attracting guests outside the main season or streamlining them to less known areas, developing gastronomy and oenology...

Development can be noticed on infrastructure building and tourist marketing, but less in development of overnighting facilities.





***The refurbishment of the Spitz quarry should finally be started; works should be staggered until 2019;***



The Spitz quarry was abandoned for economic reasons and for several years there were strong initiatives to re-cultivate the area. That was the main reason of the recommendation from 2009. However, later geological research showed that the slope is very unstable because of the direction of the rock layers. It would be possible to solve the problem with a very extensive removal of material. That would influence forest habitat above the quarry (ecologically very valuable habitat which features one of the rare populations of fluff oaks (*Quercus pubescens*)).

The quarry is not of key importance for the area and it can remain as it is, as a natural succession of typical thermophilic rock vegetation is occupying the stone slopes. It is necessary to ensure that unstable rocks cannot damage infrastructures in the valley (rail and road), but a complete refurbishment is not reasonable. This recommendation should be removed.

***The mouflon population should be brought within a limit compatible with natural regeneration of the forest, without systematic recourse to protection fences;***

The mouflon issue is only one aspect of the forest and wild management. In discussion with relevant officials from the provincial government it was clear that they are aware of complexity of this issue. Beside monitoring and controlling the population on a regular basis, forestry plans are taken into account. The area of distribution of mouflon population is in two administrative units (districts) with their own planning regarding forest and wild management, but they have common approach and good co-operation. This good practise should continue.

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**Efforts should be continued to preserve the apricot orchards;**


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In addition to the viticulture the apricot growing is another typical pillar of the regional economy. It is even called - the orange gold of the Wachau valley. Local farmers are cultivating apricots through the grafting of the best selections of "Klosterneuburger apricot". Since 1996, this local apricot has been known by a protected designation of origin within the EU as "Wachauer Marille" (Wachau apricot).

Wine production was from early times very important for the economy of Wachau. As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century grape production was threatened by grapevine leaf louse influence, local people were looking for an alternative. They decided to cultivate apricots commercially, as the climate was favourable. That was the beginning of Wachauer Marille glory!

Basically, the same economic challenge as for extensive wine production is behind the apricots orchards. This old variety of apricot is extremely tasty and aromatic, but not suitable for selling in distant markets as it is rotting fast. So, it is important to make different products, like jam, brandies or liqueurs. Apricots have a key part in dessert cuisine (e. g. apricot dumplings and apricot strudel), as well.

To answer the economic challenge, apricot farmers are using the same approach as winemakers: more than 200 farmers are part of the "Wachau Apricot Association", which vouches for the origin, authenticity and the unique aroma and the taste quality. The seal of the association may only be used by the companies that produced the Wachau varieties for more than 60 years.

Apricots are and should remain one of the identification pillars of the Wachau area.

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***Steps should be taken to ensure that consultation on how to protect the Wachau against flooding takes place in co-operation with the local authorities concerned, in order to avoid separating the river from the hinterland by a substantial dyke.***

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Floods along the Danube in the narrow Wachau valley are a serious threat for inhabitants since ever. Thus flood control is of utmost importance. Since the 2004 recommendation most of flood control works were finished, some of them are still under construction. They are built in line with the recommendation. There is no need to point out this issue further.

## **6. ISSUES NOT COVERED BY PREVIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS**

During the visit some other issues emerged that were spotted in 2009. Let me point out some of them.

## *Landscape*

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In vineyards protection nets of different colours, mostly blue ones, are used. It is a new element in the landscape picture and is a normal response to new technology supporting the basic reason of the landscape – producing grapes. However, it could be explored whether the same protection effect could be reached with protection nets of colour that is more adjusted to the landscape.

Some very good results were obtained regarding night illumination of cultural monuments to minimise light pollution. It would be reasonable to expand this approach for the whole area outside villages and towns and reduce night lighting to the reasonable minimum.

## *Christmas tree plantations at Jauerling*

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Christmas tree plantations are a relatively new response to the market demand and immediately visible and impacting the cultural landscape. This is a very good example how cultural landscape is in fact “mirror of truth” – always very sincere reflecting current social and economic circumstances. This fact is at the same time an argument that we can not preserve cultural landscape through classical nature conservation measures (like regime in protected areas), but only through influence to the local economy.

Having in mind that there is an interest to keep agricultural active in the protected area of Jauerling in order to manage particular nature conservation important habitat types (e. g. grasslands) and to support sustainable forestry, it is crucial to encourage active cooperation with farmers and local communities. A participatory approach is the only way to find a balance between economy and nature conservation requirements. In the case of Christmas tree plantations discussions within the framework of the planning system should take place to find locations that will have fewer incidences on biodiversity and the landscape picture and on the other hand maintain extensive cultivation of some grassland. One of the possibilities is to introduce an “offset-scheme”: owner of the Christmas tree plantation could take responsibility to prevent overgrowing of some grassland by mowing.

In the Management Plan implementation and local planning process the managing authority of the Nature Park should streamline local economic processes to find optimal solutions for maintaining grasslands and optimise Christmas tree plantations.

### *Dry grassland management*

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On exposed places on southern slopes, which could not be terraced for wine yards, they are species rich extensive grasslands (Natura 2000 habitat types). In the past people used them for grazing. As for the last decades pasture is not in place, grasslands are under natural succession – being gradually overgrown by forest.

The Office is organising regular removal by volunteers of bushes and young trees and mowing within some nature reserves within the framework of projects. It would be ideal to find farmers to move grasslands and use biomass in the farm. As this is not likely to happen, maintaining important grasslands depends on the management within the activities of the Office.

### *World Heritage and European Diploma*

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I got an impression that the European Diploma is in the shadow of the World Heritage Site. That is in a way understandable as UNESCO's global network is much more present in public's mind than European certifications.

Nevertheless, both designations are based on the same qualities, have similar requirements and pass the same message: this site is important and well managed! They are not competing, but they support each other.

On the level of the Council of Europe, it would be reasonable to work more actively with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Ramsar Committee and IUCN regarding multiple designations, to take advantage of such cases.

Regarding Wachau I'm convinced that there is a lot of possibilities to do more in this field, mostly to encourage partners and stakeholders to use both designations for reaching their activities out and for Wachau itself.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### General conclusion:

The Wachau Protected Landscape is of European importance and is well managed to maintain the exceptional natural and cultural character of the area.

*I therefore recommend to the Group of Specialists on the European Diploma and to the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention to agree on renewing the European Diploma of the Wachau Cultural Landscape for the next 10 years.*

In addition, the following condition and recommendations should be attached to the renewal:

**Condition** (repeated from the first nomination): *“that the scheme to build a dam on the Danube at Dürnstein be abandoned definitively, as well as a similar scheme within and immediately downstream from the area covered by the diploma”*.

### Recommendations:

1. Secure a sustainable budget to the managing authorities to ensure the management plan can be fully implemented without relying on financial resources from projects.
2. Encourage the setting up of a long-term institutional management frame for Wachau Protected Landscape and Jauerling – Wachau Naturpark;
3. Ensure the implementation and updating of the Management Plan in a participatory way;
4. Continue the good practice of complex approach for forestry and wild game management (including co-operation of managing authorities in bordering administrative units);
5. Continue the good practice of maintenance and reconstruction of wine terraces;
6. Efforts should be continued to preserve the apricot orchards;
7. Develop an integral approach to the tourist visit management;
8. Explore optimal solutions for preserving the landscape picture (colours of the protection nets, fences against rockslides, light pollution, Christmas tree plantations);
9. Use more regularly the European Diploma logo on publications and appropriate infrastructures, promote the European Diploma more actively, encourage partners and stakeholders to use European Diploma logo.

