

Strasbourg, 9 March 2021
[de02e_2021_rev.doc]

T-PVS/DE(2021)02rev

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

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

24 February 2021
(virtual meeting)

SCENARIO FOR VIRTUAL ON-THE-SPOT APPRAISAL VISITS

*Document prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Participation*

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement or cancelation of the on-the-spot appraisal visits within the framework of the European Diploma for Protected Areas.

In light of the on-going uncertainties due to the pandemic, considering that the on-the-spot appraisal visits are seen as a major asset and monitoring tool of the European Diploma, the Secretariat is exploring alternatives to the “usual” on-the-spot appraisal visits.

The aim of proposing virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits is to ensure the continuity of the monitoring of the European Diploma and reduce the backlog of visits resulting from last year.

In principle, the objective of an on-the-spot appraisal visit is to assess whether the conditions of the site have remained the same, improved or deteriorated since the awarding or extension of the Diploma. Further, the on-the-spot appraisal visit aims to assess the continuing European significance of the area, its exemplary management and the compliance with the conditions and/or recommendations attached to the award or renewal decision.

The virtual on-the-spot appraisal visit should enable to achieve similar objectives or lead to mitigation measures addressing the possible drawbacks of the virtual format of the visit.

The virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits could consist of two consecutive steps:

1. Virtual meeting with the stakeholders:

The independent expert will meet virtually with the managing authorities of the areas, nature conservation and land users NGOs, local and regional authorities, the scientific community carrying research in the area.

Based on the outcomes of the meetings, the independent expert will draft a preliminary report and propose provisional conditions and/or recommendations.

The [checklist for independent experts](#) adopted in 2018 will still help structure the discussions with the stakeholders.

2. Physical visit of the area:

If and when the pandemic allows, but within the year ahead of the possible renewal of the European Diploma, the independent expert will carry out a visit to the area (two days or more depending of the size of area) in order to ascertain the ecological integrity of the area and confirm that the provisional conditions and/or recommendations resulting from the virtual meetings are proportionate and fit to address to the possible threats identified.

The Group of Specialists:

In case a physical visit takes place, the Group of Specialists will examine the report of the independent expert based on the outcomes of the virtual meetings and the findings of the physical visit of the area.

In case a physical visit cannot take place, the Group of Specialists will examine the opportunity of the renewal of the European Diploma based on the preliminary report drafted by the independent expert. The Group of Specialists will, however, limit the renewal of the European Diploma to 5 years in case only recommendations are attached to the renewal decision, and to 3 years in case also conditions are attached to the renewal decision.

SWOT analysis of the virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits:

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Diploma holding areas are still monitored and their ecological integrity remains under review by the Group of Specialists.</p> <p>Managing authorities are reassured that the monitoring of the European Diploma continues.</p> <p>Gaps in award/renewal of the European Diploma are avoided.</p>	<p>Opportunities</p> <p>The virtual format of the meetings might enable more stakeholders to participate in the discussions with the independent expert as they won't need to travel to the area.</p> <p>Time and budgetary savings</p>
<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Virtual meetings with stakeholders will require stricter preparation: time schedules, technical requirements for joining the virtual meetings.</p> <p>In case physical visits do not complement the virtual meetings, there is a risk that the conclusions of the preliminary expert reports are incomplete.</p> <p>The European Diploma is awarded/renewed for a shorter period.</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>The monitoring mechanism of the European Diploma is a real asset compared to other certifications.</p> <p>The virtual on-the-spot appraisal visits might be considered as a sustainable alternative to usual on-the-spot appraisal visits.</p>