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Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe in the field of biological and landscape diversity (CO-DBP)

Group of specialists – European Diploma for Protected Areas

20-21 January 2003
Room 2, Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg

Thayatal National Park (Austria)

APPLICATION

Expert report by
Mr Daniel DASKE (France)

Document established by
the Directorate of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage

Mrs Françoise Bauer, of the Secretariat, accompanied the expert on his visit to the area.

Appendix I sets out a draft resolution prepared by the Secretariat with a view to possible award of the Diploma.

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Expert appraisal carried out from 15 to 18 May 2002

15 May
5 pm: presentation of the national park at its administrative headquarters in Hardegg, "Austria's smallest town"
7 pm: dinner / meeting with park staff, local elected representatives, partners.

16 May
9 am: meeting with scientific specialists (geology, botany, hydrology, ichthyology)
1 pm: lunch in Merkersdorf
2 pm: walking tour of the park via the Merkersdorf itinerary (Umlaufberg)
7 pm: visit of the underground galleries in Retz

17 May
9 am: departure for Cizov, in the Czech national park of Podyji
9 am: meeting / exchange of views with the Podyji park team – field outing; karstic caves – Vranov dam
3.30 pm: return to Hardegg, tour of the town
5.30 pm: visit around the baroque castle of Riegersburg

18 May
6 am: excursion along the Thaya on the Austrian. Viewing point overlooking the Fugnitztal
9 am: breakfast, conclusions

It would have been useful to spread a rather busy programme over an additional day. It is also a pity that we could not be accommodated in Hardegg, at the park headquarters. Special mention should be made of the very great assistance provided by Mr Robert Brunner, manager of the Thayatal national park, who accompanied us throughout the expert appraisal. We also met:

Barbara Guggenberger, responsible for forestry management and, temporarily, information and education work;
Christian Übl, biologist
Baldur Sprung, National park guide
Reinhard Rötzel, geologist;
Thomas Wrbka, responsible for plant ecology;
Harald Wintersberger, ichthyologist;
Erwin Neumeister, responsible for nature protection in Niederösterreich *Land* (province);
Joseph Fischer–Colbrie, responsible for nature protection in Salzburg *Land*;
Thomas Rothröckl, manager of Podyji national park, Czech Republic, and a few of his partners – representatives of the built heritage and local politicians, including the mayor of Hardegg.

Highlights of the visit

- The last Czech vestiges of the erstwhile iron curtain, opposite the information centre of the Podyji national park, a former border post, in Cizov. 40 years free of human intervention have resulted in the near-natural states of the two banks of the Thaya, elevated to national park status.
- The juxtaposition of a cliff where eagle owls nest and the Vranov dam, already old, grey and sinister.
- The abundance of hares which are easily seen. Despite the intensive farming in the agricultural area, a degree of crop variety subsists, one example being a shining purple field of amaranth.
- Wild boar, omnipresent. For the botanist they are propagators of undesirable nitrophilous plants. They prepare ground sections for geologists and pose a public health problem in the Czech Republic, where there are cases of swine fever.

- Wild boar are controlled on both sides of the Thaya..
- An elephant's head and a young bearded vulture, huge with open wings, both mounted on the wall of the imposing staircase of a baroque castle. Numerous castles and ruins, with restorations under way or due, make the point for complementarity between built and natural heritage.

Outline of the area, its European interest

"A little corner of nature, completely untouched" (Erwin Pröll, provincial governor)
"An intact ecosystem" (Franz Blochberger, provincial councillor)
"A gem of nature common to two countries" (Hannes Bauer, provincial vice-governor).

These few phrases introducing Franz Kraus' work "Nationalpark Thayatal" set the tone.

Manifest European interest

- There is a high degree of biological diversity. By way of example, of some 3,000 plants inventoried in Austria, 1,300 were found in the Thayatal. This is due in particular to pannonic influences but also alpine and other influences.
- Thanks to forty years of being untouched by humans, owing to the iron curtain, the natural state of the area is exceptional.
- The Austrian national park of Thayatal and the Czech national park of Podyji have forged close collaboration through regular meetings, joint decisions and field initiatives such as preventing the spread of invasive plants and events such as the night of the bats.

In the field

The footpath meanders through undergrowth where the rocky platform becomes increasingly visible. Lily of the valley in flower abounds, May lilies are more sparsely scattered, like the cyclamen leaves, here and there; the Martagon lily is well represented. Its button-like flowers are close to blooming except on a few stems where the tips have been nibbled off by a roe deer. Suddenly, an opening through the leaves and we come to a panoramic viewing point. Boxed in about a hundred metres below, the river flows in a tight series of loops in a vast range of wooded or virtually wooded hills, without any indication of immediate human control. There are one or two ruined castles and in particular a few geometric strips or triangles of spruce trees which are cut for Chritmas trees for example and replaced with broad-leaved trees suited to the region. Nothing to spoil the view.
We now advance slowly, around large slabs of rock. We have a close-up view, less than two metres away, of a green lizard and an Aesculapian snake, which slowly slithers away. It is a very light colour and must be about a metre and a half long and virtually as thick as my wrist! The green lizard is not timid either, and its blue throat indicates that it is a male. A little higher, a common toad crouches in a crevice. And a few rocks away, on a vast moss-covered slab, a viviparous lizard is identified. All these creatures in the space of a few metres! Plants of pannonic origin become frequent: Transylvanian melic grass as tall as a man, a very pretty and abundant carnation with sticky leaves, and the Iris variegata ruling supreme. There are dense clumps of it on rocky promontories, but not a flower is out yet.
Another panoramic view of the boxed-in Thaya river. Once out of the tree cover, we see a black stork rising effortlessly in the warm, cloud-free sky, delighting us as it circles upwards magnificently for several minutes.
It is in residence here, tucked away in the big trees where it has built a large nest. Several pairs have taken up residence in the two parks, and we spent a while observing them at daybreak, to gain a few insights into their private life. The babble of water accompanies us on our way, with bladdernut trees forming a guard of honour along the river bank, a beautifully formed yew tree among some fallen rocks, an alert grey wagtail. At one turn of the river, with the cliff where eagle owls nest in the background, we see a black stork facing us, standing in the river. Another appears not far away. They have the classic stork elegance. In good light, from a certain distance, the darker parts of the plumage have a metallic sheen.
The Thayatal national park and its Czech counterpart, Podyji, have the river Thaya as their backbone. Flowing from west to east, it empties into the Morava, 100 km away. It flows for 26 km in the national park following a particularly windy and boxed-in itinerary. The canyon topography tends towards arid slopes, patches of dry vegetation and scree. It cuts down to a depth of 150 m into the Bohemian-Moravian plateau. Some very tight turns almost cross paths. The forest environment represents some 90% of the area. The few

strips of non-endemic conifers are being gradually eliminated and replaced with broad-leaved trees. Set up in 2000 after 15 years in the making, the national park is very much in its early stages and many projects are under way. At the entrance of Hardegg, for example, the foundation stone of the future visitors and information centre had just been laid at the time of our visit.

Main biological characteristics

With barbel and undermouth predominant, there were originally 35 species of fish, including catfish (*Silurus glanis*) and sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*). Now there are only 22 species, with a secondary community of trout and bullheads, following the building of the Vranov hydroelectric dam on the Czech side. Daily discharges of water have greatly upset the water system, bringing the water temperature down to an average of just 12°. This in no way affects the aesthetics of the river but we did note the presence of artificial sills in concrete, for example immediately upstream from the Thaya bridge at Hardegg. It would be most useful to log the number of such engineering works not fitting in with the natural character of the watercourse and take remedial action.
We have already mentioned the abundance of plant species, a total of 1,300 within the perimeter of the national parks.
The vertebrate fauna presents a number of remarkable features:
- all three brown frogs - *Rana temporaria, Rana dalmatina, Rana arvalis* – are represented;
- the abundance of the green lizard and Aesculapian snake. Three other grass-snakes are represented: *Coronella austriaci, Natrix natrix, Natrix tesselata*;
- 145 bird species have been noted to date. The flagship nesting birds are the black stork, the eagle owl and also the red-breasted fly-catcher, the collared fly-catcher, the hoopoe and the white-backed woodpecker. The exact status of the saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*), which makes regular appearances, is not known. Occasional guests include the osprey and the white-tailed eagle in winter.

The caves, abandoned mines, various fissures and hollow trees provide a habitat for 14 species of bat, which is another major biological characteristic. The large ungulates include boar, red deer, roe deer and mouflon chiefly on the Czech side. The otter is present but currently unable to find a permanent habitat on the Thaya owing to the disruption of the water system by the Vranov dam. Passing lynx and individual elk have also been reported.
There are still caves where ice is constantly present on the park's territory, as well as items of built heritage, old mills and the ruins of Kaja castle, which might be renovated.

Hunting and fishing

The ban on cars has considerably limited access to the fishing huts that existed before the park was set up. The Czech authorities have cut the sections where fishing is authorised by half. Talks are under way on the matching up of the sections closed to fishing on both banks. There are also time restrictions owing to the presence of the eagle owl and other birds.
Hunting is essentially an activity carried out to control roe deer, boar and non-native species, fallow deer and mouflon; 460 boar were shot in 2001. Little bark-stripping is done; "we don't need pretty trees" was the manager's comment on this subject. All hunting is banned in a 130 ha area – nearly 10 % of the area of the national park – an extension up to 600 ha is proposed for the next ten years.
The park's 1,330 ha are managed by a permanent team of five, occasionally reinforced for work with visitors and surveillance. The management plan, the result of indispensable and very active collaboration, is drawn up jointly with the Czech Podyji national park and early work on its implementation is promising.

The shadow of Vranov

Built on Czech territory between 1928 and 1934 and located immediately next to the Podyji national park buffer zone, the Vranov hydroelectric dam is showing its age and has an excessive impact on the water system of the Thaya, whose characteristics it has modified. It is the key problem affecting the Thayatal and Podyji national parks and should be dealt with as soon as possible. Will the operating licence be renewed? While involving the Niederösterreich *Land* in the process as early as possible it is now a matter of taking action in two phases, first identifying solutions and then implementing them.

An opportunity for regional development

On either side of the border formed by the river Thaya, two national parks, one Czech and the other Austrian, are working together on an area that is exceptional for its natural state. The Czech park already holds the European Diploma. Given the exemplary nature of the work carried out in concert, it would be both fitting and expedient to honour the Thayatal with the Diploma too. It is an opportunity for the European spirit guiding our efforts.

Recommendations

1. Owing to the disturbance caused to the Thaya by the Vranov dam, a solution needs to be found at the level of transfrontier cooperation between the two national parks of Thayatal and Podyji. The studies embarked upon are to propose possible solutions within two years so that practical measures are taken as soon as possible. Furthermore, it is to be hoped that the funding of these efforts does not have to come solely from the two national parks concerned.

2. The different habitats making up the park are characterised by their very close state to nature, except for the river, which has a number of artificial concrete sills. From both the landscape and biological point of view, it would be advisable to envisage works aimed at returning the river to its natural state. Sills of this kind could be replaced with more appropriate rocky rapids installed over a longer gradient.

3. Nautical activities such as rafting have been observed, although they are prohibited. This matter requires greater vigilance, and all the more so since an easing of the rules appears to be envisaged on the Czech side.

4. Model cooperation at European level is pursued between the Austrian national park of Thayatal and its Czech counterpart, Podyji. Specific funding must be sought in this respect, particularly as regards public relations and educational aspects.

5. Study the possibility of introducing additional protection on the outskirts of the park, specifically in the Fugnitztal area, where the otter could find the right conditions for a permanent habitat.

6. Undertake scientific studies on the necessary conditions for the spontaneous residence of the otter, lynx, wolf and possibly elk.

7. In a logic of complementarity between natural and built environments, envisage restoring and using the ruins – notably Kaja – located within the park.

APPENDIX I

Expertenbesuch Europadiplom 15. - 18. Mai 2002

Gespräche mit Wissenschaftlern und sonstigen Personen

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Appendix II

Draft resolution
concerning the award of the European Diploma of Protected Areas
to the Thayatal National Park (Austria)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the Regulations for the European Diploma pf Protected Areas;

Taking into consideration the expert's report presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists - European Diploma of Protected Areas on 20 and 21 January 2003;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the Activities of the Council of Europe in the Field of Biological and Landscape Diversity (CO-DBP);

Having noted the agreement of the Austrian Government;

Solemnly awards the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the Thayatal National Park, in accordance with the Regulations for the European Diploma of Protected Areas, due to the very natural state of the park, its biological components and the model co-operation on either side of the border with the Czech Podyji National Park;

Places the aforesaid Park under the patronage of the Council of Europe until ……. ;

Attaches the following recommendations to the award:

1. Owing to the disturbance caused to the Thaya by the Vranov dam, a solution needs to be found at the level of transfrontier cooperation between the two national parks of Thayatal and Podyji. The studies embarked upon are to propose possible solutions within two years so that practical measures are taken as soon as possible. Furthermore, it is to be hoped that the funding of these efforts does not have to come solely from the two national parks concerned.

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6. Undertake scientific studies on the necessary conditions for the spontaneous residence of the otter, lynx, wolf and possibly elk.

7. In a logic of complementarity between natural and built environments, envisage restoring and using the ruins – notably Kaja – located within the park.