

Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe

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Introduction

EUROPE PRESENTS A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE to international cooperation in the field of conservation. With 35 countries—and a multitude of languages, cultures, and traditions—meaningful collaboration is inevitably difficult to achieve. Indeed, until the recent meltdown of East-West tensions, it was virtually impossible across the continent as a whole.

On the other hand, although much of Europe is highly urbanised, it also presents some unique opportunities for conservation. Compared with many other parts of the world, it is a wealthy region; it is spared the sight of desperately poor people destroying nature in order to survive. Human population numbers are relatively stable (indeed in some countries they are falling). Much of Europe has a surplus capacity in food production, and so there is no compelling need to fell forests or drain wetlands (which is not to say that forests and wetlands are safe). Public awareness of environmental issues is relatively high, although this varies greatly between countries. And there is a new climate abroad of international collaboration—though scarred of course by the tragedy of Bosnia and threatened by the revival of nationalism.

A recently published IUCN report, *Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe* aims to seize these opportunities and show how a more effective network of protected areas—national parks, regional parks, nature reserves, protected landscapes, and so forth—can be established in the region. It is an unusual document, both for the process by which it has been prepared and for its contents.

The story begins in Caracas, the brash capital of Venezuela, which in 1992 was the venue of the Fourth World Congress on National Parks

and Protected Areas. The Caracas Congress received reports on the status of protected areas in each region of the world, including Europe. The main findings for this region were:

- Although Europe has many protected areas (up to 20,000 by one estimate), there are dramatic differences from one country to another. Less than 1% of Ireland is protected; only 1.67% of Greece; but nearly a third of Denmark. In general the coverage and management of protected areas are least effective in Southern European countries.
- Whereas over 40% of the area under protection globally is in Category II, National Parks, of the IUCN categorisation (i.e., protected areas managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation), in Europe these account for barely 10%. Instead, over two-thirds is within Category V, Protected Landscapes/ Seascapes, (i.e., protected areas managed mainly for landscape protection and recreation). This reflects both the limited extent of wild areas in Europe and the variety and richness of its cultural landscapes. But it also indicates that little of Europe (some 3%) is given the higher degree of protection provided by categories I-IV.
- Protection of the marine environment generally lags behind

that on land, and the situation in the Northeast Atlantic and the North Sea is particularly poor.

- Although over 10 million hectares—an area larger than that of Hungary—has been added to the protected area estate of Europe since 1982, many countries still have large areas of natural or semi-natural vegetation rich in biodiversity which are not included within protected areas. This is especially true of former Communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe.
- Most protected areas in Europe are under strong pressure and subject to a wide range of threats. Those facing Mediterranean wetlands and coastal ecosystems are particularly acute, but agriculture, pollution, industry, and tourism endanger parks and reserves in every country.
- The involvement of local communities in the protection of such areas varies greatly; there is much scope to increase local support and public participation, particularly in Southern Europe.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe is particularly interesting. The protected areas systems of several countries (e.g., Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, and Slovakia) are of long-standing and as well developed as any in Western Europe (although those of Albania and Romania are as yet underdeveloped). However, the recent changes have brought dangers, the greatest of which is land re-distribution, either as re-privatisation (in which publicly owned land is returned to its former owners) or as privatisation (in which the land is distributed to the private sector). This policy puts publicly owned land in nature reserves and national parks at risk. On the other hand, the political changes have favoured open, public debate on environmental issues.

Recent developments in Western Europe have also been significant for protected areas. The European Union (EU) is the only supranational law-making body in the world, and the only regional body to which nation states have surrendered significant elements of their sovereignty. Many aspects of environmental and conservation policy fall within the EU's competence. Under two recent EU Directives (i.e., laws of the Union), the 12 Member States (soon to be 15 or 16) of the Union are creating a network of enforceable EU protected areas. But the Union's other policies in agriculture and so on still cause great damage to nature and landscape.

The Development of the Regional Action Plan

The Caracas Action Plan called on the Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas (CNPPA) of IUCN to prepare Regional Action Plans to address priority problems identified by the Congress. As a result, such CNPPA-led plans are at varying stages of development in several regions: East Asia, Africa, South Asia, and Central America for example. But it is the action plan in Europe which has been the most ambitious.

The preparation of the plan began in January 1993, and was completed twenty months later with a launch in September 1994. The process has been steered by a consortium of bodies put together by CNPPA: The Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe (FNNPE), the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, the World Wide Fund for Nature, BirdLife International, and the European Programme office of IUCN. They, and representatives of some of the government funding bodies, came together in a Steering Group under the chairmanship of the author in his former capacity as Deputy Chair of CNPPA. The Group directed and guided the work of the project co-

ordinator, Hugh Synge, an expert botanist.

At first sight this may appear a very straightforward account—the usual combination of a steering group of various interests overseeing the work of an expert. However, the real thrill of the process of preparing the plan has been that this rather “ivory tower” approach was eschewed in favour of a much more participatory one. Thus the plan is the product of several hundred contributions from around Europe; and the role of Hugh Synge has been to reflect these varied views in the process of preparing the plan, knitting together the contributions and adjusting the balance of the plan in light of guidance from the network. Participation is reflected also in the number of organisations which have helped with money, and in kind, to bring the task of writing and launching the plan to a successful conclusion.

In January 1993, a small booklet was sent to all 270 IUCN members in Europe (35% of all IUCN membership), to the 90 or so individual members in Europe and to the 80 or so institutional members of the FN-NPE. This defined the region of Europe for the purposes of the exercise as eastwards to the borders of the former Soviet Union, but including the three Baltic States (and therefore much more than the present 12 countries of the EU). It also explained the aim of the plan, proposed an initial structure, and requested contributions of material, ideas, even draft chapters. Over 120 substantive contributions were received by June 1993, when the first draft was reviewed at Nyköping, in Sweden, at a CNPPA regional session. Detailed examination in workshop sessions at Nyköping was followed by extensive rewriting and restructuring of the plan.

A second draft was launched in November 1993 at a conference at Maastricht, in the Netherlands, convened by the Governments of Hun-

gary and the Netherlands to discuss the development of a European ecological network (or EECONET), a concept which is enthusiastically endorsed in the plan. This second draft was also subject to critical review and subsequently detailed workshops were convened to address sections on Southern Europe and on the role of education, both of which were felt to be in need of more work. The final version was drafted between May and July 1994, and launched on 19 September under the title *Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe*.

As the process went from stage to stage it generated increased interest. Thus:

- By the time of the final version, the army of substantive contributors, both organisations and individuals, had grown to well over 200, from every one of the 35 countries of Europe.
- Funding came from government departments and agencies in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK; and from WWF.
- The Governments of Spain and France have expressed interest in providing funds for the translation of the full text into Spanish and French.
- The Government of Finland and Finnish Forest Industries provided the entire printing production for free.
- The Royal Society for Protection of Birds (UK) donated design services and the drafting of the summary and popular versions.
- A Slovenian industrial enterprise sponsored a key workshop.
- International bodies, like the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, acknowledged the importance of the plan and its recommendations.
- The plan was endorsed by the General Assemblies of FNNPE (in

Perth, Scotland, September 1993) and IUCN (Buenos Aires, Argentina, January 1994).

Launching the Plan

If the process of production was an unparalleled exercise in collaboration, so too was the launch programme, designed to give *Parks for Life* the maximum impact at the European and national levels. An initial European launch in Brussels involving the Director General of IUCN was accompanied (and followed) by a whole string of events across Europe from Finland, Poland, and the Czech Republic to the UK, Ireland, and Spain. In all, no less than 28 national offers have been made to launch the plan. These have varied from press conferences to seminars involving Ministers, and from indoor meetings to events held in a national park or a nature reserve. The full version is expected to be printed in four languages: English, French, German, and Spanish. A summary and a short popular version have been made available for translation into other national languages, from Finnish to Slovakian, and is expected to be translated even into some regional languages, such as Welsh and Catalan.

Thus *Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe* has been a unique exercise in partnership and joint "ownership." If, as is often said, the process is as important as the product, then *Parks for Life* is in a class of its own among European environmental initiatives.

In fact, the entire exercise is an excellent example of how IUCN—the World Conservation Union—can operate as a *union*, involving its members in the shaping of conservation policy. By bringing together governments and non-governmental organisations, IUCN provides a unique forum, ideally suited to a decentralised, network operation, such as the preparation and launch of a regional action plan. Moreover,

the story of *Parks for Life* accords well with two strategic developments in IUCN: towards the greater regionalisation of action, and working more through IUCN's members.

The Aim and Vision of the Plan

But what about its content? What vision does it aim at, what does the plan call for, and what are the prospects of that call being heeded?

At the heart of the plan is a vision, based upon the aim of the plan: *to create an adequate, effective and well-managed network of protected areas in Europe*. There are four themes to this vision, and to the plan:

1) Placing Europe's protected areas in their wider context:

- The European protected areas network should be well integrated into all other parts of national life. This means that the protected areas should be embedded in **regional planning** and that policies for related sectors such as **agriculture, forestry and tourism** would be environmentally benign.
- Most protected areas should either include or be surrounded by **support zones** where land is used in ways that contribute to conservation aims.

2) Addressing priorities at the European, sub-regional, and national levels:

- The protected areas should form an interconnected **network**. This will require corridors and stepping stones between them. Representative samples of all the ecosystems should be included.
- The network should include most **large remaining areas** of semi-natural and natural ecosystems, managed principally to conserve or restore nature, with natural succession as the dominant process. This means better protection in many existing national

parks and an increase in their overall coverage, as much as half or more from 1994 levels.

- Other areas, usually large, should be managed to protect **unique landscape qualities**. This requires that the management capacity and conservation status of many protected landscapes be raised.
- The network should include one or more viable populations of **species threatened** on a European scale. This will require more nature reserves and, for EU Member States, the full implementation of the ambitious Natura 2000 programme.
- Systems of **marine protected areas** should be created and effectively managed—in the Northeast Atlantic, the Baltic, and the Mediterranean.
- In Eastern and Central Europe, there should be **no net loss** in the protected area systems following privatization and redistribution of land to former owners.

3) Strengthening the planning and management of Europe's protected areas.

- There should be effective **laws** to underpin the establishment and management of a range of protected area types.
- Governments should develop effective **institutions** to plan and manage the protected areas, and would provide adequate funding.
- For each protected area there should be a **management plan**.
- Within large protected areas, **zoning** should be the usual approach, reconciling uses such as traditional farming and tourism—and the resulting benefits to local people—with conservation of nature and landscape.
- The professional status of **protected areas staff** should be raised. This means staff should be adequate in numbers and have sufficient qualifications and

skills. Good training should be available to all.

4) Creating a climate for success:

- Protected area agencies should work more closely with **local communities**—co-operating with them in management—and drawing on the support of many other sectors of society.
- The **public** should value their protected areas more highly, seeing them as a vital part of their nation's road to sustainable lifestyles in harmony with the environment.
- Governments should **co-operate** with others, and with international organisations, to ensure the success of protected areas at a national and European scale.

To realise this vision, *Parks for Life* does not provide a top-down blueprint of what should happen where, identifying particular places which need particular attention. Rather it makes *recommendations* for action to be taken at the national level. It also *endorses* a number of important initiatives already underway which will strengthen the role of protected areas (such as the EU's Natura 2000 programme, which will create a network of sites protected under EU law in the countries of the Union). The third kind of action are *30 priority projects* calling for international leadership, and which will have an important gearing function.

Some examples of these priority projects are:

- A programme to raise the standards of land-use planning in relation to protected areas;
- An initiative to identify and publicise the conservation value of military land which can be added to the protected area estate;
- A programme of study visits for protected areas staff from Eastern Europe to Western Europe;

- A feasibility study of a European rural landscapes convention;
- A project to support the development of more trans-frontier protected areas;
- A programme to streamline international protected area data bases; and
- A key IUCN appointment—to provide oversight and co-ordination for the implementation of the plan as a whole.

Many of these projects have identified lead agencies, and some are already getting under way.

The plan also has great value as a reference document. For example, it contains the first comprehensive list of all the European initiatives for conservation (nearly 40); it summarises the extent of protected area coverage, country by country and Category by Category; it contains detailed information on EU directives relating to protected areas; and it sets out principles and guidelines on matters as varied as land-use planning in relation to protected areas and sustainable tourism.

Finally the plan also has relevance beyond the limits of Europe. The new Director General of IUCN, David McDowell, has remarked in his preface that, while the plan addresses the needs of Europe's protected areas, "many of the key themes addressed in the Action Plan—community involvement, the need to plan and manage protected areas in their wider context, and the importance of seizing opportunities as well as responding to threats—are relevant everywhere. So is the collaborative process by which the plan was prepared. IUCN will adapt and help apply the lessons learnt in re-

gional plans for protected areas in other parts of the world."

Conclusion

Conservationists are familiar with this dilemma: that they speak and write a lot, but achieve little. All the effort that has gone into writing and publicising *Parks for Life* will be of no value unless it affects what happens on the ground. Here the plan faces difficulties. The resurgence of nationalism in Europe, and the current concerns over recession which have driven environmental issues down the public agenda, do not create the most auspicious climate for an international conservation initiative. On the other hand, the number of organisations which have been drawn into preparation of the plan augurs well: it suggests that many government agencies and non-governmental bodies concerned with national parks, nature reserves, and protected landscapes are eager to collaborate—and the plan provides them with a means to do so.

If, as recommended in the *Parks for Life*, groups come together at the national level to decide how the recommendations in it can be applied within their own countries, then there are real prospects of progress. IUCN's General Assembly has therefore invited governments and others to respond constructively to the recommendations in the plan, and has called upon its large and influential membership in Europe to help finance the agreed priority projects. IUCN commits itself to doing all it can to ensure that the efforts put into the plan's preparation are rewarded by action on the ground which will significantly improve the prospects for Europe's protected areas by the end of the century.

(Parks for Life: Action for Protected Areas in Europe is available from IUCN Publications, 219 Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0DL, United Kingdom. Price £10, or \$15, excluding postage. Fax (44) 223 277175; telephone (44) 223 277894.)

