

Towards an international protected area : Lessons from the transfrontier interdisciplinary research network for the protection of the Mont-Blanc

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Background

The Mont-Blanc, the highest massif of the Alps and of EU-Europe, continues to have a surprisingly low and spatially limited protection status that is inadequate in view of its ecological, historical and symbolical importance. This vulnerability is compounded because the Mont-Blanc area is a hotspot of international mountain and mass tourism and lies along a main European transport corridor, contrary to most other protected areas (PA). In 1990, responding to the demands of the worldwide environmental community the respective ministers of France, Italy and Switzerland agreed on creating an International Park at the « Roof of the Alps ». To date, however, only some nature reserves at the fringes of the central massif exist on the French side. As the local authorities protested against a park project fearing an « Indian reserve » they were instead entrusted to build the »Espace Mont-Blanc« project in 1991, pledging to harmonise development and protection in a much larger region of 2.100 km². Nevertheless, the three project scientists withdrew soon, regretting the lack of political will and progress towards the ambitious double goal. In a parallel process, between 1993 and 2004 the World Conservation Congress has adopted three resolutions demanding the international protection of Mont-Blanc. In recent years ProMONT-BLANC, the international umbrella NGO regrouping over 20 organisations for the protection of Mont-Blanc (MB), has attempted to draw researchers of all fields into the PA lobbying process and to provide a scientific dialogue and basis for a proposed transfrontier World Heritage (WH) nomination, as well as the required management plan and prior legal protection status.

Project aims

The multiple goals of the research network are to further cooperation between scientists across borders and fields and to popularize scientific results and predictions for decision-makers and the general public. In spite of MB's importance as the cradle of earth sciences and mountain research there is still very little cross-national and inter-disciplinary exchange of research in this region. Furthermore, solid scientific arguments needed to be assembled in order to lobby local and national authorities in respect to their responsibility towards this iconic mountain range. Scientific input is also necessary to demonstrate the massif's outstanding environmental services, the specific threats and their impacts, and the consequent needs for protection. Also, in view of a potential World Heritage nomination the uniqueness and the exceptional features of MB have to be specified in comparison with other similar sites of the world. Most urgently, ProMONT-BLANC wants to assure scientific input into the highly politicized « Sustainable Development Scheme » which is currently being prepared by Espace Mont-Blanc as an EU-INTERREG III project.

Though the local population around the MB is very proud and knowledgeable of «their» mountains, much better communication is needed on pros and cons of different PA alternatives and on research data of complex issues such as climate change and tourism trends to motivate and mobilise them towards active participation in protection efforts. For unlike earlier PAs, today the protection status can neither be imposed by the state, nor by international institutions, but has to be supported by local stakeholders and authorities, who need to be better informed about the issues at stake.

Approach

The targeted involvement of researchers started in early 2002 with a series of expert meetings with social and natural scientists and PA practitioners and a subsequent international conference on the MB as a potential World Heritage site (October 2002). Since then, ProMONT-BLANC gradually enlarged the network of researchers from France, Italy and Switzerland through several tri-national and interdisciplinary meetings and electronic communication. Initially, the strategic goal for protection is the uninhabited central area, therefore the first steps assembled mainly natural scientists. For the human dimension and for the wider region social scientists are ready to

re-integrate the network. As a result, so far 34 natural scientists from 12 Universities and other research institutions in the three countries have volunteered to contribute to the analysis of highlights, risks and environmental services of Mont-Blanc as well as of MB's scientific importance and ecological specificity citing recent and ongoing research (including data from the hot summer of 2003). Outstanding glaciologists and geologists, hydrologists and climatologists, as well as biologists and ecologists have each used the methods of their own discipline and the long data series available for MB and then jointly summarised their findings and possible trends with their colleagues from the same field. Written additions by those not present at the meetings have completed the inter-disciplinary overview of MB's natural features and possible future role.

Achievements

Researchers from all three countries have volunteered their time and drafted a preliminary dossier and are ready to work on a solid scientific dossier for a transfrontier management plan of Mont-Blanc, if so requested by the respective authorities. In this they underline MB's importance for current and future dynamic processes and strongly advocate a more coherent and effective transborder protection status of its core zone with corridors to the surrounding «balconies» and connection with the nearby National and Regional Parks in France and Italy. The researchers also confirm the compliance with at least 3 of the 4 selection criteria for a natural World Heritage site: 1) representative of earth history, 2) representative of on-going ecological and biological processes, 3a) exceptional scientific importance, 3b) unique aesthetic beauty, and 4) while the area does not excel in endemic and threatened species, it contains an extraordinary abundance of all species representative of the Western and Central Alpine arch. Therefore they strongly endorse its transfrontier nomination, although there is concern about the absence of the required prior «integrity» in legal protection.

In particular, the scientists maintain that the MB, while in the midst of densely populated Europe, distinguishes itself by offering all the world's mountain features in a nutshell, such as

- ◆ High diversity of cold, warm and black glaciers in all expositions and gradients
- ◆ All altitudinal levels and expositions suitable for plants and wildlife, including extreme ecosystems in arctic environments unsuitable for permanent life forms
- ◆ Presence and visibility of most of the geological stages and the resulting phenomena
- ◆ A reservoir of water and humidity and a buffer for the expected regional repercussions of global warming thanks to the convergence of 5 different climate zones around the summit elevation.

Therefore, the research network urges to use the massif more systematically as an ideal observatory for inter-disciplinary research on the dynamics of mountain ecosystems. They insist on intensifying the regular data gathering in view of the unique climatic conditions and the long data series that have been collected since the 18th century and which are available only on the MB. Climatologists, glaciologists and hydrologists agree on the utmost importance of this European hotspot of precipitation for the study and application of the findings about future climate risks and chances, about the renovation mechanism of glaciers throughout annual seasons and pluri-annual cycles. Geologists underline MB's crucial role for man's growing understanding of earth history and its geographical location in the Alpine arch.

While presenting a high risk for degradation by mass tourism, the area's easy accessibility compared to other higher mountain ranges of the earth – presents the opportunity of MB as a unique outdoor show case where the general public can appreciate and learn about processes of life's adaptation to extreme conditions, of ecological diversity and altitudinal variations, and of specific phenomena of climatic change (e.g. growth and decrease of glaciers in time) as well as the overwhelming richness and beauty within a compact and steeply rising mountain range.

Finally, the scientists also recommend MB as a privileged laboratory for innovative PA strategies and policies (e.g. mountain tourism) and the application of the protocols of the Alpine convention with high potential for multiplication elsewhere in the Alps and beyond because of its exemplary role.

Challenges and difficulties of the research network

While researchers and activists reached unprecedented levels of communication and enthusiasm, the process towards a *de facto* protection and concrete WH nomination is very slow and hampered by the ups and downs of voluntary NGO engagement, limited funds, and political obstacles. In addition, there are a number of difficulties regarding:

- ◆ the respective national frames of reference that are still prevailing, rather than an ecosystem perspective which transcends national species and habitat categories.

- ◆ the spatial strategy to be adopted in the initial lobbying efforts, i.e. how far to extend the future PA beyond the core area of the massif into the so-called surrounding balconies, which might compromise the political will for protection altogether.
- ◆ a recommendation as to which combination of PA types to establish around the natural WH core area (e.g. MAB Biosphere Reserve, Parc Naturel Régional and/or mixed natural-cultural WH site)
- ◆ the biologists' and ecologists' hesitation to elaborate on potential future scenarios, in particular regarding climate change and plant diversity
- ◆ the integration of social sciences into the process that underline the socio-economic, political, symbolic and historical dimension that are so crucial to the area, but might complicate the first initiative to protect the uninhabited, but contested, core zone.

Outlook

While ProMONT-BLANC was successful in bringing together researchers from the three concerned countries in a creative dialogue and in engaging them in the lobby for a PA status, the biggest challenge for MB's transfrontier protection still lies ahead: How to bridge the wide gap between the exemplary wealth and level of scientific achievements on the one hand and the decisions of local people and their elected representatives on the other. Specifically, this process now needs to strategically deploy research into creating a significant PA which is actively promoted by local, regional and national decision-makers and supported by the wide array of local and non-local stakeholders. This requires that local authorities of «Espace Mont-Blanc» become convinced that protection of their natural capital, the basis of their current prosperity, will have to be protected adequately in order to achieve realistic long-term sustainable development of tourism, mountain farming, as well as cultural and natural landscapes. In particular, issues such as environmental risks and services both for the region itself and for the wider downstream area, offer an opportunity to engage a broader set of decision-makers and stakeholders in a PA debate and to develop and implement protection schemes with people rather than in opposition to them. As one step to address these challenges we currently search for scientific journalists capable of summarising the results in a non-scientific format for political decision-makers and a popular version for the general public, primarily in French, but also in Italian, German and English.

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ZOBODAT - www.zobodat.at

Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

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