

## **AQUILALP.NET – The Golden Eagle in the Eastern Alps A trans-border monitoring project in the Austrian-Italian Alps**

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### **Abstract**

The Golden Eagle is one of the most prominent symbols of the Alps. Yet, excessive hunting and environmental changes caused eagle numbers to decrease dramatically at the end of the 19th century. Today populations are thought to be stable; they are no longer under immediate threat. However human influence still causes a potential threat, thus Golden Eagles are protected under the European Birds Directive. AQUILALP.NET aims to identify and document eagle populations in five protected areas in the Austrian-Italian Alps and to use this information to develop a coordinated trans-border protection strategy.

The project encompasses the national parks Hohe Tauern, Stelvio, Dolomiti Bellunesi, and the nature parks Rieserferner-Ahrn and Fanes-Sennes-Prags. All are part of the European NATURA 2000 network and recognised as core eagle habitats in the Eastern Alps. A co-ordinated recording scheme, regular controls of nesting sites and a standardised methodology allow scientifically exact documentation of populations and comparison of reproduction rates. Additionally, location characteristics of nesting sites were recorded, paying particular attention to present or potential disturbance parameters.

Within the project, a total of more than 70 breeding pairs are monitored and more than 230 nest sites have been documented. The co-ordinated monitoring over an area of 3,200 km<sup>2</sup> allows us to review the efficiency of the NATURA 2000 Network in the Alps for the protection of this prominent bird of prey.

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### **Keywords**

Golden eagle, Eastern Alps, Nationalpark Hohe Tauern, National Park Stelvio, National Park Dolomiti Bellunesi, Nature Park Rieserferner-Ahrn, Nature Park Fanes-Sennes-Prags, Natura 2000, population monitoring, breeding success.

### **Aims, study area and methods**

International collaboration and the development of efficient protection strategies are particularly relevant for the protection of species such as the Golden Eagle that uses its environment at large scales. One aim of the AQUILALP.NET is to intensify cooperation between Protected Area administrations in the partner regions. The coordinated and standardised quantification of Golden Eagle numbers in five spatially significant protected areas of the Eastern Alps will allow a quality control of the effectiveness of an interregional protection strategy for a protected species under Appendix 1 of the Birds Directive of the European Union. Further, the ALQUILALP.NET Project should provide a stimulus to promote general public awareness of efforts to protect the alpine flora and fauna.

The project was scheduled from 2003 to 2005. It aimed to identify and document populations of Golden Eagles within selected protected areas in the Eastern Alps and to use the information obtained to develop a coordinated strategy for the protection of the species in this trans-border region. The project encompasses 5 protected areas within the INTERREG Project region. All of these areas are included within the European NATURA 2000 network of Protected Areas. They are all recognised as core areas of habitat for the golden eagle in the Eastern Alps. Together, they cover an area of about 3 200 km<sup>2</sup>.

Co-ordinated recording, regular controls of the eyrie (nesting) sites and standardised methods allowed scientifically exact documentation and comparisons of the reproduction rates of this bird of prey. Breeding pairs and nest sites were documented and mapped. As a supplement to the reproduction data, all important location characteristics of nesting sites have been recorded within a standardised scheme. To get an idea of the variety of prey taken by the eagles within the project area, diet analyses from remains found within selected nests has been carried out.

A total of more than 70 breeding pairs of Golden Eagles could be monitored in all partner-parks and about 250 nest sites have been mapped. The breeding success varied between parks and years from 0.25 to 0.82 fledged birds per breeding pair. Golden Eagles are generalists in their diet. This means that their prey spectrum varies greatly between the investigated regions, consisting mainly of marmots in the central alps, with large open grasslands, and being much more varied in the southern alps, where limestone and dolomite rocks dominate the landscape.

Within the project a very effective cooperation between the nature reserves could be established and a standardised monitoring scheme was set up. The results clearly highlight the importance of the investigated areas for the protection of the Golden eagle, yet it is also obvious that only a network of protected areas can maintain healthy populations of wide ranging species like this bird of prey. Long term monitoring schemes are essential to get knowledge of the natural variation in breeding success between years and regions. Only with such background data it is possible to identify long term trends and to establish critical thresholds for conservation.

The strong public image of the Golden Eagle together with the results from this project, were used for the promotion of the participating national parks and nature parks.

The project website ([www.aquilalp.net](http://www.aquilalp.net)), the yearly newsletter, an extensive exhibition, and the final booklet are aimed to gain further support for the general idea of large scale protected areas in the Alps.

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# ZOBODAT - [www.zobodat.at](http://www.zobodat.at)

Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

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