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Alpine Convention secretariat for Innsbruck and Bolzano

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Collaboration between the five Caucasian countries Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey is extremely difficult because some of them are in serious conflict with one another or even, as in the case of Azerbaijan and Armenia, are officially at war. In many regions much of the population is living below the poverty line, with corruption additionally exacerbating their problems.

In this situation the question is whether it is appropriate for a representative from the Alps to make presentations and hold workshops on a subject like sustainable development, as CIPRA's Executive Director Andreas Götz did in Gudauri. Afterwards, CIPRA felt that the decision had been right because such difficult situations call for creativity and self-empowerment at the grassroots level. And in fact, the examples of the Alliance in the Alps Community Network and the Alpine Network of Protected Areas made a very positive impression on attendees. The conference is to be seen as a first step towards a long-term mutual exchange.

Contents

Alpine Convention meets Caucasus	1
Alpine Convention secretariat for Innsbruck and Bolzano	2
Programme for the 6th CIPRA Summer Academy now online	2
Storms in the Alps – a consequence of climate change?.....	2
Freshwater biodiversity ...	3
Conference on the depopulation of mountain areas ..	3
New EU statistics: tourism and the environment, year-book of the regions	3
Declaration on protected areas in European mountain regions	4
Mountain farmers call for more support from the EU Agriculture Committee	4
Miscellaneous	4

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As far as Lugano was concerned, the unanimous (8:0) decision taken by a preparatory parliamentary commission in Switzerland to reject ratification of the Alpine Convention protocols had already more or less put paid to its chances of being chosen. Italy and Austria nevertheless seem to have felt a need for a common strategy to defeat the Swiss bid. The Ministers of the Environment of the Alpine countries came together behind closed doors for a reception and dinner on the eve of the conference and were obviously involved in tough negotiations until half past one in the morning when the announcement was finally made. The Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Conference will be in Innsbruck, with an office in Bolzano for technical support and research.

The French civil servant Noël Lebel was elected Secretary General ad interim for two years. At the end of the year, Italy hands over the chair of the Alpine Convention to Germany for the next two-year period, which means that German Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin will be Chairman of the Alpine Conference until the end of 2004.

Jürgen Trittin pointed to the sheer magnitude of the traffic problem in the Alps today. He said that, with the Transport Protocol, the signatory states had entered into a commitment to refrain from establishing any new transalpine corridors for road transport. In view of the pending enlargement of the EU, Trittin felt this was a challenge that must now be confronted, for example by setting limits to the numbers of heavy lorries in transit. His proposal was supported by the Italian Minister of the Environment Altero Matteoli. In addition Trittin drew attention to the increasing frequency of storm damage and mudflows and called for solutions in this field, too.

Programme for the 6th CIPRA Summer Academy now online

(12.12.02) In August 2003, Schaan/FL will be the venue for CIPRA-International's sixth Summer Academy. The three-week programme is designed to offer a full picture of the Alpine space with all its problems and potential. The course focuses on the Alps as a region that transcends national borders. The programme covers a wide range of subjects, including geography, cultural studies, spatial planning, tourism, energy, transport and wildlife, as well as climate change and EU policy. The faculty appointed for the Academy have a combination of university, institutional and private sector backgrounds. Teaching will take the form of lectures, group working and excursions. German and French have been chosen as the course languages for 2003, and simultaneous translation will be provided. Students will have numerous opportunities – both in and out of class – to make contact and discuss with people from different countries.

In the framework of the Academy there will also be a three-day focus seminar that will be open to everyone with an interest in the subject selected for 2003, namely "Agriculture, Forestry and Biodiversity". Agriculture and forestry play a decisive role in shaping the face of the Alps and thus the living space for Alpine fauna and flora. In the three days of the seminar the focus will be on the great responsibility this entails for biodiversity in the Alps. There will be sessions devoted to such subjects as the changing Alpine landscape, and the problems and potential of agriculture and forestry, and their impacts on biodiversity. A number of successful projects leading to increased biodiversity will also be presented.

Information, programme and registration: <http://www.cipra.org> (de/fr/it/sl)

Storms in the Alps – a consequence of climate change?

(21.11.02) Last weekend stormy foehn winds and heavy rains caused serious damage in parts of the Alps. For the meteorologists it is clear that global warming means a general increase in the levels of precipitation.

The worst damage was caused in the Swiss Canton of Grisons, and in the German and Austrian regions of the Eastern Alps. In Switzerland heavy rainfall led to flooding and landslides. The Swiss meteorological office reported record volumes of rain for several Swiss cities. In the Eastern Alps forests were devastated, power lines went down, and travel by road and rail was severely hampered. The German meteorological office spoke of the worst storms in the Alps for twenty years.

Meteorologists cannot explain individual events solely in terms of global warming. What they are seeing, however, is confirmation of their predictions that the observed trend towards warmer winters will lead to more and more disastrous storms. One factor is the increase in moisture absorbed by the air masses above the sea and then carried by the winds to the Alps, where it triggers heavy precipitation.

Sources: Tages-Anzeiger 18.11.02 and 19.11.02, Süddeutsche Zeitung 18.11.02

Freshwater biodiversity

(21.11.02) The latest edition of "Hotspot", the official journal of the Swiss Biodiversity Forum (de/fr), is devoted to the subject of biological diversity in freshwater. The articles include the results of a mountain stream project, the problem of dams and the nutrient household, and hydrobiological investigations in streams following renaturation measures.

Water bodies are veritable hotspots of biodiversity. Eight percent of all animal species in Switzerland live in lakes and waterways. That is also where the largest number of endangered species are to be found. The freshwater resources of the earth constitute about one ten-thousandth of total water resources, and yet 12% all species live there. Changes in the numbers of species over time are hard to assess, as there are few historical records.

Man-made impacts on the ecosystems of waterways – as a result of hydro-engineering structures such as dams and canals – are greater than on any other ecosystems. The problems are compounded by the dramatic deterioration in water quality since the industrial revolution. The success achieved in imposing ceilings on immissions of pollutants like phosphorous or nitrogen should not blind us to the fact that stocks of fish in many Swiss lakes and waterways have declined dramatically over the last few years. The main cause is thought to be high concentrations of heavy metals and hormone derivatives, which are not eliminated from the water in the sewage treatment plants.

Source and information: <http://www.biodiversity.ch/forum/publications.html> (de/fr), <http://www.biodiversity.ch> (en)

Conference on the depopulation of mountain areas

(21.11.02) Last week a conference was held in Innsbruck/A with speakers from Austria, Italy, France and Switzerland to discuss the reasons for and effects of the depopulation of mountain regions. The presentations focussed first of all on migratory movements in the Alps, their history and impacts, risks and potential. The conference then moved on to the subject of culture and the people living in the mountain regions, their present situation and problems, including the Alps as a economic space, targeted legislation for mountain regions in the EU, and the Population and Culture Protocol to the Alpine Convention.

Source and Information: Rete Montagna, <http://www.alpinenetwork.org> (de/fr/it)

Abandoned mountain farm



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New EU statistics: tourism and the environment, yearbook of the regions

(28.11.02) Eurostat has presented a short report in which the first ever attempt is made to quantify the impacts of tourism on the environment. The data indicate a correlation between the level of tourist activity and such parameters as power consumption, the production of refuse and waste water, and the volume of potable water consumed. The Alpine areas of central and west Austria and north-west Italy are some of the busiest tourism regions in the EU with the highest densities on both the demand side, i.e. the numbers of tourists, and on the supply side, i.e. the hotel and catering trade. Major environmental impacts are therefore to be expected in those regions.

Download:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/Public/datashop/print-catalogue/EN?catalogue=Eurostat&product=KS-NP-02-040--N-EN> (en)

22 November saw the release of Eurostat's Regions - Statistical Yearbook for 2002. Apart from information on a variety of socio-economic factors (population, GDP, unemployment, etc), the yearbook also includes data on the environment, transport, urbanisation, the economy, science and research, technology, health and agriculture. The statistics are taken from the 211 regions of the EU plus 55 regions in the accession countries.

Information:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat/Public/datashop/print-catalogue/EN?catalogue=Eurostat&product=KS-AF-02-001--C-EN> (en)

Declaration on protected areas in European mountain regions

(21.11.02) On 13 -16 November a conference was held in Chambéry/F on protected areas in European mountain regions. At the close of the conference, representatives of protected areas, international organisations and research institutions formulated a joint Declaration for the Protection of the Mountains. The goals of the document are based on the Alpine Convention, Agenda 21 and the Berchtesgaden Declaration.

The declaration stresses the importance of the mountain regions and their biodiversity on the one hand and their vulnerability on the other. The authors list the following objectives: establishment of a liaison committee in every European mountain region, creation of an inventory of protected areas for comparison with existing inventories (IUCN), dissemination of knowledge on methods and models for applied nature protection and sustainable development, compilation of problems and solutions relating to protection area management, and promotion of partnerships.

Progress made with the work involved will be the subject of a further conference to be held in 2005.

Information: Alpine Network of Protected Areas, <http://www.alparc.org> (de/fr/it/sl/en)

Mountain farmers call for more support from the EU Agriculture Committee

(28.11.02) "If Brussels won't come to the mountain, the mountain must go to Brussels." That is how Austria's farming representative Agnes Schierhuber saw the task of the six-strong delegation of mountain farmers from Austria, Italy and Germany in front of the Agriculture Committee of the European Parliament. The members of the Committee were told about the importance of mountain farming and farmhouse holidays, and were called upon to provide extra funding.

Farmhouse holidays can be the key to economic survival, especially for smaller farms. Over 100,000 farmers throughout Europe already offer a relaxing stay in a rural setting and unspoilt natural environment. Mountain farms have to contend with special difficulties. "The location and climatic conditions make farming arduous, and the limited scope for mechanised working also means higher labour costs. These disadvantages on the agrarian market must be recognised by society and compensatory payments made," stated Ms Schierhuber.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development held its meeting on 26 - 27 November in Brussels. The agenda also included such topics as foot and mouth disease, a soil protection strategy, and the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU.

Source: EVP-ED 27.11.02, information: <http://www.europarl.eu.int> (de/fr/it/sl/en)

Miscellaneous

(14.11.02) **Solar energy in the mountains** In Blons/A (900 m) preparations are underway for the construction of the biggest photovoltaic system in Europe, at Hügga Alpe near Blons in Gross Walsertal. The actual installation is scheduled for the spring of 2003. The system comprises a total of 304 solar panels occupying an area of 2.4 ha. The panels will be configured in 23 individual PV arrays with a rating of 20 kilowatts each for a system capacity of 460 kilowatts. The combination of high altitude location and mechanical adjustment to the incident angle of the sun are the keys to high system efficiency, resulting in a return on investment of 12 - 14 years.

Sources: Vorarlberger Nachrichten 11.11.02, Nikolaus Bertl 11.11.02

(28.11.02) **"Mountains, Water and Science" – focus of the current edition of GAIA** The latest edition of GAIA, the interdisciplinary journal for environmental research, provides a thematic link between the Year of Mountains 2002 and the Year of Freshwater 2003. The six articles address the role of the mountains as a reservoir of water for human life, showing how scientists in the fields of geography, economics, anthropology, agronomy and energy research analyse the problems and translate the results of their work into solutions.

List of contents for GAIA 3/2002 and information: <http://www.gaia-online.net> (de/en)

(5.12.02) **Alpentone – a project for culture and tourism** The Centre for Alpine Ecology (CEALP – Centro di Ecologia Alpina) in Trent/I is submitting its Alpentone project for the second phase of the EU's Interreg III B – Alpine Space programme. The objective of the CEALP initiative is to strengthen the ties between the inhabitants of the Alpine space – and especially the young people – and their mountain homes so as to counter the problem of rural exodus and the need to commute to work. The project takes an interdisciplinary approach, addressing the subject from three angles: culture, education and tourism. The project programme also includes an ethnic music festival, a conference for ethnic/linguistic minorities, a masters course in sustainable tourism, and new initiatives for sustainable tourism.

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