More Nature for Better Climate

CIPRA Requests on Nature Protection

When climate changes, nature feels it. Mountain areas are particularly sensitive, and the greatest losses in terms of plant and animal species may occur precisely there. According to scientific estimates, almost every second plant species in the Alps is threatened with extinction by 2100. For the flora with the highest number of varieties in Central Europe this would be an enormous loss. Because of global warming, also well-known animal species such as the Alpine ibex, the snow grouse and the mountain hare will experience far worse living conditions in the Alps.

Complete ecosystems are affected by climate change, for example watercourses. If their temperature, as some models forecast, increases in the next decades by 2 degrees, the living areas of fish species which rely on cold water will be reduced to as much as one fourth.

Nature protection and climate protection can go hand in hand. Intact living areas can withstand the consequences of climate change better than damaged ones. In addition, natural woods, living swamps and extensively cultivated meadows improve our greenhouse gas balance, since they naturally bind carbons. Therefore, preventing the release of greenhouse gases which are still present in biomass must be a fundamental point in the connection between nature and climate protection .

Climate is now changing more quickly than in previous decades. However, ecosystems react with a marked lag in time, therefore vigorous but also wise action must be taken. Many projects currently under discussion for the management of climate consequences can damage the natural balance, and thus the most important climate system that we have available. CIPRA welcomes renewable energies which prove neutral towards climate, but only if the consequences have been carefully weighed. Conflicting objectives arise when valley biotopes are soaked in order to set up a lake for the production of electricity, when waters are jammed into a concrete canal to achieve protection against high waters, when snow cannons counterbalance the loss of natural precipitations or when extensively cultivated green areas are utilised for industrial biofuel cultivations.

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CIPRA requests:

(1) A Network for Nature.

Because of global warming, in the northern hemisphere of the earth vegetation areas shift horizontally as well as between valleys and mountains. In order for animals and plants to react to this change and be able to find new sites to survive, protected areas as well as non-protected shelters must maintain a variety of species, and ecological corridors must be set up between them, in order to facilitate migrations.

(2) Bring Alpine Rivers back to Life

Revitalisation of watercourses reduces natural hazards and thus significantly contributes to the management of climate impacts. If rivers have more space on both sides, they can retain more water and therefore reduce the danger of floods. At the same time, they become more varied and more valuable as living areas for plants and animals. In order to establish some supraregional coordination of such renaturation projects, Alpine countries and the EU must draft together a binding action plan, which includes a concrete time schedule for the various projects and makes available the necessary funds.

(3) Preserve swamps

Swamps provide an essential contribution to climate protection. They amount to just three percent of land, but store twice as much carbon than all woods. Therefore, they must be protected. Those areas which in the past were dried and partially destroyed must be brought back to their natural state. Swamps which are soaked again can store more carbon dioxide, while at the same time their ecological value as living areas for numerous animal and plant species increases. In addition, they act as sponges: they provide natural water storage, and protect surrounding areas from flooding.

(4) A Quality Seal for Climate Friendly Woods

Naturally cultivated woods bind particularly high quantities of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. At the same time they have a high ecological value, since they offer diverse niches and living areas for animals and plants. Intact woods can better react to future climate change and therefore better carry out their various tasks — among which also protection from natural hazards such as landslides.

CIPRA requests that all woods in the Alps be certified based on a commonly recognised system such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Such certificates include assessments on naturally and socially sustainable cultivations and help towards better marketing of timber

from the Alps. If necessary, laws must be changed in order to make certification and sustainable economic management mandatory for the owners of private forests. In addition, the existing label jungle must be cleared: appropriate criteria are necessary, which apply to the whole Alpine region. The Alpine Convention is the place where they can be drafted.

(5) Check Sustainability

All the projects that slow down climate change or are supposed to counterbalance its impacts must be subject to a sustainability check. Unilateral decisions cannot be taken in case of conflicting objectives between climate protection and nature protection. The situation is particularly delicate when formerly natural areas become industrial land to grow raw materials for biofuels. Hydroelectric water plants and technical systems for high water protection can also entail great damage for the natural balance. Before anything is built, each project must be assessed in terms of its environmental, social and economic impacts. This to prevent that what is “well conceived” becomes “badly made”.

(6) Fair Compensation

Land and forest owners who give up part of their revenues to the benefit of nature protection must be compensated. Their land might be a significant element in a complex biotope system or in a renaturation project. Current promotion systems in the EU and in most Alpine countries do not offer sufficient compensation for such cases and must be urgently improved.

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