**The challenge of developing a shared vision: Marittime-Mercantour European Park**

A systemic conservation strategy is the driving force of the sustainable socio-economic development in the Marittime-Mercantour Transboundary Protected Area. This area encompasses approximately 1,000 km² of protected land, created through a partnership and twinning process between the contiguous Italian Marittime Alps Regional Park and the French Mercantour National Park. The territorial contiguity, together with the high value natural and cultural heritage, has given to this area a strong common identity that goes beyond the administrative, legal and cultural barriers. The close collaboration is the result of a long joint path in sharing and maturation of a vision. This has brought the two parks to experiment new forms of cooperative management and governance, through the implementation of a strategic plan for the governance of the Transboundary Protected Area.

In 1987, the two parks signed a twinning agreement with the preliminary goal to undertake simple joint management activities for conservation and sustainable development of the area. The cooperation began in the field with common wildlife management projects, such as the improvement and enlargement of the existing ibex population, the reintroduction of the bearded vulture, and the common monitoring of the wolf natural re-colonization. The cooperation becomes then more complex, thanks to the European Programme Interreg, which allowed funds (since 1991, 17 projects for a total of 10 million EUR) for projects ranging from management activities, such as the improvement of a transboundary trail network and a common signposting system, to scientific research, such as the All Taxa Biological Inventory (ATBI), being this one the second place in the world where such an inventory is carried on, after the Great Smoky Mountain National Park in the United States. This project is still continuing and received the special support of Prince Albert II Foundation and Monaco Principality. The shared vision that inspires the activities of Marittime Alps and Mercantour led the two parks receive important international recognitions: in 1993 they were awarded, for the first time jointly, the European Diploma for Protected Areas (renewed in 1998, 2003 and in 2008). In 1998 they signed a new more structured Twinning Charter, in which priority actions were identified for transboundary conservation and sustainable development. One of these actions was regarding sustainable tourism, which is why the parks signed jointly the EUROPARC European Charter for Sustainable Tourism and presented a common strategy and action plan for the whole transboundary area.

Special procedures have been established to formalize cooperation, in particular the adoption of a “Marittime-Mercantour Common Action Plan” in 2006. This plan outlines for the first time the need for the creation of a common juridical structure. The vision of the establishment of the first European Park, a common juridical management structure established under the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) mechanism, becomes more concrete with the support of the Italian Ministry of Environment in the framework of the Alpine Convention, a Steering Committee and expert group aimed to exploring existing legal transnational structures suitable for the purpose. The EGTC, representing the unique governance entity of the Marittime-Mercantour transboundary area, allows the effective implementation of joint projects, transboundary management operations, and sustainable development plans.

One of the most innovative management tools for the transboundary area is again offered by the Interreg ALCOTRA European Programme, with the approval and financing (10 million EUR) of the Marittime Mercantour Integrated Transboundary Plan (ITP). This consists in 6 integrated thematic projects, involving 17 partners other than the two parks and regarding a territory much larger than the two protected areas.

Marittime Alps and Mercantour have worked together and with the partners for: scientific research and nature conservation, cultural identity, territorial management, eco-tourism, soft mobility and environmental education. This Plan has also stimulated the local community involvement, encouraging the creation of “interest groups”, local stakeholders belonging to both parks that share common concerns. The ITP lasted three years and greatly contributed to the creation of a common transboundary identity: a “Mountain without Frontiers”.

Finally, after more than 25 years working together, on 23 May 2013 the EGTC Marittime/Mercantour was officially established, giving birth to the first European Park.

The systemic vision of the conservation of natural and cultural values promoted by the Marittime-Mercantour transboundary park is constantly looking towards the future, producing new long term and ambitious goals such as the inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List. This idea, started initially from the two parks, now involves other five Italian protected areas (Marguareis and Alpi Liguri regional parks, two Natura 2000 areas in the province of Imperia and the Marine and Terrestrial Reserve of Giardini Botanici Hanbury, creating in this way a continuous stretch of high value protected nature, comprising all the ecological successions from the highest mountain of the area (Argentera, 3,297 metres) to the Mediterranean sea. This area has been included in April 2013 in both Italian and French UNESCO’s Tentative Lists as a transboundary natural property with the name of “the Alps of the sea”. The EGTC is the leading force of the process, and the goal is the inscription of the site in 2016.

In today’s social and economic context, where the relationships among the states are often prevented by cultural and political barriers, the experience of collaboration between these two contiguous protected areas demonstrates that the mission of protected areas gives off a motivating force that can also facilitate the transnational processes to link people in sharing identity and a common sustainable future.

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*Further reading: Marzo et al. (2012);* Parc National du Mercantour, Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime (1998); Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime, Parc National Le Mercantour (2006); Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime (2006); Senge (2006);

[http://www.marittimemercantour.eu](http://www.marittimemercantour.eu/), <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5818/>,

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