National Parks in France

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National Parks in France
The 9 national parks in France grouped together within the “Parcs Nationaux de France”, are part of the cultural identity of the Nation just like the most prestigious cultural facilities. They represent a very strong symbolic value for all publics. They are internationally recognised as exceptional territories and offer a combination of remarkable terrestrial and maritime areas as well as a method of governance and management that enables them to conserve their richness.

In 2007 there are nine national parks:

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The reforms concern in particular:
• the modernisation of legal tools
• the modification of governance in order to locally anchor the parks and reinforce their social acceptability
• the setting up of a charter that concerns the heart of the parks and the area of adherence to which the concerned ‘communes’ (districts) could freely adhere to.

The charter creates a new dynamic of sustainable development that takes its source from the exceptional heritage that is specially protected in the hearts of the national parks and from their character. This is what the fundamental principles* mean by ecological solidarity.

National parks are therefore key points in terms of international renown for the protection of the environment and landscapes. Their priorities are:

• the protection of biodiversity, an essential assignment that the national authorities expect from a national park; however since the Law of 2006, a national park is also responsible for protecting its cultural heritage which is often very remarkable;

• good governance which aims at ensuring a better functioning of institutions reinforcing relations with local players;

• excellent management of heritage and tourist centres, by which the national parks must be worthy of the symbolical dimension which distinguishes them from other formulas of protection and more so from ordinary natural environments.

In the framework of the implementation of the national strategy for the protection of biodiversity, the operational measures of the “Grenelle Environnement” foresees that at least 2% of the territories are placed under high protection in the next 10 years to come. It also foresees that three national parks (Mediterranean, humid areas, lowland hardwoods) be created. A first project currently under study of the Calanques of Marseille-Cassis has progressed.

*see the brochure “National Parks of France, Territories of Reference”.
“Parcs Nationaux de France,”
a new public enterprise
In short, the Law of 14 April 2006 relative to national parks led to the establishment of the public sector enterprise “Parcs Nationaux de France”. It is a national public enterprise of an administrative nature under the supervision of the Minister for the Protection of the Environment.

The purpose of Parcs Nationaux de France is to create a link between the public enterprises of the national parks and reinforce their common culture, promoting them on national and international levels and to contribute to the quality of their management.

Its assignment is to:
- provide its technical and administrative assistance to the national parks, particularly by the development of common services facilitating economies of scale;
- favour the mobility of staff among the parks;
- organise a common policy of national and international communications;
- represent, where relevant, the parks in national and international bodies dealing with issues of common interest to these establishments;
- deposit and administrate the collective brand name “Parcs Nationaux de France” certifying that the products and services, stemming from the activities performed in the parks, are in line with the ecological process that conserves fauna and flora;
- contribute to the gathering of data on the parks;
- give to the Minister for the Protection of the Environment opinions on the implementation of the policy of the parks and the financial resources that are allocated for it.

The enterprise is administered by a Board of Directors made up of:
- the Chairman of the Board of Directors and the Chairman of each national park,
- two representatives designated by the Association of Regions of France and the Assembly of Departments of France,
- a deputy and a senator designated by their respective assemblies,
- two qualified personalities designated by the Minister for the Protection of the Environment,
- a representative from a trade union.

As soon as Parcs Nationaux de France was established and whose headquarters is in Montpellier, it began its technical and scientific assistance to the national parks. It started to organise common administrative and accounting services and set up a communications cell from autumn 2007.
The Main Issues for each National Park
The Cevennes National Park fascinates by its wide open spaces of “high lands” of Mont-Lozère, Bougès and Causse Mejean. This beautiful and also harsh landscape developed due to herds crossing, and especially from the work of the men who led them, who went up terraces, dug “béals” and patiently built “clapas”, that are stony heaps which punctuate the steppe of the Causse Méjean.

Everywhere, even on the cut crests of schistic Cévennes, the past and current presence of mankind is in evidence. The forest itself bears this trace on the Mont-Aigoual, reforested with the will of visionary foresters, or in chestnut groves, the vestiges of a time when the “bread fruit tree” nourished the Cévenne.

A cultivated area, the National Park also shelters an exceptional fauna and a flora (2400 listed animal species including 219 types protected on a national level, 40 % of the French flora). This remarkable biodiversity results from the landscape, from the combination of schistic, granitic and calcareous rocks, the crossing of the Mediterranean and continental climatic influences, ... and from the work of the Park which has contributed to the successful reintroduction of symbolic species such as the Griffon and Black vultures, the Red Deer, the beaver...

Today the National Park is also a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and the stakes in the preservation of the heritage are conceived through the prism of the sustainable development:

• seeking and promoting an agricultural-forest-hunting balance which respects the agriculture and the forest, while protecting the animal populations regulated notably by hunting;
• accompanying the development of an exemplary sustainable agriculture and forestry in a remarkable natural environment, particularly by contractual arrangements within the framework of Natura 2000;
• maintaining the symbolic landscapes (near steppe of the Causse, moors, terraces and chestnut groves);
• supporting the projects of communities and private operators for the preservation of the built heritage and the history of Cevennes;
• promoting sustainable tourism respectful of natural environments and the cultural heritage.
The Ecrins National Park offers a great diversity of territories whose main characteristic is mountains and high altitude mountains (more than 100 peaks are over 3000 m. high). 20 percent of this area is covered by glaciers.

Its fauna and flora are extremely rich and have been the subject of many scientific studies. It is internationally recognised with the renewal of its diploma of the Council of Europe and its very strong commitment in the alpine network of protected areas.

In 1996, the Park signed with the local authorities a charter for the environment and sustainable development and concluded numerous agreements with the authorities and socio-professional partners. These assets in partnerships will facilitate the preparation of the charter.

The Ecrins National Park:

- affirms its vocation to protect and manage with the local players a heritage of international interest;
- intensifies its studies to better know and share all acquired knowledge;
- invites the players of the territory to be the ambassadors of welcome and discovery for near and far-away visitors.
- animates a device for the visitors anchored in the territory and offers varied tools to discover the mountain and its heritages.
The Guadeloupe National Park is a group of protected territories with high heritage value.

From the sea beds and islets of the Côte Sous-le-Vent and from the North of Basse-Terre up to the highest mountain peaks of the island, the National Park ensures the conservation of both emblematic, rich and varied ecosystems: coral reefs, submarine herbariums, mangroves, swamp forests, dense humid forests, high savannas and an active volcano...

It also highlights the development of prestigious natural sites therefore contributing to the promotion of tourism in the archipelago.

All of these environments are the refuge of a rather rare but unique fauna. Indeed, because of the strong island endemism, many species or subspecies (animal and vegetable) are present only in Guadeloupe, still justifying further protective measures.

The National Park is working on the long-term project of the reintroduction of the manatee into the waters of Grand-Cul-de-Sac Marin where this mammal used to live. The return of this animal to the bay is considered as the successful conclusion of a series of actions to be collectively carried out by all the concerned partners, so that in the near future, optimal living conditions could be combined so that the best chances of survival could be provided.

The determination of many local actors had enabled the creation, in 1989, of the first overseas French National Park. The challenges for the protection, which the whole archipelago now has to face, justify that this area of ground and maritime ecological solidarity, as defined by the Park, now concerns 21 municipalities which represent nearly two thirds of Guadeloupe.

Promoting early on tourism which combines the economic development, environmental protection and respect of traditions, the Guadeloupe National Park has awarded its “Mark of confidence” to certain providers working in ecotourism. Thanks to its commitment for tourism development that is respectful of natural areas and inhabitants, it obtained its accession to the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in protected areas in 2007.

Since 1992, the Guadeloupe National Park has been appointed by UNESCO to head the World Biosphere Reserve of the archipelago, where sustainable development practices have become renowned and are experimented in real conditions on a regional level.
French Guiana Amazonian Park, created on February 27th, 2007, covers 3.4 million hectares, which represents 40% of French Guiana. It is the largest European National Park in South America. Border of the Brazilian National Park of Tumucumaque, another giant of 3.9 million hectares, it contributes to form one of the largest protected areas in the world. This National Park is a jewel of biodiversity in the world, including Amazonian forests in a good state of conservation, remarkable natural species and habitats, springs and rivers.

The park is bounded by two major rivers, the Oyapock, border with Brazil and Maroni, border with Suriname.

But the Amazonian Park is also an area inhabited by traditional Amerindian and Bonuses communities, which still gather their livelihoods from the river and the forest. The territory is waiting for a sustainable development and the National Park is a tool for the residents and all Guiana.

The mainstays identified with the inhabitants for the local development with the inhabitants, also to be consolidated in the charter of the national park - are traditional handicrafts, sustainable tourism and food-producing agriculture, with introduction of short and integrated micro-networks.

The governance of the Amazonian Park is based on consultation and negotiation, relied on residents committees, located in the 10 life pool in the country, a local life committee, a scientific board and a Board of the park which brings together all stakeholders in the territory, including the customary authorities.

About illegal gold mining, that is the illegal exploitation of gold, the National Park sets up a device for surveillance and alert, that enable to establish a environmental state for the territory. These data are available for state departments in charge of the fight against illegal gold mining: prefecture, police and army.

In conclusion, the French Guiana Amazonian Park is a national park from new generation which both protects its natural and cultural heritage on the one hand, and enhances local development in compliance with the lifestyles of people on the other.
To know the Mercantour, it is necessary to grasp the diversity of its landscapes, geographical complexity and multiple climatic influences. We need to understand its history so ancient as tempestuous, which alternates isolation and border wars, generating the current rich and multiple cultures. Finally it is necessary to discover the wildlife that abounds everywhere from the largest mammals to the smallest life forms.

Knowing the Mercantour, above all invites you to ponder on the evolution, change and contrasts, ranging from the mildness of the Mediterranean to the severe alpine weather, from olive trees to larches, from villages linked with the broadband network to Bronze Age rock engravings, from the crowd at the agricultural fairs to the isolation of the 600km of marked paths. There is the mountain, you can soak your feet in the Mediterranean Sea and lay your head in the sun...

To know the Mercantour, is finally to become soaked with the culture of exchanging, with proximity and with variety. The massif Argentera Mercantour is cut in two by the French-Italian border. That is why it is important to cooperate with the Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime that protects the other side of the massif, with which the Mercantour is twinned since 1987. Thanks to this cooperation which is our core business, the knowledge of the living, which is revitalized (especially by heading one of the most ambitious biological inventories of the planet launched in conjunction with the Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime in 2008). It is also our ancestral cultural links which unite both territories and are refreshed. Finally it is an ambitious and long-term policy for sustainable tourism, which promotes these protected spaces.

The challenges for the Mercantour National Park:

- to make the heart of Park an exceptional territory for its biological wealth, character, tranquility and its role as a long-term reference;
- to become a territory which presents a relevant, effective and structured offer, that of quality natural tourism and discovery available all year round the whole area;
- to become a welcoming land for sustainable and innovative agriculture, high local added value and which participates in the preservation of biodiversity and quality of the landscapes;
- to innovate for a territory which respects the possibilities of the living, water and natural environments and to pass these values on to future generations.
This is above all a marine, coastal and insular national park. It is the first national marine park created in Europe and is the symbol of the issue of global concern about the conservation of marine biodiversity. Off-shore action requires means and specific, numerous material and human skills. The Port-Cros National Park ensures, which is exceptional in France, the full direct management of the areas that are entrusted to it by the State and the Conservatory of the Coastline. So it acts as project owner.

The Port-Cros National Park exercises the responsibility of the Island of Port-Cros but also on the Island of Porquerolles, on the peninsula Giens, the Salins d’Hyères (salt marshes) and the cape Lardier, and lastly within the framework of the international sanctuary of marine mammals Pélagos.

Even though the areas protected and managed are more restricted than other national parks, Port-Cros must face the influx each year of 2 million visitors throughout the concerned areas.

It has a natural but also a considerable cultural and historical heritage as shown by the numerous military forts. Some of these are very attractive for visitors but they also mean very high costs for maintenance and development.

Also, the public enterprise manages the prestigious Botanic Conservatory of Porquerolles responsible for the conservation of Mediterranean plant varieties and species.

The impact of the Law of 2006 on the Port-Cros National Park leads to seek among the authorities that surround the commune of Hyères the support for a project of a totally new charter.

The main lines of the action of the Port-Cros National Park can be summarised as follows:

- inform the public (pedestrian, maritime) of educating about the environment to raise awareness of the fragile nature of the environment and for the participation in its protection;
- ensure continuous monitoring and watch of the heritage (fire risks);
- manage the natural spaces and to remain in this field a national and international reference (particularly the Mediterranean basin);
- continue to improve the tourist, traffic circulation and signage infrastructures;
- develop the evaluation methods of the impact of tourism and human activities;
- enrich the partnership policies on the management rules with partners (nautical activities, professional fishing, scuba diving, bicycle touring, etc...).
The Pyrénées National Park is the third National Park created in France in 1967. It covers 6 valleys from the Aspe Valley on the West to the Aure Valley on the East, from 1 060 up to 3 298 meters on the top of Vignemale.

The Pyrénées National Park is acclaimed on a national and international level for the protective management of its remarkable natural, cultural and landscape heritage.

It has a very original flora (80 sorts of endemic plants) and a fauna so diverse as fragile (Bear, Izard, Capercaillie, Desman, Midwife toad, and Bearded vulture).

As a border-line Park, it cooperates on a long-term basis with the National Park of Ordesa and Mont Perdu in Spain. The emphasis is placed on the continuity of these protected areas listed on the World Heritage of UNESCO.

It is also an area with an intense pastoral activity. The Park’s support for this activity has strengthened a new tool, until now considered original in a protected area. A facility of financial helps intended for farmers, in order to maintain the natural hay meadows was set up in July, 2006.

In anticipation of the signing of the charter, communications with local partners and the general public has been intensified.

Management and facilities for the general public in the valleys, the maintenance of the network of trails and the support to refuges constitute the main lines of intervention that is much appreciated of the Park for tourist purposes. Since 2004, the Park has been proving its will to improve the reception of disabled persons. A nature trail adapted to 4 handicaps, i.e. visual, hearing, mentally and mobility impaired, was inaugurated in the Aspe Valley in spring 2008.

For a long time, the Pyrénées National Park has been constituting a very rich collection of documents about the environment whose specific feature is based on its park wardens’ and guides’ life and experience on the field. Many remarkable films have also been produced by the park.
On March 5th 2007, Reunion Island welcomed the 9th French National Park as an essential tool in the face of numerous challenges which the territory has to meet.

Indeed, the exceptional landscapes and nature have now the coordination tool which was missing for its protection and the organization of its discovery and development. Since about fifteen years, sites sheltering volcanoes and primary forests were, already identified as areas with high ecological value, which are considered as essential in a perspective of sustainable development. With the delimitation of the heart of the National Park of 105 000 ha (42% of the area of the island) and a maximal partnership zone which concerns all of the 24 municipalities of the island, it is also the guarantee of an exemplary management of the living environment and the tourist potential that is sought.

On this territory, among the youngest on the Earth (3 million years old), also hosts one of the communities with a recent history (15 generations) and a dynamic evolution. While big cities are concentrated on the coastal belt, the “mid-slopes” and cirques also accommodate a large population. The challenge to host one million inhabitants in a restricted area over the next twenty years is thus one of all the institutions.

The island is a real live laboratory. The activity of Piton de la Fournaise continuously shapes lunar landscapes, then life gradually takes place on the lava flows. The Piton des Neiges, an extinct volcano, is however constantly transformed under the erosive action of the climatic agents. It is also an open book on the ground morphology with its Planèzes and Cirques (Salazie, Mafate, Cilaos), which have no equivalent in the whole world.

The island has exceptional ecosystems of the oceanic tropical forest, which is undisturbed and raised in tiers in height. Over 30% of high plants are endemic. Furthermore, the high mountain ecosystems make the Reunion Island really original in the Mascarenes archipelago.

The land pressure sometimes puts some ecosystems in danger, but it is the intrusive exotic animals and plants species that constitute the greatest threat and mobilize significant means.
Vanoise is surrounded by an immense skiable domain, the largest in the world, and benefits from an easy access. The international fame of this area generates strong tourist and urban pressures. The local economy is prosperous and mainly focused on winter tourism.

The fauna, the flora and the landscapes of Vanoise are prestigious and known world-wide. The concern of communicating about the issues on the protection of the heritage so as to share them with the authorities is essential. Progressively, the players of tourism, mountain and pastoral agriculture, urbanism and of the landscape management see in this park an ally for the conservation of their nature capital.

The Park has created many partnerships and set up different strategy elements including an interpretation plan. The Vanoise National Park is today a reference.

Its management goals aim to:
- implement the fine-tuning management of the space and heritage taking into account the biodiversity and the nature of the park;
- reinforce the sustainable development approach by developing in particular actions and communication aimed towards local populations, schools and specific publics;
- put the park in line with the transnational perspective on an alpine and European scale.

The National Park has developed a powerful network of information for the general public in partnership with authorities and large mountain associations and associations for the protection of the environment. All this information is relayed by the tourist offices of the two main valleys of Maurienne and Tarentaise.

In this context, the preparation of the charter greatly mobilizes the Board of Directors, the park’s team and the authorities for a project that will rely on the evaluation of the current development programme, the definition of the park’s nature and a shared vision of the issues and goals.
Values:
Sharing Nature
The National Parks of France are exceptional areas that half a century ago entered the Hall of Fame of the environment.

Just like Voltaire, Hugo, Zola, Jaurès and Moulin, they have become one after the other the members of the most illustrious body of national geniuses. Vanoise, Mercantour, Ecrins, Pyrénées, Port-Cros, Cévennes, Guadeloupe, Réunion and the Amazonian forest of French Guiana, are now side by side to radiate the diversity and richness of our national territory in the world.

From generation to generation, these spiritual and natural symbols guarantee the solidarity and pride of the French towards their country and trace the contours of eternal France.

The National Parks show solidarity through time as well as space. Mountainous or marine, desert or populated, mainland or ultra-marine, they make French excellence shine in Europe but also in the Americas and the Indian Ocean taking the voice and the influence of France far beyond its borders.

Solidarity is the heart of the concept itself of the National Park*.

Ecological solidarity between the heart of the Park, a natural jewel that is fragile and protected and its periphery whose remarkable spaces require sustainable development and enhance mankind and its traditions. And without this necessary breathing, the heart would stop beating.

There is solidarity between nature and culture due to the eminent role that mankind has played in shaping the landscapes of the magnificent ponds of Salins d’Hyères and the pasturelands in Cévennes and Béarn. It is the harmony between the gift of the heavens and the talent of mankind that builds the character, gives a soul and sends humanity the message of these magical places.

Finally there is solidarity between these cathedrals of nature and ordinary nature. Isn’t it by visiting the Louvre or the Prado that the Mayor of a small village finally decides to enhance a chapel or a calvary? It is without a doubt also by discovering the Ecrins, Soufrière or Piton de la Fournaise that like Candide many of us decided one day to look after and cultivate our garden.

But how to mention the ecological, spatial, temporal, cultural and natural dimensions of the solidarities that found our National Parks without considering the consequences and without measuring our responsibilities.

These territories belong to humanity that is to everybody.

If they have been struck by the seal of exception, their tourism and their growth has to also be open to all. Protecting nature is also sharing it.

* See in particular the fundamental principles applicable to all the national parks in the brochure “National Parks of France, Territories of Reference”.

The emblem of the National Parks of France is a hymn to life. It reveals the extreme diversity from the infinitely small to the infinitely great. It embodies the wealth, complexity and evolution of life. It also symbolizes the solidarity between nature and Mankind and between the heartland areas and the areas of adherence of the National Parks.