

Econnect Project: Nature without frontiers

Connecting habitats and protected areas all over the Alps is the new conservation frontier: an ambitious international project funded by the EU in the framework of the Alpine Space Programme aims at establishing an Alps - wide ecological network.

The Econnect project will bring a major and innovative contribution to the conservation of the Alps' outstanding biodiversity. Sixteen partners from six Alpine countries have come together to promote a dynamic approach to conserving the natural heritage of the Alps.

The project became operational in September 2008 and will run until the end of August 2011.



The activities of the Econnect project contribute to the implementation of the Alpine Convention (Art. 12 Nature Conservation Protocol) which is binding for the signatory states according to international law.

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Project Partners

Lead partner: University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna; Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology (FIWI) (A)

Other partners: University of Innsbruck, Institute of Ecology (A) Umweltbundesamt GmbH (A) National Park Gesäuse GmbH (A) National Park Hohe Tauern (A) Italian Ministry of Environment (I) European Academy of Bolzano (I) WWF Italy (I) Nature Park Alpi Marittime (I) Autonomous Region Valle d'Aosta (I) General Council of the Department of Isere (F) Task Force Protected Areas of the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention (F) Scientific research centre CEMAGREF (F) National Park Berchtesgaden (DE) CIPRA International (LI) Swiss National Park (CH)

AIMS OF THE ECONNECT PROJECT

Protection of biodiversity along an integrated and cross-sectoral approach of the ecological continuum for the Alpine region is the over-reaching objective of the Econnect project, as specified in Article 12 of the Nature Conservation Protocol of the Alpine Convention.

Overcoming legal and ecological barriers while considering transboundary and transnational needs will enhance ecological connectivity. Beyond providing strategic guidance, the project aims to harmonise geographical data, analyse existing physical and legal barriers with a common terminology and methodology and subsequently define linkage corridors on an Alpine space level. With effective strategies for multi-stakeholder community involvement the concepts and action plans will be implemented in 7 pilot regions.

Econnect will also focus on gathering and transferring knowledge about gaps, barriers, ecological connectivity and communication beyond the alpine region.

To achieve these objectives a comprehensive broad-based partnership, characterised by a large number of partners with complementary competencies on a regional, national and transnational level and a long tradition of cooperation, has been established. This partnership encompasses regional and national administrations, international NGOs, scientific institutions and the regional implementation partners (7 national parks).

Chris Walzer, University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna

KICK OFF MEETING

The kick-off for the project took place in Vienna/A on 4th and 5th November 2008.

The internal project partners meeting was the occasion for the sixteen partners and four observers from all the Alpine States to discuss and establish the roadmap for their ambitious work over the next three years: realising the first concrete steps to implement an ecological network across state borders and beyond the confines of protected areas.

The very well attended public part of the meeting gave the opportunity to present the project as well as its thematic background to the interested audience. The aperitif and buffet that followed the public presentations were convivial opportunities for the pilot regions to present their regions as well as the work they intend to realise within the frame of the project.

Consortium Ecological Continuum Project



The public part of the Kick Off meeting was a good opportunity for networking.
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NEWS FROM WORK PACKAGES AND PILOT REGIONS

Internal and external communication for supporting ecological connectivity

Successful internal and external communication is essential when establishing effective actions in the field. WWF Italy, as responsible partner for the information and publicity activities, is currently developing a specific communication strategy.

The actions concerning external communication performed to date include providing a unique visual identity by designing a project logo, publishing a basic version of the project website, and distributing a first press release. A poster, explaining the aims and objectives of the project, has been produced by CIPRA, who also is responsible for the publication of the newsletter.

Concerning internal communication, graphic guidelines have been developed, and Word and pdf templates have been made available to all project partners via a dedicated project ftp server account.

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The next immediate steps include updating the website texts, and implementing on-line cooperation tools such as discussion forums and interactive calendars.

A disclose: a photo contest will be organized by the middle of this year on the website for partners and public!

Danusia Piovesana, WWF Italy

Spatial data management as basis for defining barriers and corridors

Work package 4 is responsible for the management of the diverse spatial data needed in Econnect. Data acquisition, organisation, harmonisation and preparation are the core tasks. Following the project kick-off in September 2008, research regarding the availability of suitable datasets at the alpine level was conducted. The results were presented to and discussed with the involved project partners at the project meeting in November 2008.

To serve the data needs at the regional level; a questionnaire was devised in cooperation with WP5 Barriers and 8 Knowledge Transfer and distributed to the Pilot Regions in December. Its aim was to gain a good overview on the availability of the datasets required for the connectivity analysis, their characteristics and limitations in user rights. Here a distinction was made between geographic and species data as well as data coverage within and outside the protected areas. The question regarding species is valuable for the selection process of core species. During February the majority of parks returned the completed forms and the information could be compiled in an overview document. Besides those preparatory data gathering activities, research regarding a suitable data harmonisation process was carried out and an infrastructure for the data management and access is being devised.

Kathrin Renner, EURAC

Identification of ecological anthropogenic barriers

The main issue of current work regarding barriers and corridors (work package 5), has been to elaborate a work program containing detailed work steps and a binding time schedule. UBA-Vienna is working out a comprehensive proposal that will be discussed among the partners of the work-package, mainly University of Innsbruck, CEMAGREF and the Task Force Protected Areas as the representative institution of the pilot regions. The main topics are the adoption of a common approach on how to deal with migration needs of a selective and representative sample of species and to meet the aims of the actions. Therefore two approaches are discussed, the 'species approach' and the 'spatial approach' on different geographic levels (alpine wide, regional and local). Subsequently, the workloads within the work package will be distributed and a geographic arrangement for a comprehensive literature review will be performed (e.g. Western and Eastern Alps).

Secondly, we gave input to design a questionnaire which was elaborated by work package 4 and sent out to the pilot regions in January. The aim of this survey is to obtain a comprehensive overview of existing species data in protected areas concerning migration needs, barriers and corridors.

At the beginning of March a small meeting between the work packages data management, barriers and corridors as well as implementation will be held in Vienna to clarify the delineation of the contents and to strengthen cooperation.

Bernhard Schwarzl, Umweltbundesamt Österreich

Workshop on legal frameworks for transboundary cooperation of alpine protected areas

The first workshop on legal barriers to ecological connectivity will take place on **April 16th 2009** in **Sacro Monte Calvario/I** in Centro di Spiritualità Rosminiana. It will be entitled **“Transnational Workshop on the Legal Framework of Protected Areas in each Alpine State”** and will address the following issues: What is the legal framework in each Alpine State for cooperation among protected areas? In which manner national or regional legal frameworks are barriers to integration of protected areas for the establishment of ecological connectivity? The workshop will be followed by a conference on transboundary cooperation on Friday April 17th from 10am to 1pm at the same venue. Applications and inquiries: jchurch@eurac.edu

Jon Marco Church, EURAC/MATTM

Improving ecological networks on the ground in pilot regions

Pilot region „Northern Limestone/Eisenwurzen/Gesäuse/Dürrenstein“

Recent activities in the Eastern Austrian pilot region „Northern Limestone / Eisenwurzen / Gesäuse / Dürrenstein“ comprise the release of an information folder of the pilot region concerning Econnect, a short description of the protected areas and their categories of protection as well as a brief overview of actions in different sectors concerning nature conservation.

In Februar 2009 three meetings with 80 participants were organised in Styria, Lower and Upper Austria to inform local stakeholders about Econnect and the planned interviews. The latter has been successfully implemented in Styria. The interest for participation within Econnect is great among different stakeholders, i.e. mayors, representatives of regional management, forestry, agriculture, nature conservation, water management, NGOs, et al.

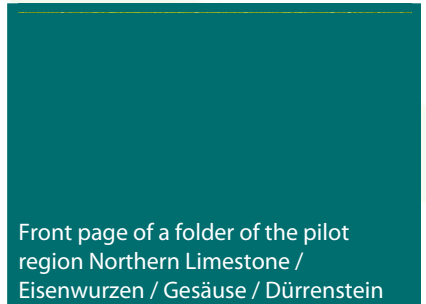
Lisbeth Zechner, National Park Gesaeuse Ltd.

Pilot region Berchtesgaden – Salzburg

Representatives of the German-Austrian pilot region “Berchtesgaden – Salzburg” met on 9th February 2009 in Weißbach/A in order to organise activities in the region and to discuss upcoming events. One important aspect was the discussion on how to define the transboundary planning and pilot region. A representative of the Hohe Tauern National Park – one of the other pilot regions – participated in order to ensure exchange and intensive cooperation between the two neighbouring regions. The meeting was a good occasion to address questions relating to the spatial vicinity of the pilot regions and to harmonise activities in the frame of Econnect.

One of the next steps will be to organise the first workshop. Because of many common issues and stakeholders, a close cooperation between the two pilot regions for the organisation of upcoming events is essential.

National Park Berchtesgaden



Front page of a folder of the pilot region Northern Limestone / Eisenwurzen / Gesäuse / Dürrenstein



Representatives of the working group at the meeting in Weißbach.
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The start of a new project in the departement Isère, France

On 6th February a new European project for the restauration of the green corridors in the Gresivaudan's valley: "Couloirs de vie" or "Hallways of life" had its kick-off. 500'000 persons live in the Gresivaudan's valley around the town of Grenoble. As the Econnect project is looking for legal and physical solutions to reconnect important connectivity areas on an Alps wide level, the "Couloirs de vie" project experiments solutions on a smaller scale (70 km).

All the partners who have participated and contributed to the realisation of this project were present to celebrate the beginning of this new adventure. This project, co-financed by the European fund for regional development, the general council of Isère, the regional council of RhôneAlpes, AREA, the manager of the motorways and the Water agency for a total amount of 9 millions €, will last 6 years. It aims at reestablishing the major connections between the massifs of Vercors, Chartreuse and Belledonne. All actors of the area who are concerned by ecological connectivity (the mayors, the hunter's association, the fishermen's association, the farmers, the environmentalists...) have contributed to the identification of the six last corridors and then have been involved in the conception of the various measures. That's why it was important to get together all of these actors. Aware of the urgency of the situation, the president of the general council, André Vallini, brings his support to this project, reminding that in the time of crisis the environment should not be left beside. The president of the regional council, Jean-Jack Queyranne, presented at the same time the work of the region about the identification of the green corridors at the regional level.

Conseil général de l'Isère

Transfer of knowledge on all levels in and outside the Alps

The contribution of work package 8 to the Econnect's main objectives is to provide results for a common understanding of project and to transfer knowledge to other mountain regions.

Knowledge-transfer activities are targeted to reach key actors on all levels, in respect of responsibility (stakeholders, managers, NGOs, GOs, scientists) and spatial dimension (local, Alps, European). For an optimal attention and to guarantee the sustainability of Econnect results, implementation guidelines and project syntheses will be distributed to key actors on local, Alp-wide and European level. A specific emphasis at an advanced project state will be paid to transfer knowledge to other mountain regions.

Objectives, methodologies, activities and achievements of workpackages will be synthesized, elaborated into a project synopsis, edited and widely distributed. The WP operates as an integrative platform where workshops and outreach publications focus on the transfer of knowledge to WP3 for communication, national key actors in the pilot regions and to the transnational level.

In a specific workshop for knowledge transfer, key actors from the Alps and other mountain areas (esp. Carpathians and Pyrenees) will be invited for the elaboration of implementation guidelines and policy recommendations. These results will be "packed" into a toolbox that will be made available to administrative bodies of the Econnect pilot regions as well as a wider local/regional, national and European level.

A specific aim will also be to generate together with other work packages popular science information. General and scientific results and policy recommendations will be presented in form of scientific publications, oral and poster presentations at external conferences (Alpine and Carpathian Space).

The first workshop will be held on November 4-6th 2009 in Grenoble/F and will be organised by Cemagref and the University of Innsbruck.

Leopold Füreder, University of Innsbruck Institute for Ecology and Jean-Jacques Brun, CEMAGREF Grenoble

