

Historical elements on national parks and scientific research in the French Alps

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National parks are a recent creation in France. After a first failed attempt before WW1 (ZUANON, 1995), the French turned towards their colonies to found protected areas (MAUZ, 2003; SELMI, 2006) and became aware during the decolonization that they would remain the only country in Europe without any national park. A law was eventually passed in 1960 and the Vanoise national park (VNP) was created in 1963. The two other national parks created in the French Alps are the Ecrins national park (ENP) in 1973 and the Mercantour national park (MNP) in 1979.

At that time, two extreme models existed concerning the relationship between national parks and science with, on one hand, the Swiss national park designed by and for nature scientists and, on the other, U.S. parks which had taken a clear recreational orientation (KUPPER, 2009) during the period between the two World wars.

Which route was chosen in France? What has been the role of scientists in the design and management of national parks in the French Alps? And, symmetrically, what has been the role of national parks in the progress of the natural sciences?

My communication aims to show that national parks in the French Alps have become important research sites, even though true scientific programs have not been set up, but that scientists have failed to become important actors in park management, even if they have led and won the battles against infrastructure projects. It draws on an in-depth survey on the history of the VNP, on elements about the history of the ENP and MNP, collected while carrying out investigations in these two parks, and on a document written by Jean-Pierre Raffin²⁴ in 2006, after he chose to quit chairing the ENP's scientific council.

The near absence of scientists at the inception

When the VNP project emerged, French ecologists had been involved in the creation and management of small nature reserves for a long time. These reserves were strictly protected and their access was restricted to scientists, who regarded them as well suited for scientific research. However, they were wary of large national parks where, they believed, regulations would be difficult to enforce and research less interesting because of human activities interfering with "natural" processes. In particular, they were not eager to support the VNP, which sought to combine two very different projects, first a "cultural" project aimed at saving the "Alpine civilisation", which did not appeal at all to scientists, and secondly, a more naturalist project, aimed at saving the ibex. The man who supported this project was both a well-known naturalist and a passionate mountain hunter who, after being caught several times hunting illegally in protected areas and condemned, was shunned by ecologists.

For all the above reasons, scientists showed little interest in the 1960 law and in the creation of the VNP. No wonder then, that scientific activities were not a major consideration in the debates and the law itself made no mention of national parks participating in the production of knowledge or even the existence of a scientific council.

The lack of genuine scientific programmes

However, the spatial organisation selected for national parks did take into account the scientists' views on protected areas. Three zones were created on the paper, a buffer zone, a core zone and fully protected reserve zones, the latter being set aside for research and accessible to scientists

²⁴ I am very grateful to Jean-Pierre Raffin for having sent me this document, entitled *Research, scientific councils and national parks: some history* (unpublished, 6 p.)

only. And while a scientific council had been forgotten in the decree creating the VNP, it was created by the park advisory board during its first meeting.

The scientific council was an interdisciplinary board of renowned scientists. It had two priorities, draft a scientific programme and designate the reserve zones. The question of fully protected reserves was much discussed during the initial meetings of the council, but no agreement could be reached. The topic progressively faded out and was eventually given up²⁵. It also turned out to be very difficult to design a genuine research programme. Scientists each had their own research priorities and deciding which to favour was a thorny issue. Moreover, they were not always interested in the questions raised by the park authorities and were offered small budgets. The lack of budget and of clear ideas on what research could and should be done in a national park did not help in drafting a scientific programme. It was even more difficult to coordinate research activities at the national and international levels. In 2003, the chairs of the park scientific councils repeatedly asked the director for nature and landscapes to organise a meeting to improve the coordination of scientific work in and for national parks. The meeting was eventually organised in 2004 and the project to create an inter-park structure was announced, which has become "National parks of France".

Important research fields

National parks have become important research fields for ecologists. The field staff hired by the park authorities has progressively acquired precious naturalist skills and their permanent presence in the field has been an important asset for researchers. After a series of meetings held in 1979, scientific departments were created in national parks. Although a letter from the director for nature protection stated in 1986 that scientific departments should not themselves conduct research, they have all built databases and exchange data and ideas with scientists. In addition, the certainty that research sites will not be disturbed has encouraged scientists to undertake long-term observations and experiments. As time passes, the data collected in national parks have become increasingly valuable and national parks are now considered by ecologists as ideal places to study ecosystem responses to global changes. Significantly, scientific departments often present the parks as "open-air laboratories".

Scientists as defenders of the parks

Whereas scientists had been nearly absent when the first national park was created, they were very active when its integrity was threatened. At the end of the 1960s, a project to build a ski resort in the core zone of the VNP emerged. It was backed by politicians who happened to chair the park advisory board. At the local and national level, young scientists set out to defend the park. They launched a battle which is now considered the first environmental battle in France (CHARVOLIN, 1993; MAUZ, 2003). After two years, they had succeeded in transforming the project into a national affair and had learnt to talk with politicians, fight them if necessary, and organise an environmental battle. In short, they had become activists. A second "Vanoise affair" broke out a few years later (MAUZ, 2005; SELMI, 2006). This time, a dam was to be built in the core zone. Again, though the park authorities supported the project, the scientists led and won the battle. After these two affairs, they were in a position to present themselves as the main defenders of national parks.

A minor role in the decision-making process

In 1970, an international conference on European national parks was organised in Paris, which recommended that "the scientific councils play an important role in the choice of the major options in the park management". But the role of scientific councils in park management was never totally clarified, despite several attempts and announcements. For example, in 1979, the director for nature protection announced his intention to constitute a group to coordinate scientific work in national parks. That same year, a letter from the Prime Minister reinforced the scientific mission of national parks and requested that research organisations, each in their particular field, contribute to the scientific work in the parks. In 1982, a national committee for research in protected areas was constituted, but then abandoned after three meetings. Another committee was founded in 1984, with the same fate. The 2006 law on national parks did not officially recognise the existence of scientific councils. But some more power was given to scientific councils, whose chair now sits on the park advisory board, as well as more responsibilities, in that scientific councils must now advise on projects within the "heart" (former core zone) of the parks.

²⁵ Only one fully protected reserve was finally created, in the ENP.

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