

## PARKS, PEACE, AND PARTNERSHIP: GLOBAL INITIATIVES IN TRANSBOUNDARY CONSERVATION

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# Transboundary Protection of Mont Blanc: Twenty Years of Tri-national Negotiation around the Roof of the European Alps

*Barbara Ehringhaus*

## INTRODUCTION

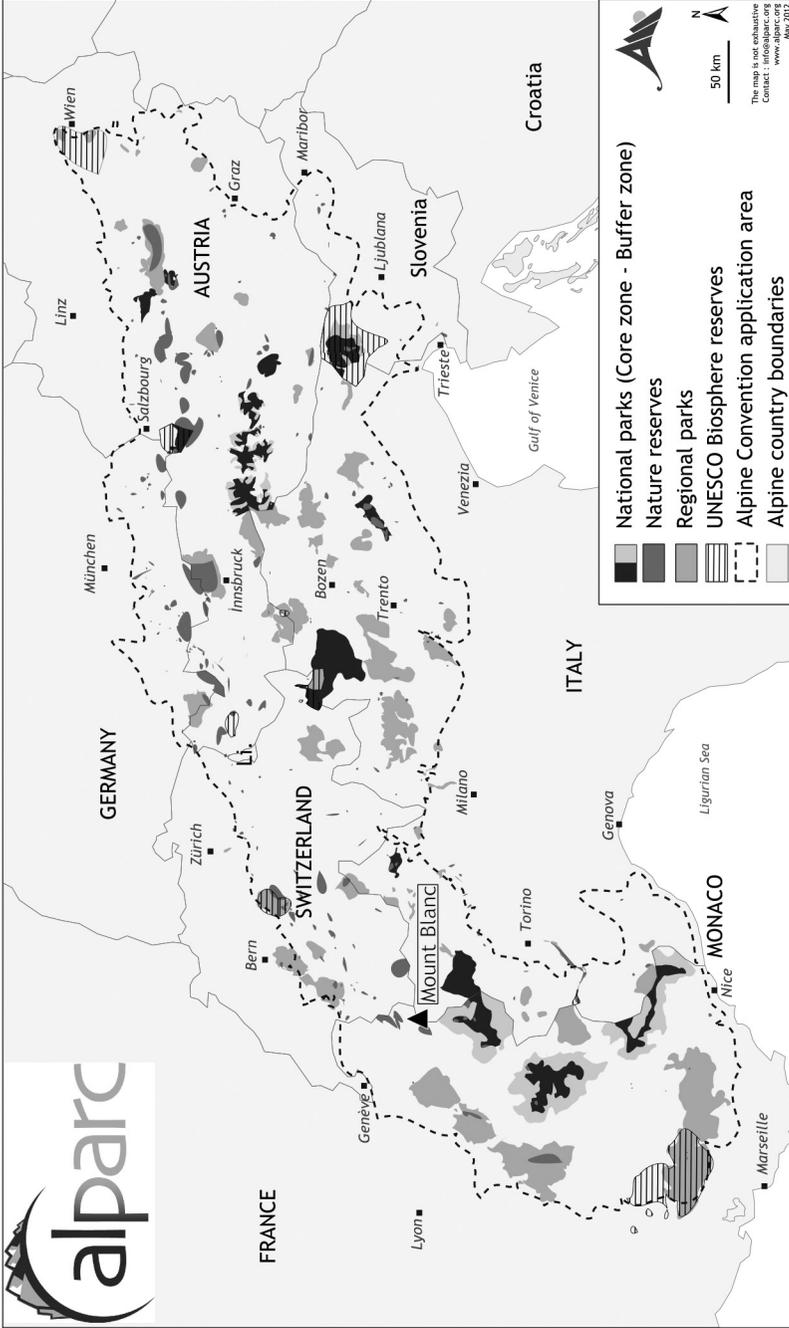
The Mont Blanc region refers to a mountain range centred on Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the European Alps at 4,810 metres (Map 1). The surrounding massif and valleys encompass areas in France and Italy and to a smaller extent in Switzerland. This part of the Alps is characterized by a unique diversity of natural phenomena including glaciers, alpine geological processes, and mountain landscape biodiversity, all occurring in a relatively compact area in the middle of highly populated Europe (pro-MONT-BLANC 2011). The convergence of different climate zones and the continued existence of active glaciers are of heightened importance in the face of climate change and its threats.



MONT BLANC (JEAN-MARIE COMBETTE).

Mont Blanc is iconic among the mountains of the world for its awe-inspiring beauty and its history as a cradle of mountaineering and of earth sciences. Climbers reached the summit of Mont Blanc in 1786, and scientists began studying the alpine environs from the time of the earliest ascents.

Because of its attractions and central location in Europe, the Mont Blanc region is also subject to serious threats to its ecosystems and cultural landscapes. Its valleys are cut by a major highway over which thousands of trucks carry goods between northern and southern Europe, resulting in major traffic and pollution and constant road development. Increasing international tourism has sparked major infrastructure development for access to high mountains and glaciers and has spawned a real estate and development boom that is destroying valley bottoms.



MAP 1. MONT BLANC AND THE EUROPEAN ALPS (TASK FORCE PROTECTED AREAS – PERMANENT SECRETARIAT OF THE ALPINE CONVENTION).

## CONSERVATION ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

While there are several protected areas in the Mont Blanc range, the summit itself and parts of the surrounding central massif are only *site classé* on the French side and recently became a site of European importance (SIC) on the Italian side. In 1986, at the two hundredth anniversary of its first ascent, a group of the world's most famous mountaineers petitioned for formal and consistent international protection and founded Mountain Wilderness as a kind of 'Greenpeace of the Alps.' Subsequently, in 1991, all three Ministers of the Environment of France, Italy, and Switzerland agreed to establish an International Park. In order to promote this international park, an umbrella non-governmental organization (NGO) was created by alpine clubs and environmental organizations. Today, this group is called ProMONT-BLANC (pMB).

However, a number of politicians from the region immediately opposed what they called an "Indian Reserve" that would freeze development out of the region and maintain its inhabitants as "Indians" in a museum to be visited by tourists. Instead, they proposed to create a much larger tri-national Espace Mont Blanc (EMB), where they themselves would drive a model case of sustainable regional development across national boundaries. The countries conceded the funding with high expectations, but after several years gradually withdrew their active involvement owing to a lack of progress. Yet, all three governments continue to finance the EMB. Also, the European Union (EU) increasingly allocates funds from its INTERREG (an EU funding initiative that aims to stimulate interregional cooperation in the European Union) program towards Mont Blanc transboundary cooperation, but without the requirements for, and monitoring of, particular investments for conservation purposes.

ProMONT-BLANC tried to actively promote the tri-national park as a goal beyond Espace Mont Blanc and was later invited by the countries to be an 'observer' inside Espace Mont Blanc in 1997. This step helped to influence the transfrontier conservation aim from within this forum, and resulted in the proposal to create a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site and a tri-national biosphere reserve that would surround it. Further, ProMONT-BLANC worked on concrete conservation projects and on a

management plan and maps, and contributed decisive inputs into an action plan or scheme of sustainable development created by Espace Mont Blanc which was completed in 2005. However, in spite of initial optimism, very little of this action plan has been implemented.

## LESSONS LEARNED

More than twenty years of experience in the Mont Blanc region provide a unique opportunity for reflection and evaluation. The following section offers a number of “lessons learned” which might be useful for transboundary protection efforts elsewhere (Ehringhaus 2004a, 2004b).

### **Lesson One: It is more difficult to achieve protected areas at the centre of a prosperous booming tourist region than in poor peripheral border areas.**

Although Mont Blanc is internationally recognized for its historical, cultural, and natural significance, regional economic interests present a barrier to adequate protection. Evidently, it seems to be much easier to establish transboundary protected areas or international peace parks in frontier areas where there are larger expanses of natural areas with low human population densities and difficult access as is the case with many protected areas worldwide.

The Mont Blanc area, however, is quite densely inhabited and easily accessible though unevenly developed. It is a tourism hot spot with two world famous ski and mountaineering resorts: Chamonix in France and Courmayeur in Italy. On the Swiss side you can still find better preserved mountain agriculture and its associated cultural landscape. Many nearby urban centres and airports make the region a favourite holiday site for millions of international tourists.

After centuries of marginalization and poverty in these agricultural valleys, recent prosperity owing to tourism has made local stakeholders confident enough to deny “outsiders” (national and international authorities alike) any right to interfere with further exploitation of what they



A VIEW OF THE MONT BLANC REGION (V. NEIRINCK/MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS).

consider “their mountain” (Débarbieux 2001). Today, this attitude is supported by the principle of “subsidiarity” which serves as the banner to fight bureaucratic centralism at Brussels and to bring government back home to the people. This notion is entrenched in the Maastricht Treaty of the European Union of 1992, where article 5 stipulates that: decisions should be taken at the lowest appropriate level i.e., as close as possible to the people affected by those decisions.

**Lesson Two: Good transboundary cooperation may paradoxically eschew transborder conservation and may present the best basis for the coordination of conservation boycotts.**

In spite of centuries of war between the three nations, the inhabitants of this transboundary region and their political representatives share a

long history of common culture, of intensive exchange, and they share the same language – French (even similar dialects of French). The Italian border region of Val d’Aosta has obtained the right to bilingual education (French and Italian) with its status as an autonomous province at the end of World War II; this is quite common in the Alps: In other transboundary cooperation initiatives like the so-called “magical triangle” between Austria’s Western Tirol, Switzerland’s Lower Engadin, and Italy’s Venosta Valley (formerly Austrian until 1919) people also speak the same language, German. In the tri-national border area between Slovenia, Austria, and Italy most people speak either German or Italian, though Slovenian belongs to the Slavic language family.

A common language facilitates frequent communication and cooperation, as do traditional economic activities: raising cattle on mountain pastures, cheese-making and – a surprise for high mountain regions – wine production. Another common specialty of the region, in contrast to other alpine areas, is the combative festivals of cows which fight for leadership during the move of the cattle herds to the high alpine pastures in the early summer after a winter of confinement in the valleys, in a process called *transhumance*. These traditional cow fights have recently become more and more of a unifying ritual all around Mont Blanc. This ritual gives high social prestige to the owner of the winning cow. On these and other social occasions, the respective local varieties of the same products such as cheese, air-dried meat, sausages, and wine are abundantly tasted and compared with connoisseur sophistication.

Thanks to frequent transboundary communication, the local politicians jointly succeeded in avoiding the establishment of the tri-national park. They also were entrusted with the task of receiving the funds for the large development and conservation project in the transboundary region. Espace Mont Blanc, with its intentionally vague terminology, managed to encompass both development and conservation while aptly avoiding any commitment to concrete conservation goals and targets and even words like ‘park’ or ‘reserve.’

Part of the lesson then is that the three countries should have set clear conditions, clear deadlines, and clear monitoring criteria for funding Espace Mont Blanc. Such established conditions, deadlines, and criteria

are missing as there is no founding document for Espace Mont Blanc. Therefore, after eighteen years of existence, the EMB has neither achieved progress in joint conservation nor in socio-economic development of the region in its other proclaimed priority fields of public transport, mountain agriculture, and ecotourism. Today the EMB is almost unknown by the general public of the region, though the bulk of funds from the EU and the partner countries have been almost exclusively invested in communication, which always announces the imminent beginning of concrete projects which almost never materialize. One notable exception is a book on nature and cultural trails in 2001. Many project proposals have been prepared by ProMONT-BLANC, Mountain Wilderness, and consultants, but none of them have been implemented by EMB on the ground yet. Those municipalities, which do participate in the Espace Mont Blanc meetings, are exceedingly frustrated by the eternal promises of sustainable development without follow-up. Meanwhile, huge outside investments in heavy infrastructure, mass tourism, and real estate go on unhindered. For the time being, the local and outside forces with short-term financial interests still dominate over those of the local stakeholders who would prefer long-sighted sustainable development planning.

### **Lesson Three: Inter-regional funding galvanizes transboundary cooperation, but not necessarily towards transboundary conservation.**

In counter-balance to the uniformization among European countries, there has also been a growing encouragement of transboundary cooperation within particular regions (*Europe des régions*) and of the principle of subsidiarity. The European Union has been supporting both these tendencies with its multiple interregional funds (INTERREG I-III, since 1988) both among its member countries as well as with non-member neighbours (like Switzerland which contributes matching funds). Though the large-scale EU priorities like transcontinental road traffic, industrialization, commerce, and agro-industry receive the bulk of the euro millions, these relatively modest INTERREG projects certainly do promote transboundary cooperation on a smaller scale. However, they do not tend to support transboundary conservation. The clear prioritization of

economic development over conservation is mainly due to the classification of these mountain regions as “disadvantaged peripheral areas” in need of economic development. Nevertheless, the ongoing multi-year program, INTERREG IV 2007–2013, now includes so-called integrated projects linking themes such as innovative development, environment, and quality of life (European Commission 2011).

#### **Lesson Four: Without a legal structure and a joint authority with sufficient regulatory jurisdiction, transboundary protection is very difficult to achieve.**

“Soft cooperation,” such as shared participation in research, conferences, and cultural exchanges are useful but not sufficient to solve urgent problems on the ground. This is the story we learn from handling problems transcending jurisdictions within countries, like crime, traffic, river and air pollution, migratory birds, and many others. The jurisdiction of the authority has to be compatible with the nature and transboundary dimension of the problems at hand.

There is no lack of treaties and conferences: sixteen years ago, all eight alpine countries and the European Union signed the Alpine Convention for the joint protection of the alpine environment, resulting in meetings at the level of ministers, annual meetings of experts, and a joint office. However, the convention is rarely applied on the ground; the office has no power and still is practically unnoticed by local communities.

A joint legal structure has been discussed within Espace Mont Blanc and new legal options have been proposed. However, these processes are stalled for a variety of complex political reasons rooted mainly in jurisdictional differences.

#### **Lesson Five: No progress can be made without multiple partnerships.**

NGOs are important players in the creation of protected areas but their power is insufficient due to their volunteer structure, occasional professional input, and their limited resources and access to political channels. In the everyday practice of conservation, the managers of protected areas

might be more easily inclined and able to cooperate in practice than national or regional governments are willing and able to officially agree upon at a political level. For instance, the official unification of the two adjacent national parks in the German Harz Mountains on both sides of the former Iron Curtain took a whole decade after Germany's reunification, while rangers and park managers had long been closely cooperating. A worldwide meeting of national parks practitioners linked to the Hannover World Exhibition in 2000 offered the political opportunity to formalize this unification.

Active cooperation also exists between non-adjacent nature reserves – both in the wider Mont Blanc area and throughout the whole Alpine region, as is the case in the Alpine Network of Protected Areas (ALPARC). However, this network of cooperation is not strong enough to enforce conservation in a context of growing mass tourism and real estate business, where state and national conservation authorities are considered as unwelcome interference.

In its drive for transboundary protection ProMONT-BLANC has forged multiple partnerships on the local, regional, national, and international level, with local stakeholders (local NGOs, tourism sector representatives, mountain guides, farmers, amenity in-migrants, seasonal workers, etc.), conservation experts, scientists, politicians, and journalists, and with multiple international NGOs and networks.

Although various member NGOs of ProMONT-BLANC explored different strategies of cooperation and pressure with Espace Mont Blanc ranging from provocative demonstrations with strong media involvement to local development and training projects, ProMONT-BLANC is still at odds with Espace Mont Blanc, which would be the most logical partner from a technical point of view.

Espace Mont Blanc, however, still refuses to cooperate with or to jointly implement NGO initiatives, despite stressing this type of initiative in its own action plan or scheme of sustainable development. EMB is also not interested in looking at and learning from other similar initiatives in the Alps or elsewhere, such as the Alpine Convention, ALPARC, CIPRA-Alliance des Alpes, the French and Italian regional parks, nor from international expertise of the International Union for Conservation

of Nature (IUCN) , the World Wide Fund for Nature, and the United Nations Environment Programme, which have headquarters in the region. This underscores the conclusion that EMB is not a body that actively seeks to shape and implement an effective sustainable development and conservation strategy for the region but rather seeks to maintain business as usual with some minor conservation contributions. In this light, EMB has increasingly become official partner of, and funding source for, successful management initiatives that already are established in the area (gastronomic and folkloric festivals, huge sports events, publicity events for mountain gear and existing information centres with the respective nature guides).

In this context, NGOs have struggled to find a difficult balance between their different and sometimes diametrically opposed partners. The Mont Blanc conservation lobby therefore is refraining from using exclusively green and conservationist arguments and allies, as it has been shown to not be very effective. For example, the three international IUCN resolutions adopted at different World Conservation congresses (1994, 2000, and 2004) in favour of the Mont Blanc's international protection did not yet help much on the local scene. On the contrary, these contributions are deliberately ignored if not rejected as irrelevant pronouncements from international actors who do not really have any say in this particular negotiation.

Despite these tensions and difficulties, the long-term partnerships and networks and the many positive examples worldwide have provided tremendous encouragement to ProMONT-BLANC and its member NGOs to continue their engagement and maintain momentum despite their struggles.

Nevertheless, in addition to this kind of moral support, ProMONT-BLANC and other conservation groups will need much stronger sponsoring and financial partners in order to professionalize its work, which is still based on sporadic volunteer engagement. There are relatively few businesses located in the immediate area which offer support as several foundations have done. Neither the three countries nor the EU have provided a continuous financial basis for stronger NGO involvement.

Ironically enough, in the middle of prosperous Europe which spends a lot of money protecting nature in far-away places, the only substantial sponsor ProMONT-BLANC has had during one year came from South Africa: the Peace Parks Foundation. And, until recently (2011), the luxury mark “Montblanc” pen manufacturer, which uses a logo of the white summit of Mont Blanc and made the number of 4,810 diamonds on its most exclusive pens correspond to the altitude of the Mont Blanc, declined sponsoring the protection of its own very symbol. “Montblanc” had indeed sued Espace Mont Blanc because of the use of the Mont Blanc name, which is their protected trademark!

### **Lesson Six: An approach focussing on protection without adequate consideration for economic development will no longer be accepted.**

The creation of many new national parks all over Europe up to the 1990s probably allowed conservationists to put forward proposals with a strong conservation bias at the expense of social and economic development considerations concerning local stakeholders. Thus local politicians successfully opposed the creation of an international Mont Blanc park and still continue to seek socio-economic progress over environmental conservation. After thirty years of strong nature protection, the national park laws of both Italy and France are now being revised and softened towards increased influence of local administrations. All three countries currently favour the creation of regional nature parks with weaker protection measures and stronger development aims. In Switzerland, these regional nature parks have only recently been introduced as an instrument to promote regional development rather than nature protection, much to the chagrin of the conservation lobby. In order to realize the creation of future protected areas across borders, and even across three countries, a way forward must be found that can better reconcile development goals and conservation by creating local employment opportunities and thus adjust to the development and prosperity concerns of local inhabitants.

## CONCLUSION

The case of incomplete transboundary protection of the Mont Blanc region teaches us, among other lessons, that there are historical moments of opportunity which might be missed or seized. It is not always easy to create the right political moment with different actors demonstrating the same political will towards such a goal. There are a number of examples of transboundary cooperation efforts that demonstrate such opportunities. One such example is the swift creation of five national parks in Eastern Germany's military zone along the iron curtain, in the middle of the political confusion after the fall of the Berlin Wall when Western real estate speculation had not yet started. Only one year later this conservation achievement would have been impossible.

Conservation efforts for the last twenty years within the Mont Blanc region have advanced slowly, encountered numerous setbacks, and had to adapt strategies to changing political conditions, stronger local government, accelerated development and tourism, and new opportunities among partners. While difficult, the engagement within multiple networks, political spaces, and stakeholders has brought about better conditions to grasp future opportunities.

There might also be other signs of improving conditions in the next years:

- Environment and conservation are more prominently integrated into the EU INTERREG funds, explicitly in its Alpine Space sub-program.
- Climate change and environmental risks are moving to the top of the agenda of world politics. The visibly melting small- and medium-sized glaciers in the Alps enhance the value of the few longer-lasting big glaciers such as on the Mont Blanc.
- In the run-up to the Copenhagen climate conference, a higher ecological awareness has developed among the general public. The French government launched a wide bottom-up process, *la Grenelle*, which collected proposals for environmental

improvements. In the Chamonix Valley a surprising 30% of the inhabitants voted for Europe Ecologie in the 2009 European election. The Swiss Canton of Valais voted in favour of the right to opposition by environmental NGOs – contrary to its anti-green tradition so far.

- The call for Mont Blanc as World Heritage Site has been taken up by regional, national, and international decision-makers and echoed by the media. Italy and France have both included Mont Blanc in their tentative nomination list, and the five Italian municipalities in the Espace Mont Blanc have officially asked for its nomination.
- Within the European Union, there are more and more transboundary cooperation initiatives, often including Switzerland, which integrate cultural, technical, economic, and environmental aspects.

Time will tell whether a stronger tri-national conservation of Mont Blanc is politically viable, and whether it will indeed take the shape of a tri-national park and a World Heritage site. After almost twenty years of opposition to stronger conservation measures, Espace Mont Blanc has proposed the creation of a tri-national regional park. Hopefully, these opportunities can be seized, the partnerships leveraged towards that goal, and concrete commitments and responsibilities can be negotiated among different stakeholders.

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