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9 Moving Mountains: The Protection of the Alps

Abstract This chapter analyses how throughout the long twentieth century people strived to protect the Alps. After 1900, individual critics of mass tourism were joined by the nascent nature conservation movement, which perceived the rapid growth of Alpine tourism as a threat to both the culture and nature of the Alps. The following decades saw the birth of international conservation organizations, the creation of new protected areas, and the introduction of national laws and international conventions on species protection, but also substantial growth in Alpine tourism and the rapidly expanding exploitation of Alpine waters for electricity generation. From the 1980 onwards, Alpine conservation was increasingly informed and inspired by the environmental movement and triggered by controversies surrounding the construction of large-scale road infrastructure for transit traffic across the Alps. As this chapter shows, all these developments had distinctly European dimensions.

Keywords Alps; nature conservation; tourism; water power; transit traffic

The Alps, a curving mountain range, 1,200 kilometres long and 250 kilometres wide at their broadest, are the most extensive mountainous area of Europe (see figure 1). While many of its mountains rise to remarkable altitudes, with the highest peaks in the Western Alps reaching well over 4,000 metres above sea level, human settlements are concentrated in the many valleys, where the climate is more temperate and the vegetation lusher. Most remarkably, the Alps are surrounded by areas that for centuries have been among the most densely populated parts of Europe. The Alps thus arguably constitute Europe’s most central periphery. As such, they present an obstacle to transport, travel, and communication between political, commercial, and cultural centres in the south and north (less so between east and west due to the Alps’ geographical east-west orientation); in particular, they separate the Italian peninsula from the rest of Europe. Consequently, there have long been efforts to overcome this barrier by facilitating transport and exchange across the Alps.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, writers and travellers started to depict the Alps in a new way: as Europe’s most sublime landscape. Once merely a hindrance on the journey to Italy for young aristocrats embarking on the Grand
Tour, the Alps became a destination in their own right. Over the course of the
nineteenth century, as the Alps were discovered as the “Playground of Europe”,¹
the noblemen were joined by others, first bourgeois travellers and later on hikers
and climbers from among the social elite, as well as a growing number of “ordi-
nary tourists”. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Alps had not only de-
veloped into a prime tourist destination, but had also become the archetype of
the mountain landscape, to which all other mountainous areas in Europe and
beyond were compared.² The identification of the Alps as the European moun-
tain range by Europeans and in the European diaspora can be seen in the use of
the word “alpine” as a common designation for any mountainous area. The de-
scendants of European settlers christened hundreds of mountain ranges (and in
some cases mere hilly landscapes) all over the world with the name “Alps” or
“Switzerland” – for Switzerland and the Alps had come to be perceived as virtu-
ally synonymous.³

Figure 1: Map of the Alps. In the political order established since World War I, eight states
share the Alpine territory, from south-west to south-east: France, Monaco, Switzerland, Italy,
Liechtenstein, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia (formerly Yugoslavia). There is no universal
agreement on the exact territory covered by the Alps, since this depends on how the region
is defined, and such definitions have been and continue to be contested. Map: Wikipedia
Commons.
This new status of the Alps was inspired by the experience of their overwhelming mightiness. The thrill of getting close to this uncomf orting nature and maybe even exposing oneself to its dangers was (and still is) an integral part of the widespread fascination with the Alps.⁴ It was only at the turn to the twentieth century that a growing number of people started to discover that these mighty and frightening mountains not only could pose a threat to human lives, but also were themselves threatened by human actions and thus needed protection both by humans and from humans. From this moment on the Alps moved people in new ways.

The protection of the Alps evolved over “the long twentieth century” in three main stages, all of which had distinctly European dimensions. The first stage occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century, when individual critics of mass tourism were joined by the nascent nature conservation movement, which perceived the rapid growth of Alpine tourism as a threat to both the culture and nature of the Alps. This burgeoning nature conservation movement grew surprisingly quickly and it successfully propelled the Alps to the forefront of European and global nature conservation. But World War I put a halt to the activities of nature conservationists in the Alps and beyond. In the interwar years, nature conservation struggled to ensure the continuation of what had previously seemed to be securely established, while after World War II conservation efforts experienced a renewed blossoming. This second stage saw, on the one hand, the birth of international conservation organizations, the creation of new protected areas and the introduction of national laws and international conventions on species protection. On the other hand, this period also saw substantial growth of Alpine tourism in both the summer and winter seasons, as well as an additional threat to the unspoiled Alpine nature: the exploitation of Alpine waters for electricity generation, although not new, was rapidly expanding.

The third stage of Alpine conservation took off in the 1980s and was triggered by controversies over the construction of large-scale road infrastructure for transit traffic across the Alps; it was informed and inspired by the young environmental movement, which had emerged just a decade previously. In contrast to the earlier organizations for Alpine nature protection, which were firmly grounded in urban middle classes living mainly outside the Alpine region, this new movement recruited many spokespeople and supporters in the Alpine valleys themselves. It also no longer put the conservation of unspoiled Alpine nature at the forefront of its efforts, but rather stressed the livelihoods of the inhabitants of the Alps, their present well-being and their future opportunities. This last stage was also marked by the enlargement and economic integration of the European Communities (EC) resp. European Union (EU) and the establishment of the European Economic Area.
1 Emergence and Consolidation of Nature Conservation

In the context of nineteenth-century nation building, historical monuments and places across Europe and beyond came to be seen as sites of public value and national pilgrimage. Public campaigns aimed to preserve such sites and to make them accessible to the public. Some of these activities involved the preservation of areas of land and the protection of natural features. This was, however, a mostly unintentional side effect, e.g., when the Prussian state put the Drachenfels, a striking rock overlooking the Rhine River and containing a picturesque castle ruin, under protection in 1836. The protection of nature moved to the centre of attention only after the turn of the century, and the nature conservation movement that evolved during this time took the form of countless local and national associations but was global in its spread and ambitions. The idea of nature protection was built on a discourse that constructed nature as a limited good severely endangered by encroaching civilization. In the United States, this centred around concern about the closing of their famous “frontier”, but Europeans, too, felt that they were living at a historical turning point in which the world was being stripped of its last mysteries. Alongside continued belief in the achievements of European civilization, a growing body of dissenting voices pointed to the costs and consequences of this much-acclaimed progress. These voices suggested that, with the loss of its natural and traditional cultural landscapes, civilization was being deprived of its origins as well as its “other”, its corrective and curative outside. In the long run, it was feared, European societies would collectively lose their identity and sanity and, thus, human civilization – which for contemporary Europeans was, of course, equated with European civilization – was endangering its own continued existence.⁵

In all of Europe and beyond, the nature conservation movement was dominated by the urban middle class. The educated urban citizens who initiated and supported nature conservation read Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Darwin and met in learned societies. They did not make their living by working the land; rather, they revelled in nature and during their excursions developed a keen sense for changes in the land. Spending most of their time in cities, nature conservationists found the objects of their desire in rural areas inside and outside Europe (see chapter 3 by de Bont). Some of these areas were fairly close to the urban centres, while others were highly remote. While the former were primarily hailed as cultural landscapes, the latter were regarded as comparatively unspoiled and untouched by civilization and thus came close to embodying the evolving ideal of wild nature or wilderness. These natural areas were also
home to rare species threatened by extinction, some of which soon became iconic symbols of nature conservation. In the Alps, the eagle, bear, and ibex received special attention as well as the edelweiss and Alpine rose.\(^6\)

Whereas the main threats to nature in densely populated areas were generally considered to be industrialization and urban sprawl, in Alpine areas it was mass tourism and increasingly the use of waterpower to generate electricity which concerned nature conservationists most. Both these threats to Alpine nature extended across national borders and thus had clear European dimensions. Of seemingly more limited scope were conflicts that evolved around local hunting, fishing, and gathering, as well as logging and livestock farming. Such issues often induced local residents to oppose nature conservation ideas because the conservation measures restricted their land-use practices and, unless accompanied by adequate compensation, tended to have a negative effect on their livelihoods. Such local conflicts, however, were also framed by developments on the European level. As continental and global markets integrated in the wake of industrialized production and revolutionized transport, many agricultural and forestry products from the Alps were no longer able to compete. This put Alpine economies under pressure. Agriculture and forestry underwent a process of intensification and for several decades Alpine valleys saw significant out-migration.\(^7\)

This constellation in the Alps – the combination of marginal economic value and high symbolic and emotional value as along with national and international fame – helped to make the Alps into a hotspot of nature conservation. In the absence of more powerful economic interests, the chances of being able to realize nature protection measures were considerably greater, a circumstance that has also been observed in other economically marginal parts of the world, most notably the American West.\(^8\) The conservation and restoration of nature that took place, however, was only partly the result of intentional human action. Nature itself reacted to the intensification of land use by reforesting mountainsides (albeit slowly, due to the harsh climate) as well as by repopulating areas with species once displaced or eradicated by humans. One example is the red deer, which had essentially disappeared from the Swiss Alps by the end of the nineteenth century only to re-enter Switzerland from the east at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many decades later, another returning migrant, this time spreading from both the southern and western parts of Alps, was the wolf, while a growing number of bears, originating from Slovenia, began to stroll through the eastern Alps. Hunting and nature conservation laws, as well as the establishment of protected areas, helped these and other creatures to return on their own. Others, most famously the ibex and the bearded vulture, were reintroduced by conservationists during the twentieth century.\(^9\)
The nature conservationists’ attitudes towards tourism were complex and ambivalent. While they detested and feared modern mass tourism and its infrastructures such as grand hotels and cable cars, they propagated and widely practiced so-called nature-friendly tourism, which mainly consisted of quiet and contemplative hiking with overnight stays in huts and simple hotels. This activity was seen as a way for civilized men (women, who constituted a small minority within conservationist elites, were of less concern) to reconnect and reconcile with wild nature. Alpine clubs often supported conservationists and there was a considerable overlap in membership between hiking and conservation organizations.¹⁰ In France and Italy, conservationists also teamed up with touring clubs; this was less common in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria.¹¹ Sometimes these groups joined forces to counter plans for the installation of hydroelectric plants. Initiatives at the beginning of the twentieth century which saved the Krimml Waterfalls in the Salzburgian High Tauern and the Sils Lake in Switzerland’s Upper Engadin were early instances of such opposition to hydropower utilities.¹²

The beginning of the twentieth century was an era of great growth in nature conservation, with initiatives popping up all over Europe within just a few years. One of the most influential figures was the biologist Hugo Conwentz, head of the Prussian state’s newly created Staatliche Stelle für Naturdenkmalpflege (an office for the conservation of natural heritage sites). Conwentz considered the selective preservation of a variety of singular features of nature, like unique trees and small sections of forests, wetlands and swamps, waterfalls and rocks, within a network of natural monuments (Naturdenkmäler) to be superior to the preservation of large stretches of land in parks. He regarded this as particularly suitable for Central Europe, where there were few places untouched by civilization and which was thus unsuitable for American-style national parks. The natural monument became a key concept in nature conservation all over Europe and also guided initiatives in the Alps. Bavaria as well as Austrian crown lands started to register natural monuments and France enacted a law to protect natural sites and monuments in 1906.¹³

Others disagreed with Conwentz and started to combine the concepts of large nature reserves and small natural monuments. At the forefront of this was the Swiss nature conservation movement under the leadership of the naturalist Paul Sarasin. While adopting Conwentz’s concept of the natural monument and engaging in the small-scale preservation of natural landscape features, Swiss conservationists soon decided that the most urgent and valuable action was the establishment of large nature reserves. In 1909, they managed to lay the foundations for the creation of the first national park in Europe, by leasing 20 square kilometres of a mountain valley in the Lower Engadin in southeast
Switzerland. Additional land was leased in the following years, so that by 1914, when the Swiss federal state took charge of the park, it covered an area of approximately 150 square kilometres. From the very beginning, the Swiss National Park attracted substantial international attention, thanks to active promotion and an emphasis on its scientific value. As early as 1912, the journal Nature praised the park as “a great achievement” and “the most important in Europe” with a comprehensive preservation scheme that even excelled the “celebrated” American national parks.\(^4\) Whereas the United States put emphasis on public recreation and actively promoted tourism in its parks, the Swiss National Park stood for strict preservation and scientific research. For many decades, it served as the global model of what a science-oriented national park should look like.\(^5\)

The Swiss model was discussed all over the world, but it was especially influential in neighbouring Alpine areas. The German-Austrian Verein Naturschutzpark, founded in 1909, worked for the creation of three parks, one in each of the “typical German” landscapes: the high mountain Alps, the low mountains of the Central Uplands (Mittelgebirge), and the lowlands of the North German Plain. The park envisioned for the Alps would be a source of cultural identity, but it was also meant to complement the habitat of the Swiss National Park. The association acquired a considerable piece of land in the High Tauern region of the Austrian Alps in 1913. In France that same year, supported by the state forest administration (Direction des Eaux et Fôrets), representatives of the Alpine Club and the Touring Club founded the Association of National Parks of France and its Colonies (Association des parcs nationaux de France et des colonies). At the association’s request, the French state purchased forty square kilometres of land in the department Isère in 1914 with the intention of establishing a national park. The conceptual plans for this Parc de La Bérarde were explicitly modelled after the Swiss National Park.\(^6\)

On the international and European level, Sarasin became the counterpart of Conwentz, tirelessly campaigning for his cause and promoting the Swiss National Park as his showcase. His crowning achievement was the organization of the first International Conference on Nature Protection (Conférence Internationale pour la Protection de la Nature) in Bern in 1913, which resulted in the establishment of an international nature protection commission situated in Basel, presided over by himself. The invitations for a follow-up conference had already been issued when, in the summer of 1914, the start of the war abruptly halted this promising initiative.\(^7\)

The First World War was a major turning point in nature movements. It put an enduring damper on both the civilizing optimism of the conservation movement and the movement itself. Many nature conservation projects suffered a setback, especially park projects in the Alps. In Switzerland, ideas for further na-
tional parks were quietly shelved. The plans for the park in Austria’s High Tauern stagnated while the plans for the French Parc national de la Bérard were abandoned. In the early 1920s, the Association des parcs nationaux disbanded and, as elsewhere, the remaining French nature protection organizations set their sights on smaller reserves. Efforts to establish larger reserves were shifted to France’s African colonies; other European colonial powers, especially Britain and Belgium, did the same.¹⁸ In Italy, the interwar years saw the end of the plans for a protected area directly adjacent to the Swiss National Park. However, a decision by King Victor Emmanuel III to donate land to the state as a public park dramatically changed the situation. In response, ideas of nature conservation revived rapidly and in 1922 the Italian state created its first national park in the king’s former hunting grounds of Gran Paradiso in the western Alps. The park was overseen by an independent scientific commission that emphasized research on and protection of the ibex. A second Italian national park, established in the Abruzzi in 1923, was dedicated to the protection of the bear.¹⁹ In Berchtesgaden in Bavaria and the Triglav in Slovenia (at the time part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia established in 1918), protected areas were created in the 1920s, with both areas serving as the nucleus of national parks established several decades later. In Switzerland and in Bavaria, nature conservation enjoyed fairly broad support in the middle classes, as manifested by each region’s League for Nature Protection (Bund für Naturschutz) founded in 1909 and 1913, which attracted tens of thousands of members by the end of the 1930s.²⁰ Such accomplishments cannot hide the fact, however, that nature conservation in the interwar years was mostly concerned with ensuring the continuation of past accomplishments, in the Alps as well as in Europe as a whole. Tourism recovered from the collapse during the war years and began to thrive again and expand activities into the winter season. Likewise during this era, the construction of dams for power production accelerated and road building for motorized traffic opened a new chapter of intrusion and conflict.²¹

Although nature conservation organizations continued to attract new members and successfully pushed for the enactment of laws and decrees for nature conservation, they were disappointed by the slow implementation and poor enforcement of these regulations. Under these circumstances, many nature conservationists welcomed Fascism and National Socialism and collaborated with the new regimes in Italy and Germany. The agrarian romanticism-infused ideologies of both regimes seemed open to conservationist ideas – and unlike the democratic governments, the authoritarian leaders seemed prepared to act quickly and undertake stringent measures. At first, the nature conservation actions of both regimes appeared to confirm this assessment. However, the impression soon proved to be deceptive. In Italy, paramilitary forces took over administra-
tion of the national parks. They were not interested in nature conservation but in the development of the parks as tourist destinations and in their potential as highly visible emblems of Fascist Italy. This was especially the case for the two newly founded parks of Circeo (1934) near Rome and Stelvio (1935) in the South Tyrolean Alps on formerly Austrian territory.²²

The Nazi regime passed an ambitious Nature Conservation Act (Reichsnaturschutzgesetz) in 1935 and created plans for Alpine nature reserves and national parks in Germany and, after 1938, in Austria. Implementation, however, fell far short of the laws, decrees, and plans. The Nazi nature conservation policy turned out to be primarily made up of empty promises and projects constantly put off until some later point in time, when there were no other more urgent needs that necessitated giving priority to matters such as overcoming the economic crisis, expanding the military power, or achieving food self-sufficiency. Eventually, this became a promise to address the issue after the war had been won. Despite this lack of any tangible results on the ground, the National Socialist era had some long-term effects for nature conservation: Most of the infrastructure projects started in the Nazi period were completed after the war under the new regimes. Likewise, some nature conservation schemes resurfaced in the post-war era, frequently put forward by those who had originally crafted them under the Nazi regime.²³

2 Heyday of Mass Tourism and Dam Building

The post-war period brought an impressive surge in nature protection and conservation initiatives. The year 1948 saw the founding of the International Union for the Protection of Nature (later the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN) by eighteen nations, several international conservation organizations, and countless local and national actors; it would become instrumental in spreading the ideas of nature protection and promoting countless projects. Another important player was the Council of Europe, established in 1949 (see chapter 16 by van de Grift/van Meurs). In 1965, its member states began awarding “European Diplomas” for initiatives in nature protection and declared a European Nature Conservation Year in 1970. Later, in 1979, the Council’s Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) obliged its signatories to conservation of flora and fauna and their natural habitats. The convention’s list of protected animals includes iconic Alpine animals such as the ibex and the chough.

One of these many European conservation organizations was dedicated specifically to the Alps: the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps
(Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Régions Alpines, CIPRA), founded in 1952. Like others, CIPRA was founded in the booming post-war years when the Alps were undergoing their own “great acceleration” in the form of the construction of hydroelectric plants and tourism infrastructure.²⁴ The planning of “development” of the Alpine regions as well as the designation of protected areas took place on a national level. One of CIRPA’s main goals was to create a European convention that would enable the transnational protection of Alpine nature. The founders of CIPRA were mostly university professors or directors of nature museums or nature parks. Among them were Swiss botanist Charles Jean Bernard, who was also IUCN’s first president from 1948 to 1954, and German forester Wolfgang E. Burhenne. These key figures linked the organization to social networks of research and conservation professionals, to international organizations and national governments. They also played an important role in shaping the goals and ideals of CIPRA, which were rooted in the park movement from the early years of the century. Thus, CIPRA was mostly concerned with protecting natural monuments such as the (aforementioned) Krimml Waterfalls or iconic landscapes like the Alpine “hummock meadows” in Slovenia.²⁵

Even if CIPRA’s resolutions were not binding on a national level and its status at the Council of Europe starting in 1967 was only consultative, support from CIPRA and likeminded international organizations was pivotal for the establishment of new national parks in the post-war era. National experts profited from their networks and the creation of international standards. Of the 14 national parks existing in the Alpine region in 2020, 11 were established after 1960 (e.g., Triglav in Slovenia in 1961; Vanoise in France in 1963; Berchtesgaden in Germany in 1978; High Tauern in Austria in 1981–1992). Many of these parks were only established after at least a decade of struggle. And not all such struggles ended in success. In the midst of Cold War, Angela Piskernik, director of the Natural Science Museum (Prirodoslovni Muzej) of Ljubljana and highly respected CIPRA member, dreamed of and pushed for a transnational park in the Savinja Alps and the Karawanks, but after her death in 1967 nobody continued her efforts.²⁶ Besides national parks, more modest regional nature parks were established in all Alpine countries starting in the 1960s (see chapter 8 by Hasenöhrl/Groß).

Meanwhile, national governments in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia pushed the construction of hydroelectric power plants. Since World War I, hydropower, or “white coal”, a term introduced by the French engineer Aristide Bergès at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle, had become an important element in securing national defence and economic independence. Projects continued in the interwar years and during World War II.²⁷ But in the
post-war years, the construction of hydroelectric power plants experienced a major boom. Supported by funds for European reconstruction, “the years of the great dam constructions in the Alps” began.²⁸ In 1953, the German engineer Harald Link tallied at least 200 artificial lakes in the Alps at an altitude of at least 500 metres used for power production.²⁹ The national grids were increasingly connected through high-voltage lines, several of them crossing the Alps, and the expanding system of Alpine hydraulic reservoirs and power stations took on the role of “Europe’s Battery”.³⁰ With its capacities to store power and generate it flexibly at any time, the Alpine hydroelectrical system became indispensable for covering consumption peaks and stabilizing the Western European electricity net.³¹

The Alpine countries managed to merge the Alpine myth with an ideology of modernization: Waterpower represented the mighty force of the mountains, now tamed by humans to supply the nation with energy. Thus, it was also seen as an important part of national defence during both World Wars. During World War II, the Nazi regime put much effort into construction of hydroelectric dams, using forced labour and neglecting issues of nature conservation.³² Most of the power plants were only finished in the post-war period with the aid of the European Recovery Program (“Marshall Plan”). For example, Austria invested about 37 per cent of the recovery funds in waterpower.³³ Such was the importance of hydroelectric plants, that nations were even willing to exchange territory to secure this resource: In 1962/1963, Switzerland and Italy exchanged 45 hectares land, whereby Switzerland gained the area on which the Valle di Lei dam had been constructed in the years 1957–1962. Other power plants that cross borders, like Lac d’Emosson (France and Switzerland, 1974) or Lago di Livigno (Italy and Switzerland, 1968), operate on the basis of international treaties.³⁴

While nature conservation groups in Bavaria challenged small-scale water-power projects in the Prealps with considerable success,³⁵ opposition to the construction of hydroelectric power plants in the high Alps remained insignificant. Even conservationists did not intervene unless projects affected iconic landscapes or already protected areas such as national parks and thus endangered endemic species. Where opposition did emerge, economic concerns were usually given priority over ecological ones. In addition, dams also elicited pride in national technical capabilities while satisfying the aesthetic taste of the age: Italy’s national narratives fused classical ideals of beautiful nature with modernist ideals of technical progress, with a vision in which humans could perfect the incompleteness of nature with their constructions of solid concrete.³⁶ Engineer Link stated in 1953 that “lakes are the jewellery of any landscape, particularly in the high mountains”, regardless of whether these lakes were natural or artificial³⁷ – a view that lived on until the 1970s.³⁸ In a few cases, a dam project
met opposition from local inhabitants because the planned plant would affect a protected area or force an entire community to be moved. Opposition against the resettlement of villages was only successful in Switzerland (Rheinwald, 1942, Ursern 1920–1954), where local resistance drew on strong traditions of cultural and political autonomy. Other Alpine villages were lost to the waters of the reservoir (e.g., Morasco, Italy, in 1940; Reschen, Italy, in 1950; Tignes, France, in 1952; Marmorera, Switzerland, in 1954; and Fall/Lenggries, Germany, in 1959). Concerns about nature reserves were similarly ineffective: no matter how forceful the arguments for conservation, they were always beaten by economic interests (e.g. in the case of the Engadine power plants [Engadiner Kraftwerke] that affected the Swiss National Park).

While power plant manufacturers and utilities collaborated transnationally, resistance remained local and national until the 1970s, even in cases in which power plant construction affected cross-border river systems. The motivations of conservationists, i.e. protecting endangered species and unique landscapes, and of local inhabitants, i.e. preserving their native soil, rarely complemented each other. Although the European-wide power supply system more and more integrated Alpine hydroelectric production, public discourses on hydropower continued to be national ones.

In the 1960s, construction costs for waterpower plants increased considerably. The best spots in the Alps were already in use, while capital and labour became more expensive and legislation for the protection of nature and scenery required measures such as underground installations. Furthermore, the development of nuclear technology as an energy source made investments in the expansion of hydropower seem less worthwhile. The golden age of dam construction came to a close (landmarks in size and generation capacity, the Swiss Grande Dixence dam was finished in 1961, and the French Grand-Maison in 1985). Whereas the construction of three facilities in the Soča Valley in Slovenia had to be abandoned because of financial problems in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s, other dam projects such as in the Dorfertal in Austria’s High Tauern, in the Greina Valley in the Swiss canton Grison, and in the French Vanoise National Park were defeated by the burgeoning environmental movement. This movement, supported by a growing body of scientific knowledge, criticized the exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. It expressed the concern that the “limits to growth” were also reached in the Alps (see figure 2).

The construction of dams in the Alps was only one aspect of a broader structural change that occurred after the Second World War. Small valleys emptied as people migrated to regional centres, while the landscape was restructured to support mass tourism (see chapter 8 by Hasenöhrl/Groß). After 1950, the winter resort, an originally French concept of “an artificial developed city in the heart
of the white desert”, as contemporaries stated, expanded across the entire Alpine region. To support winter tourism, entire mountain slopes were transformed into “treeless, long, obstacle-free downhills”. While in 1945 about 30 skiing resorts existed in France, only 20 years later their numbers had grown to 200. In 1975, the Swiss economist and tourism expert Jost Krippendorf warned against an impending decline of the Alps to a “suburban landscape between Munich and Milan”, where mass tourism would pollute water and air, severely damage the landscape and local social structures. Krippendorf became one of the staunchest advocates of sustainable tourism. Other contemporaries also reflected critically on these structural changes and assigned special importance to the typical cultural landscape (Kulturlandschaft) of the Alps, formed over centuries by extensive cultivation and transhumance. The conservationists of the IUCN and UNESCO considered this landscape part of the World Heritage of Mankind. The UNESCO research programme Man and the Biosphere (MAB), proposed in 1968 at the Biosphere Conference in Paris and launched in 1971, was crucial for the production of science-based knowledge about the interconnection of humans and nature in the fragile ecosystem of the Alps. The Biosphere Conference was attended by 88 members of intergovernmental organizations and 236 dele-
gates from the 63 UNESCO member states spanning the entire globe and bringing
together East and West.⁴⁷ Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland jointly con-
ducted the MAB subproject No. 6, “The Human Impact on Mountain Economy”,
which resulted in the designation of numerous Alpine areas as UNESCO Bio-
sphere Reserves and countless scientific publications.⁴⁸

After 1970, the UNESCO continued to be a powerful actor in nature conser-
vation in the Alps by designating selected areas as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. Scientific knowledge about ecological interrelationships became a central argu-
ment for nature conservation and supplemented the arguments based on aes-
thetic value. While these actors and arguments remained important in the late
twentieth century, an additional factor came into play: the people living in the
Alps and their particular living space.

3 Large-scale Alpine Transit Infrastructure

The third stage of Alpine conservation was characterized by controversies about
transit traffic through the Alps and the infrastructure that supported it.⁴⁹ From
the 1970s onwards, European integration and increasing environmental con-
sciousness became the main forces shaping the perception and history of the
Alps.⁵⁰ Politics of European integration emphasized Alpine transit corridors as
important European infrastructures linking the economic centres in the north
and south. Throughout the twentieth century, the Alps continued to present a
natural obstacle for traffic, with passage possible only in a small number of pla-
ces; they thus were seen as a barrier that slowed down Europe’s economic inte-
gration. High-speed traffic concentrated on a few “bottlenecks”⁵¹ like the Bren-
nner Pass between Austria and Italy, the Gotthard Pass between Switzerland and
Italy, and the Mont Cenis Pass between France and Italy.⁵² However, while traffic
was regarded as an important economic driver in the 1960s, a decade later envi-
ronmentalists, scientists, and activists reframed it as the greatest threat to Alpine
habitats – and a major nuisance for the people living along the thoroughfares.⁵³

Although ecological problems such as erosion, noise, and air pollution were
not exclusive to the Alps, their consequences were particularly evident here due
to the particular geographical and topographical conditions.⁵⁴ Following the
opening of the Austrian Brenner motorway in 1971 and the Swiss Gotthard motor-
way in 1980, the amount of transit traffic on these routes increased dramatically.
A connection was quickly established between transalpine transit traffic and the
growing environmental pollution. Consequently, resistance emerged throughout
the Alps: citizens’ initiatives along the transit routes were directed against the
constantly increasing traffic from road freight transport and the resulting dam-
These protests were particularly strong at two of the most heavily used crossing points, Brenner Pass in the Austrian province of Tyrol and Gotthard Pass in Switzerland. Initiatives like the Transitforum Austria-Tirol in Austria, the Alpen-Initiative in Switzerland, and the Transitinitiative Südtirol in Italy were very successful at fostering broad public awareness of the transit problem through the media, extending even beyond the immediate vicinity of the transit routes.

This new kind of Alpine nature protection reflected broader trends in post-1970 environmentalism, which no longer focused preserving natural monuments, but rather strove for ecologically and socially responsible environmental protection. In contrast to the earlier organizations for Alpine nature protection, which were firmly grounded in urban middle classes living outside the Alps, this new movement recruited its spokespeople and supporters in the Alpine valleys themselves. These activists and their supporters highlighted the Alps as a cultural landscape, an economic area, and a living space for millions of people. Nature conservation was no longer at the forefront; rather, the emphasis was on the livelihood of the inhabitants, their present well-being, and their future prospects. Hence, the activists demanded a reduction in traffic to limit air pollution and noise, and end to further expansion of large-scale road and railway infrastructure, and more inclusion in political debates about Alpine spaces. These actions took place in the context of a larger transnational debate on the dying of forests due to sulphur dioxide (see chapter 7 by Hözl/Oosthoek). In Tyrol, for example, where forests played an important role in protecting the landscape, the Forest Condition Report (Waldzustandsbericht) of 1984 initiated a tense public debate on exhaust emissions, particularly along the Inntal and Brenner route where forest damage was the most substantial. The main culprit was quickly identified as freight transport traffic. However, in spite of the ecological arguments, the concerns were also partly informed by a traditional, romantic image of the Alps: efforts to modernize the Alpine region were told as a story of decay, with the current problematic situation measured against a supposedly intact natural state.

In Austria, citizens' initiatives and Alpine protection associations mainly turned to protest actions to make their concerns heard. The Tyrolean and South Tyrolean transit opponents organized blockades of the Brenner motorway, which were attended by hundreds of people and became part of the collective memory of the region. Although North and South Tyrol were linked by the Brenner Pass and thus affected by the same traffic problems, cooperation between the two regions only began in the mid-1990s. As South Tyrolean environmentalists such as Markus Lobis, chairman of the Transitinitiative Südtirol, later remarked self-critically, they had relied for too long on North Tyrolean resistance in the hope that this protest would also have positive effects on South Tyrol.
Unlike Austria, Swiss transit opponents did not make use of demonstrations but instead launched a popular referendum for the protection of the Alpine area from transit traffic ("Zum Schutze des Alpengebietes vor dem Transitverkehr") in 1989, which resulted in the adoption of legislation restricting transit traffic in 1994. In Italy and France, opposition to transit traffic was less frequent. Along the Mont Blanc route, the autonomous government of Aosta Valley opposed the widening of the Mont Blanc Tunnel and in 1994 adopted a law on the control of road freight traffic (limiting speed and emissions) that was directed against the "wicked policy of land degradation" of the Italian state. In Chamonix, on the French side of the tunnel, people also protested sporadically against traffic.

Drawing on these local initiatives and opposition groups, in 1995 members of the Swiss Alpen-Initiative founded the Initiative Transport Europe (ITE) to create a transnational network of activists from Austria, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland. The ITE organized annual transit conferences and actions as well as sending petitions to the European Parliament and the European Commission. A highpoint of the ITE activities was the Day of Action with coordinated protest meetings across the Alps held annually from 1996 to 2000. As a result of various difficulties, such as language barriers, an enormous administrative burden, and different national goals, ITE ended its activities in 2000. Fritz Gurgiser, chairman of Transitforum Austria-Tirol, spearheaded the Alpine Protection Transit Declaration (Alpenschutztransiterklärung) in 2002, which laid out measures to reduce transit traffic. It was signed by many Tyrolean citizens’ initiatives as well as by South Tyrolean environmentalists like Kuno Schraffl, chairman of the umbrella organization for nature conservation and environmental protection of South Tyrol (Dachverband für Natur- und Umweltschutz Südtirol). The declaration was formulated in terms of the entire Alpine region and called for joint action across national borders and transcending political parties. Even though the declaration claimed to represent the entire Alpine region, the signees mainly represented the German-speaking regions.

As these examples show, activists recognized the need for cross-border protection of the Alps, but often encountered difficulties in their efforts to establish transalpine cooperation. Such cooperation was only conceivable in the context of European integration. Thus, the EU played an important and at the same time extremely ambivalent role as a discursive reference point for Alpine protection groups: it functioned as the abstract “other” in contrast to the tangible “own”. On the one hand, the Alpine environmentalists defined the Alps as an ecologically exemplary model region that contrasted with the EU’s economy-centred orientation. On the other hand, the EU served as a shared point of reference which not only suggested a unity of the Alpine region, but also discursively
brought it about. Therefore, Alpine environmentalists raised the Alps as a political argument: they considered a coherent unity of the Alps to be indispensable for pushing through their own intra-Alpine needs and interests against claims from outside the Alps. The Alpine countries had never managed to develop a uniform strategy to reduce transit traffic. The citizens’ initiatives and Alpine protection associations were highly critical of this lack of coordination, as they believed that a common Alpine-wide policy, especially for Austria and Switzerland, could achieve more than individual national initiatives. Andreas Weissen, chairman of CIPRA, called on the politicians of the Alpine countries for joint negotiations on several occasions.65

In spite of this lack of coordination on a national level, European integration facilitated administrative cross-border cooperation between sub-national entities. Thus, politicians from Alpine mountain regions increasingly focused on cooperation and exchange beyond national borders. For regardless of which side of the border one was on, the challenges for the Alpine inhabitants, economy, and environment were felt to be similar. And all regions of the Alps had to manage comparable natural hazards and socio-economic developments. In 1972, the Association of Alpine States (abbreviated Arge Alp, from the German name Arbeitsgemeinschaft Alpenländer), was founded on the initiative of the Governor of Tyrol, Eduard Wallnöfer. The participating regions from Austria, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland aimed to strengthen cross-border cooperation. In addition, the Alpine Convention, which entered into force in 1995, and in 2001 the Committee of the Regions’ Alpine group provided new frameworks for inter-Alpine and inter-European political cooperation.66 The global dimension of their concerns became visible when mountain protection proponents at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 succeeded in ensuring that a separate chapter was dedicated to mountains in the sustainable development Agenda 21.67

Furthermore, the political institutions of the EU were an important reference point for Alpine transit opponents and nature conservation movement. Besides its effects on national economies, the EU also took the lead in policy fields such as transport and the environment (see chapter 16 by van de Grift/van Meurs). In this case, Alpine conservationists saw Europe and the EU as both the place where problems originated and where these problems had to be solved. Since the 1970s, Austria and Switzerland had conducted talks with the then EC regarding the transit issue. From the mid-1980s, both countries independently negotiated transit agreements with the EC to regulate traffic flows. While the EC was mainly interested in ensuring free movement of goods, the Alpine states demanded a shift from road to rail and a drastic reduction in transit journeys in order to reduce the burden on people and the environment. While both Switzer-
land and Austria negotiated transit agreements with the EC in 1992, there were fundamental differences in the treaty terms and measures undertaken to reduce the burden of transit traffic. Austria was not able to achieve any quantitative restrictions, and the introduction of so-called “Eco-Points” was only intended to reduce emissions. Switzerland focused on expansion of the rail network as a way to increase rail transport capabilities, in particular by constructing base tunnels on the Gotthard and Lötschberg-Simplon rail lines. Construction on both tunnels started in 1999 and they were put into operation in 2007 (Lötschberg) and 2016 (Gotthard). Austria also presented plans for the construction of base tunnels on the Brenner and Semmering lines. Here, construction work, subsidized by the EU, only started in 2006 and 2012 and is expected to be finished by the end of the 2020s. Both base tunnel projects elicited protest from traffic experts and environmentalists, who criticized the high costs and the impact on the landscape. Moreover, numerous studies called into question whether the construction projects would solve the problem of transalpine transit traffic through Austria.

The most recent milestone in the transit traffic issue was the signing of the Transport Protocol of the Alpine Convention in 2000. After ten years of discussions, which threatened to fail several times, the environment ministers of the contracting parties agreed on a treaty text at the Sixth Alpine Conference in Lucerne. Even though transit opponents and environmentalists welcomed the signing of the protocol, there had also been an increase in critical voices doubting the effectiveness of the Alpine Convention and whether its practical implementation was in fact protecting the Alps.

It should be noted that the conservationists’ and transit opponents’ vision of a transnational Alpine region was embedded in a dialectic exchange with the process of European integration. It moved the Alps from an economically peripheral position into the “heart of Europe” and gave the region a new visibility at the political level. Thus, movements typically oscillated between regional and national poles on the one side and European concerns on the other, as well as between appreciation and rejection of the EU. On an ideological level, the emerging politicized region of the Alps served as a framework for action for transit opponents. In this context, a new awareness and self-confidence arose among Alpine residents, who now saw themselves as being able to actively participate in decision-making and shaping the future development of the Alpine region. Transit opponents emphasized the central location of the Alpine region in Europe and presented it as a zone of contact and meeting. At the same time, the Alps also served as a demarcation between inside and outside, between inner-Alpine and extra-Alpine demands and needs.
4 Conclusion

In the context of ecological debates and European integration during the twentieth century, the Alpine region became a political space in two ways. First, discussions about the development and protection of certain Alpine areas achieved a permanent place on political agendas. Second, residents of the Alps increasingly gained political weight both on national and European levels. Europe, epitomized by the EC resp. EU, became more and more acknowledged as the place and space in which the environmental problems of the Alps originated and had to be solved.

However, as this chapter has shown, seeing the Alps as a European common has a long tradition reaching back to the Enlightenment. From the early 1900s onwards, it was mainly the many branches of the nature conservation movement that tried to defend the Alps against economic threats, in particular mass tourism, hydropower, and motorized traffic. This movement was mostly led by urban elites and only occasionally involved the local Alpine population. Only in the wake of the ecological revolution of the 1970s and in response to the rapid increase in motorized transit traffic Alpine communities themselves became major actors in what was now seen as a struggle to defend Alpine livelihoods. The various activists, associations, and regional and national authorities of the Alpine region each approached Alpine issues with their own perceptions of the Alps and perspectives on nature conservation, environmental protection, and socio-economic development. In particular, different groups put varying emphasis on matters of ecology versus economy.

The fault lines between blessing or curse, winners or losers are not easily drawn. On the one hand, tourists brought much needed capital to the mountain valleys, but on the other hand, mass tourism threatened to destroy the Alpine landscape. Likewise, dams for hydroelectric plants meant a major disruption of entire Alpine valleys, but they provided people all over Europe – including the Alps – with comparatively clean energy. The expansion of traffic infrastructure had promised to connect remote villages with the centres of Europe but failed to deliver. Instead, transalpine freight traffic had detrimental effects on the population and nature of the Alps, while enabling Europe’s economy to thrive. The movement of ever-increasing amounts of goods through and over the Alps in turn moved and newly mobilized people in the Alps as well as in Europe and reinforced the Alps’ political significance as Europe’s most central periphery.
Notes


7 Mathieu, *The Alps*.


Jean-Paul Zuanon, *Chronique d’ un parc oublié*: *Duparc de la Bérarde* (1913) au parc national des Ecrins (1973) (Grenoble: Revue de Géographie Alpine, 1995); Raphaël Larrère, Bernadette Lizet, and Martine Berlan-Darqué, eds., *Histoire des parcs nationaux: Comment prendre soin de la nature?* (Versailles: Editions Quae, 2009); Ford, *Natural Interests*. An exception to this trend was the 100-square-kilometre nature reserve created in the Camargue along the Rhône delta in France in 1927.


Denning, *Skiing*.


The controversies over the construction of large-scale Alpine transit infrastructures at the Gotthard and the Brenner Passes are currently being studied by the joint Austrian-German-Swiss research project “Issues with Europe: A Network Analysis of the German-speaking Alpine Conservation Movement (1975–2005)” (https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/issues-with-europe). All authors of this chapter are part of the research project.

Mathieu, *Die Alpen*, 191.

There are a total of fourteen motorways through the Alps, most of which pass through Austria; Othmar Kolp, “Die gescheiterte Transitpolitik? Der alpenquerende Straßengüterverkehr anhand des Fallbeispiels Tirol – Die Verkehrspolitik Österreichs, der EU und der Schweiz” (PhD thesis, University of Innsbruck, 2015), 49.


Aschwanden, “Politisierung der Alpen”.


Mathieu, Die Alpen, 198 and 215; Glauser and Siegrist, Schauplatz Alpen, 24.

Mathieu, The Third Dimension.

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