

## **Walking towards Concerted Management of Hiking-Path Networks: A Well Engaged but Tricky Challenge for French Alpine Protected Areas**

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### **Introduction**

Hiking-path networks are intimately related to the rural areas they cross. They are also used by the managers of nature reserves to enhance their acceptance by, and co-operation with, the local and mainly rural areas within which they have been established. The managerial approach of such networks is currently based on continual consultation with stakeholders and can be considered as a means of mediating in local-area issues.

The encouragement of collective action is part of an effort to establish co-operation between local areas. This should enable unilateral, fragmented, area-based approaches to be transformed into global, interconnected, negotiated ones in which local areas develop in conjunction with one another.

Nevertheless, whereas different original and successful initiatives have been set up in many French alpine protected areas, the definition of common objectives regarding the accessibility and the maintenance of these networks is still delicate to implement.

Besides, the different types of concrete interventions and strategies developed by protected areas managers and local stakeholders directly concern the visitors of such areas. Actually, these operations influence the way that hikers, climbers, farmers, hunters, etc. use the networks while the combination of these operations also contribute to build global monitoring tools like the observatory of the natural reserves of Haute-Savoie (France). This observatory is supplied with many data produced by several surveys addressed to visitors.

The stake of the management of visitors' flows thus can not be separate from one of the most important goal of protected areas: their integration in the local areas within which they have been created and their participation to local dynamics (social, cultural, economical, etc.).

Then, the basic but complex question we want to develop here is the following one:

Can hiking path networks contribute to local development and to enhance local acceptance of protected areas, when these networks form the subject of collective management strategies?

The main objective of this proposition is thus to go through concerted initiatives about hiking-path networks in protected areas and visitor monitoring operations, in order to bring into light some major methodological trends which may improve the management of protected areas within a local and sustainable development perspective.

### **Methods and Results**

This paper first considers the emergence of participation and collective action issues in the French territorial planning policy and more precisely in regard to the management of natural protected areas. It implies a brief historical overview of procedures and measures adopted and applied both by French institutions and natural protected areas.

These contextual elements introduce the presentation of some strategies developed by protected areas (Natural Reserves of Haute-Savoie, National Park les Ecrins). We will particularly focus on the original and complex device elaborated in the Nat-

ural Reserves of Haute-Savoie. This tool contributes to a global monitoring of the different users of hiking-paths and more generally of the whole protected areas. Our observations are essentially based on textual analysis of discourse obtained from local actors during personal interviews. We also explored the constitution and functioning of management processes and tools by the mean of an active collaboration with managers of protected areas, and thanks to regular participations to field sessions and meetings with technicians and members of the administrative staff of protected areas.

Finally, this communication reconsiders the efficiency of these strategies and interventions aimed at the improvement of the local acceptance of protected areas. It also underlines the importance of a global and regulated management of hiking-path networks, which have to be thought as a major heritage for local inhabitants as for all types of visitors.

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