



Epidemics as a challenge for managers of protected areas

I am writing this editorial during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the authorities in most countries have restricted the movement of their inhabitants. In Slovenia, people are not allowed to leave the territory of their own municipalities without good reason, but they are allowed to engage in leisure activities outdoors within the territory. With such restrictions in place, we have become especially aware of the importance of nature, and in particular of the protected areas near our homes where we can stroll and admire the spring. I am very fortunate: a walk of just 10 minutes from my home takes me to a landscape park which lies practically in the centre of the Slovenian capital. However, while enthusiastic statements about protected areas are common, some townspeople and nature conservationists tend to forget about the locals who had little opportunity to take part in decision making and for whom the protection of nature involves a restriction in their activities.

In this issue of *eco.mont*, this topic is discussed in depth by Mosè Cometta in an article on the failure of the initiative to declare the Adula Park in Switzerland a national park. The park *was perceived as a project that threatened the local way of life*. A similar conflict occurred in Slovenia in 1924 at the declaration of the country's very first protected area, in the Triglav Lakes Valley, when local farmers lost their right to graze livestock there.

Three articles in this issue discuss the management of Biosphere Reserves. The article by Valerie Braun and co-authors describes how management in the Austrian BRs implements the three complementary functions: conservation, sustainable development and logistical support. Günter Köck and co-authors describe the outcome of a UNESCO-Expert meeting held in Škocjan (Slovenia) and emphasize the importance of science in underpinning the management of protected areas. In their article on the Italian Julian Alps Biosphere Reserve, Stefano Santi and co-authors state that *“The Julian Alps are characterized by three main aspects: extremely high biodiversity, an extraordinary cultural mix, and communities with a high level of resilience who, over time, have never ceased to fight proudly to preserve and protect their territory and culture.”* Estela Inés Farías-Torbidoni and Demir Barić, in *The economic impact of tourism on protected natural areas*, talk about how much revenue visitors bring in for local populations. Based on their findings, managers of protected areas will be able to direct visitors appropriately so that conservation goals and the economic expectations of local residents are met.

During the current pandemic, tourist flows have virtually stopped, and as a result protected areas have remained without visitors. As the purpose of protected areas is to preserve nature, their managers should be pleased that the degradation of nature has decreased during this period. However, they cannot fulfil their other purpose – that is, enabling people to visit and experience nature. This time without visitors can be used to think about how to organize visits as sustainably as possible, both while pandemic restriction measures are in force and after they have been lifted. As social distancing will have to be maintained for some time, some visitors may be more likely to leave the marked trails. In recent days, I have often noticed this kind of behaviour in the Ljubljana area. Vera Kopp and Joy Coppes in their article *Why do people leave marked trails?* analyse the factors that influence precisely this type of visitor behaviour. Will our behaviour in the wild in crisis situations also change for the long term?

In *Herpetofauna diversity in the middle of the Southern Carpathians*, Severus-Daniel Covaciu-Marcov and his colleagues find that hydroelectric power plants pose the greatest threat to biodiversity. With a focus on the Tiroler Lech, one of the last near-natural Alpine river valleys in Austria, Marlene Salchner presents a LIFE project that is concerned with the preservation or restoration of wild river habitats and their typical biodiversity. We can see a conflict between renewable energy production and nature conservation in many mountain areas. As environmentalists, are we, on a personal level, also willing to give up long, energy-consuming journeys and thus reduce the pressure to build new energy facilities? Currently, our travel to remote national parks in other countries and other continents is limited. We can embrace this restriction as an opportunity to visit nearby protected areas that we may not yet know. For the managers of protected areas, this time is an opportunity to direct visitors to sustainable journeys to protected areas and a respectful attitude towards natural and cultural heritage. In times of crisis, we change our habits. Hopefully, the pandemic will be an opportunity to improve our behaviour for the long term.

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