



Strasbourg, 27 November 2003
[diplome/docs/2004/de10e_04]

PE-S-DE (2004) 10
English only

**Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe
in the field of biological and landscape diversity
(CO-DBP)**

Group of specialists – European Diploma for Protected Areas

12-13 January 2004
Room 2, Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg

**CRETAN WHITE MOUNTAINS
SAMARIA GORGE NATIONAL PARK
(Greece)**

RENEWAL

Expert report by
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*Document established by
the Directorate of Culture
and Cultural and Natural Heritage*

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was first awarded to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park in 1979 and has been regularly renewed.

The Secretariat did not accompany the expert on his visit to the park.

Appendix I reproduces Resolution (99) 16 which was adopted when the Diploma was last renewed. In Appendix II the Secretariat presents a draft resolution for possible renewal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

National Park White Mountains – Samaria Gorge was declared in 1962 by Presidential Decree and belongs under supervision of the Greek ministry of Interior (Region of Crete, Forest Directorate in Chania), while it still keeps its strong links with the ministry of Agriculture. In 1979 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe awarded the National Park by European Diploma; within following years the Diploma was four times renewed (1984, 1989, 1994 and 1999), without any complications, but always with some recommendations.

On 24 March 2003 I was requested by the Head of the Natural Heritage and Biodiversity Division of the Council of Europe to carry out an on-the-spot appraisal of the Cretan White Mountains – Samaria Gorge National Park with a view to renewing the European Diploma before it is going to expire in 2004. I accepted the task with pleasure and a great interest.

2. TIME AND ORGANIZATION OF THE VISIT

I visited Chania and the National Park on May 15 to 17, 2003. My visit was perfectly prepared by Forest Directorate in Chania (contact person Ms. Hariklia Kargiolaki) and was organized as follows:

15 May morning

Visit of Forest Directorate of Chania in Chrysopigi, meeting with the director of Forest Directorate – Mr. Vasilis Kasiotakis and other people who took part on the appraisal, basic information on changes and development of the National Park within the last years, leaving to the White Mountains, meeting with people of the Alpine Group of Chania in the shelter at Kalergi (Mr Takis Houliopoulos),

15 May afternoon

Walking through the Samaria Gorge from Xyloskala to Samaria, accompanied by Ms Hariklia Kargiolaki, Mr Panagiotis Drougas and Ms Souzana Andritsou from ministry of Agriculture, Mr Argyris Regas from the local Fire Brigades (forester responsible for the fire protection of the gorge) and a few permanent and temporary wardens; overnight at Samaria.

Evening meeting and discussion with some scientists of Natural History Museum of Crete (which is a part of the University of Crete): Dr Mihalis Drettakis, Dr Apostolos Trichas, Dr Haralambos Fasoulas, Dr Manolis Avramakis and their guest, Dr Nico Cellinese, the botanist from Yale University, U.S.

16 May

Walking through Samaria Gorge continued; in Agia Roumeli meeting with the mayor of municipality of Sfakia, Mr Josef Lykos, president of the local council of Agia Roumeli, Mr Rousos Viglis, and with Mr Yianis Poulionakis and Mr Stavros Agapakis of Regional Forest Directorate in Iraklio, also with Mr Vasilis Kasiotakis.

17 May

Visit of Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (MAICh), speaking to researchers, responsible for monitoring of endemic plants and conservation project (Ms Christini Fournaraki) and Alpine region monitoring (Mr Yiorgos Kazakis).

Meeting with people of municipalities and state administration: Mr Yiorgos Agorastakis – vice prefect of Chania, Mr Pantelis Tzortzakis – Director of Regional Forest Directorate, Ms Ekaterini Marmara – ministry of Environment, Planning and Public Works, mayors of Sfakia (Mr Josef Lykos), Mousouroi (Mr Xenofon Arnantonakis), Anatoliko Selino (Mr Lefteris Papaderos) and Therissos (Mr Evangelos Hnaras), besides the people who participated on the trip to Samaria Gorge.

Press Conference

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PARK AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

All area of the White Mountains (Lefka Ori) is significant for its natural value. There are six sites recognized to belong to the NATURA 2000 network, all area hosts more than 150 plant species, most of them endemic to Crete, many animal species live there. Notable occurrence of big raptors makes the area well-known among ornithologists all over Europe. Only a small part of the area is – until today – protected as the national park: 16 km long and a few hundred metres deep gorge, called after a tiny abandoned village inside, Samaria Gorge, has been declared 1962 as the National Park. Total area of the National Park is only 4,850 ha (with a buffer zone which is not exactly delineated), while all the area of scientific interest adjacent to existing national park exceeds the strictly protected area 5 times. The importance of the area for NATURA 2000 programme helps very effectively to implement the plans for extension of the national park. Now the extension of the national park is prepared to the total area of 24,542 ha, in which the existing national park will stay as the core zone of the protected area (extended to 6,097.7 ha), 18,444.3 ha will be a transition zone with a special management. The extended National Park will cover (beside the Samaria Gorge) also the Wildlife Refuge White Mountains (declared by Greek ministry of Agriculture) and Special Protected Area (Birds Directive EU). It covers also the substantial part of proposed Site of Community Importance White Mountains. All area of the national park belongs to the state, which makes the management easier. The park is also a part of the Biosphere reserve UNESCO.

The park is relatively well afforested; since 1960s there is no wood cutting, before that time there was only very limited cutting of pines (*Pinus brutia*) on accessible places close to Samaria village. There are nice stands of *Pinus brutia*, *Cupressus sempervirens horizontalis*, specimen of *Quercus coccifera* and others (including *Zelkova abelicea*) are found.

Samaria Gorge is accessible for humans only by two entrances: northern entrance at Xyloskalo lays at altitude of about 1,200 m a.s.l., while southern entrance, close to Agia Roumeli is a few metres above sea level. There are no other possibilities to enter the gorge, not only for people, but it is difficult for larger animals (wild goats) to cross the natural borders of the gorge, too. The population of wild goat (*Capra aegagrus cretica*) is then isolated and hybridism with the domestic goats is almost excluded. The wild goats live also in other parts of the White Mts., but even there hybridism has not been confirmed, probably because the different rutting season between the wild and domestic goats. The number of wild goats is always increasing, estimation speaks of more then 500 individuals in the Gorge and more then 2,000 in all area of the White Mts. During our visit we could observe a female with two kids close to Samaria village. The question is, if the increasing number of wild goats in the Gorge could not cause the problems in future. Overgrazing by wild animals can bring the same problems like that by domestic goats. Until now, no damage on forests has been observed.

No available data exist about the wild cat (*Felis silvestris cretica*) despite of effort of scientists who work in the park.

White Mts. area is known as the breeding place of big raptors : golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) occur regularly, while the bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) is the rare nesting species : in the area of the White Mts. there is one active breeding pair out of the four on Crete. No nest of bearded vulture was found in Samaria Gorge, one nest is found every year close to the western border of the existing park. We could observe one individual of griffon vulture during our trip.

We could observe also two choughs (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) which are not rare at the all area.

Because of improving cooperation with the University of Crete – Natural History Museum, the scientists carry out monitoring of above meant animals and birds. Special attention is given to monitoring and conservation of *Gypaetus barbatus* (project “Conservation Action for *Gypaetus barbatus* and Biodiversity in Crete”). Botanists also monitor some rare species of plants: *Bupleurum kakiskalae*, *Nepeta sphaciatica*, *Hypericum aciferum*, which are endemic plant species to the White Mountains.

4. VISITORS

There are hundreds of thousands of people from all over Europe who visit every year sea resorts on Crete. Most of travel agencies organize trips for their clients and Samaria Gorge is a very common target for them. Thus, number of visitors of the park is very high and stable: about 240,000 every year approximatively. Despite of relatively long trail (18 km) and difficult terrain, many people go through because Samaria Gorge is known as a site of outstanding beauty. Most of visitors arrive at the upper (northern) end of the trail (Xyloskalos), which is accessible by bus or car and walk down through the gorge until they reach the village Agia Roumeli, where is a little port and they have possibility to get by ferry to Chora Sfakion or to Paleochora. Both places are connected by road to Chania. Some people prefer to go to a “lazy tour”, short walk from Agia Roumeli upstream to the “gate of Samaria” the narrowest point of the gorge, about 3 km from Agia Roumeli. The entrance fee to the gorge is possible to pay at both entrances, the proceeds is divided (30% go to adjacent villages: 10% Lakkoi, 10% Agia Roumeli and the rest 10% is divided to the villages Agios Ioannis, Anopolis, Therissos, Meskla & Sougia; the state gets the 70% of the annual income). Nobody is allowed to overnight in the park; there is an emergency station in Samaria village, a doctor stays there during a high season. In the case of need it is possible to overnight there, too. A few houses of the old village (abandoned before 1965) have been reconstructed and serve to the staff and emergency unit.

Removal of solid wastes from the park is very well organized and we did not see any problems. The trail is necessary to maintain every year after winter rains and it is done by wardens. All these works are done using local materials and traditional techniques. Also protection against fire is carefully organized. The attention should be given to the water pipe-line to Agia Roumeli. It is not possible to remove it, but perhaps to hide it better.

5. MANAGEMENT

Responsible body for the national park is Forest Directorate in Chania, supervised by the Regional Forest Directorate for Crete in Iraklio, under the Region of Crete authority. However, forest policy in Greece is decided by the ministry of Agriculture in Athens, so the linkage between regional authorities and the central relevant Ministries is still very strong. The role of ministry of Environment was – until today – rather weak, but there is an important change, which is to be implemented before the end of 2003 – the changes are referred to the overtaking of the ministry of the Environment of all protected areas (NATURA 2000, National Parks). Thus, implementation of the new Board of the National Park is done by the Greek ministry of the Environment by a Joint Ministerial Decision (ministries of Environment, Agriculture and Development) on February 2003. The Board will be consisted of 8 members, one representative from each of following bodies: ministry of Environment, ministry of Agriculture, ministry of Development, Region of Crete, Prefecture of Chania, one representative of municipalities of Sfakia, Mousouroi, Therissos and Anatoliko Selino, one scientist with expertise on issues for the management of natural environment and one representative of a Non Governmental Organization. The Board will be chaired by the representative of ministry of Environment.

The staff of the national park is sufficient by number and by qualification. The lack of scientists in the staff, criticised in previous reports, was solved by closer cooperation with the University of Crete – Natural History Museum and Mediterranean Agronomic Institute in Chania. Both of these institutions are involved in many activities, national and international projects on monitoring and nature protection. Perhaps an exchange of information could be improved, especially from the side of scientists.

The maintenance of the park is on very high level. There are no problems with wastes. Any economical activities (wood cutting, grazing etc.) are excluded. Thus, the management plan for the park in existing borders is very simple and there is no problem to follow it. The situation will be changed before the end of this year (2003), when the Board of the National Park starts to work and the existing protected area is to be extended substantially. The project for extension and the new management plan are already prepared. The park shall be extended to 24,542 ha, the existing protected area of Samaria Gorge will stay (after extension from 4,850 to 6,097.7 ha) the core zone of the national park without any human intervention to ecosystems; the extended area will be a transition zone with a special management. The extension of the core zone will be reached by joining Trypitis Gorge on the western neighbourhood of Samaria Gorge, which is the nesting place of *Gypaetus barbatus* and protected "wildlife refuge". Most of the new area of protection – the buffer, or transition zone – is used now as grazing land for goats. This will not be excluded due to many reasons: political (it is traditional and under some conditions relatively sustainable use of land) and biological (some ecosystems depend of certain intensity of grazing; big raptors – vultures, eagles – depend on cadavers of dead animals). That is why the grazing will be only limited by number of animals and perhaps, on some places, by seasonal limits. The management plan is prepared and negotiated with users of the land on about one half of the area. I find this management plan reasonable and hope that it will be accepted by stakeholders before the end of this year.

The extension of the park will solve an old problem – an improvement of the area of Agia Roumeli and protection of this area against non-regulated development.

An interesting discussion with mayors assured me, that mayors are not against the national park, which "helps to economy of local communities". The establishment of the Board is welcome. The extension of the park is agreed, when the non-intervention zone will be limited, more or less, by borders of existing national park and grazing on extended area would be limited as little as possible.

As I have been informed by Ms Ekaterini Marmara from ministry of Environment, Planning and Public Works, the Board is prepared to solve all technical problems. Extension of the park is approved by the ministry of Agriculture (1998) and had been forwarded to ministry of Environment, Planning and Public Works for co-signature. The procedure was complicated by a new law (1999), now it is going on further. It is expected, that before the end of this year extension and the management plan will start to valid.

6. FINANCE

The budget of the park is satisfactory. Salaries of permanent and seasonal personnel are covered by state sources, while most of the works are co-financed: 75% by the European Union, 25% by the State.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN 1999

- (1) The management plan should be approved and implemented as soon as possible in consultation with the local authorities, and an advisory body comprising members of the local population and relevant administrative departments and scientists should be set up to monitor the application of the plan. The planned extension of the park and the creation of a buffer zone are to be given priority.

Negotiation with the local authorities have still not been finished, but there is a general consensus, that the management plan is acceptable by all stakeholders. The Board of the national park is on the way to be established and should start work within a few months. The extension of the national park is prepared and approved by the ministry of Agriculture. The approval by ministry of Environment is still missing; however the Board Establishment Act coincides with an extended area for its authority.

- (2) Scientific monitoring and information must be improved to reach the same standard as for the supervision and maintenance of the trail. To achieve this, one or more biologists should be included in the team of technicians to help train to park staff.

Scientific monitoring has been improved by closer cooperation with University of Crete – Natural History Museum, which continues on some botanical, ornithological and geological research and with Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania (endemic plants monitoring and Alpine region monitoring). The park staff is trained, but research depends on scientists.

- (3) Research, especially in areas of importance to conservation (the bearded vulture, the wild goat, the Cretan wild cat, developments in the vegetation etc.) must be encouraged and the flow and exchange of scientific information between researchers and the park authorities must be improved.

Research of the bearded vulture is running by the University of Crete – Natural History Museum under the project “Conservation Action for Gypaetus barbatus and Biodiversity in Crete” which includes also research of rare species of animals and plants, living in the habitats of the bearded vulture. Other international project, called GLORIA (Global Observation Research Initiative in Alpine Environments) is running under leadership of the University of Vienna, Austria, its aim is monitoring of global warming and its influence on alpine vegetation. The flow of scientific information to the park is slow, scientists do not like to release information before their publication.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The national park White Mountains – Gorge of Samaria stays over long time at the level of quality, which enables to keep European Diploma, as defined in Resolution (98) 29, Council of Europe. Since 1979, when European Diploma was first time awarded to this national park, it has been possible to watch perpetual improving of practical conservation of the area, which depends, naturally, also on the progress in legislative system in the country and implementation of law in civic society. Among the most important improvements in the last 5 years is finalisation of the management plan, zonation of the park and preparation of necessary documents for extension of the park. Further improvement is expected when the new Board of the National Park starts to work. Practical problems with the maintenance of the proposed core zone of the park do not exist due to very good organization of the staff, warden services, cleaning the area, maintenance of tourist trail and information of tourists, protection against fire etc. Scientific research is in progress, too.

European Diploma awarded to the White Mountains – Gorge of Samaria National Park should be renewed in recognition of its natural value and with respect to the local, regional and governmental authorities, which try to keep the wider area of the national park in the best state and support nature conservation effort.

9. RECOMMENDATION

Following recommendations are suggested to be included to the resolution on the renewal of the European Diploma:

- (1) The extension of the national park and its zonation should be declared in a very short time; implementation of the management plan should follow as soon as possible.
- (2) The Board of the national park should start its work immediately. Appointment of the Board members should be closed by the end of the year 2003. The Board should get under its evidence also scientific research and should support a better flow of information from science to practice.
- (3) The new borders of the national park should be marked: by signs on all public roads leading inside the park and on important and visible points in terrain.

REFERENCES

Following documentation was available for me before, during and after the visit of Samaria Gorge:

SN-R-DP (79) 19 On-the-spot appraisal by Mr. Theo Hunziker 1979

PE-S-ZP (94) 45 Appraisal report by Mr. Joan Mayol 1994

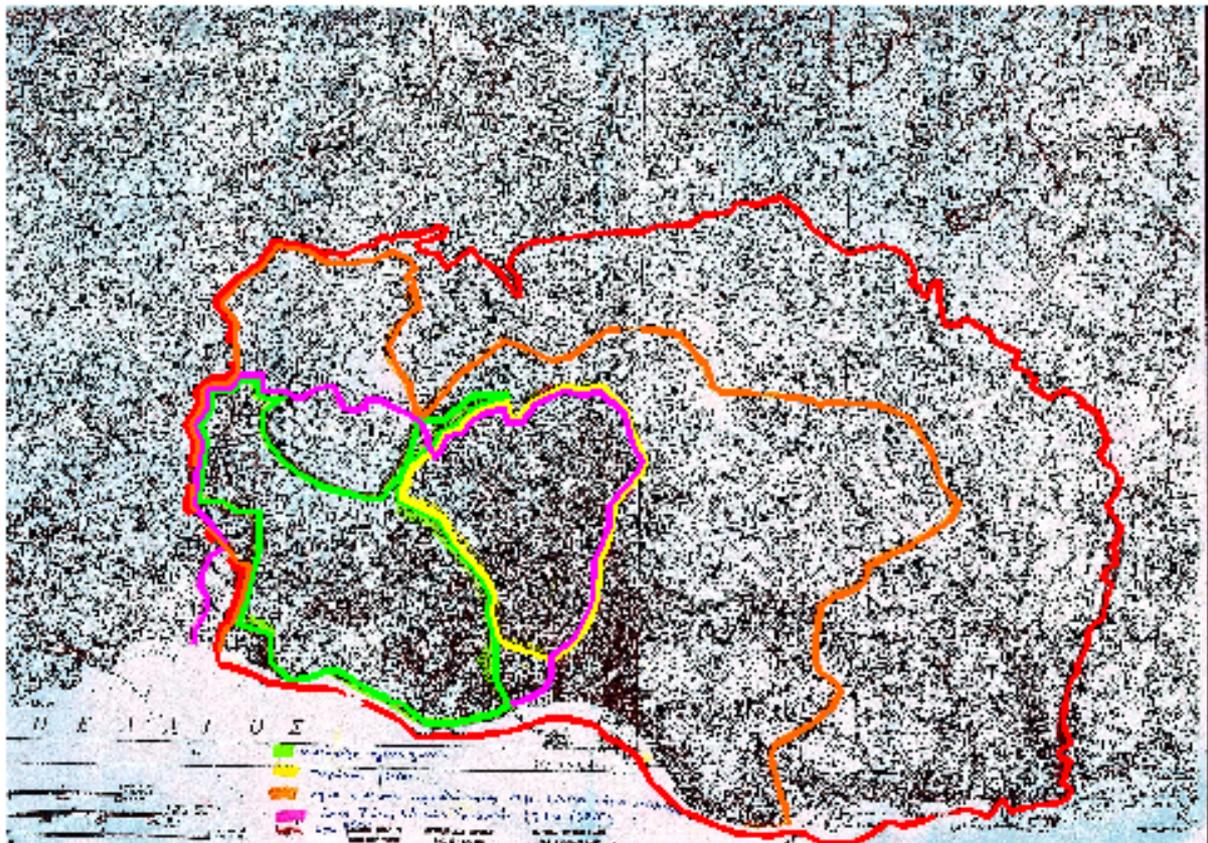
PE-S-DE (99) 52 Appraisal report by Mr. Joan Mayol 1999

PE-S-DE (99) 18 Annual report for 1998

PE-S-DE (2000) 18 Annual report for 1999

Annual reports for 2000, 2001 and 2002

Information by ministry of Agriculture on state of extension of the national park and implication of the park to the system Natura 2000 and on current scientific research.



LEGEND

- WILDLIFE REFUGE BOUNDARIES
- CORE AREA BOUNDARIES (OF THE EXISTING NATIONAL PARK)
- EXTENDED NATIONAL PARK BOUNDARIES (MANAGEMENT BODY AREA RESPONSIBILITY)
- SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA BOUNDARIES (SPA)
- PROPOSED SITE OF COMMUNITY IMPORTANCE BOUNDARIES (pSCI)

APPENDIX I

**COUNCIL OF EUROPE
COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS**

**Resolution (99) 16
on the renewal of the European Diploma awarded
to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park
(Greece)**

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers
on 9 September 1999
at the 678th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the regulations for the European Diploma for protected areas;

Having regard to Resolution (79) 14 awarding the European Diploma to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park in category A;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the Activities of the Council of Europe in the field of biological and landscape diversity (CO-DBP);

Taking into consideration the expert's report as presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists for the European Diploma of Protected Areas on 29 and 30 March 1999;

Renews the European Diploma awarded to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park until 13 September 2004,

Makes the renewal subject to the following recommendations:

1. The management plan should be approved and implemented as soon as possible in consultation with the local authorities, and an advisory body comprising members of the local population and relevant administrative departments and scientists should be set up to monitor the application of the plan. The planned extension of the park and the creation of a buffer zone are to be given priority.
2. Scientific monitoring and information must be improved to reach the same standard as for the supervision and maintenance of the trail. To achieve this, one or more biologists should be included in the team of technicians to help train the park staff.
3. Research, especially in areas of importance to conservation (the bearded vulture, the wild goat, the Cretan wild cat, developments in the vegetation, etc.) must be encouraged and the flow and exchange of scientific information between researchers and the park authorities must be improved.

APPENDIX II**Draft resolution
on the renewal of the European Diploma of Protected Areas
to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park
(Greece)**

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the regulations for the European Diploma for protected areas;

Having regard to Resolution (79) 14 awarding the European Diploma to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park in category A;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the Activities of the Council of Europe in the field of biological and landscape diversity (CO-DBP);

Taking into consideration the expert's report as presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists for the European Diploma of Protected Areas on 12 and 13 January 2004;

Renews the European Diploma to the Cretan White Mountains (Gorge of Samaria) National Park until 13 September 2009,

Makes the renewal subject to the following recommendations:

1. The extension of the national park and its zonation should be declared in a very short time; implementation of the management plan should follow as soon as possible;
2. The Board of the National Park should start its work immediately. Appointment of the Board members should be terminated by the end of the year 2003. The Board should be regularly informed about ongoing scientific research and should support a better flow of information between research scientists and the Park authorities;
3. The new borders of the National Park should be indicated: by signs on all public roads leading inside the park and on important and visible points in the field.