

After three years of research and fieldwork, the European project ECONNECT comes to a conclusion: the results of the final conference

The closing conference for the ECONNECT project was held in Berchtesgaden, Germany, attended by political representatives of the six Alpine countries, as well as experts and scientific researchers from local and international institutions. Project team members presented the results of the project, which was one of the first to deal with the issue of Alpine connectivity that applied an integrated and multidisciplinary approach.

The final conference included debates and proposals of significant interest for the protection, improvement and development of ecological connectivity throughout the Alpine range. “The most important and, in some ways, most surprising result, is that **connectivity in the Alps is actually still adequate for many species**” stated Dr. Chris Walzer of the Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology of the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna, who is the lead partner of ECONNECT. “But this is precisely why we must stay on guard. The connections between Alpine habitats have to be preserved and maintained by wise and farsighted management strategies covering the entire territory and by means of specific tools.” One of the tools developed by ECONNECT researchers is the highly innovative **JECAMI platform**. This is a computer-based system for mapping ecological barriers and corridors that allows users to view the potential migration routes of a given species, and thus to take them into account during regional land-use planning processes in order to ensure their protection.

Some of the other tangible results are the actions put in place in the seven pilot regions of the project. ECONNECT has provided a concrete contribution for protecting the ecological linkages in these regions, as can be seen by what has happened in the Maritime Alps Natural Park. Most importantly, apart from implementing a system for monitoring the cables of ski-lifts and cable cars, the research performed for ECONNECT by the Park’s staff made it possible to alert the public authorities involved to the existence of an important wildlife migration corridor in an area where a construction project had been planned, which was stopped as a result.

Another striking result of the ECONNECT project is that the most significant barriers which have to be overcome for achieving effective international collaboration on ecosystem protection are cultural. ECONNECT has been an important opportunity for discussing and developing solutions for these issues from a broader perspective, thus moving ahead in the direction of creating ecological connectivity in the Alps. Among the results achieved, perhaps the most straightforward is the sharing of environmental data throughout Europe to support research activities. Sharing of environmental data across the Alps is an essential precondition for effective transnational collaboration on biodiversity conservation.

THE ECONNECT PROJECT

Funded by the European Union through the Alpine Space programme and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the aim of ECONNECT is to improve ecological connectivity in the Alps. This project involved international organisations connected to the Alpine Convention, scientific institutes and local institutes. All these bodies joined forces not just to demonstrate the need for connectivity in the Alpine territory, but also to assess the best ideas to guarantee coordinated action for the development of innovative systems and for promoting ecological connectivity.

PARTNERS IN THE PROJECT

Coordinator:

- Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology (FIWI) of the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna; (A)

Other partners:

- University of Innsbruck-Institute Ecology (A)
- Umweltbundesamt GmbH (A)
- Gesäuse National Park GmbH (A)
- Hohe Tauern National Park (A)
- Italian Ministry of the Environment (I)
- European Academy of Bolzano (I)
- WWF Italia (I)
- Wildlife Park of the Maritime Alps (I)
- Autonomous Region of Valle d'Aosta (I)
- Council of Department of Isère (F)
- Task Force Protected Areas / Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention
- Scientific research centre CEMAGREF (F)
- National Park Berchtesgaden (D)
- CIPRA International (LI)
- Swiss National Park (CH)