

## **ECONNECT: FROM ECOLOGICAL ISLANDS TO ECOLOGICAL NETWORKS IN THE ALPS**

*Under the umbrella of the ECONNECT project, for three years 16 international partners worked towards extending and protecting the Alpine ecological network. The results of their work will be presented in Berchtesgaden, Germany, from 26 to 28 September 2011.*

Ecological connectivity refers to how well habitats are connected physically and how easy it is for species to move between them. This is of great importance for the conservation of biological diversity, because many species and most ecological functions – many of which provide important ecosystem services for humans – require much larger areas than are available within park boundaries. The ECONNECT working groups analysed the issue of ecological connectivity in the Alpine Arc, one of the most biodiversity-rich and at the same time one of the most densely populated regions in Europe, from different perspectives: they took into account both the tangible effects of man-made physical barriers on the free movement of species, and —perhaps even more importantly – the legislative and institutional issues that must be tackled to build an effective Alpine ecological network.

The ECONNECT consortium developed a solid methodology to identify the key Alpine corridors and physical barriers. Researchers used the needs of six "indicator species" (wolf, brown bear, Eurasian lynx, griffon vulture, red deer and black grouse) to test connectivity and discovered, for instance, that 71,4% of all potential habitats

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for brown bears are located outside protected areas and that 64,5% of the suitable corridors for lynx are unprotected. Beyond physical barriers, the project partners also examined the “invisible barriers” to ecological connectivity, such as insufficient or conflicting laws and institutional arrangements. They designed a useful mapping tool to visualise barriers and corridors, which can illustrate the concept of ecological connectivity for policy makers and planners.

### **A NEW VISION FOR THE ALPINE ARC**

“The ECONNECT project team envisions an enduringly restored and maintained ecological continuum, consisting of inter-connected landscapes, across the entire Alpine Arc region” affirmed Chris Walzer, lead partner of ECONNECT. “This requires conservation measures beyond individual ecological islands and even more importantly across all sectors of society. Connectivity is key to biodiversity conservation and the resilience of ecological processes on which we all depend”.

To reach this ambitious goal, it is essential that policy makers initiate farsighted decision-making processes that bring together scientists, politicians, practitioners and stakeholders to develop workable, integrated solutions that build on the ecological and economic opportunities for synergy and co –benefits of ecological connectivity.

### **ECONNECT IN THE FIELD: THE CASE OF THE BERCHTESGADEN-SALZBURG PILOT REGION**

ECONNECT implemented solutions in seven pilot regions scattered all along the Alpine Arc. These actions were unified in their complexity; landscapes are the result of complex interactions between humans and other species, old and new economic constraints and opportunities, leisure activities and species’ needs. Recognizing this complexity is key to building an effective Alpine ecological network. “Within the Berchtesgaden-Salzburg pilot region, for instance, tangible actions aimed at maintaining the regional ecological network of open extensive grasslands as part of

the cultural landscape and the regional identity have been implemented” says Michael Vogel, director of the Berchtesgaden National Park. “Open meadows and pastures are not only essential for regional flora and fauna, but also a representative part of the traditional landscape of the area. By preserving these areas we can maintain both their ecological and their scenic value with its high tourism potential”.

The ECONNECT team has come up with a number of recommendations for policy makers that will have to be heeded if we are to transform degraded and fragmented ecosystems into a healthy Alpine network. These policy recommendations along with numerous other important and interesting results will be presented at the ECONNECT final conference in Berchtesgaden (Germany) from 26 to 28 September 2011. The conference will be an opportunity to propose innovative ways of protecting our Alpine natural heritage and will provide a forum for discussing ways to place ecological connectivity firmly on the European political agenda. High-level representatives of international, European and local institutions are expected to attend.