Nature Conservation in Ski Country? The Vanoise National Park

Isabelle Mauz

Summary

Created in 1963 in the northern French Alps across the border from the Italian Gran Paradiso National Park, the first French national park derived from several projects with very different origins, scopes, and aims. This diversity influenced the 1960 French law on national parks. Although the final draft of the park and the creation of the ski resorts were designed together, a major conflict in 1969, known as "the Vanoise affair," brought the park and the resorts into conflict. From then on, the park has been limited by the need to negotiate between nature conservation and a booming tourism industry.



View of the Grande Casse in the Vanoise National Park

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Created in 1963 in the northern French Alps, the Vanoise National Park derived from three projects with very different origins, scopes, and aims. From the 1940s onwards, a renowned naturalist and mountain game hunter, Marcel Couturier (1897–1973), endorsed a project inspired by Gran Paradiso National Park in Italy. Like its Italian model, the goal of this project was to create a sanctuary for ibex; its proximity to Gran Paradiso National Park increased the wildlife conservation benefits.

In the 1950s, Gilbert André, deeply impressed by the lifestyles of the people he met during months of wandering through the French Alps, set out to save this Alpine civilization by creating a large "cultural national park." He chose the upper Arc and Isère valleys for its site. At the same time, mountaineers and natural scientists made proposals for a much smaller park next to the Italian border.

Together, the three projects convinced policymakers of the need for a park in this area, which would, at last, endow France with its first national park. The person in charge of drafting a design was an urban architect, Denys Pradelle (1913–1999), who was also deeply involved in the creation of ski resorts. Skilfully, he combined

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the initial projects: the park would comprise a core zone delineated for the ibex, a buffer zone roughly inspired by the "cultural national park," which was to promote local heritage and tourism, and strict nature reserves for the natural scientists. This spatial configuration influenced the 1960 French law on national parks, which was elaborated by the influential water and forest administration. Yet, the law introduced important differences. In particular, the park was given little power in the buffer zone. And the decree creating the park was resented locally, as the inhabitants felt that nature conservation had largely prevailed over the development dimension.

Despite these early tensions, the first years of the park were busy with hiring and training the staff, building the paths and cabins to welcome the visitors, and helping the ibex to colonize this newly protected territory.

Meanwhile, the ski resorts developed at high speed in the buffer zone. In particular, the upper Isère valley soon gathered one of the world's highest concentration of ski resorts. The first major difficulty appeared in 1969, when a property developer embarked on building a ski resort in the core zone. Scientists and nature protectors led an intense two-year battle, at all levels, to "save the first French national park." Known as "the Vanoise affair," this episode marked the beginning of the environmental movement in France.



Ibex at the Col de la Vanoise

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The conflict was settled by the government's decision to reject the resort project. But the promoters obtained the permission to install ski facilities elsewhere in the core zone. From then on, the national park and the ski resorts, although born together, have existed in a state of constant tension with one another. And to this day, the Vanoise National Park seeks a tenuous balance between nature conservation and a booming tourism economy.

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Further readings:

- Laslaz, Lionel. *Vanoise: 40 ans de parc national; Bilan et perspectives.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
- Mauz, Isabelle. "Regional Development and the French National Parks: The Case of the Vanoise National Park." In *Protected Areas and Regional Development in Europe: Towards a New Model for the 21st Century*, edited by Ingo Mose, 115–28. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
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Related links:

- Vanoise National Park on Protected Planet
  https://www.protectedplanet.net/661
- Website of the Vanoise National Park
  http://english.vanoise-parcnational.fr/fr/vanoise-national-park.html

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Isabelle Mauz
Isabelle Mauz is a sociologist. She has studied the history of some of the oldest protected areas in France, including the Vanoise National Park. Her current research focuses on new ways of investigating and managing nature in an era of biodiversity loss, especially the interface between biodiversity scientists and nature managers.

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