



WWF

BROCHURE

APRIL
2012

Conservation

Climate Change

Sustainability

The European Alpine Programme

Joint action for nature in the European Alps 

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FOREWORD

“Our aim is to maintain the Alps’ natural heritage for future generations.”



It is easy to take the Alps for granted. After all, there are more exotic places on Earth. And yet, the Alps are truly a special place. Their beauty is stunning, their biodiversity spectacular, their resources precious. Unfortunately, the Alps are in danger. No other mountain range in the world is as severely exploited, or densely populated, as the Alps.

The many problems biodiversity is facing in the Alps may be of a global nature, such as climate change, or they may be localized, such as urban sprawl, hydro-power installations, and unsustainable tourism practices. All these problems need solutions that are coordinated internationally. The threats impending over biodiversity in the Alps do not stop at national borders. Solutions must therefore also be transnational. That is what the WWF European Alpine Programme is trying to provide.

Our aim is to maintain the Alps’ natural heritage for future generations. To achieve this far-reaching goal, the WWF European Alpine Programme organises the work of WWF’s national offices in each of the Alpine countries. We strive to provide coordinated responses to global and regional threats to biodiversity. Furthermore, we provide state-of-the-art conservation methodologies to our partners and involve stakeholders and public administrations in our conservation efforts.

We firmly believe that conservation goals can be achieved only through the involvement of all relevant actors. Our solutions are based on the best science available, but they are rooted in consensus. We know, based on the lessons we learned in decades of conservation work, that no solution is really viable if the ‘human factor’ is not taken into account.

The WWF European Alpine Programme will continue its efforts to uphold biodiversity in the Alps in a vision where nature and humans live in harmony and the natural landscape of the Alps is passed on to our children. We make this effort because we believe that the unique natural and cultural heritage of the Alps is not to be taken for granted.

Sergio Savoia, Director of the European Alpine Programme

The Alps

ONE OF EUROPE'S LAST WILD SPACES

Towering over Europe, the Alps represent one of the continent's last strongholds of nature.

The Alps – one of the last remaining areas with truly wild places in central Europe – are remote. They are breathtaking. They are beautiful. They are one of the last strongholds of nature.

4,800 m



1,200 km

The Alps are 1,200 km long and reach up to 4,800 m in height.

As one of the largest and highest mountain ranges in the world, the Alps form an arc of 1,200 km in length from Nice to Vienna, rising up to 4,800 m (Mont Blanc). They stretch across eight different countries (Monaco, France, Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany, Austria and Slovenia). About 14 million people are distributed over approximately 6,100 communities. This is the basis for the rich cultural heritage found in the Alps.



© ELMA OKIC / WWF-CANON

Living in the extreme. The rock and ice deserts characterising Alpine peaks comprise some of the harshest and most extreme living conditions on Earth

Their mountainous character sets the Alps apart from the surrounding landscapes and separates the dry evergreen forests of the Mediterranean region from the central European deciduous forests.

The Alps are a labyrinth of mountain chains and valleys. Dynamic natural processes – Foehn storms, avalanches, rock falls, periodic flooding, and harsh winters – continuously reshape the landscape and are the driving force for biological diversity.

It comes as no surprise that the Alps support a huge variety of habitats: from warm, lush valleys and deep mountain gorges to ice and rock deserts dominating the summit regions.

The Alps

A RICH NATURAL HERITAGE

The Alps are one of the most intensively exploited mountain ecosystems in the world. They nonetheless represent one of the richest biodiversity hotspots in Europe.

Around 30,000 animal and 13,000 plant species live in the Alps.

30,000 + 13,000

39%

The number of vascular plant species living in the Alps represents 39% of the total European flora.

80 100m²

Up to 80 species per 100 m² in high Alpine meadows.

The complex and dynamic character of the Alps is the main reason for the astonishing diversity of life found here. Despite centuries of human settlement and activity, pristine wilderness can still be found. Oak, beech, ash, and maple forests continue to dominate large areas. Wild flowers blanket many Alpine meadows. Red deer, ibex, chamois, marmots, and other species can be found climbing high up in the mountains. And large carnivores – **wolf**, **bear** and **lynx** – are slowly returning after almost being totally wiped out from the Alps.

The rich natural heritage characterising the Alps also reflects the historical influence of human presence in the area. Traditional farming practices dating back to Neolithic times have in fact added to biodiversity. For instance, extensively farmed Alpine meadows located at 1800 to 2200 metres above sea level support up to 80 species of plants per hundred square meters. About a quarter of all plant diversity is man-made or depends on particular forms of agriculture.

What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the “**spice of life**”. It consists of the different genes, species, ecosystems, and processes that sustain life on Earth. The Alps support a high level of biodiversity because of their complex morphology and variety of unique living spaces. Over time, animal and plant species evolved to live in the many different Alpine habitats forming a rich fauna and flora. However, even as one of the best studied mountain systems in the world, we have only a very basic knowledge about the different components of Alpine biodiversity. We do not know how much natural wealth we stand to lose.



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Typical Alpine species

The **chamois** (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) is a typical Alpine species. Its ability to traverse near-vertical slopes demonstrates how specialized species need to be to live in harsh Alpine environments. While its distribution spans mountainous regions across Europe, some subspecies of the chamois, like *R. r. cartusiana*, are endemic to the Alps – that is, they are found in the Alps and nowhere else on Earth.

The Alps

A THREATENED LANDSCAPE

Habitat degradation is the major threat to Alpine biodiversity. Spreading settlements, unsustainable farming, road networks, and river dams are the main culprits.

150 million



Nearly 150 million people cross the Alps every year

Sprawling cities

The expansion of urbanised centres is threatening the very last natural relics in Alpine lowland areas. The easily accessible valleys of the Rhône, Rhine, Inn, Adige/Etsch, and other major rivers have already lost most of their biodiversity value due to urban sprawl.

The dense road and rail networks in these valleys exacts a heavy toll through space-eating traffic infrastructure, noise, and air pollution. It is also a leading cause of habitat fragmentation constituting a major barrier for Alpine species. Tourism – a top industry in the Alps – is a major driver of urbanisation. Large tourist resorts have an area consumption rate that is far greater than that of a non-tourist community. This is especially problematic for remote Alpine regions which would otherwise be safe from urban sprawl.

Lost traditions

In the last 50 years, traditional Alpine farming changed radically: remote farming locations were abandoned while the more favourable zones were intensified. This trend has led to a decrease in biodiversity as species rich mountain pastures are either converted into heavily fertilized ‘green deserts’ or overgrown by forests.



In the next 20 years, alpine transit is expected to increase by 100% for freight and 50% for passenger traffic.

Tourism – threat or opportunity?

Around 120 million tourists visit the Alps every year making the impact of tourism on Alpine nature considerable. New waves of ‘mass tourism’ threaten to destroy pristine wildlife areas – the very thing that attracts tourists in the first place. But not all forms of tourism are inherently destructive. On the contrary – well planned and sustainably designed tourism can be used to promote the conservation of natural areas.

For this reason, WWF is using tourism as a conservation tool. Ecological accommodation – e.g. “Gîtes Panda” and “Fattorie del Panda” – and nature educational trails – e.g. WWF’s “Ursina” project – are some of many examples of how tourism is being used to promote nature protection in the Alps.

Human attitudes

After nearly being wiped out from the Alps, large carnivores – the wolf, bear, and lynx – are returning. But their return is not without opposition. Many Alpine farmers and hunters, concerned about livestock and game, remain strongly opposed to the return of large carnivores, especially in regions where the species have been absent for a long time. Low acceptance continues to be the main obstacle to the successful return of large carnivores in the Alps.



Only 10% of Alpine rivers are in natural or near-natural conditions.

Dying rivers

Water bodies in the Alps have been heavily altered and degraded. Riparian areas, which regulate floods, have been cut off from rivers and converted to agricultural fields or urban areas. River straightening and hydroelectric dams destroy freshwater habitats: fish spawning grounds are wiped out and migratory routes are cut off. This has devastating effects for the unique and specialised freshwater organisms. Global warming will only put more pressure on freshwater systems.

To dam or not to dam – is ‘renewable’ ecological?

Hydroelectric power is a leading source of energy in the Alps.

While it can offer a relatively sustainable solution to the energy problem, it can also be ecologically destructive to freshwater systems.

Likewise, not all hydroelectric power can be considered ‘clean’ energy. For example, many hydroelectric installations in the Alps use cheap offload power (mostly produced by coal or nuclear sources) to pump water up to the reservoir which in turn produces valuable peak-load electricity.

But hydropower can be made more sustainable. WWF supports green certification schemes that uphold strict ecological criteria and can reduce the impact of hydroelectric plants on natural freshwater areas.



The Alps have warmed by 1.5 °C in the last century.

A warming planet

Global warming will impact mountain areas in a particularly severe way. Changes in rain- and snowfall patterns are predicted, along with an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather-related events, such as floods and avalanches.

Over the last century global warming has caused all Alpine glaciers to recede and has led to an upward migration of Alpine plants. In the long run, lowland plants will displace Alpine species to ever-higher altitudes until they simply have nowhere to go at all, effectively forcing them into extinction. The spread of exotic species from parks and gardens is another foreseeable outcome and can already be observed in the Southern Alps.

Conservation

THE EUROPEAN ALPINE PROGRAMME

Nature knows no boundaries.

Neither do the problems it faces. Threats to the remaining natural areas of the Alpine region are thus a common problem for all Alpine countries. Shared solutions must therefore be found.

Towards a pan-Alpine perspective

The Alps are recognised as being globally important for conservation and were included in WWF's Global 200 – over 200 ecoregions representing the finest examples of a given major habitat type in the world. To conserve the natural wealth of the Alps, a new approach to conservation is needed. Four WWF national Alpine organizations (WWF Austria, WWF France, WWF Italy, and WWF Switzerland) are working together under the coordination of the European Alpine Programme (EALP). The main aim is to implement a more comprehensive and transboundary conservation strategy in the Alps. By adopting the ecoregional approach, the WWF offices shift towards integrated, large-scale and long-term conservation, supporting the objectives of the Alpine Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Goals

The EALP is leading actions to save Alpine nature by:

- 1) considering biodiversity from an Alps-wide perspective
- 2) identifying biodiversity hotspots (priority areas), where conservation is most urgent or will be most effective
- 3) enhancing connectivity between natural areas and the freedom of movement for animals
- 4) identifying priority issues for conservation
- 5) implementing action plans for priority areas and issues



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The Alps are among the world's most important ecoregions – regions that share a distinct assemblage of species, ecological processes, and environmental conditions. To protect Alpine nature in its entirety, the EALP is taking an 'ecoregional' approach, applying broad-scale and far-sighted solutions that transcend national borders.

Conservation

THE GEMSTONES OF THE ALPS

Our vision:
a representative portion of Alpine biodiversity is maintained through WWF's work in Priority Conservation Areas – the Alpine gemstones.

The WWF European Alpine Programme consulted top Alpine experts to outline the most important areas for the survival of the flora, mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and insects of the Alpine region, as well as specific habitats such as the few remaining pristine freshwater basins.

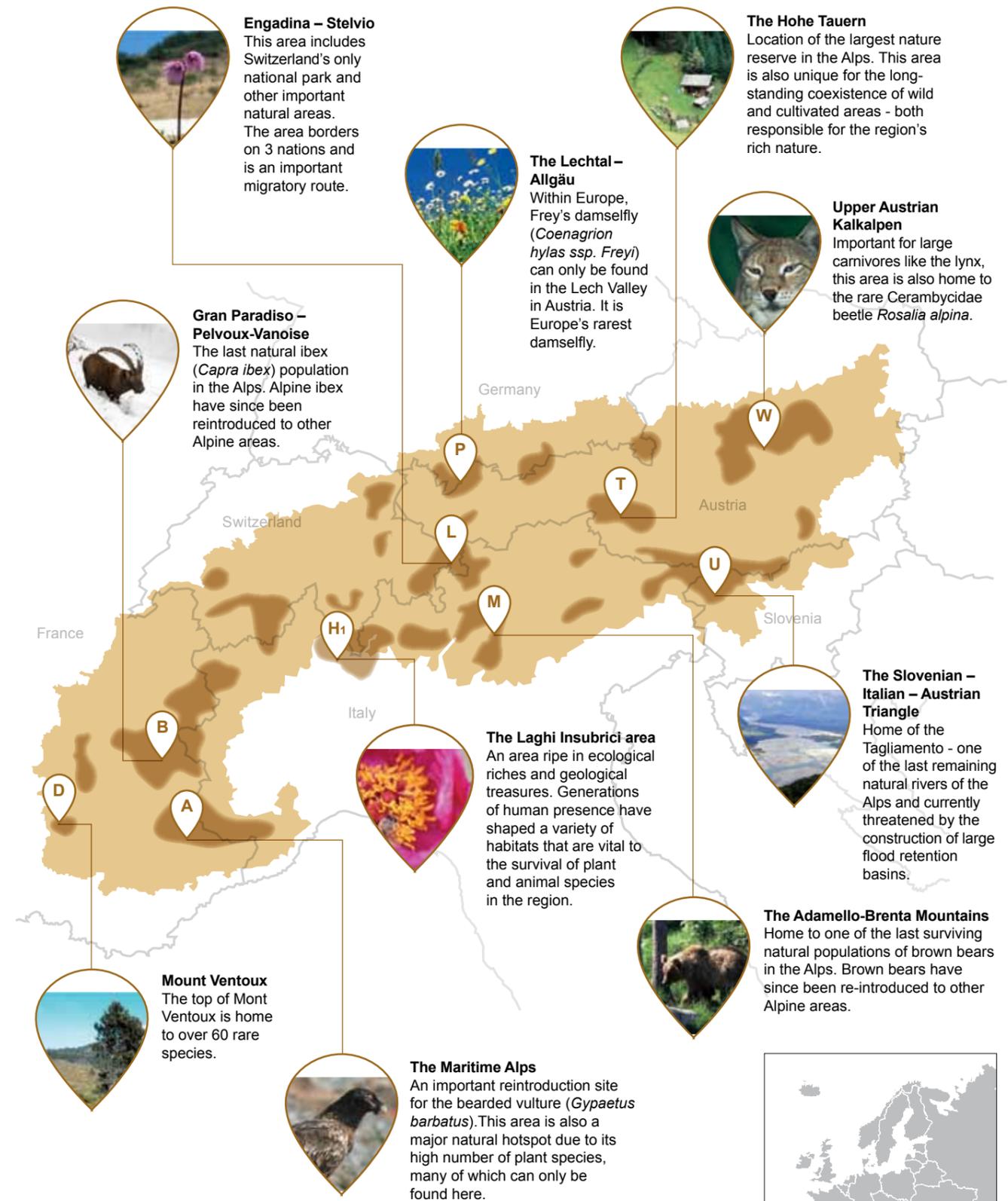
By overlaying the important zones for each of the 'biodiversity elements', 24 priority conservation areas across the region were identified. These are the 'gems' of the Alps. For each priority conservation area, the EALP and its partners are preparing an action plan for biodiversity.

What are the Alpine gemstones?

The Alpine gemstones are the key areas that need to be protected in order to save Alpine nature. That does not mean that the areas outside these gemstones are unimportant, but if we want to be most effective with our limited resources we have to concentrate our efforts on the areas that will have the biggest impact.



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Action for nature

SAVING AN ALPINE GEM



Facts and figures

- 1'816 km²
- 271 communities
- 805'000 inhabitants
- 385 inhabitants/ km² (Italy)
- 670 inhabitants/ km² (CH)
- 2'800 farms
- 12'000 companies

Conservation themes

- Freshwater habitats
- Connectivity in valley floors and urbanised areas
- Dry meadow and vineyard biodiversity
- Rare and traditionally managed forest formations



The Laghi Insubrici area • Forest habitat restoration work • River projects • Dry meadows on Monte Generoso • Management planning

The **Laghi Insubrici** area in Italy and Switzerland is one of the 24 priority conservation areas identified in the Alps. The WWF EALP is using this region as a pilot area to test the most effective and efficient way to conserve biodiversity in the Alpine gemstones.

The region's natural value was characterized by identifying hotspots of biodiversity and the presence of rare or endangered species, as well as the factors threatening to destroy biodiversity in the region. Based on this, priority conservation themes were selected.



Dry meadows

WWF is working to restore dry meadows on the slopes of Monte Generoso. This effort will both enhance the region's ecological richness and restore its unique cultural heritage. Collaboration with local communities who identify with the rich landscape will play a key role in restoring biodiversity.



Rivers

WWF is working to restore the ecological integrity of the Vedeggio and Laveggio Rivers. In the Vedeggio River area, for example, WWF is helping to establish an ecological network. The aim is to promote connectivity between the few remaining natural and semi-natural zones within this highly urbanized area.



Forests

WWF is working to protect and restore ecologically important forest habitats. Key conservation targets include traditionally managed forests like chestnut orchards and coppice forests as well as rare and/or species-rich forest formations. Training foresters and other professionals in pro-biodiversity management practices will play an important role in ensuring a successful conservation effort in the region.



Management Planning

WWF is developing the conservation management plans for a small but important protected **SCI** (Site of Community Importance) in the northeast section of the Laghi Insubrici area.



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What are dry meadows?

Dry meadows – recognizable by their rich spring colours and golden autumn hue – are man-made openings that offer a sunny escape for many plant species that cannot survive in the shade of trees and are a haven for many insects. Current trends towards the abandonment of traditional farming are threatening to destroy this important source of biodiversity in the Alps.

Action for nature

CONNECTING NATURE

Our vision: relevant ecological corridors of the Alps are functional.

For protected areas to be effective, they must also be accessible to animal and plant species. Many Alpine species are restricted to isolated habitat 'patches' and have little opportunity to expand their range and improve their numbers. This will ultimately lead to extinction, even though protected areas exist.

Alpine-wide connectivity work

To tackle the lack of ecological connectivity in the Alps, the EALP and its partners identified a set of areas linking regions of high conservation concern like the Alpine gemstones. Protecting and restoring these areas will help reconstruct the ecological network and ensure the freedom of movement to animals across the Alps.

The Ecological Continuum Initiative was created to advance connectivity work in the Alps. It provides an Alps-wide methodology for implementing connectivity activities and building awareness about its importance.

This led to the creation of ECONNECT – a multinational project involving NGOs, scientific institutions, international umbrella organisations linked to the Alpine Convention, and local implementation partners. Through collaboration and innovative thinking, this project explores the best options for coordinated action and the development of new tools to promote ecological connectivity.

Local connectivity work

WWF is also working at the local level to promote habitat connectivity within the Alpine gemstones. In the Laghi Insubrici region, for instance, an ecological network in the Vedeggio River area is being established to enhance connectivity between the few remaining natural and semi-natural zones within a highly urbanized area.

What is an ecological network?

An intact ecological network means that individuals of a species can move freely from one natural living space to another via a natural corridor or connecting area. The regular flow of individuals (and hence genes) between different populations of a species is important to avoid low genetic diversity and the effects of inbreeding depression – a common ailment in small and isolated populations. With global warming, connectivity will be especially important for species in the Alps who cannot adapt to new climate conditions and must migrate to new areas.



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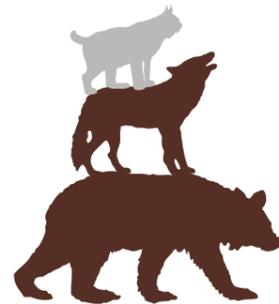
The Alpine ibex

After near extinction, the Alpine ibex (*Capra ibex*) survived as a small population in Gran Paradiso National Park in the Italian Alps. Individuals from this remnant population have since been reintroduced to other parts of the Alps allowing the species to reclaim much of its Alpine range. But the distribution of Alpine ibex continues to be fragmented and many colonies are small. The result is a low genetic diversity – possibly among the lowest detected for a mammalian species – which could constitute a major threat to Alpine ibex populations.

Action for nature

LIVING WITH THE BEAR, WOLF, AND LYNX

Our vision: the large carnivore populations in the Alps are viable and connected, living in peaceful coexistence with humans.



Under the Bern Convention, the three large carnivores are listed as protected (lynx) or strictly protected (wolf and bear).

After near extermination, large predators have made somewhat of a comeback in the Alps. The recovery of natural woodland and ungulate populations and the establishment of international treaties like the [Bern Convention](#) were important contributions to the return of bear, lynx, and wolf.

But the successful return of the large carnivores is not yet set in stone. Recovering populations of these predators still face human persecution and the small, highly fragmented populations that exist are not enough to ensure a future in the Alps. For this reason, the WWF European Alpine Programme is playing an active role in the conservation of large carnivores in the Alps.

Promoting acceptance

Successful conservation of large carnivores depends on the attitudes of the people that must live and work alongside these animals. Low acceptance of bears, wolves, and lynx in Alpine communities is currently the biggest barrier to ensuring the successful return of large carnivores. The WWF EALP is working with local communities to enhance acceptance across the Alps.

The Ursina project

WWF's [Ursina project](#) promotes bear acceptance in the Swiss, Austrian, and Italian Alps. Through an educational 'bear trail', local communities and visitors are informed about the importance of an intact natural landscape for the existence of the brown bear and how humans and bears can live in peaceful coexistence. The project also aims to reduce human-bear conflict by promoting the use of bear safe garbage bins.

Damage prevention projects

WWF is also working with Alpine farmers to implement livestock protection measures. Promoting different damage prevention measures with local farmers, including reintroducing livestock guardian dogs, is a key strategy that WWF has been testing across the Alps.

But the reintroduction of guardian dogs can become a problem for tourists. WWF is thus distributing tourist information on damage prevention measures in the Alps to promote acceptance and understanding among both Alpine communities and tourists alike.

European LIFE projects

WWF coordinates the conservation activities for [LIFE-COEX](#) in France. The project aims to enhance large carnivore acceptance in regions across Europe, including some Alpine areas, through a participatory approach.

The [LIFE-ARCTOS](#) project, for which WWF Italy is an active partner, aims to improve partner coordination in bear management (i.e. monitoring, genetic analyses, damage prevention, problematic bears management, etc). It also aims to promote bear acceptance in the local population, mainly with farmers, breeders, honey producers, tourist operators, and hunters.

Creating an ecological network

Despite reintroduction efforts and natural range expansions, large carnivore populations are unevenly distributed across the Alps. Many populations remain small and isolated and have already lost much of their genetic diversity. This exposes them to inbreeding problems and a reduced potential to adapt to new situations.

Bridging the gaps and linking the lynx

WWF is working to "link the lynx" with the goal of restoring lynx populations across the Alpine region. In France and Switzerland, successful reintroduction programmes have already enabled lynx to expand their range and establish new homes. WWF continues to be involved with lynx reintroductions, the latest being the release of two individuals in Austria's Limestone Alps. To monitor the progress of re-established populations, WWF supported the development of two lynx monitoring projects: the European Lynx Online Information System ([ELOIS](#)) and the Status and Conservation of the Alpine Lynx Populations ([SCALP](#)).



After disappearing from the Alps, **lynx** are being re-established in parts of their former Alpine territory. But the viability of these populations remains uncertain.

100 YEARS

Within a period of 100 years, the bear was nearly eradicated from the Alps.

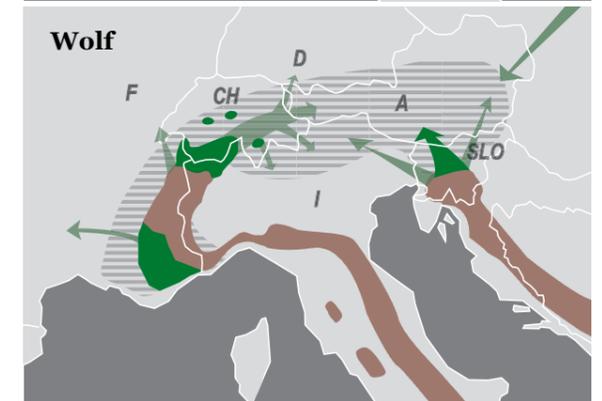
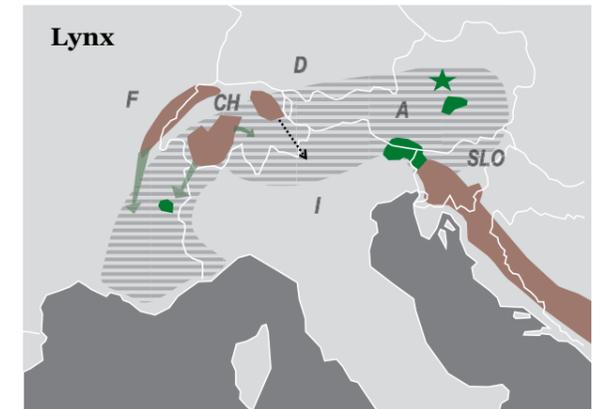
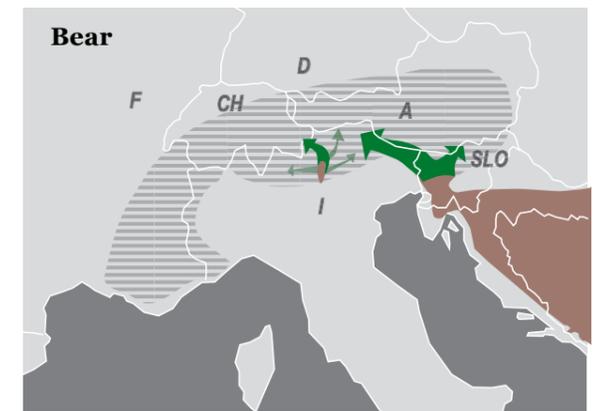


20%

Forty years after reintroduction, lynx occupy less than 20% of suitable Alpine habitat.

0.5%

Wolves cause less than 0.5% of the total livestock damage in Europe.



Established population

Permanent presence*

*(bear = no females; lynx = no reproduction; wolf = no packs)

Dispersal trend

Dispersal of a single individual

Most recent translocation area (2011)

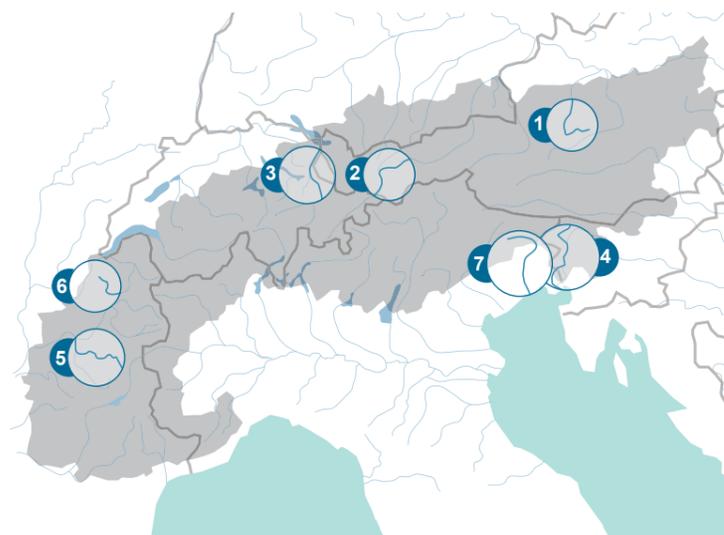
Large carnivore distribution in the Alps

The wolf needed little assistance to recolonize the Alps. It is so far the only one of the large carnivores who has been able to make a completely natural comeback. Bears and lynx, on the other hand, required restocking and reintroduction programmes to facilitate their return.

Action for nature

SAVING RIVERS ACROSS THE ALPS

Our vision:
through WWF's work,
the situation of Alpine
river basins has improved:
habitats are protected,
restored, and connected.



The Alps - Europe's freshwater reservoir. Cities both near to, and far from, the Alps rely on Alpine water for their drinking needs and hydroelectricity supply. But human pressures and global warming have put freshwater in the Alps at risk.

The WWF European Alpine Programme has made freshwater a priority for conservation in the Alps. From lobbying for the preservation of the Tagliamento – one of the last pristine rivers in the Alps – to restoring some of the most ecologically important Alpine rivers, WWF is helping to return freshwater back to its natural state.

The Traun River (1) Together with regional partners, WWF implemented a river basin management plan for the Upper Traun River, including river and flood plain restoration, reconnecting tributaries, creation of fish ladders, awareness raising, and conflict mitigation with respect to ecological flood control measures, restoration activities, and hydropower discussions.

The Inn River (2) WWF is working to link flood management to nature conservation by giving more space to the river, reconnecting its tributaries, and recreating floodplains.

The Alpine Rhine (3) WWF is actively lobbying for the restoration of the Rhine River, is fighting against new unsustainable hydropower infrastructures, and is working to minimize the ecological damage of already existing hydropower use. Together with their partners, WWF continues to support conservation work through the platform 'The Living Alpine Rhine'.



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The Soča/Isonzo River: Known locally as 'The Emerald Beauty', the Soča/Isonzo is the jewel of rivers in the eastern Alps. Despite its importance as a Natura 2000 site, new dam projects are being proposed for this river.

The Soča/Isonzo River (4) Also known as the 'Emerald Beauty', this crystal green river retains much of its natural dynamics and is home to the endangered marble trout, *Salmo marmoratus*. WWF is planning a conservation strategy for this river.

The Romanche (5) Hydrodams are being demolished in order to reconnect migratory routes and revitalise the river.

The Rivières Sauvages (Wild rivers) (6) In addition to restoring and repairing degraded river systems, we also need to protect and preserve the few remaining pristine and "wild" rivers that we have left. Rivières Sauvages (Wild Rivers) is an initiative by WWF France that aims to protect portions of rivers that remain untouched and ecologically valuable. The Chéran in the French Alps is one of the pilot rivers for the project.

The Tagliamento (7) One of the last pristine rivers in the Alps, the Tagliamento is threatened by the construction of new flood control structures and water retention basins. In addition to lobby work and information events, the WWF EALP and its partners also helped to design sustainable alternatives for flood control. The battle to save this river is ongoing.

There are 550 plants in the Alps with more than 10 MW and 2900 GWh of annual output



Hydroelectric power in the Alps

As the 'water tower' of Europe, it's no surprise that hydroelectric power tops the list as one of the most important energy sources in the Alps.

To ensure that hydropower production has as little effect on the surrounding nature as possible, WWF is promoting eco-labeling schemes across the Alps. The idea is to support the construction of hydroelectric installations that do not majorly damage and alter the natural habitats and social elements of the affected rivers and lakes.

Setting the standards for sustainable hydropower

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| France | WWF France helped develop the French eco-label EVE (Ecological Green Electricity) – a label guaranteeing that environmental and ecological criteria are satisfied by certified energy producers. |
| Switzerland | Naturemade Star is another quality mark – initiated and supported by WWF Switzerland – for identifying ecologically produced renewable energy. The ecological criteria employed by this label are some of the strictest in Europe. |
| Italy | The project CH2OICE – for which WWF Italy is an active partner – also developed a certification scheme that allows existing hydropower plants of 'high environmental standard' to be distinguished from those with a heavy ecological footprint. |
| Austria | In the eastern portion of the Alps, WWF is strongly involved in the development of an Austrian Hydropower-Criteria Catalogue, aiming to preserve valuable river stretches through limited future hydropower development. At the same time, WWF is fighting the most destructive hydropower projects and is promoting increased energy efficiency as an alternative to excessive hydropower development. WWF is also leading a project for a pan-alpine perspective on hydropower use. |

The future of freshwater conservation

The European Alpine Programme and its partners are working to develop a pan-alpine perspective on hydropower development. This will be an important step to saving Alpine rivers in their entirety.

Acknowledgements and Contact

- | | | |
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| Expert guidance | Kristina Vogt (KORA), Anja Molinari (KORA), Christian Pichler (WWF A) | |
| Graphic design | Christian Demarta - studio grafico eureka, Sementina, Switzerland | |
| Partners | Collaboration is key to WWF's conservation successes across the Alpine Arc. Check out our website to learn more about the multitude of organisations and local implementation partners who are working together with WWF to save Alpine nature. | |

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100%
RECYCLED



Why we are here.

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

www.panda.org/alps