

Excursion to the Plateau de Valensole, Lac de Sainte-Croix and the Gorges du Verdon - Summary

Part 3: Gorges du Verdon

After visiting the Plateau de Valensole and les Salles-sur-Verdon with the Lac de Sainte-Croix our last stop took us to the most important and known attraction of the region, the Gorges du Verdon or the Grand Canyon of Europe. The gorge with a maximum depth of 700 m represents the heart of the Verdon regional natural park (Fig. 2), which was created in 1997 and comprises over 180000 ha (COMITÉ REGIONAL DE TOURISME - PACA 2007). To learn more about the park, the gorge and difficulties the park has to face we met with Ilias Zinsstag, an employee of the park, who gave us some insights and accompanied us during our walk in the gorge and through a series of dark tunnels.



Fig. 1: Image of the Gorges du Verdon

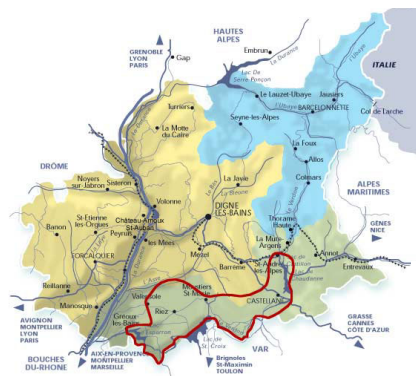


Fig. 2: Location of the Verdon regional Natural Park (framed red) (Alpes de Haute-Provence 2007)

In general regional natural parks in France were established to protect the natural and cultural heritage of a region but also to implement economic and social development in a sustainable way by allowing various business activities (FEDERATION OF THE REGIONAL NATURE PARKS OF FRANCE 2005). But compared to national parks this kind of park has no legislative power and cannot declare any restrictions.

The parks work with a charter, which consolidates the intended protection and development drawn up for the region. The communities that sign this charter are committed for ten years. Regarding the Verdon natural park 45 communities are now committed to the charter for the next twelve years.

The main reason to create the Verdon Natural Park was the huge interest of tourists in the gorge and the Lac de Sainte-Croix, what began in the 80's. Today the tourism is the most important source of income (80 %) for the region and the park, whereby there is a large concentration of tourists in summer. There are a lot of activities offered to tourists like rafting, sailing, paragliding, mountain biking, hiking and climbing. The communities gain by offering accommodations, shops and guides. Furthermore the wildlife, for example the Griffon vulture, reintroduced to the region in 1990, attracts tourists as well.

But there are often contradicting interests between protecting wildlife and tourism. There are two examples to mention: The region attracts a lot of climbers, but they disturb breeding places very often. This led to a ban of climbing on cliffs owned by the French national forest office. The park now tries to find a solution for both parties by finding adequate climbing places somewhere else or by educating climbers more. Other disturbances are caused by getting in and out of the rafting boats. The people damage breeding places for fishes and move rocks. Therefore the park wants to establish defined places for these actions.

In general water and water management play an important role in the park and when asked about concerns for the future local people always mention the amount of water in the lake. If there is not enough water to fill the lake in winter and spring than this will affect tourism very strongly. Furthermore the Verdon with its five reservoir lakes provides drinking water for the bigger cities in the

region (Aix-en-Provence, Toulouse, Marseilles, Nice), what means that it is a very important objective for the park to maintain the very good water quality. This sometimes leads to conflicts with farmers on the Plateau de Valensole, who intensify agriculture by using chemicals and pesticides. Very often these farmers are reluctant to except guidelines from the park although there are already programs to receive money (this year from the EU) when the farming is conducted in a sustainable way.

In addition the strict water management also affects the environment. First of all due to the damming most of the Verdon is not a natural river anymore. The amount of water running down the river is strictly controlled. Normally 500 l/s of water come down the river. During the summer on two days/month 20000 l/s water are let down to give the opportunity for rafting. At the time of our visit 30000 l/s ran down because two of the five reservoir lakes had to be emptied to repair the concrete dam. These changing water levels indicate a severe impact on the ecosystem of the river and indeed there are only a few fishes left, what leads to conflicts with fishers. At the moment studies are under way to make clear which kind of activities are especially damaging to the environment.

Ilias Zinsstag told us these details and highlighted the important role of the park as a moderator between nature conservation and economic development. The communication to local communities and local stakeholders is not always successful as seen in June of this year when four communities left the charter. They argued that the focus is too much on environmental issues although economic development is more important. Nevertheless the close work with the communities is important because they have the legislative power to speak out restrictions and they can provide money for environmental projects aimed to protect biodiversity.

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References

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