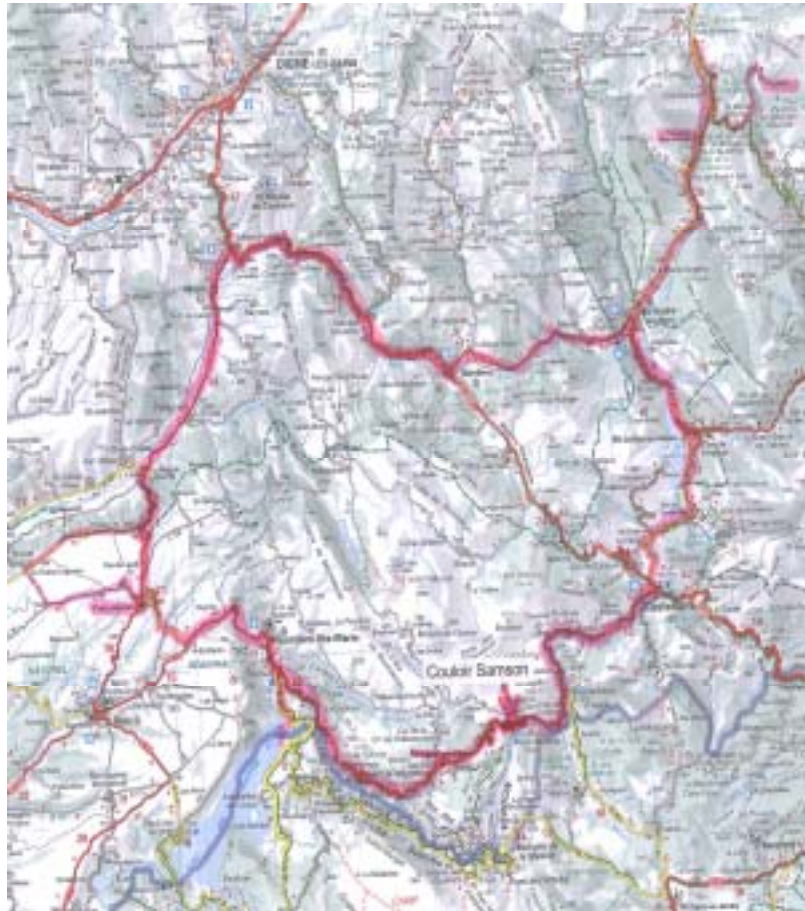


**ALTERNet Summer School September 2009 (Daniel Kreiner & Cathy Jolibert)**

Excursion to the Verdon Catchment: Friday 11th September 2009



All photos by Daniel Kreiner



Map of the route through and around the Parc naturel régional du Verdon (Coulair Samson: Walk into the Gorge du Verdon)

### First stop:

A wonderful place with a nice clock tower of the small church of the village: Puimoisson but unfortunately there was no time to have a cup of coffee at the square. We pick up our two guides: Etienne and Laetitia. Their profession: public participation, landscape planner, social scientist and landscape architect.



Drive to the Plateau de Valensole. Some of the group are not used to the curvy roads and therefore have some problems with their stomach, but happily everybody keeps cool and no complications with people putting their inside out...

### The Plateau de Valensole



View from the plateau down to the valley of the Asse river

The Plateau de Valensole is a special protection zone for heritage, architecture and landscape which was installed on a bottom-up approach. This means the “protection” was a wish from the local inhabitants and stakeholders.

The planners created a landscape atlas with particular features of the region especially as tool for the local stakeholders and specifically for the policy makers.

The view on the landscape is dominated by the historical development. One milestone in this evolution was the law for landscape protection in the year 1992 (Loi Paysagère = Landscape law). It protects not only the landscape as heritage but for example also the entrances to the villages. Landscape architects are involved in the development planning (urban structure, local relationships, environmental impacts...) and they are often leaders in the local planning group. There are some restrictions on how to build up new infrastructure. For example the construction of wind turbines is not allowed because they do not fit into the landscape (aesthetics).

There are mainly two kinds of people living here: The rural people and the “new rural” people (mainly coming from urban areas). They do not want to see urban infrastructure being developed because they consider this as a disturbance as they are mainly searching for silence and remoteness. They are not only coming from France but also from Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK and most of them are retired persons.

There were three main waves of immigration. In the 70ies some hippies came, in the 80ies mainly poor people came because for them living in rural areas was easier and today retired persons are moving in. Today only 50 % of the houses are owned by locals.

Before this immigration took place the area was nearly emptied. Several exoduses between 1815 and 1970 left many villages abandoned. So today every mayor is happy about each single project which causes repopulation (opening of schools...). The Haute-Provence is now also called the "backyard-country" ("arrière pays") and some people, especially at the coast, now already say "stop it".

Question: Is there a vision?

Answer: The vision is to bring people in!

The construction of the highway changed the whole development of this former very remote area. We call it now an "urbanized rural area" (Filled up). But everybody here is positive in respect to tourism and the aim is to get the people and to keep them for at least 2-3 days.

The secondary residences are often still owned by locals, but they definitely do not care about ruined houses and so many of them were reconstructed by foreigners. The ones who stayed here are happy with this development especially the mayors. Many of the employees are only seasonal workers in the tourism (there are many important ski stations around the Plateau) and agriculture business. More important than jobs is the housing...



Ruined house on the Plateau de Valensole

The Plateau de Valensole is part of a border area between the "lower Provence" and the "higher Provence" (Préalpes) and a transition zone between the Alps and the sea. The Valensole is flat; it

constitutes a transition area where we find richer landowners. The outer borders are marked by the valleys of the Verdon, the Durance and the Asse.

The geology and geomorphology is very complicated and this influences the agriculture and shapes the kind of farming systems and the social life.

Today the forests are the main habitat type. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century every single part of the land was used (terraces for agricultural use, grass/hay from the alpine meadows). There was not any tree on the slopes left. Since 1870 the artificial and natural reforestation began. The central government was getting stronger and in the year 1863 a law for reforestation was enacted. The extensive farming system decreased. The main purpose was to protect the soil and water for the cities. So the state accelerated the exodus and also bought the land. This conflict between the state and the region lasts until today. Some could say the state won: 13 villages were ruined; the high altitude grassland and fields are still shrinking (due to land-use change and more and more also climate change). Scots pines but also Austrian pines (Black pine) are spreading out. Indeed, Black pine grows faster than the natural local tree, the Sylvester pine. Moreover, Austrian pines are seeding themselves and their roots are stronger than those of the Sylvester pine.

Another big change was construction of a dam in 1950 on the river for electricity production (the whole Durance is dammed). There are problems because of the irregular flooding regime but also because of the intense irrigation use. In former days only the community in which the dam was built got the money, nowadays the whole region is getting profits.

In the opinion of Etienne today the strategy is to reopen the landscape. In this respect foresters, ecologists, local and tourism stakeholders go in the same direction. But there is the same number of sheep in the area as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on a smaller area but they are not reopening the forests. Indeed, sheep eat only little pines (two year old ones). So to reopen the landscape, 100.000 sheep are needed? So who is going to pay for this additional effort? There is a special kind of transhumance in the region... The sheep are coming up from the "Lac de Ste Croix" to the Plateau de Valensole, the Préalpes and to the Mercantour. In the autumn they are going back again.



A lavender field on the Plateau de Valensole

Concerning the agricultural use of the plateau it has to be said that the cultivation of lavender is most important. In former days there were much more almond trees on the plateau and farming was much more diverse: Wheat, olive trees, prune and others. After industrialization it became more and more monoculture. There was a higher pressure on water use, followed by a collapse of the public irrigation. Today the main driver is "speculation farming"! Although there are some subsidies for many crops there is a stronger pressure from the prize. So lavender and truffles are the "cashcrops" of the plateau. The problem is the higher needs for irrigation and also the expansion of lavender fields in higher altitudes (from former 700-800 m a.s.l to 1000-1200 m a.s.l.).

As we finished learning the difference between several types of lavenders, we are happy to share these explanations with you. The *Lavenda officinalis* (Lavander officinale) grows naturally between 800 and 2000 m a.s.l.. This specie produces the best quality of fragrance which is sold 70 euros the liter. Then, we have the *Lavandula latifolia* (Lavander aspic) which grows between 300 and 800 m a.s.l. This wild type is not cultivated but presents several advantages such as, it needs less water and insecticides. Finally, we have the *Lavandula burnatii super* (Lavandin) which grows between 500 and 800 m a.s.l. This species produces the lowest quality of fragrance and its aroma is filled into detergents.

But we also have to recognize that lavender saved the landscape and settlements! It is - besides the landscape - also a main attraction for tourists. Before it was grown there was the "Route Napoleon" and besides the "Geological features" of the region.

There are many conflicts between stakeholders and land-user groups: Foresters versus farmers, sheep keepers versus foresters, local population versus new population, and so on...

#### **Interview with a local farmer and shepherd, Armand Ferrando:**

His main problem is that during the summer the sheep have less grass (especially in dry summers). One reason is that there are no snow fields left in the mountains any more (climate change) but he also says that in his opinion the increasing woodland needs more water and therefore there is less for the grassland. Also the times of the occurrence of rainfalls have changed...

There are 10.000 sheep for 10 shepherds; but the meat is cheaper from other regions in the world, therefore they get subsidies so that they can get along. But Armand told us that he would like to live as in the past (iron-fire-water) with a lower livelihood but happier!

Tourism is highly related to agriculture but the farmers cannot profit from it. The tourists are not buying regional products and even if they would the season would be too short (only 2-3 month), so no sustainability in this case. There is also no communication between the tour-operators and the farmers (local people)...

The cooperation with the regional nature park is good (he himself is in the coordination panel for the nature park). They try to help the farmers with bureaucracy (filling out forms...)

Other problems: water usage, pollution through pesticides, wolves ...

### **Interview with a former employee of the regional nature park:**

The natural park exists since 1997

They try to evolve a sustainable tourism (all season) – this is the main objective of the park!

200.000 ha, 25.000 inhabitants, 45 municipalities

There is a charter which is renewed every 10 years

New objectives: Participatory approach (participatory democracy), more involvement of the local people, it is very difficult to make things visible...

1.5 Mill. visitors per year (mainly in July and August), they are coming mostly from Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy and more and more also from eastern EU countries.

Multiple use of the river is sometimes a problem (fishers, tourists, rafter, EDF (Electricité de France)...). Also the pollution caused by camping sites is not yet solved and it is the most important source of pollution. It is a highly sensitive habitat and there is also an endemic fish species, discovered in 2005 and only known from the Verdon and the Durance: le lapron (*Zingel Asper*).

80% of the people in the region work in the tourism sector!

13 people work in the park (mainly coordinators, + 5 rangers for tourist information)

<http://www.parcduverdon.fr/>

### **Hike through the Gorges du Verdon “Grand Canyon of Europe”**



A small part of the Gorges du Verdon from above and from the path below