

Ecological Continuum Initiative

THE ECOLOGICAL CONTINUUM INITIATIVE: CATALYSING AND MULTIPLYING ALPINE CONNECTIVITY

**Concept for the
implementation of a think tank and a service
centre on Alpine ecological networks
and work programme 2010**

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23/12/2009



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The Ecological Continuum Initiative is carried out by ALPARC (Alpine Network of Protected Areas), CIPRA (International Commission for the Protection of the Alps), ISCAR (International Scientific Committee Alpine Research) and the European Alpine Programme of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) with the aim of maintaining or restoring ecological connectivity between important areas for nature conservation in the Alps. The activities are running since 2007 and are mainly financed by the Swiss MAVA Foundation for Nature.

Introduction

Ecological networks in the European Alps are means to enhance ecological connectivity and hence to contribute to the conservation of the outstanding Alpine biodiversity. Since 2007 three complementary initiatives focusing on the promotion and implementation of ecological networks have been established. First, the **Platform Ecological Network of the Alpine Convention**, fostering the cooperation of alpine territories to implement the protocol “Conservation of nature and the countryside” (since 2007), second the **Ecological Continuum Initiative** started by the Consortium of ALPARC, CIPRA, ISCAR and WWF and financed by the Swiss MAVA Foundation for Nature, fostering long-term and Alps wide strategies for linking protected areas and biodiversity hotspots throughout the Alps and beyond (since 2007), and third, the **Alpine Space Project “ECONNECT Restoring the web of life”**, fostering reliable Alps wide data and implementation projects in pilot areas (2008-2011).

An evaluation of ongoing activities by the three listed initiatives carried out in 2008 by the Consortium of the Ecological Continuum Initiative concluded that there are manifold activities but none of them with long-term continuity. On the other hand first results from pilot areas showed, that the establishment of ecological networks will be a long lasting process. Neither the Platform Ecological Network of the Alpine Convention, nor the ECONNECT project are able to assure continuous work on a long term: the Platform because of rotating presidencies and changing political priorities of the parties, ECONNECT because of limited project duration (until August 2011).

Therefore, the Continuum Initiative decided to focus on further activities with long-term issues. A first action is aiming at the preparation of **follow-up projects beyond ECONNECT** to ensure that the fundamentals built up during ECONNECT can be used for further concerted implementation projects. Such projects have to be developed referring to the existing expertise on ecological networks and followed up on integrating available scientific and practical experts into such a process. In this context the idea of a think tank on ecological networks came up, a think tank which gathers most of the available expertise in alpine countries and therefore could also take in hand further tasks. The proposed think tank is explicitly no new structure or network. It is planned as a pool of experts who cooperate in a problem and result oriented way.

A second action aims at the continuation and extension of the existing **information services** provided by the Continuum Initiative and the Platform Ecological Network.

Aims, actions and functioning of a think tank and the tasks of an information service centre have been discussed with experts - mainly from ECONNECT and from the Platform - on the base of a preliminary concept during a workshop on December 2, 2009 in Chamonix/France. The main outcomes from this workshop are considered in this document.

Both actions (the think tank and the service centre) could be linked in future e.g. in a Connectivity Competence Network (CCN). Such a network could be discussed, if future development will account for such a structure.

1. Think tank

1.1. Aims

The think tank will bring together a wide range of experts from science and practice at an international level for developing new projects on ecological networks in the Alps and for providing advice to the implementation of existing and future projects. The think tank will therefore aim on one hand at fruitful synergies between practitioners and scientists, and on the other hand at providing knowledge and advice to policy.

In a first phase (2010-2011) actions of the think tank will focus on:

- **developing projects beyond ECONNECT,**
- **developing stakeholder networks in pilot areas,**
- **developing a long-term vision for Alpine connectivity including further activities of the think tank after 2011, and**
- **providing expert knowledge and advice to policy.**

1.2. Experts

The think tank will include experts from all relevant scientific disciplines and practitioners engaged in existing initiatives or programmes (regional, national, transalpine, pan-European) dealing with Alpine ecological networks. Especially addressed will be experts already active in the Platform Ecological Network of the Alpine Convention, in ECONNECT and in the Continuum Initiative. Experts from neighbouring mountain regions or other European areas where connectivity projects are carried out can also be associated. Occasional engagement from experts from other continents will be possible. The conditions for joining the think tank will be restrictive.

Conditions for joining the think tank

Experts fulfilling the following criteria can join the think tank:

a) Scientists engaged in fundamental research (mainly basic knowledge) or applied sciences (basic knowledge or implementation) with at least one of the following **fields of expertise**:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Population Genetics■ Population Dynamics■ Botany / Phytogeography■ Zoology / Zoogeography■ Habitat Fragmentation■ Ecological Effectiveness■ Biosecurity (wildlife disease, alien species)■ Indicator Systems■ Cartography of Biotopes and Habitats■ Land Cover / Land Use Analysis■ Data Conservation and Processing / GIS■ Legal Framework■ Social Issues■ Economical Issues |
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Chart 1: Fields of scientific expertise defined in 2007 by the Consortium Partners and the Platform “Ecological Network”.

To join the think tank, scientific experts should have at least a master degree and show their competence by indicating at least **one scientific publication, or a cooperation in a research project or a presentation at a scientific conference** dealing with ecological networks (ecological corridors, habitat fragmentation, migration, etc.).

b) Practitioners from all types of organisms (engineer offices, NGO's, responsible administrations, private initiatives, etc.) engaged in the **planning or implementation of projects** concerning connectivity issues, with at least one of the following **fields of expertise**:

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Nature conservation▪ Agriculture▪ Forestry▪ Hunting and fishing▪ Tourism▪ Spatial planning▪ Transport▪ Water resources management▪ Environmental education and public relation work |
|---|

Chart 2: Sections in the *Catalogue of measures* (2009) relevant for the implementation of measures dealing with ecological networks.

Experts have to provide information on implementation projects (title, type, location, aims, etc.) indicating their specific function and contribution.

The think tank is an open body and aims consequently at integrating new experts:

- Following the criteria above, an initial pool of experts was identified by the Consortium (ALPARC, CIPRA, ISCAR, WWF) in the first phase of the Ecological Continuum Initiative (ca. 150 persons – state October 2009) and registered in an online database. The registered experts are published on the website www.alpine-ecological-network.org > services > experts.
- Scientists and professionals who fulfil the criteria listed above can subscribe to the think tank. After sending all needed information to the coordinator of the database, experts will be registered in the think tank and published with all information on the website indicated above.
- For all experts the contact data and all information concerning the expertise (projects, publications, presentations at conferences, etc.) will be accessible on the web.
- There are no fees.

1.3. Functioning

The think tank will **start actions** following point 1.1., mainly on the initiative of the Continuum Initiative, ECONNECT or the Platform Ecological Network, as well as on the initiative of **experts** who are willing to take an active role in the proposed action. Proposed actions will be started if there are sufficient experts willing to cooperate.

For each action a **responsible person and a steering group** will be designated among the cooperating experts. Actions are free in organizing their work (workshops, consultations, video-conferences, E-forums, etc.). Actions are problem and result oriented and should come to an end within an assigned time frame.

The Consortium of the Continuum Initiative will designate a **coordinator** (ca. 40 % employment integrated in an existing institution) who will **assist the think tank** in all its actions. As far as possible the Consortium will provide a financial base to support actions (costs for coordination unit, cover expenses for meetings and workshops, printing of reports, etc.). An application will be addressed to the MAVA Foundation, but additional funding from other interested parties will be needed.

All members of the think tank will be invited once a year to a common **workshop** for discussion of a long-term vision and strategy, the initiation of new actions and for exchange of information. Regular communication is provided by the coordinator and via the website. The language of the think tank will be English.

1.4. Work programme 2010

a) Actions

According to the aims listed above, the experts proposed to focus in a first phase (2010-2011) on four key issues with specific needs:

1. To develop follow-up projects to ECONNECT based on a review of ongoing activities within ECONNECT and in general.

Needs expressed:

- To increase scientific knowledge on the relevance of barriers, fragmentation and connectivity with new methods (for example genetics)
- To face corridor problematics (invasive species, diseases)
- To monitor and assess improvements due to measures (restoration, etc.); especially monitor measures in pilot areas regarding connectivity in the wider landscape (not only corridors).
- To concentrate on the implementation of ECONNECT results (Alps-wide and in pilot areas).

Actions proposed:

Actions	Expected outcomes
1a) To prepare a proposal for an international project concerning basic knowledge (research project)	Main elements and partners to develop a proposal for an interdisciplinary research project (EU or transnational)
1b) To prepare a proposal for an international project concerning new actions for implementation and the harmonization of national Ecological Networks within the Alps	Main elements and partners for an international follow-up project to ECONNECT with new pilot areas
1c) To prepare projects for the continuation of running and promising actions in pilot areas	Project proposals for actions in pilot areas

It is proposed to bring together interested experts in a 2-days-workshop for realising actions 1a) and 1b). Scientific and implementation aspects (between actions 1a and 1b) should be linked during the workshop.

Proposed leading organisation for this issue: ECONNECT (**responsible person:** Leopold Füreder., University of Innsbruck, Austria)

Addressed experts: ECONNECT collaborators, scientists, experts from other initiatives (national, regional), new pilot areas, national administrations (Platform)

2. To develop stakeholder networks in pilot areas

Needs expressed:

- To enhance the organization of implementation in the pilot areas
- To bring stakeholders working at the local and regional level to cooperate better together, to do actions with scientific background
- To develop a representation mode for the nomination of pilot areas by the Platform

Action proposed:

Action	Expected outcomes
2) Workshop with stakeholders to know their needs and to exchange on problems regarding management issues.	Guidelines for establishing stakeholder networks in connectivity areas (existing and new)

For this action it is proposed to bring together experts from the pilot areas in a 2-days-workshop. At the same workshop proposals for follow-up projects in ECONNECT pilot areas (action 1c) could be worked out with the experts from the pilot areas.

Proposed leading organisation for this issue: ALPARC (**responsible person:** Guido Plassmann)

Addressed experts: Experts and stakeholders from existing pilot areas, ECONNECT collaborators

3. To develop a long-term vision for Alpine connectivity including further activities of the think tank after 2011

In the frame of the Platform Ecological Network and in the frame of the Continuum Initiative, first elements of a long-term vision for ecological connectivity in the Alps have already been developed. These reflections could be put on a wider base, deepened and finalised in the frame of the think tank. Based on the long-term vision, major elements of a strategy for Alpine connectivity will be discussed and further developed in the frame of the Continuum Initiative.

According to the results of these discussions and depending on other needs identified, the think tank could take in hand further activities:

- to assess current trends and define further needs in research and implementation,
- to evaluate connectivity initiatives and implemented measures in pilot areas,
- to make recommendations to practitioners (administration, project leaders,...),
- to support the activities of the Continuum Project (strategies, implementation, communication, lobbying),
- to cooperate with the Platform Ecological Network in the framework of its work program,

- to cooperate with other existing international initiatives, like the Pan-European Ecological Network or the Green Belt.

In case of growing future tasks, the think tank could be developed to a **Connectivity Competence Network (CCN)** and combined with the service centre (see below).

Action proposed:

Action	Expected outcomes
3) develop a long-term vision and discuss major elements of a strategy for Alpine connectivity including further activities of the think tank after 2011	Commonly agreed long-term vision, basis for the development of a strategy and decision on the work programme 2011-2012 of the think tank:

For this action, all experts of the think tank will be invited to a 2-days-workshop, which is at the same time the general meeting of the think tank. A broad exchange on ongoing projects and initiatives has to be integrated in this workshop (as a basis for discussing future activities).

Proposed leading organisation for this issue: ISCAR (**responsible person:** Thomas Scheurer)

Addressed experts: All experts of the think tank

4. To provide expert knowledge and scientific advice to policy

Needs expressed:

- advice to the mandate of the Platform Ecological Network
- identification of a list of benefits, threats, limits and cost
- identification of gaps that should be known by policy makers
- legal analysis of minimum level for ecological networks implementation (database)
- define simple actions that can be understood in all Alpine countries
- information through workshops, papers, etc.

Action proposed:

Action	Expected outcomes
4) Identify needs of policy for scientific evidence concerning ecological networks	Evidence-based development of ecological networks by the Platform and cross-border administrations

This action should be organised as an activity of the Platform with the contribution of the Consortium partners.

Proposed leading organisation for this issue: Platform Ecological Network (Yann Kohler, Coordinator of the Platform)

Addressed persons: Platform members, stakeholders, scientists

b) Organisation of work

Organisation

For each key issue a **leading organisation** has been chosen among the cooperating initiatives (Platform, ECONNECT, consortium of the Continuum Initiative), as well as a **responsible** contact and leader **person**. A **steering group** (3-5 persons willing to give advice and strategic support) will be designated as soon as actions will start. For each issue, the responsibilities will be shared between the responsible person (concept, moderation / animation, lecture) and the coordinator (organisation, working documents, reports).

The responsible persons will address the pool of experts to start think tank processes for each key issue. The actions proposed in this chapter will start if there are sufficient experts willing to cooperate and a steering group has been established.

2. Service centre

2.1. Aims

The service centre will aim at giving continuity to the work started during the initial phase of the Ecological Continuum project (2007-2009). It will intend to support the transfer of knowledge and know-how between projects and territorial units, by providing **information services**. Especially it will focus on the following objectives:

- to facilitate current projects by providing expertise to stakeholders (as far as needed),
- to provide easily accessible and up-to-date information on ecological networks,
- to provide scientific advice to policy by the means of the online database of experts
- to act as an interface between knowledge production and implementation projects
- to promote Alps wide networking concerning ecological network topics by bringing people together and keeping discussion alive,
- to pool and synthesize knowledge.

2.2. Functioning

The Consortium of the Ecological Continuum Project will assume the activities of the service centre. Information will be produced and disseminated in English.

Main **beneficiaries** are scientists and stakeholders dealing with Alpine ecological networks in all relevant sectors (nature protection, municipalities, research, agriculture, forestry, etc.) from transalpine to local level. The good functioning of the service centre requires also an active contribution of these

beneficiaries, especially by providing relevant information to the service centre (for website and news) and by disseminating information to their own contacts. Especially experts of the think tank will be actively contacted for providing information to the service centre.

A regular **quality control** of the input and the output of the service centre has to be established.

For **funding**, an application will be addressed to the MAVA Foundation, but additional funding from other interested parties (e.g. Platform Ecological Network) will be needed.

2.3. Work programme 2010

Actions

In order to achieve the aims listed above and to continue the work started during the first phase of the Continuum Initiative, the service centre will focus in 2010 on developing the following existing information tools (ordered by priority):

- www.alpine-ecological-network.org with general information on Alpine ecological networks and the 3 Alps wide initiatives, last news, etc.
- Expert and project database. There will be two project databases: one for scientific research projects and the catalogue of measures.
- Press release accompanying project milestones
- Newsletters, at least twice a year (Continuum Initiative and ECONNECT)
- Communication material (poster, brochure, glossary)
- CIPRA dossier with news, publications, links, events and background report
- Awareness raising: Articles in journals, media and newsletters; presentations at conferences and to the public; synthesis publications.

References concerning data of interest for SOIA will be ensured.

There are some **options** for developing information tools (in case of free human resources):

- A discussion forum for the stakeholders could be developed on the website, according to the interest.
- To realise improvements of the user interfaces
- To translate the website in all alpine languages (exception: the content of the experts and project database will remain in English)
- Development of a best practice database (combined with the catalogue of measures)
- Add videos to the website and/or to the CIPRA dossier (eg. interviews with stakeholders)