

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

RESOLUTION (76) 34

ON THE ECOLOGICAL CHARTER FOR MOUNTAIN REGIONS IN EUROPE

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 21 May 1976
at the 258th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers,

Referring to Recommendation 6.i of Resolution No. 1 of the European Ministerial Conference on the Environment (Vienna) which recommends that a study be made of "the specific ecological problems of certain mountain and rural areas, as affected by the abandonment of farming, grazing and forestry activities and by the development of tourism, possibly in a narrower regional setting" ;

Welcoming the initiatives taken by the Council of Europe with regard to mountain regions and especially the study on endangered Alpine regions and disaster prevention measures and that on the economic and social problems of mountain regions ;

Considering as mountain regions the Alps and the other mountain chains of Europe ;

Aware of the importance of mountain regions from the natural, historic, cultural and social points of view ;

Aware that the fragility and vulnerability of these regions is a corollary of their special characteristics ;

Recognising that the pressure of man's activities on these regions endangers their vital role as reservoirs, as farmlands, forests and pastures, and as recreation areas and wildlife habitats ;

Believing that the environment and the biological balance of mountain regions are endangered ;

Considering that action at European level is needed to improve the present situation, and that the Ecological Charter for mountain regions and the action plan adopted at the International Symposium on the Future of the Alps provide appropriate means for achieving such an aim,

Adopts and proclaims the principles of this Charter prepared by the European Committee for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources which are given below :

Basic conception

1. *Mountain regions in Europe are a common natural heritage whose value must be recognised by all. Everyone has a duty to see that it is preserved.*

Mountain areas have various functions, particularly as water-storage basins, agricultural and grazing land, forests, recreation and wildlife areas.

Man's activities, and particularly the demographic growth and economic development that characterise the 20th century, affect the mountain regions which are part of our natural heritage.

Increasing pollution of air and water, destruction of the soil, deterioration of the landscape and the depletion or extinction of animal and plant species destroy the balance of various vital biological systems, essential to all human life. To spoil mountain regions amounts to abusing the natural heritage. Every person and every community (local, regional or national) should in this respect show solidarity to others and see to it that this environment is protected.

Ecological situation

2. Mountain environments are delicate ecosystems, and are among the biological systems most threatened in Europe.

Because of the high precipitation, the effects of snow and ice, more or less steep slopes, strong radiation, extreme temperatures and violent winds, the situation of mountain ecosystems is different from that of the other regions of Europe.

The impact of human activities on them consequently gives rise to critical situations. Such ecosystems are seriously threatened :

- on the one hand, by soil erosion, landslides, avalanches, torrents in spate, flooding etc. ;
- on the other hand, by damage to and destruction of landscapes, particularly forests, in some cases by the construction of water-storage dams, power supply lines, water and air pollution, pesticides etc.

3. Mountain regions must preserve their function as a living space.

The impact of human activities on mountain ecosystems varies according to the climatic zone, local socio-economic conditions and the cultural heritage. The various forms of needs — forestry, grazing and farming, hunting, tourism, industry, transport — must be satisfied in such a way as to maintain the ecosystems in a biological balance. Mountain regions must not become museums or amusement parks ; their function as a living space must be asserted.

4. Mountain biotopes and their ecosystems must as a matter of principle be given general protection.

Since the process of restoring biotopes is more difficult and lengthy in mountain regions, these ecosystems must be effectively protected, treated with care and, as far as possible, reconstituted according to ecological principles.

Any new activity such as land development, ski-lifts, roads, pylons and overhead electric cables, industries, recreation facilities etc., that affect the natural environment must be the subject of authorisation, based on relevant specialist opinion and given only after consultation with the local authorities and populations concerned.

Planning

5. All mountain regions must be the subject of a proper policy of planning, development and mountain population promotion.

In the past, mountain economy was based almost solely on farming, stock-breeding, forestry and cottage industries. Most mountain regions are undergoing changes in the use made of them. They are being diverted from their original purposes, and the mountains are being more and more used for tourism and for recreational and industrial activities.

The result is a deterioration of the landscape, destruction of agricultural land, damage to vegetation and fauna, in certain cases to the water balance, greater air and water pollution, more

frequent avalanches etc. ; in short, disruption of nature. Mountain populations must be encouraged and helped to fight against the deterioration of their living space.

All mountain regions must, therefore, be the subject of a proper planning and development policy, taking into account competent specialist opinion, after consultation with the local communities concerned.

To that end, a judicious balance between the various traditional and new activities must be sought. Here it must be recognised that each mountain region forms a biological and human whole and must be considered as such, with due regard for special regional or local features.

6. *The development of tourism, transport and industry must be based on a rational management of natural resources.*

Development of, and building in connection with, tourism, the direct and indirect effects of modern techniques, such as the building of ski-resorts, ski-runs, ski-lifts, roads, electricity supply lines, and dykes and dams for electric power etc. have reached such proportions that the harm done to the natural environment in general, and to certain ecosystems in particular, has sometimes reached a critical point.

In view of the vulnerability of ecosystems to human activities, there are incompatibilities between such activities and the protection of our natural heritage. For this reason, effective measures must be taken ; they must take account of ecological criteria, and be integrated harmoniously into the principles of rational planning and development.

7. *Effective preventive measures must be taken against natural disasters such as avalanches, torrents in spate, landslides and falling rocks.*

The natural disasters occurring annually with increasing frequency in mountain regions have manifold and complex repercussions on man and his environment. Protection against these hazards must be preventive, and be aimed at preserving human life and the natural environment. For that purpose, it may include such measures as building avalanche barriers, diverting torrents, afforestation or reafforestation, clearing, educating and informing tourists and the local population, and any other appropriate laws and regulations. In particular, in the context of regional planning, it is important to determine precisely, in addition to the threatened areas, those which are dangerous to man and, for the sake of safety, to prohibit any human habitation.

Protection

8. *Natural, semi-natural and cultural landscapes and environments must be preserved.*

Natural, semi-natural and cultural mountain landscapes and environments are very delicate and vulnerable. Recreational and technical development is frequently responsible for their serious deterioration. The ecological capacity is being strained to the utmost. In these circumstances, most if not all landscapes and environments still left intact by man are in danger of disappearing.

The biological function of landscapes and environments must be maintained. They must therefore be conserved and, as far as possible, restored.

9. *A mountain network of biogenetic reserves must be established.*

The present system of protected mountain areas does not adequately take into account the different representative and typical biotopes and habitats which must be preserved in order to maintain the diversity and integrity of biotic communities of plants and animals in natural ecosystems.

A mountain network of biogenetic reserves must therefore be established in co-operation with Project 8 of Unesco's Programme MAB (reserves of the biosphere).

Management

10. *Rural mountain life is indispensable for conserving the living mountain environment ; efficient measures shall be taken to preserve its originality.*

The ill effects of departing from the original uses of mountain regions are plain to see, and in the long run will destroy such areas as rural and recreational zones.

Even if profits from mountain farming appear to be slight for the time being, the long-term profitability of mountain regions should not be overlooked. The right of mountain populations to satisfactory living conditions and incomes must accordingly be recognised, which means a concerted policy (economic, financial and technical support) in their favour.

11. *Over-grazing, as well as neglect of grazing, must give way to optimal grazing.*

The disastrous consequences of over-grazing, as well as of neglected grazing, are felt in some mountain regions ; as a rule, the most threatened are the marginal zones. The result is the impoverishment and sometimes the uniformisation of natural vegetation, the deterioration of soil already in danger of erosion, the prevention of forest renewal and a noticeable increase in the risk of avalanches, landslides etc.

The access of flocks and herds to forests should be eliminated gradually ; on the other hand to neglect grazing is equally harmful since it impoverishes the landscape.

Optimal grazing, enabling the biological balance to be maintained, must take the place of over-grazing ; re-introducing grazing where it has been abandoned is recommended.

12. *The use of fire in land development in mountain regions must be strictly prohibited.*

Forests are particularly sensitive to fire, and ecosystems quickly deteriorate if the plant cover is destroyed. Fires are often the cause of deforestation. Because of the growing frequency of forest fires, climax forests in the Mediterranean region have largely been replaced by maquis and scrub. A few years suffice to destroy plant cover and, consequently, ecosystems, but a century or more is required to reconstitute them.

13. *Native species must be used in maintaining or restoring forest cover.*

Natural forest is the result of an evolution over hundreds and thousands of years. Native forest species are best adapted to existence in natural conditions. Natural forests provide the best protection :

- on the one hand, against soil erosion, avalanches, landslides, floods ;
- on the other hand, for original ecosystems, physical features and water systems.

Replacing native forest species by foreign species and by single-species plantations should be prohibited ; it could upset the mountain environment. A natural forest has advantages from the economic as well as the ecological point of view. Renewal of plant cover according to ecological criteria is therefore essential. In certain cases, above the tree-line, meadows also have important uses and should be provided with adequate protection.

14. *Fauna and flora must, as a normal rule, be protected, and extinct species must be re-introduced wherever possible.*

Many plant and animal species have disappeared from some parts of Europe, and some species even from the whole continent. Many species are threatened with extinction. The resulting upset in the ecological balance is serious and still largely disregarded. If this

development is to be arrested, flora and fauna must be properly protected, except in special cases. The re-introduction of native species is desirable.

The planned management of natural flora and fauna must take account of the need to preserve the genetic material of threatened mountain species. Strict regulations should be introduced in Europe to control picking and gathering.

15. *Adequate ecological control of game is necessary.*

In some countries the stock of the larger game species is too big, and causes considerable damage to forest and vegetation. The renewal of the natural forest, with the exception of spruce, is in danger. Game and forest industries are contributing to the ageing of forests. Ecological control, by judicious regulation of the game population density, is the best way of preserving the genetic resources of the fauna.

International co-operation

16. *Conservation of the natural heritage of mountains and their ecosystems calls for scientific co-operation at all levels.*

The situation can only be improved with a thorough knowledge of mountain ecology and man's activity there. All the relevant organisations and institutions are invited to contribute to this work and to co-operate actively in it by drawing up inter-disciplinary research programmes. Close co-ordination must be established with the decision-making bodies. The resources for research concerning mountain regions must be augmented. If necessary, specialist bodies must be set up. Research must be conducted at international or inter-regional level.

17. *Appropriate programmes are required for informing and educating public opinion and for training specialists.*

It is important to inform and educate the public, particularly teachers, about the dangers threatening mountain regions. Special syllabuses should be introduced at the various levels of education ; this would enable citizens to play an active part in the rational management of mountain regions and their resources.

18. *Human, ecological and economic problems arising in various mountain regions have the same basic characteristics irrespective of the country. Therefore legislation designed to solve them should be harmonised at the European level.*

Despite the basic unity of the subject, the states concerned run the risk of adopting different legislation on the conservation of nature and natural resources in mountain regions. Furthermore, national legislation is likely to be developed at a different rate. It is therefore necessary to harmonise such legislation in order to prevent the social and economic discrepancies which might result from any differences in it.

19. *Mountain regions in Europe may form a natural whole but be divided by frontiers. As far as possible, they ought to be jointly managed by the states concerned according to ecological principles.*

Some mountain regions form a natural whole embracing land belonging to several states or provinces. The fundamental unity of such regions calls for joint research and management, irrespective of the states or administrative sub-divisions to which the various parts belong. Similarly, any planning of such regions must be done in common, or, at least, in consultation with the territorially competent authorities.

Any initiative towards greater co-operation and co-ordination in this sphere between international organisations and non-governmental institutions, and between scientists, research institutions or administrative departments in different countries, must be encouraged, at whatever level it is taken.