THE ECOLOGICAL NETWORK IN THE ALPS: DEFINING CRITERIA AND OBJECTIVES FOR PILOT REGIONS

FINAL REPORT   APRIL 2009

Contents

Title page images supplied by: Alpi Marittime region; Isère département; Inn-Adige region; Christine Klenovec, Weißbach Natural Park; T. Kerschbaumer, Gesäuse National Park photo collection; Dürrenstein Wilderness Area.

1   Project definition

The purpose of the Ecological Network Platform of the Alpine Convention is to create a transnational ecological network. The Platform provides a framework within which the Alpine countries can compare their experiences, work together to develop methodologies and measures, and coordinate their activities. Raising the profile of the ecological network through targeted PR activities is also a priority. In order to promote the creation of this network, we decided to select and support pilot regions which would implement and test measures designed to create geographical links.

By designating pilot regions for the Alpine ecological network, we want to recognise the contribution of regions that have worked hard to establish ecological networks within the Alps and to ensure sustainable regional development. For example, the pilot region label can be used to endorse a protected area that has implemented ecological (networking) projects that extend beyond its own boundaries. The chosen pilot regions will benefit from ecological and socio-economic advantages, which should inspire other regions to make their own contribution to the ecological network.

This report sets out:
- the selection criteria for designating pilot regions for the Alpine ecological network
- the selection and follow-up processes
- the potential benefits of selection.

The project requirements set out four key objectives:

A. Definition of ecological and technical objectives for the pilot regions (1st expert group meeting)

The ecological and technical objectives defined for the pilot regions should indicate how the Alpine Convention (or Ecological Network Platform) can use the selection of pilot regions to promote the creation of an Alpine ecological network. The definitions should clarify matters such as the type of areas and species that should be priorities for the ecological network and whether to concentrate on improving the network links for certain species or between specific habitat types.

B. Definition of the selection criteria for pilot regions and pooling ideas on promoting the pilot region brand (2nd expert group meeting)

The purpose of the second phase is to draw up the broadest possible list of criteria for selecting pilot regions – presence of certain species or habitats, previous ecological network activities, etc. In addition to the list of potential selection criteria, the group should identify the economic and social benefits that will complement the ecological benefits of being a designated pilot region.

Regions will be invited to apply to become pilot regions in a call for expressions of interest. With this in mind, a questionnaire will be compiled to obtain information about the region's technical programme.

C. Presentation of programme for selecting pilot regions (3rd expert group meeting)

In the next step, proposals will be made for a selection process offering maximum transparency and impartiality. The first pilot regions are due to be selected at the Xth Alpine Conference in Evian in March 2009[1].

During this phase the follow-up process will also be defined, which involves considering the possibilities for renewing pilot region designations and addressing questions of financing, implementation and responsibilities.

D. Reporting

Following the third expert group meeting, the approved results should be described in a report. At this last meeting, the experts will decide on how the different procedural phases will be implemented.
The final report should contain information about the success of the pilot region designations issued at the Xth Alpine Conference.
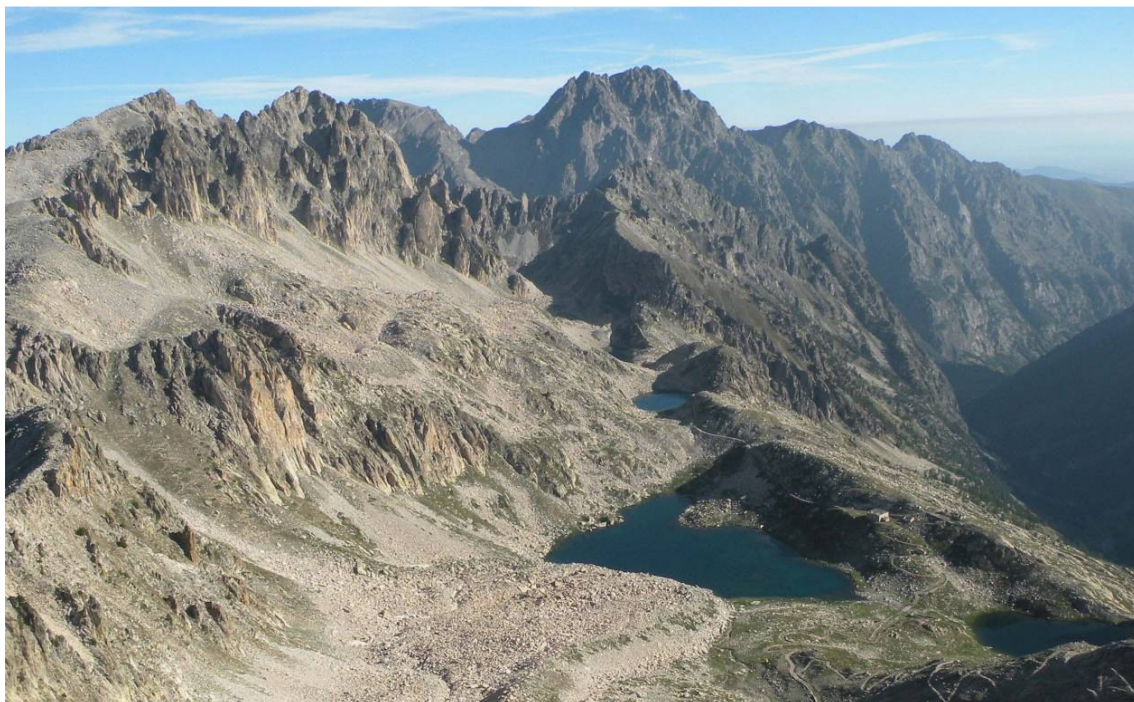

Figure 1:   Fremamorta, Alpi Marittime pilot region. Source: Alpi Marittime region

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[1]   The selections could not be made at the Xth Alpine Conference: time constraints prevented the item from being included in the agenda. Consequently the selections could not be evaluated either.

2   Project leader

The project was set in motion by the Presidency of the Alpine Convention's Ecological Network Platform. All financing was provided by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN).

3   Timetable and budget

The timetable and budget are defined in an agreement between the BfN and CIPRA dated 3 November 2008. The details are as follows:

The contractor must produce the project deliverables by 30 April 2009 at the latest.

The contractual payment will be made in three parts, with each payment made on completion of the work to be delivered by that date:
Part payment (one quarter of the total) on 30 November 2008
Part payment (one quarter of the total) on 15 February 2009
Final payment (half of the total) on 30 April 2009

Figure 2: Berchtesgaden National Park, Berchtesgaden-Salzburg pilot region. Source: Berchtesgaden National Park

4   Scientific and technical review

A group of experts provided project support in the form of regular telephone conferences and meetings plus bilateral contacts with individual experts.
The members of the expert support group were:

> Bettina Hedden-Dunkhorst, BfN
> Christelle Otto, BfN
> Kerstin Lehmann, BfN
> Peter Finck, BfN
> Yann Kohler, ALPARC
> Guido Plassmann, ALPARC
> Michaela Künzl, Berchtesgaden National Park
> Ferdinand Lainer, Hohe Tauern National Park
> Werner Franek, Gesäuse National Park

When preparing this report, the group also considered existing and ongoing projects and similar procedures. The report therefore builds on existing ecological network approaches and projects: ECONNECT[2], the Ecological Continuum Project[3], the National Ecological Network (REN – Switzerland)[4] and the trame verte et bleue projects (France)[5]. Comparisons were also made with existing selection procedures for parks of national importance (Switzerland)[6] and the WWF's PAN Parks certification[7].

5   Planning and workflow

The scope and content of the project were defined in the client's requirements (see section 1). Bettina Hedden-Dunkhorst and Christelle Otto from the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) in Bonn met to finalise the issues to be addressed and the procedures. There were no major changes to the original project plan. The various milestones are set out in Table 1.

The project was given a run time of six and a half months, from October 2008 to 30 April 2009.

The interim project deliverables comprised technical working documents on the different project phases (see section 1), which were provided in good time before the expert group meetings and telephone conferences, plus organising and chairing all the expert meetings.

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[2]   www.econnectproject.eu
[3]   www.alpine-ecological-network.org/index.php/the-ecological-continuum-project
[4]   Berthoud, G., Lebeau, R. P., Righetti, A., 2004 *Final report on the REN National Ecological Network* (Nationales ökologisches Netzwerk REN. Schlussbericht), Environment Series No. 373, Federal Office for the Environment, Bern.
[5]   http://www.legrenelle-environnement.gouv.fr/spip.php?rubrique112
[6]   Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (ed.), *Parks of national importance. Guidelines for planning, establishing and operating parks*, Environmental implementation No. 0802, Federal Office for the Environment, Bern, 2008
[7]   www.panparks.org

Table 1: Project milestones

	October	November	December	January	February	March	April
Work commences	X						
Meeting with client	22 Oct						
Bilateral discussions							
1st expert group meeting ☽		26 Nov					
2nd expert group meeting ☺			10 Dec				
3rd platform meeting ☺			11 Dec				
3rd expert group meeting ☽					10 Feb		
Xth Alpine Conference						X	
4th expert group meeting ☽					.		2 Apr
Project end							X

☽   Expert support group telephone conference
☺   Meeting of expert support group

6 Project deliverables

A range of products were produced over the course of the project, in accordance with the project requirements (see section 1). The products are described in brief in this section.

6.1 Designation of pilot regions

The designation of pilot regions is intended to further the efforts of the Alpine Convention and the Ecological Network Platform to establish an ecological network in the Alps. This is achieved directly by recognising regions that have contributed to the ecological network, and indirectly as other regions will be inspired to take similar steps when they see the benefits of the designation. The Platform is responsible for supporting and promoting specific programmes and for facilitating discussion between the pilot regions.

In principle, all regions which are working to establish an ecological network in the Alps should be designated. The regions must meet a number of minimum requirements, such as having an altitude range of at least 100m, plus various criteria which will be assessed using a questionnaire (see sections 6.3, 6.4 and Annex 1). The aim is to incorporate the broadest possible range of regions and issues, such as improving links between certain types of habitat or the habitats of specific species.

6.2   Proposed selection procedure and responsibilities

A variety of approaches could potentially be used for the selection procedure. Factors include not only specific activities, but also the different stakeholders involved and the timetable (see Table 2). on the basis of the expert group's deliberations, the following procedure has been proposed.

Table 2: Outline of selection procedure timetable

		1.Monat	2.Monat	3.Monat	4.Monat	5.Monat	6.Monat	7.Monat	8.Monat	9.Monat	10.Monat	11.Monat	12.Monat	13.Monat	14.Monat	15.Monat	16.Monat	17.Monat	18.Monat
a.	Auftragsvergabe	■																	
b.	Aufruf zur Interessensbekundung		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨							
c.	Rückmeldung der Regionen / Versand		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨							
d.	Ausfüllen Fragebogen		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨					
e.	Einreichung Fragebogen			▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	■				
f.	Auswertung / Erstellung Dokumente															▨	▨		
g.	Übersetzung Faltblatt																	▨	
h.	Signierung Zertifikat																	▨	
i.	Einladung / Absage Pilotregionen																	■	
k.	*Reserve*																		▨
l.	Nominierung																		▮

Key: blue and red indicate a specific date, green indicates period of time

Explanatory notes regarding the individual phases:

a. Awarding of contracts:
The Platform Presidency is responsible for the selection procedure. The Presidency may either undertake the different tasks associated with the selection process (sending out questionnaire, acting as the contact point for applicants, evaluating the questionnaires, producing flyers, etc.) or may delegate these duties to a third party.

b. Call for expressions of interest:

The call for expressions of interest will be published online (www.alpine-ecological-network.org) and also sent out to regions, protected areas (via ALPARC) and organisations (NGOs). The call may also be mentioned in a CIPRA newsletter article.

c. Responses from the regions and sending out questionnaires:
Regions can indicate that they are interested in being selected. This can be done by informing the Platform Presidency (or its appointed representative) by telephone or e-mail. The Presidency or its representative will then send the questionnaire and supporting documents to the region.

d. Completing the questionnaire:
The regions in question will complete the questionnaire (approx. 2 months). The Platform Presidency (or its appointed representative) will be available to answer any queries.

e. Returning the questionnaire:
The regions will submit the completed questionnaire and supporting documents (maps, plans, photographs, etc.) to the Platform Presidency/appointed representative.

f. Evaluating the questionnaire & producing the documents:
The questionnaires will be evaluated. If any information is unclear, it will be clarified with the relevant region. A certificate and flyer will be produced for those regions which meet the requirements.

g. Translating the certificate and flyer:
The certificate and flyer will be translated into the language of the region.

h. Signing the certificate:
The certificates will be sent to the Alpine Convention Presidency for signature; they will be signed and returned.

i. Acceptance/rejection of pilot regions:
The Platform Presidency will invite all regions which meet the requirements to an award ceremony. Existing pilot regions that fulfil the criteria will also be invited and their designation renewed.
Any regions that do not or no longer meet the requirements will be rejected and informed of the reasons for the decision.

k. Extra time:
Extra time built in to allow for unforeseen events.

l. Designation:
The pilot regions will be officially designated during the Alpine Conference. The structure of each Alpine Conference will determine how and when this is done: as an item on the agenda, as a side event or during a Permanent Committee dinner. Good media attendance is essential. The event also needs to be announced well in advance.

6.3 Selection questionnaire

Selection criteria for the pilot regions have been defined which can be assessed by way of a questionnaire that reviews the ecological programme in each region. The questionnaire has been structured so as to allow a definitive evaluation of each region, based on whether its activities are appropriate. These activities will be assessed using clear and easily-identifiable

criteria, such as zoological information or aerial photographs. The questionnaire is therefore designed to focus on regional particularities – specific species, semi-natural habitats, existing protected areas – and the region's contribution to creating an ecological network in the Alps (specific measures and projects). The criteria have been chosen to reflect a holistic approach which focuses on the landscape as a whole; natural resources, human inhabitants and the resultant priorities will also be taken into account. This is reflected in the criteria chosen: the criteria relating to protected areas, habitats & landscape, and species concentrate mainly on the region's natural features. The criteria dealing with sustainable land use, measures & projects, and fragmentation tend to concentrate on how humans have affected the landscape. The criteria were chosen in the course of discussions within the expert group.

In order to provide a transparent and objective evaluation process, we have opted to use a questionnaire with a points system to select pilot regions (see section 6.4). This method also simplifies the follow-up process for the reapproval of existing pilot regions. The points system makes it easy to identify whether a pilot region has improved or worsened since it was last designated. There is some flexibility built into the purely quantitative criteria: in addition to the fixed points system, a region can qualify as "outstanding". In such cases, the region must achieve at least one-third of the maximum score – rather than the usual half – in order to be classified as a pilot region. Evidence of the region's outstanding value may be provided in writing or at a meeting between the pilot region and the Platform Presidency/its appointed representative (see also section 6.3).
Information about similar procedures already in use was taken into account when compiling the questionnaire (see section 4 and bibliography in Annex 1).

The points system made it easy to evaluate the questionnaires which were completed and submitted by the regions in February 2009. Only the French département of Isère failed to achieve minimum score A (see section 6.3). However, during a telephone conversation, the region was able to demonstrate that it did qualify as an outstanding natural region because of the measures taken to link up unspoiled natural areas within the valley.
As expected, some information provided by the regions in response to the questionnaire was fairly vague, because some criteria were based on estimates (for example if no GIS data was available). Two solutions were put forward in order to avoid similar inaccuracies in the questionnaires used in the follow-up process, particularly since the questionnaire could be filled in by a different person. The questionnaire was expanded to include information about sources. These sources and principles will be used to evaluate each criterion, and could prove very useful when the region applies for renewal. In addition, pilot regions applying for renewal will now be asked specifically what has changed since their last application. As a result of the evaluation of the questionnaire, further explanations will be required and some minor changes have been made, such as including RAMSAR areas under protected areas.

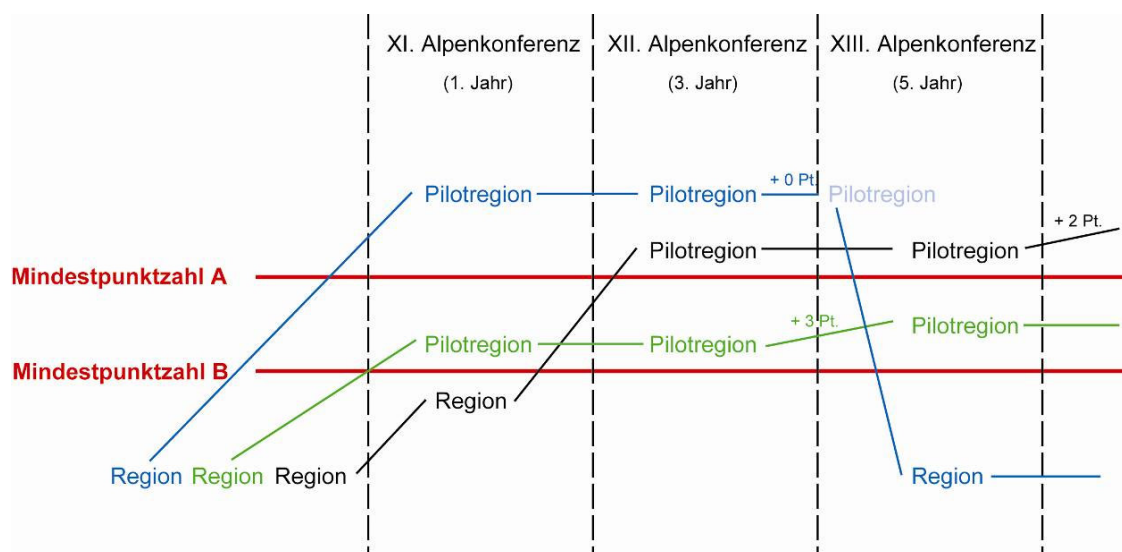## 6.4   Selection and follow-up processes

The questionnaire described in section 6.2 (see also Annex 1) serves as the basis for determining whether a region meets the requirements. Each region has to meet the requirements, namely achieving the predefined minimum score in the criteria questionnaire and/or qualifying as outstanding, depending on its score. There are two key thresholds:

A 62 points: if a region scores at least 62 points (more than half of the maximum score of 123), it will be designated a pilot region.

B 41 points: if the region scores at least 41 points but less than 62 points (one-third or more of the maximum score), the region will only become a designated pilot region if it qualifies as outstanding on the basis of its efforts. In order to classify as outstanding, the region must be able to demonstrate that it already has effective networking between unspoiled

natural areas within a densely-populated valley and that the network function is actively protected or that measures (at least five) have been taken/are being taken/will be taken to protect this function.

The designation is valid until the next-but-one Alpine Conference. During this time, the selected region can be referred to as "a pilot region in accordance with the Alpine Convention".

At the next-but-one Alpine Conference, the pilot region will be required to provide information about the changes that have taken place since it completed the first questionnaire. Rather than being expected to complete the whole questionnaire again, the region is only required to identify any changes that have occurred – this statement is taken on good faith. These changes will then be entered in the questionnaire. When the points are recalculated, the region must score at least two points more than in the first selection process in order for the designation to be renewed. The minimum scores for the pilot regions will be regularly increased by two points (at every other Alpine Conference, i.e. usually every four years), thereby ensuring that the pilot regions will continue to improve rather than resting on their laurels.

Examples:

In Year 1, the **Blue** region achieves the minimum score for category A and therefore qualifies as a pilot region. The designation is valid until the next-but-one Alpine Conference. At the Alpine Conference in Year 5, the region again achieves the minimum score but does not increase its score by the requisite two points (compared with the original application) and therefore no longer qualifies as a pilot region. If it had scored two more points, the designation would have been renewed.

The **Green** region achieves the minimum score in category B. In discussions it is able to prove that it qualifies as an outstanding region because of its work on creating networks and is therefore designated a pilot region. At the next-but-one Alpine Conference, the region adds a further three points to its original score because of new networking projects. It therefore remains a designated pilot region.

The **Black** region does not achieve the minimum score in the first selection procedure so does not qualify as a pilot region. In Year 3, existing and planned initiatives to encourage new species to migrate to the area and more detailed information about habitats allows the

region to score more than minimum score A. It is therefore selected. In the course of the next-but-one selection process, the region scores two more points and therefore remains a pilot region.

6.5   Evaluating the questionnaires

For the first pilot region selection process, regions were contacted that were already known to be contributing significantly to the creation of a trans-Alpine ecological network in the context of Econnect or the Ecological Continuum Project. The following regions completed and submitted questionnaires in February 2009:

- Alpi Marittime (France and Italy)
- Berchtesgaden-Salzburg (Austria and Germany)
- Département of Isère (France)
- Inn-Adige (Austria, Italy and Switzerland)
- Northern Limestone Alps/Eisenwurzen/Gesäuse/Dürrenstein (Austria)

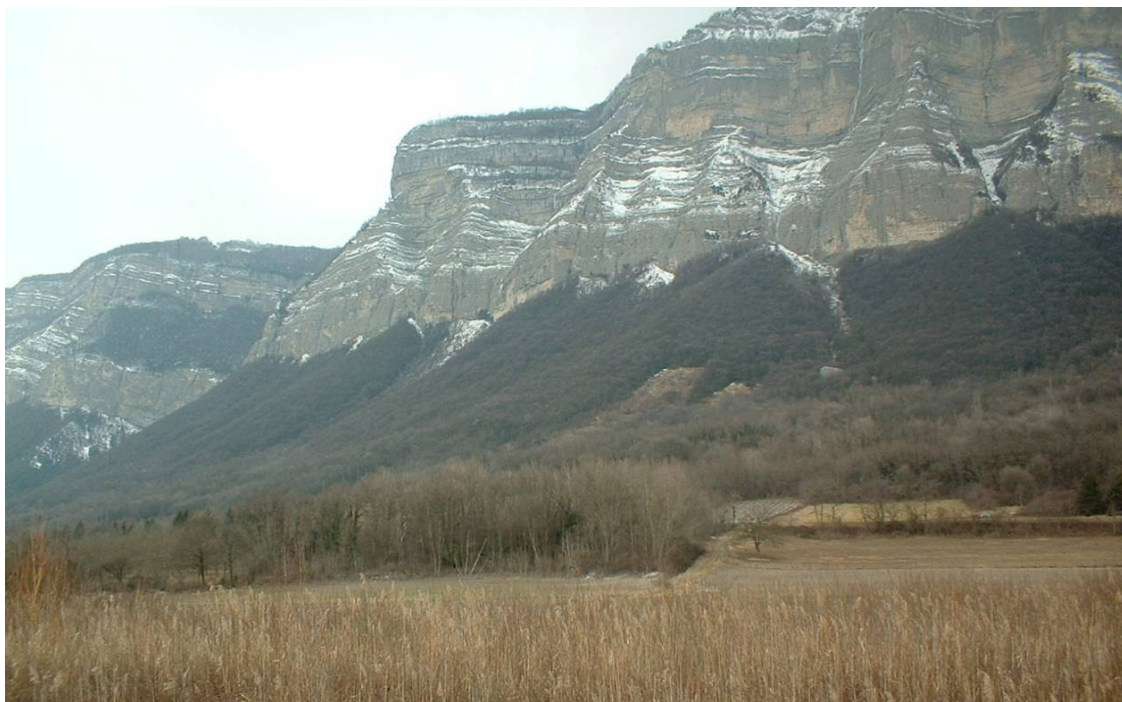The region's questionnaire scores are shown in Table 3.

Figure 3: Département of Isère pilot region (Crolles Montfort, Chartreuse side). Source: département of Isère

Table 3: Breakdown of scores for questionnaires submitted in 2009

	possible score	Berchtesgaden-Salzburg	Alpi Marittime	Northern Limestone Alps/Eisenwurzen/Gesäuse/Dürrenstein	Inn-Adige	Isère
S1 Protected areas	19 (+3)*	13	10	10	18	7
S2 % of area that is protected	6	3	3	1	3	1
Total protected areas	**25**	**16**	**13**	**11**	**21**	**9.5**
L1 Types of habitat	15	11	12	11.5	11.5	6.5
L2 Traditional uses	2	2	1	2	2	2
L3 Degree of self-containment	1	1	1	1	1	0
L4 Habitat diversity	2	2	2	2	2	1
Total habitat/landscape	**20**	**16**	**16**	**16.5**	**16.5**	**9.5**
A1 Species-specific habitats	21	18	9	15	15	4.5
A2 Species networks	7.5	2.5	2.5	5.5	7	1.5
A3 Other species	(10.5)**	7.5	7	7.5	9.5	0.5
Total species	**28.5**	**28**	**18.5**	**28**	**31.5**	**6.5**
N1 Residential areas	1	0	1	0	0	0
N2 Alpine products	1	1	1	1	1	0
N3 Artificial light	1	0	0	0	1	0
N4 Climate change	1	0	1	1	1	0
N5 Partnerships/cooperation	1	1	1	1	1	1
N6 Cross-border issues	4	4	4	2	4	0
Total sustainable land use	**9**	**6**	**8**	**5**	**8**	**1**
M1 Measures	40.5	12	16.5	8	13.75	19
Total measures/projects	**40.5**	**12**	**16.5**	**8**	**13.75**	**19**
Z1 Fragmentation	0	-3	0	-2	-8	-4
Total fragmentation	**0**	**-3**	**0**	**-2**	**-8**	**-4**
Total score	**123**	**75**	**72**	**66.5**	**82.75**	**41.5**
Classifies as outstanding						**X**
A Minimum score excluding outstanding status	**62**	**X**	**X**	**X**	**X**	
B Minimum score plus outstanding status	**41**					**X**
Designated pilot region*		**yes**	**yes**	**yes**	**yes**	**yes**

Explanatory notes:
* S1 Protected areas: the points shown in brackets relate to other protected areas that were not specifically mentioned in the questionnaire.
** A3 Other species: the points shown in brackets relate to other species that were not specifically mentioned in the questionnaire.
*** A region is classified as a pilot region if it a) achieves minimum score A, irrespective of its classification as outstanding or b) achieves minimum score B and qualifies as outstanding (see sections on the selection and follow-up processes).

All regions met the requirements and have therefore been designated pilot regions by the Alpine Convention's Ecological Network Platform.

6.6   Designation and benefits for the region

At a small award ceremony, each designated pilot region will receive
- a certificate (see Annex 2)
- a flyer about the region which contains information about the scenery and natural resources found in the region and the reasons why it has been selected (see Annex 3)
- a press information kit (see Annex 4)

The certificate is an official document signed by the President of the Alpine Conference.

The flyer contains a general section with information about the Alpine Convention, the Ecological Network Platform and the role of the pilot regions, plus a section about the individual pilot region. The flyer is designed for use in the pilot region's marketing activities. For example, it could be copied and made available in tourist offices or visitor centres in the protected areas.

The press information kit contains a more in-depth version of the information in the flyer. It includes detailed information about the Alpine Convention and the Ecological Network Platform. There are plans to include a press release about the award ceremony in future versions of the press information kit (this is not part of the current project).

The benefits of being a designated pilot region are set out in the document entitled Information about the benefits of being selected (*Angaben zu den Nutzen der Nominierung*, Annex 1).

Figure 4: Inn-Adige pilot region. Source: Inn-Adige region

7 Past and future publication of the results

Discussions are currently underway with regard to the possibility of publishing the results in the Alpine Signals series produced by the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention.

8 Evaluating the project results & next steps

8.1 Designated pilot regions 2009-10

In October 2009, the Permanent Committee of the Alpine Convention tabled a resolution for the designation of pilot regions for the ecological network in the Alps. If the resolution is approved, the pilot regions for 2010 will be officially designated at a small award ceremony in December 2009 or January 2010.

8.2 Designating additional pilot regions

The follow-up process (see also section 6.3) specifically allows more pilot regions to be designated as part of the ecological network in the Alps at future Alpine Conferences. The first call for expressions of interest for the designation of additional pilot regions is due to be launched at the XIth Alpine Conference in spring 2011.

At the last expert group meeting (2 April 2009), the expert support group agreed that it would be willing to act as an advisory committee for the follow-up process.

Figure 5: Northern Limestone Alps/Eisenwurzen/Gesäuse/Dürrenstein pilot region (Inn Valley including Totes Gebirge range and Dachstein). Source: Gesäuse National Park collection

9   Summary

The platform "Ecological Network" of the Alpine Convention aims to promote the creation of a cross-boundary ecological network in the Alpine region by nominating pilot areas. Areas awarded the nomination "pilot area of the Alpine Ecological Network" are especially active in supporting an ecological network in the Alps and promoting sustainable development in their own region.

The procedure envisages nominating pilot areas at each Alpine Conference. The decision to recognise a pilot area is based on a questionnaire completed by the applicant regions. For instance, the questionnaire uses certain criteria to gather details both on a region's ecological characteristics and its active contribution to sustainable development, as well as on concrete projects and measures which help present and promote the ecological network in the Alps.

The completed questionnaire is evaluated according to a points system. In order to be nominated, an area must gain a specified minimum number of points and/or, depending on the final point score, must have singularity status. The nomination is valid for a limited duration but can be applied for repeatedly.

It is proposed that nominated pilot areas will each be presented with a certificate, a leaflet on their region and a press kit during a small ceremony; these can then serve both as official documentation (certificate) and for advertising and information purposes (leaflet and press kit).

At the beginning of 2009 five regions filled out the questionnaire (Alpi Maritime, Berchtesgaden – Salzburg, Départment de l'Isère, Inn – Etsch / En – Adige, Nördliche Kalkalpen/Eisenwurzen/Gesäuse/Dürrenstein). These are already pilot areas in the framework of the Econnect or Ecological Continuum Project. Evaluation of the questionnaires showed that all five regions meet the criteria for nomination as pilot areas under the "Ecological Network" platform of the Alpine Convention.

Being nominated a pilot area can bring a region both socio-economic and ecological advantages. For instance, the nomination can increase the region's value added and enhance media response by acting as an advertising vehicle, or through exchange with other pilot regions. In addition pilot regions could find it easier to obtain financial support through existing instruments which contribute to promoting the ecological network.