

**Alpine Convention – German Presidency 2015/16
Cultural dimension of the Alpine Convention / "Reading Mountains"
initiative**

**Interview with Federal Minister Barbara Hendricks on the occasion of
International Mountain Day for *Börsenblatt des Deutschen Buchhandels*
(Gazette of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association)**

Germany holds the Presidency of the Alpine Convention in 2015/2016. In this context, the German Environment Ministry has suggested that the focus of International Mountain Day should be on the special cultural and linguistic characteristics of the region. Wouldn't ecological topics be a more obvious choice?

The Alpine Convention is a good instrument to promote the protection and sustainable development of the Alpine region. This includes cultural and linguistic characteristics, as sustainable development must also include socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects. The Alpine Convention can only come into full effect in cooperation with the region's inhabitants. In 2006, representatives of the Alpine countries adopted the Declaration on Population and Culture. The intention was to jointly preserve and support cultural diversity in the Alps. The "Reading Mountains" initiative will be a contribution to reaching this goal. By the way, the motto of the German Presidency is "The Alps - a symbol of European diversity". Of course we are also addressing biological diversity under his heading. The Alps are what we call a biodiversity hotspot in Europe.

How was the proposal to choose a cultural, literary focus received by the other members of the Alpine Convention?

Very well. We had expected a positive response from the beginning, but now I am quite surprised to see just how many exciting events are being prepared throughout the region. On 11 December 2015 readings and cultural events will be held in all eight countries that are parties to the Convention, including in Munich, Innsbruck, Bolzano, Vienna and Berlin. The town of Chambéry in the French Alps is even organising a four-day reading festival. Many Alpine communities, both large and small, are participating in the initiative. A map on the website of the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention shows the locations of all the events being held. I like this idea because it makes it so easy to see at a glance which book is being read where.

One of the events on International Mountain Day will be held at the Federal Environment Ministry in Berlin. Robert Seethaler will read from his book "A Whole Life". Why did you choose Seethaler?

Being President of the Alpine Convention increases one's awareness of references to the Alps in everyday life. We came across Robert Seethaler's book in a bookstore in Berlin. Using simple, unpretentious language, he describes a simple, unpretentious life in this barren landscape - in a very touching way. This book was just one of

many little things that encouraged us to go ahead with the Reading Mountains campaign. And there is another reason why we chose Robert Seethaler's book. I am a Minister working here in Berlin, and at the same time I am President of the Alpine Convention. Robert Seethaler is an author who comes from the Alps and lives in Berlin. I think that is a nice parallel. Once the idea was there, we worked together with the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention and the other Alpine countries to find out more about Alpine literature. A lot of mountain literature has been published recently in all Alpine languages, not only the typical documentaries and travel logs on Alpine topics, but mainly modern, engaging novels.

What would you like bookstores and publishers to do? What can, what should they contribute to make Reading Mountains on 11 December a success?

The recent mountain literature paints a vivid picture of life in the Alps and the challenges it involves. This appeals to a wide range of people. The readings held throughout the Alpine region are meant to highlight the diversity of cultures and languages in the Alpine countries. All participating bookstores and publishers are making an important contribution to this goal. I would therefore like to encourage all bookstores and publishers to support our Reading Mountains initiative by organising readings of their own, presenting specific book displays for Christmas shoppers or simply by informing their customers about the initiative and events. My particular thanks go to the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, which has supported and intensively promoted our initiative from the beginning.

What conclusion would you like to be able to draw after International Mountain Day? What do you think the campaign can achieve?

Looking at the events that have already been planned, I am sure that the Reading Mountains initiative will be very popular. With our events on 11 December we want to make the cultural connections in the Alpine region visible and tangible. As President of the Alpine Conference I am looking forward to the readings and hope that our initiative will spark people's joy of reading, and that it will be great fun.

What other goals will Germany be pursuing during its Presidency of the Alpine Convention? What has already been achieved?

The Alpine Convention calls for an integrated policy for the protection and development of the Alpine region, and that is also the focus of our Presidency agenda. We will pay particular attention to the policy of greening the economy in the Alpine region: sustainable tourism, energy-efficient building, ecological network, spatial planning, transport and water management. Together with all Alpine countries we are currently drafting a report containing recommendations on greening the economy. We want to enhance practical implementation and awareness of the Alpine Convention in the region, for example by supporting joint projects in the Alpine countries under the EU's INTERREG funding programme. We have applied for funding for five specific projects, and I hope that the EU will approve them. The German Environment Ministry is then going to provide the required national co-funding.

Is there anything that you consider particularly important for your Presidency?

I attach particular importance to cooperation with the inhabitants of the region. This includes civil society organisations and various Alpine networks: the community network Alliance in the Alps, the Alpine Town of the Year association, the Alpine Network of Protected Areas and the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, CIPRA. We have already agreed on projects with these players and provided financing to support sustainable development in the Alpine region.

The XIV. Alpine Conference on 13 October 2016 will be an opportunity to take stock of what we have achieved during our Presidency. This Conference is the biennial meeting of the Environment Ministers of the Alpine countries. It will mark the end of the German Presidency, Austria will be next.

Source: Börsenblatt des deutschen Buchhandels, 19.11.2015