

Whatsalp Vienna – Nice 2017

Most important results



Known as "whatsalp", a group of Alpine experts was hiking from Vienna to Nice from the 3rd of June to the 29th of September 2017. Along the 1800 km long route, approximately seventy local meetings and events with several hundred participants took place in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France. We met numerous people and organizations working for the Alps. About 200 people hiked with the whatsalp group for a shorter or longer time. The aim of the project was to document the current state of the Alps and to exchange views and experiences with different people on-site and on the way. Another objective was to draw a comparison with the results of the "TransALPedes" crossing of the Alps in 1992, in which a part of the whatsalp core team was involved. Additionally to the retrospect, we will have a look into the future: what will the Alps look like in 25 years if another group would start an Alpine hike in 2042? Where is the greatest need for action at the moment?



An important framework of our project is the Alpine Convention, which the Alpine countries have committed themselves to for the protection and sustainable development of the Alps. On our hike, we have repeatedly noticed that the Alps do not form a homogeneous entity and that the initial situation and the current situation are very different in the different Alpine regions. In this paper, we give an overview in seven points of the most important results of the whatsalp project. The contents derive from our experiences and adventures during our tour. In our blog on the website www.whatsalp.org, hikes and local dates are documented in detail.

Climate warming has continued to grow and its consequences are becoming increasingly apparent.



In 1992 climate change was a topic that was not yet widely considered in the Alps, but now we have recognized it as a central challenge. During our walk we observed numerous signs of climate warming and its consequences for nature and humans. The accelerated decline in the glaciers (e.g. Pasterze A, Rhone Glacier CH, Montblanc area I, Grande Motte F) was particularly noticeable. Shortly after our visit to Bergell, a large landslide took place in the Bondasca valley, which also worried us. We noticed the striking traces of natural events such as floods, landslides and mudslides in numerous other places. We also saw extensive protective infrastructure, which was not yet existing to this extent in 1992. Another sign of climate change was the massive expansion of artificial snowmaking in many ski areas (e.g. Amadé Skiarena A, Tarantaise F, Bardonecchia I) and today's popular activities such as snow-farming or covering of glaciers (e.g. Dachstein A, Andermatt CH, Val d'Isère F). Many small, low-lying ski areas are affected by a lack of snow and have no future.

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Compared to 1992, strategies against climate warming and their consequences were discussed much more strongly in many places. However, only in a few places (e.g. Ramsau, A, Puschlav CH, Obergoms CH, Maurienne F) were we introduced to serious approaches towards a more climate-friendly Alpine development. This year, the impact of the great heat in the lowlands on mountain tourism was very noticeable, which in some places caused a big boom.

The Alps are particularly affected by climate change and its consequences; in the context of the urgently needed, more stringent climate protection policy of the states, special adapted strategies are needed for this sensitive natural, economic and living area.



The global-oriented, non-ecological intensive tourism is facing new forms of nature-based tourism in the Alps.



In the past 25 years, several new activities and offers have resulted mainly in nature-based summer tourism (e.g. mountain biking, theme walks, adventures in all countries and many regions). Tourism locations are increasingly focusing on regional products, especially in the gastronomy sector. We experienced soft and nature-based forms of tourism, for example, in Rauristal A, Binntal CH, Bonneval-sur-Arc F and Clarée F, sometimes in combination with local small and medium-sized ski regions.

Nowadays, Alpine tourism is much stronger dominated by global tourism destinations than in 1992. When visiting some of the major destinations (e.g. Amadé Skiarena A, Andermatt-Sedrun CH, Valle di Susa I, Tarantaise F), we noticed that upgrading has increasingly taken place: development and merging of ski areas, new ski slopes, artificial snow making equipment, construction of reservoirs and mountain bike downhill trails. To hike through these faceless, engineered ski landscapes left us with a strange feeling and had little to do with experiencing nature. The question arises as to which extent these expanded ski areas can still be profitably operated in the future, facing increasing expenditure.



In many of the regions we hiked through, we noticed that urban sprawl of landscape through holiday homes continues. In Switzerland, we had the impression that the new act on second homes does not yet work properly. We saw the renovation and conversion of old farmhouses as second homes, especially in France and Italy (e.g. Tarantaise F, Valle Varaita, Valle Maira I).

Alpine tourism urgently needs a reform in the direction of sustainability, be it with greening of intensive tourism, but also with a more consistent promotion of a nature-based tourism adapted to the respective local conditions.

Transit freight transport on the road has continued to increase, and motorized leisure traffic has also developed strongly over the past 25 years.



In Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France, whatsalp came across nine large Alpine transit routes. On most of these axes, some of which have been further developed since 1992, goods traffic has grown considerably. In Austria and Switzerland almost a doubling was recorded, which we clearly felt while walking along some transit roads. Only in Switzerland, the share of goods in Alpine rail traffic is relatively

high today, namely 68%. In France this figure is only 15%, in Austria 28%. This not only causes a great exposure of the Alpine valleys to air pollutants and noise, the expanded traffic routes also require more and more land and this in regions where usable land is anyway scarce for topographic reasons. The Swiss shift policy in the transit freight transport sector has a certain effect, but the objective as anchored in the constitution and law has not yet been achieved. In other countries and in the EU there are currently no instruments for the transfer of transit goods to rail.



According to our perception, motorized leisure traffic on the road has at least doubled since 1992. Particularly noticeable is a strong increase of heavy motorcycles. The increased traffic is connected not only with the increasing motorization, but also with the construction and improvement of many mountain roads (e.g. in Niederösterreich A, Südtirol I, Piemont I).

Despite a series of projects to promote soft mobility (e.g. Mariazellerbahn A, Rauristal A, Val Ferret I, Termignon F), it is not possible to mitigate the abundant leisure traffic in the Alps.

The Alpine countries and the EU are required to create new regulation and funding instruments to contain transit traffic, to shift goods, in particular goods traffic to rail and to soothe motorized leisure traffic. Already developed models for transport of goods such as an Alpine transit exchange or an Alpine transit charge, are to be introduced in a concrete way so that the quality of life along the transport axes is not further restricted.

Energy transition leads to new conflicts between energy projects and landscape protection.



We were relieved to find that most of the pumped storage projects we visited in 1992 are no longer active. Instead, new power plant projects are being discussed, which are justified by the energy transition (e.g. Sellrain A, Trift CH). Overall, their contribution to the future energy supply is relatively low. The planned destruction of the last intact mountain landscapes for the use of renewable energy leads to new conflicts in nature conservation circles, especially in Switzerland.



In all countries along the route we noticed a lot of new small power plants. These were often built with little sensitivity into the sensitive Alpine landscape (e.g. Briançonnais F). We only encountered a few new wind turbines, in contrast, mainly in Austria and South Tyrol, we saw new solar systems on the house roofs.

The expansion of renewable energy sources in the Alps must not be at the expense of the last unexploited Alpine valleys. An energy policy is needed, which, in addition to promotional measures, also provides for intervention measures so that energy consumption does not increase any further.

Within the scope of new parks and large protected areas the question arises: to promote cultural landscape or wilderness?



Since 1992, a number of new national and nature parks have emerged; some of them we hiked through in Austria, Switzerland, France and Italy. In particular new national parks protect the landscape long-term from energy projects (Gesäuse A) and ski areas (e.g. Hohe Tauern A, Vanoise F). For many parks, the question is how much

they are going to preserve the traditional Alpine cultural landscape or to what extent they are to promote a new wilderness. In the core zone of the national parks, a free natural development

('wilderness') is at the centre (e.g. Gesäuse A, Swiss National Park CH, Mercantour National Park F). Regional nature parks are mainly preserving the nature-based cultural landscape (e.g. Steirische Eisenwurzen A, Pfyn-Finges CH). The discussion on wilderness is linked to questions about biodiversity and the population of the respective valleys. Since 1992, a new national park in Switzerland has been rejected by the local population in several places. In addition, the problem of large predators such as bear and wolf, which are not restricted to the boundaries of countries and protected areas, were addressed again and again by our conversation partners.



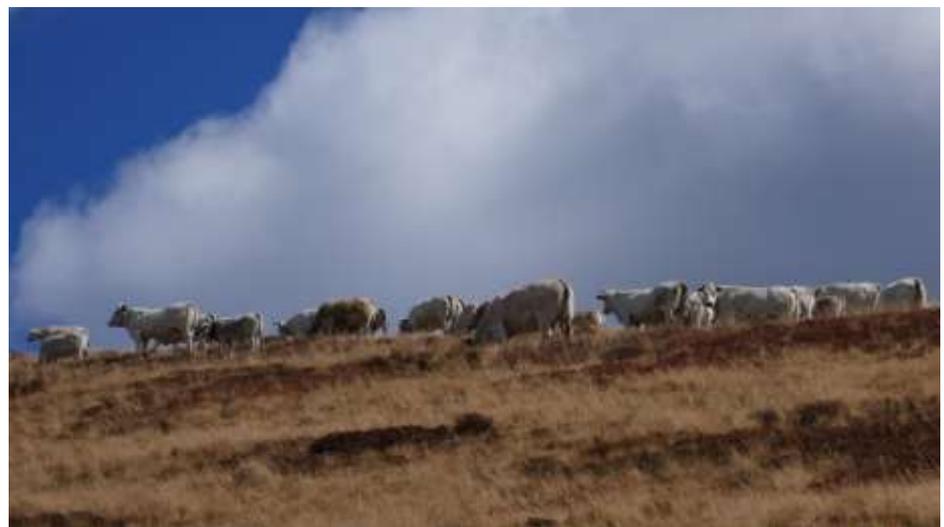
There is a need for an open discussion on the question of future wilderness development in large protected areas and beyond that in the whole of the Alps, based on scientific knowledge, past experience and the involvement of the population.

Organic farming has become reality in many valleys since 1992, while in other places intensive and not ecological agriculture and forestry continues to dominate.



Since 1992, organic mountain farming has prevailed in many valleys of the Alps. The focus is on the production of milk and meat as well as the cultivation of herbs, special cereal varieties and fruits (Naturpark Steirische Eisenwurzen A, Ramsau A, Mals I, Puschlav CH). In other places we observed a still intensive, not ecological agriculture with large-scale monocultures and use of pesticides (Niederösterreich A, Vinschgau I, Wallis CH). Particularly noteworthy are the effects of intensive forestry on the landscape with many clear cuttings and large forest roads (e.g. Niederösterreich A, Steiermark A). However, we also saw many natural forests and forest reserves (e.g. Dürrenstein A, Val Müstair CH, Valle Varaita I).

Mountain farming is still very different in the countries and regions of the Alps. In many regions of the Italian and French Western Alps it has almost come to a complete standstill. As a result, the cultural landscapes are becoming increasingly overgrown with bushes and trees (e.g. Maurienne F, Valle Varaita I, Valle Maira I, Valle Stura I).



In contrast, in parts of Austria, South Tyrol and Switzerland, we encountered dynamic mountain farming. But we there also noticed a progressive devaluation of the landscape by forest growing into locations where cultivation has proved to be difficult (e.g. Gasteinertal A, Pustertal I, Urseren CH).

Within the framework of the agricultural policy of the Alpine countries and the EU, the greening of mountain farming must be further promoted and comprehensive organic farming in the Alps should be pursued; the cooperation between agriculture and tourism should be further strengthened.

The Alps are characterized by strong population growth, but they are still suffering from a large-scale migration in many regions; refugees arriving through Italy are challenging the Alpine regions.



The population of the Alps has grown considerably over the last 25 years, with the exact figures diverging. However, in many places we experienced that the population dynamics are very different from region to region. While the population has increased considerably in the catchment areas of the cities (e.g. Vienna A, Zürich CH, Bolzano I, Grenoble F) and many large Alpine valleys (e.g. Vinschgau I, Wallis CH, Tarantaise F) since 1992, the population is stagnating or decreasing in the peripheral regions (e.g. Mölltal A, Bergell CH, Queyras F, Okzitanische Täler I). In some places this leads to smaller political influence of the mountain regions, e.g. Provinz Turin I). The age structure has also changed in many regions, for example, in the peripheral regions we saw significantly fewer young people than 25 years ago.



The Alps are a large region that has always been characterized by migration. However, with the flight of many people from war zones and crises areas to Europe, border regions in the Alps now face new challenges. The population is often overstrained by the arrival of numerous refugees mainly via Italy. In several regions we met committed local initiatives for refugee aid (e.g. Chiavenna I, Briançon F).

There is a need for new strategies and models adapted to the respective national and regional circumstances in order to slow down the strong growth of the Alpine cities and to make the peripheral regions more attractive again for living and working.

Within the framework of European refugee policy, the specific challenges which peripheral border regions are facing must be taken into account. In particular, financial and professional support is needed so that the often financially weak mountain communities can afford the integration of migrants.

The Alpine region could become more sustainable until in 25 years a new group might be starting the next Alpine hike.



We still encountered many intact natural resources, natural and cultural landscapes, summer retreats, streams and rivers in the Alps. If the political will exists, these resources can be protected and used sustainably with appropriate strategies and measures. In contrast, the persistent capture of traditional structures and concepts such as the one-sided fixation on ski tourism, motorized individual transport and industrial agriculture is not a suitable recipe. There is a need for innovative and creative ideas of locals as well as migrants. These should be given more space than until now. We saw some encouraging examples, e.g. in Ramsau A and in Puschlav CH. The demands of our young co-hikers in the whatsalp youth project also go in this direction.

Nice, 29th of September 2017

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