Introduction

Location and General Description

The Alps represent one of the most important biodiversity hot spots in Europe. An ecotonal mountain system, placed between the Eurosiberian and the Mediterranean biogeographic regions in Europe, divided in three major sectors: the western one influenced by the mild and humid Atlantic air streams, the central and continental one, and the eastern one Mediterranean they cover an area that is about 1200 km long, and belongs to seven different countries, with a total population of 11.1 million people. They are a rather young mountain system, whose “steplike” morphology was contoured by the Pleistocene glaciation. Alpine bedrocks can be divided into two major groups: calcareous rocks and siliceous material. The climate is mainly cold and temperate, with slight local variations (e.g. in border “Mediterranean character” areas).

Outstanding or Distinctive Biodiversity Features

The Alps are an interzonal mountain system (orobiome), a “transition area” between Central and Mediterranean Europe, with a still high degree of naturalness and large almost pristine areas. About 4500 species of vascular plants (up to 400 of which are endemic – genera Campanula, Draba, Pedicularis, Phyteuma, Primula, Ranunculus, Saxifraga and Viola), 800 species of mosses, 300 liverworts, 2500 lichens and more than 5000 fungi can be found. Mammalians (most of them small ones) belong to about 80 species, none of which is “strictly” endemic; large carnivore populations have been reduced in size or fragmented in small remaining groups. Large herbivores are largely distributed. About 200 breeding bird species can be identified, and as many migratory species. Only one species of amphibia in 21 is endemic (Salamandra lanzai); reptiles are present with 15 species, while invertebrates’ diversity overrules that of the vertebrate species by a factor of almost twenty (about one third of invertebrate species are considered as threatened).

Status and Threats

Wilderness areas can still be found almost all over the Alpine territory: the main problem is their excessive fragmentation and loss of habitats and populations. This threatens mainly the permanence of large carnivores (who are naturally returning or are being reintroduced in the Alps). Moreover, Alpine conservation has not only to do with difficulties in protecting a rather big area, but also with the necessity of dealing with an area that is inhabited and exploited by man (through tourism, agriculture, power plants/industry) and where the air and water pollution factor becomes more and more dangerous.

Characteristic and Focal Species: Large carnivores (lynx, wolf, brown bear)

Primary Sources and Justification for Ecoregion Delineation: