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FACTSHEET



The Ötztal Alps © Christiane Böhm

ECOLOGICAL VALUES OF THE

WILDERNESS AREA ÖTZTAL ALPS

The area of the Ötztal Alps ("Ötztaler Alpen") represents the largest connected glacial zone in the entire eastern Alps. It is one of the most important parts of a pan Alpine network of wilderness areas and a very important refuge for typical alpine species. The moraines of the Ötztal Alps are highly important as climate archives and exceptional models for studies and research on climate change.

The pristine freshwater systems of the southern Ötztal Alps. The rivers and streams of this region have a very pristine character. They are free flowing, mostly without significant signs of human impact. Especially the two large rivers in the southeast of this region, the Gurgler Ache and the Venter Ache and their larger tributaries such as the Königsbach and the Ferwallbach are of high ecological value. According to the Austrian River Basin Management Plan – that Austria also submitted to the EU in 2011 – Gurgler and Venter Ache are classified as rivers with an exceptional ecological state. Following a study, conducted by SCHMUTZ et al (2010) only 14% of Austrian rivers still remain in this very high ecological state. Apart from their ecological functions, these high alpine glacier river systems represent also high importance for studies and research concerning climate change.

The Ötztal Alps fall within a special type of alpine rivers. These rivers provide a great variety of habitats and are home to specially adapted organisms. In the one-of-a-kind valley "Platzertal" special habitats such

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HOTSPOT OF ALPINE FAUNA AND FLORA

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as freshwater systems, alpine meadows and dry grasslands, all of which are protected under European Habitat Directives can be found. Such habitats belong to the most threatened in the whole Alps and are therefore of national and European importance. In the Platzer valley the rarely existing meandering river – type also remains.

Regional characteristic of the flora and fauna

According to Annex I and II of the EU- Habitats Directive- and the Birds- Directive the wilderness area of the Ötztal Alps hosts at least six different species of vascular plants, 16 bryophytes and lichens, 13 species of birds and 15 animal species, that are strongly protected by the regulations of Tyrolean environmental law. This region has high importance for the preservation of threatened species. 77 (31%) out of 367 species of fauna and flora that are close to extinction in Northern Tyrol, can be found in the Southern Ötztal Alps. Austria and Tyrol are required to care for the protection of wildlife because of international standards in conservation. Populations of high alpine species like the Alpine marmot (*Marmota marmota*) must be monitored because this species was once widely distributed in the higher elevations of the Alps and was dramatically decimated by human predation in the 19th century. The Ötztal Alps still accommodate the largest naturally found population of alpine marmot in the entire eastern Alps. It also hosts important breeding grounds for typical alpine birds such as the rock ptarmigan and the snow finch. Over 10% of Austria's whole breeding population of those two species can be found here, on only one percent of the area of the Austrian Alps.

Declared Protection Areas

The main parts of the Ötztal Alps are protected areas such as Natura 2000, biosphere reserve, nature parks and "Ruhegebiet". About 73 % of the central and south-eastern Ötztal Alps - within Austria's national territory - are declared protected areas. A specific feature in this network of protected areas is the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Gurgler Kamm. The designation of biosphere reserve is awarded mainly to areas of national and international importance for natural research and environmental protection. The Gurgler Kamm is the largest area of this kind in the entire eastern Alps.

Actual threats for the region

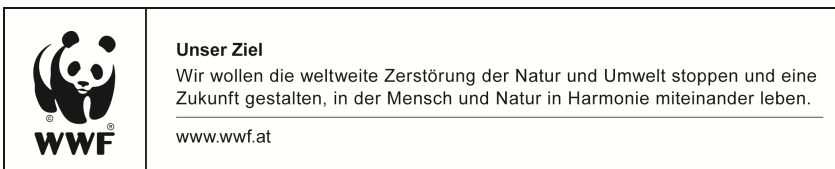
The landscape of the southern Ötztal Alps and its pristine freshwater system is currently threatened by a huge power plant project of TIWAG, the largest Tyrolean energy provider. TIWAG is planning an expansive water pipeline system into the Kaunertal valley, thus the Gurgler and Venter Ache being transformed into lifepoor drainages. In the Platzertal, a nearly untouched high alpine valley, an embankment dam – 120m high and about 450 wide – is planned to be built. Such infrastructure projects are not in accordance with – but rather contradicting – the goals of protected areas like the Ötztal Alps.

Further Information:

www.fluesse-voller-leben.at

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