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Dear Sir/Madam

The IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) is deeply concerned about recent developments in the National Park Hohe Tauern Carinthia. According to our information, a new hunting agreement for the national park has been signed in Carinthia, which possibly violates national park principles and criteria, as set out in the “IUCN Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories” (Dudley 2008, 2013). In the 1990s, Republic of Austria has declared conformity to these guidelines a prerequisite to the use of the label “national park” in Austria. National Park Hohe Tauern Carinthia (established in 1981) has eventually reached this conformity in 2001, on the basis of special agreements with stakeholders, notably hunters and landowners. Since 2001, the national park has successfully implemented numerous measures to secure and perpetuate its conformity with international protected area standards, and has thus contributed to the overall high standard of Austrian national parks. In the interpretation of the protected area management categories for Europe (EUROPARC and IUCN, 2000), the guidelines clearly state that management of the IUCN protected category II should eliminate exploitation (of natural resources), including hunting and fishing, and that this is a duty of the authorities responsible for the management of the National park.

The Carinthian hunting agreements for the national park (2001-2010 and 2011-2020) were a model for the successful co-operation between national park authorities and stakeholders. It now seems that the former achievements are jeopardised by the new hunting agreement.

Our concern specifically relates to a purported passage in the hunting agreement, which refers to “the preservation of and support for autochthonous, reintroduced wildlife species (e.g. Ibex, Bearded-Vulture) *with exemption of large predators, like Wolf, Lynx, Brown bear as well as Golden Jackal and Otter*”. IUCN WCPA considers that such an exemption would openly contradict the goals and purposes of a national park. According to IUCN-guidelines, national parks “*are large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area... (Dudley 2008, 2013)*”. There can be no doubt that Wolf, Lynx, Brown Bear and Otter are characteristic species of Central European forest ecosystems (the Golden Jackal being a recent, but natural immigrant). The four species have naturally occurred in the Hohe Tauern region until about a 100-150 years ago, before they were exterminated by man, mostly for economic reasons. Today these species are not present in the park, at least not at viable populations. With the establishment of the national park, the primary focus of the area has shifted towards protection of natural biodiversity and – closely related to this – towards new benefits for man, related to enjoyment of nature, education and scientific research. The IUCN guidelines clearly state as one of the objectives of national parks: “*To maintain viable and ecologically functional populations and assemblages of native species at densities sufficient to conserve ecosystem integrity and resilience in*



the long term” (Dudley 2008, 2013) . It was through recent research in national parks that the key role of large predators for maintaining ecosystem integrity and resilience was scientifically established. One can infer from this that both preservation and support for large carnivore populations should be a central issue in national parks – in clear contrast to what the new hunting agreement for the National Park Hohe Tauern Carinthia asserts. Given the fact that in national parks *“the composition, structure and function of biodiversity should be to a great degree in a “natural” state or have the potential to be restored to such a state.... (Dudley 2008, 2013)”* it can be concluded that national parks have to contribute actively to the restoration of key-species, like large carnivores. A wholesale refusal of active support measures, like proposed in the new hunting agreement, is certainly not an appropriate position for a national park.

IUCN WCPA is further very concerned about another purported passage in the hunting agreement, according to which there should be *“no investments in research and finances for these species”*. Applied research is a key tool in protected area management. Especially in conflict-prone species like large carnivores, it seems almost irresponsible to abstain from research, monitoring and the collection of scientific data.

According to our information, the agreement seems to have other flaws as well, when compared with the previous agreements in place. The *“full-time protection of all other game species”* (referring to those species which are not subject to a national park specific game-management) has to remain a central position in the agreement. In our view, this weakens the special character of game-management in the national park and tends to blur the difference between national park core zones and other parts of the landscape, where conventional hunting is practised. Also, with reference to potential wildlife damages, the new agreement seems to provide more generalized rights of intervention into game-populations. While we do not contest the necessity of such interventions on principle, we would consider it more advisable to decide upon them in a more restrictive way, on a case-by case base.

Since the agreement itself has not yet been published, we have to admit that our knowledge of it mainly depends on media reports, like the one from 21 February 2020 <https://kaernten.orf.at/stories/3035590/>. In those reports, we found direct quotes of Landesrat Gruber that appeared positively alarming to us. Among others Mr. Gruber has stated: “Bear and Wolf, but also other predators like Lynx, Golden Jackal and Otter are not welcome in the national park”. This has prompted us to check the accuracy of the information with the national park, and to our dismay, it was not only confirmed, but we also learned that the national park had refused to sign the agreement, for fear of violation of both IUCN-guidelines and EU-law. We explicitly welcome the courageous stance of the national park in upholding international national park criteria and principles!



Dear Sir/dear Madam, IUCN WCPA is highly interested in supporting Austria in its endeavour to secure high standards for Austrian national parks. Hohe Tauern National Park is one of the most emblematic protected areas and it is considered as the cornerstone of conservation efforts at the European level. This is why we have taken the liberty to sound the alarm, as soon as the globally accepted protected area standards appear to be threatened. We hope very much that our concerns will prove to be wrong and therefore urgently request you to provide us with the full text of the new hunting agreement. Should it turn out that there is indeed no conflict with IUCN guidelines (as claimed in a press release by Mrs. Schaar and Mr. Gruber on 24 February), IUCN WCPA is ready to review its preliminary judgment on the agreement. On the other hand, should our concerns be confirmed by the text, we want to leave no doubt about the necessity of rapid action: the agreement should then be fully revised and brought in accordance with the IUCN-guidelines for a national park. IUCN WCPA is ready and willing to support such a revision with all their means!

Sincerely

Dr. Andrej Sovinc, IUCN WCPA RVC Europe

cc:

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Trevor Sandwith, Director, IUCN Global Protected Area Programme

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