

## Whatsalp – A hiking study across the Alps

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### Abstract

How has the image of the Alps changed over the decades? What traces are left behind in the landscape by people and natural events? Between June and September 2017, a group of Alpine experts hiked from Vienna to Nice under the name *whatsalp*. Along their journey on foot, they examined the current state of, and changes in, Alpine regions, documented developments across the landscape and in society, and discussed future scenarios with local actors. An important aim of *whatsalp* was to compare the present situation with that of 1992. At that time, several group members of the 2017 project had undertaken a similar walk, under the name *TransALPedes*, along approximately the same route. Partners of the project *whatsalp Vienna – Nice 2017* included the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA); the Swiss Alpine Initiative; ISCAR; the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention; and other Alpine-wide networks.

### The route

The *whatsalp* hike started out on 3 June 2017 from the Stephansplatz in Vienna (Figure 1), through the Wienerwald biosphere reserve, which is located in the states of Vienna and Lower Austria. The next important stop was Gesäuse National Park. From this point, the route continued to Salzburg and the Hohe Tauern, the largest national park in the Alps. Via Carinthia, the group arrived in East Tyrol; after leaving Austria, they travelled via the Pustertal and reached the Alpine towns of Brixen and Meran in the Italian South Tyrol (Siegrist et al. 2017, 1993).

Through the Vinschgau, the group continued to the Swiss Grisons and Valtellina in Lombardy, Italy, then on, via the cantons of Ticino and Uri, to the Grimsel area (canton of Berne) with its large reservoirs. The route led through the German- and French-speaking parts of the Valais, over to the Italian Aosta Valley at Mont Blanc.

From this point, the group reached the Haute Savoie (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region) in France. Having travelled through Vanoise National Park and past the ski stations Arc 2000 and Tignes-le-Lac, the group stopped in the Maurienne. After a detour to Bardonecchia (Italy), they then hiked towards the historic Alpine town of Briançon in the French region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, the next stop on their journey.

Around Monte Viso, the hikers reached the Occitan valleys of Piedmont. There, the *whatsalp* group followed the long-distance hiking trail known as Grande Traversata delle Alpi (GTA), turning off to the French National Park Mercantour. On 29 September 2017, they were received in Nice, the end-point of the journey. The hiking route covered a total of 1 800 kilometres and about 65 000 metres difference in altitude, see [www.whatsalp.org](http://www.whatsalp.org) (Figure 2).

As part of the research, more than sixty events took place along the route, which included a simple local meeting, evening events, and workshops lasting



Figure 1 – Start in Vienna on 3 June 2017. © D. Siegrist

several days. The primary topics discussed at these events included climate change, energy, transport, tourism, agriculture, nature conservation, regional development, culture and migration. The members of the core team documented their walk, as well as their numerous conversations and encounters, using photo and video cameras (see [www.whatsalp.org](http://www.whatsalp.org)). More than 200 scientists, experts and other interested people took part in these numerous discussions. Of note, a large number of young people were also present as part of the CIPRA project, *whatsalp youth*. The core team of *whatsalp* regularly reported on their experi-



Figure 2 – The hiking of *whatsalp* 2017 between Vienna and Nice. Data sources: Open Street Map Humanitarian. Design: Nicola Siegrist.

ences throughout their journey via a blog and social media. There were over one hundred media contributions in newspapers, on the radio and on television that featured *whatsalp* (see Der Spiegel 2017).

### The findings across seven Alpine landscape types

#### The leisure landscape

Over long distances, the leisure industry shapes the Alpine region. Of note, when compared with the landscape 25 years ago, there are now more ski resorts, both large and small, with extensive slopes, lifts, large gondolas, batteries of snow cannons, and reservoirs. Although efforts are being made to restrict second homes (for example, via the implementation of a second-home initiative in Switzerland), in comparison to 1992, the number of such residences in the region had increased.

#### Agriculture goes organic

In our experience, the best-maintained meadows are often grazed by cattle. On many mountain slopes, we can still recognize former arable fields, which are now being used for grazing. Despite the gloomy picture of the region that is often portrayed, agriculture in rural areas is important and sustainable. When compared with the situation in 1992, farms today are well managed and more likely to be organic. Along the lengthy hiking route, increasing amounts of local and regional food are being produced by farmers, processed by cheese makers, butchers and bakers, and served as specialties by the chefs in local restaurants.

#### The landscape as an electricity supplier

As is the case across Europe, countless Alpine valleys have been transformed into energy landscapes, for the production of electricity. Dams and reservoirs characterize the streams and rivers. Although many of these structures are old, since 1992 a few new ones have been added. The energy landscape also includes overhead lines with their sixty-metre-high pylons that cut through the mountain landscapes.

#### The climate landscape: shrinking mountains

Our society's current lifestyle is leading to global warming. In the Alps, the effects are particularly noticeable: melting glaciers, mountain flanks that are eroding rapidly, and permafrost boundaries that are at increasingly high altitudes characterize this climate landscape. Landslides and mudslides, such as those in Bondasca (Grisons, Switzerland) in 2017, are nothing new in the Alps. However, they are becoming less predictable and, due to dense building development, their effects are mounting. In many places, natural hazards require elaborate, landscape-defining protective structures.

#### The transit landscape

The transit landscape is characterized by a tentacular network of express roads and highways. This network has grown since 1992, and it is increasingly visible, smelly and audible. Between Vienna and Nice, we pass nine important transit axes, primarily in the large Alpine valleys, where many people and natural habitats are affected by emissions. Further, additional express routes through the Alps are planned, such as the *Alle-magna* between Munich and Venice, or the *Tendapass*

in the Maritime Alps. Thanks to the Alpen-Initiative, serious efforts are underway in Switzerland to shift freight traffic onto the railways.

### The growing urban landscape

The urban landscape consists of core cities and their vibrant historic centres; these areas are surrounded by growing settlement belts, creating sprawling agglomerations. Here, the population is increasing, while it is stagnating or decreasing in rural areas. The valleys are being cut up as urban developments spread, reaching mountain villages that were previously little touched.

### Good news from the park landscape

Parks and large protected areas are predominantly located close to nature, and sometimes interspersed with pockets of land featuring new forms of wilderness. We visited twenty-five parks and spoke to their managers, who instructed us in how to take care when traversing the Alpine landscape. As hikers, we were invited to explore national parks such as the Gesäuse and the Hohe Tauern in Austria, the Stelvio in Italy, and the Mercantour in southern France. We held discussions with representatives of the National Parks in Austria regarding whether the promotion of the wilderness concept is suitable when the development of protected areas is proposed. This approach is viewed rather critically, as protected area managers believe that it does little to improve locals' understanding of national parks. The various nature park initiatives, which aim to protect the Alpine landscapes and to promote their sustainable use (as is the case in Styria, Grisons, and Valais), seem promising.

### Outlook on a new Alpine policy

In 1992, the TransALPedes group visited numerous citizens' initiatives that had opposed new reservoirs, roads and ski resorts. Many of these plans were realized, although some ended up being shelved. While most resistance groups have since disappeared, a new generation of committed people has replaced them. These individuals are less likely to oppose the construction of reservoirs, but they typically work on and promote various – often professional – projects, such as the park initiatives, or new agricultural and cultural initiatives. During the hike, we became dramatically aware of how global warming, the deterioration of the landscape and our own behaviours are continuing to destroy the Alps. Since 1992, the interconnections between the Alpine countries, the European Union and the wider world have greatly increased. Many questions can no longer be solved in the community, region or capital. Even in the Alps, nation states are dependent on international politics and a globally networked economy.

To ensure the sustainable development of the Alpine landscapes, there are five points to enforce which should be on any political agenda:

- a climate policy that does without fossil fuels and prevents the expansion of energy production by new hydroelectric power plants;
- a transport policy that promotes transport with a low carbon footprint and public transport;
- spatial planning that relies on the economical use of limited resources;
- an agricultural system that is consistently ecological in orientation;
- mountain area development that is oriented towards the strengths of the Alps and that focuses on social and cultural innovations.

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