

# The Pyrenees national Park



## What is a national park ?

It is a unique area of land with an exceptional national heritage. The heart of the national park is given maximum protection. In the peripheral area defined as the optimum area for accession, the national park encourages the local population for enhancing the economic development of the area, and the exploitation of its cultural and natural potential.

The Pyrenees national Park is one of the ten French national parks (the Vanoise, Port-Cros, Mercantour, Cévennes, Ecrins, Guadeloupe, Reunion, Guyane and Calanques Parks). There are 200 national parks in Europe, and 2 000 worldwide.

The area classified as a national park is run by a national public body with a board of directors, half of whom are local councillors. It is under the administrative supervision of the Ministry of the Environment, which allocates the necessary budget to cover staff and equipment, and it draws up and monitors conservation policy.

Cover photo:  
Northern face  
of Vignemale  
(B. Clos)  
a) Rangers of  
the park in  
observation  
(Ch. Verdier)

## Flora

### Exceptionally rich heritage

In any mountain range, and notably in the Pyrenees, any visitor is struck by the difference in vegetation according to the altitude. The higher one goes, the more difficult life becomes for plants : annual average temperatures drop by around 1 degree every 150 m, the growing season shortens, precipitation increases, snow stays longer, winds are stronger and more and dry out the plants. Light becomes more intense and raises soil

temperatures considerably, and light energy is richer in ultra-violet rays which accelerate plant development and fructification. Paradoxically there is less water, soils are poorer and the humus formed by the forest at the montane level does not exist in such quantities at the alpine level.

Added to these special conditions is the history of former climates, which explains the presence of certain plants. When the Pyrenees were formed the climate was subtropical and some species managed to adapt to mountain conditions. At the end of the glaciations a certain number of species which arrived with the cold periods retreated northwards, but others found a home in the high altitude mountain areas.

Apart from these "travelling" plants, which were either chased away or brought by the climatic conditions, there are also a whole series of plants which developed their originality in the Pyrenees. All the plants specific to the Pyrenees are said to be "endemic". Their large number (about 80) is the result of the longstanding isolation of the Pyrenees and Cantabric chain, compared to other European mountain ranges.



b) Cushion pink  
(J. L. Dumerc)  
c) Pyrenean Lily  
(C. Ringeval)

From 900 to 1 600 m lies the cool, damp montane level, with its forests of beech and fir on north-facing slopes. Some examples of plants are the Pyrenean valerian, the water saxifrage, the famous Pyrenean ramonde, the Pyrenean saxifrage and the Manescout cranesbill.

Above this, from 1 600 m to 2 200 m is the subalpine level whose characteristic landscape consists of forests of mountain pine, grassland and alpen rose moorland with some birch and mountain ash. Flowers include Pyrenean lilies and iris, the carline-leaved thistle, the gispet and Gaston's gromwell.

Higher still, from 2 200 m to 2 700 m lies the alpine level. The only "trees" are dwarf willows creeping over the rocks. Vegetation shortens and flattens, but colours are bright: moss campion, sweet poppy, Irat saxifrage.

Above these altitudes lies the nival zone, of which there is little in the Pyrenees. Here only a few lichen and algae manage to survive.



Pyrenean  
Louisewort

## The role of a national park

Preserving biodiversity, protecting landscapes and sites of outstanding natural beauty, helping the public to appreciate and respect this heritage, reconciling conservation and economic activities, contributing to lasting development in the valleys, there are some of the national park's objectives.

In order to protect something effectively it is essential to have a detailed knowledge of it. That is why a great deal of observation is carried out, particularly in the field by the park rangers. By listing the wildlife, observing behaviour and evolution, analysing habitat zones, compiling inventories of plantlife, surveying the land and studying the climate, a suitable environmental policy can be adopted. Species which had disappeared from the area may thus be reintroduced, and threatened native animal or plant stocks can be propagated.



Mountain pine  
(J.L. Dumerc)

The Pyrenees national Park also collects local customs in the valleys (knowledge about plants, traditional songs, dances...). It invites visitors to discover this unique area. Rangers therefore have a dual responsibility to enforce national parc regulations while at the same time informing visitors and helping them to discover and hence respect the natural world. Park information centres offer all types of assistance : publications, exhibitions, talks around films, guided walks and so on. School groups are also welcomed all through the year for guided excursions.

The Pyrenees national Park also takes actions as regards facilities for the disabled or people with problems of social integration. A programme is being developed so as to make this protected national area easy of access to everybody : label "Tourism and Disability" of the park centres, creation of paths for guided walks, training of the agents...

Within the membership zone, the National park is a permanent local partner. The National park and the actors from the valleys, elected representatives, socio-professional organisations, users and inhabitants, have drawn up a charter, local collaborative project. This charter defines the objectives for the protection of the National park's core zone and the directions for the improvement and sustainable development of the valleys: maintenance of the landscape quality, village planning, support to the management of summer pastures and the promotion of local agricultural products, development of forestry activity, reception management on great tourist sites, public awareness, conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, preservation of water resources. In 2016, 65 towns decided to sign up to the charter and became a partner of the National park.

## Fauna

### Unusual species

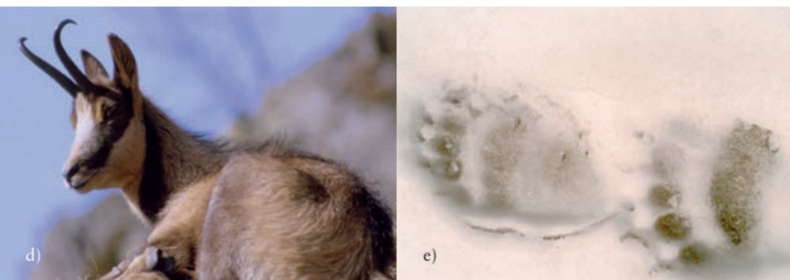
The Pyrenees, and today the area of the national park in particular, have acted as an important refuge for great species of vertebrates. These animals (izards, bears, large birds of prey) have found there a final place to live in the wild. We too often forget that these are wild animals. They can only rely on themselves to survive in the natural environment, which they are totally dependent on. It is not the national park's role to feed them, nor to care for them, but simply to ensure the quality and diversity of their environment.

Disease, accidents, predators – these all make up pieces of the puzzle – and this aspect is what makes national parks special compared to any other areas. 75 of the 167 species of the French mammal fauna are found in the national park. The Pyrenean desman is not doubt the most unusual, since it is found nowhere else on earth except in the Pyrenees and in northern Spain. It lives on the edges of mountain streams, as high as 2 200 m. Although extremely difficult to spot, it can be easily recognised, with its scurrying mole-like appearance, little trunk and webbed feet. Among

the rodents, the marmot is the easiest to see. Although it disappeared from the chain 10 000 years ago, it was re-introduced around 1950 into the Luz valley, and then via the national park into all the other valleys. Today marmots can be found everywhere, even on the Spanish side.



Carabe des  
Pyrénées



d) Iazard  
(J.P. Grampe)  
e) Prints of bear  
(J. Cédet)

The izard has benefited greatly from the protection of the national park. Threatened by extinction 40 years ago, there are now around 3 700 in the national park. At the end of the 90s, only 6-7 brown bears remained. In 2016, as a result of the reintroduction operations led since 1996 in the Central Pyrenees, there are at least 29 bears, and only 2 can be found in the National park, as the others live in the departments of Haute-Garonne, Ariège and Aude.

The return of the marmot has certainly helped the royal eagle population. There are now 32 pairs of this large bird of prey in the park area. The griffon vulture of 2.70 m wingspan, has benefited from the protection of the Ossau natural Reserve which was created by the national park. Today 340 pairs nest each year in its cliff faces, and the zone frequented by these birds is spreading eastwards. The most spectacular and most beautiful of the large birds of prey is without hesitation the bearded vulture, with its wingspan of 3 metres, and its magnificent orange-coloured breast.

14 pairs are currently living in the park area. The national park is also home to the capercaillie, the black woodpecker, the ptarmigan and to amphibians such as the astonishing midwife toad.



Capercaillie  
(L. Nédélec)

## The Pyrenees

### The national park landscape

Formation of the Pyrenees began during the primary era, 500 million years ago. However, the mountain range we see today is a mere 40 million years old. In the park the chain stretches over a hundred kilometres from east to west, between the high valleys of Aure and Aspe. A mosaic of crystalline and sedimentary rocks, battered by glaciation and erosion, have created fabulous landscapes : a multitude of lakes, impenetrable gorges, of cirques such as those at Gavarnie and Troumouse, with their immense cliffs and vertiginous waterfalls...

There are six principal valleys in the national park : Aure, which boasts of having the highest mountain pine forests in Europe ; Luz-Gavarnie, with its 3 000 m summits ; Cauterets, looking up to the highest peak in the French Pyrenees (the Vignemale, at 3 298 m) and surrounded by splashing waterfalls ; Azun, dominated by the pyramid of the Balaitous which rises to 3 144 m ; Ossau, home to grazing livestock, and finally Aspe, with its great forests. The national park shares a 15 km border with the Spanish national park of Ordesa and the Monte Perdido (3 355 m). The Neouvielle natural Reserve, neighbouring the national park to the west, is under the same management. The Pyrenees form both a natural frontier with the Iberian peninsula and a real climate barrier. The oceanic influence brings the northern, French slopes mild damp weather, which contrasts with the southern, Spanish side, both hotter and drier. The prevailing winds produce heavy precipitation, explaining the green landscapes and the profusion of streams, lakes and waterfalls.

Cirque of Lescum,  
Aspe valley  
(E. Sailler)



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## A few figures

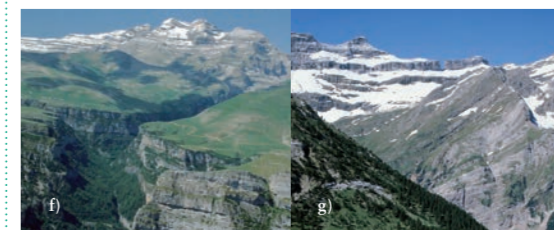
Creation of the Park	23rd March 1967
Permanent staff	74 employees
Heart	457 sq. km
Optimum area	2 063 sq. km
Visitors	Over 1.5 million a year
Altitudes in the heart	Ranging from 1 067 to 3 298 m
Paths	350 km of waymarked paths
Lakes	300 lakes, home to 571 species of algae
Plants	80 endemic plant species
Mammals	64 species out of the 167 found in continental France
Bears	29 bears in 2015 on the whole range (3 in the national park)
Izards	more of 3 700
Birds	200 nesting species
Birds of prey (within the heart and optimum area)	14 pairs of bearded vulture 340 pairs of griffon vulture 32 pairs of Egyptian vulture 25 pairs of golden eagle

## Pyrenees Mont Perdu World Heritage

In 1997, part of the two national parks in the Pyrenees (France) and Ordesa and Monte Perdido (Spain) in the area of the Monte Perdido were classified by the UNESCO within the World Heritages : valleys of Ordesa, Anisclou, Escuin, Pineta and cirques of Gavarnie, Estaubé, Troumouse, Barroude. The great value of the territory is universally recognized both on a natural and cultural basis.

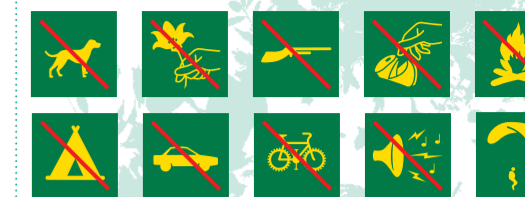
f) Anisclou Valley  
(B. Clos)

g) Summits of  
Gavarnie  
(B. Clos)



## National park regulations

The heart of the national park is a natural area open to all but subject to regulation based on a code of good conduct.

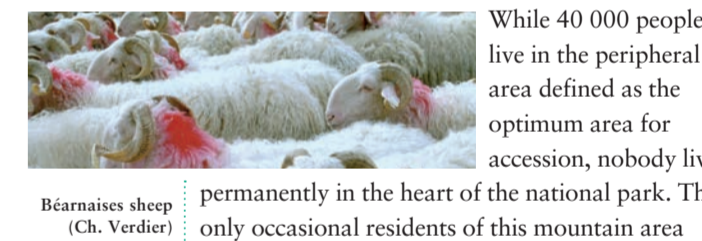


- No dogs, even on a lead respect wildlife and livestock.
- Don't pick anything or take samples animals, plants, rocks and fossils belong to the landscape.
- No firearms all the animals are protected species here.
- Take your litter home keep the countryside clean.
- Don't light fires they can quickly get out of control and ruin the soil.
- No camping don't spoil the beauty of the landscape and create pollution.
- Overnight camping under certain conditions only authorised at more than one hour's walk from the Park boundaries or from a paved road.
- No vehicles discover the area on foot, except on authorised routes.
- Avoid making any noise or disturbance everyone appreciates the calm.
- Regulated free flight

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## Pyreneans of past and present



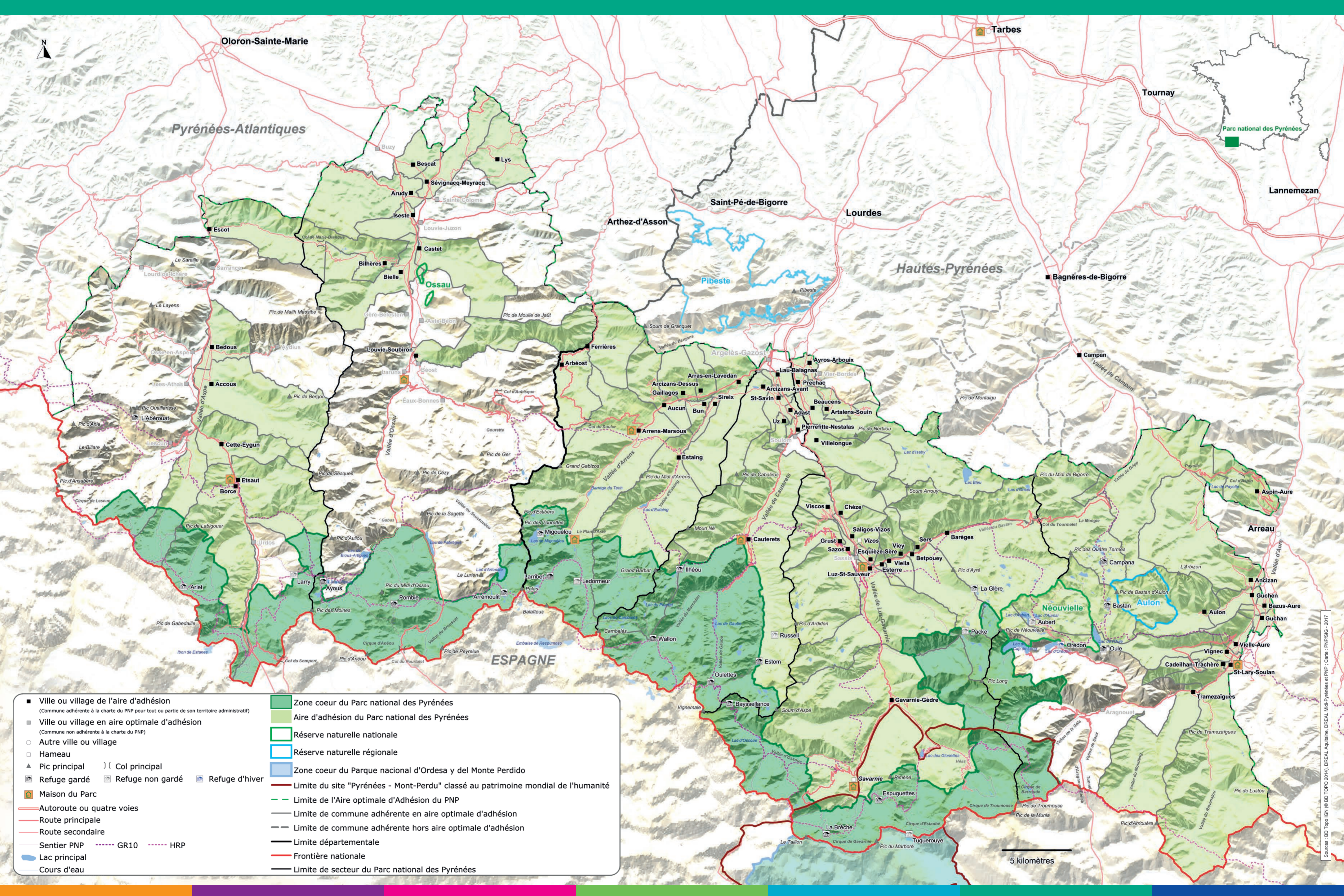
Béarnaises sheep  
(Ch. Verdier)

While 40 000 people live in the peripheral area defined as the optimum area for accession, nobody lives permanently in the heart of the national park. The only occasional residents of this mountain area are the 200 shepherds who visit the high pastures during the summer. Herders and their animals have moulded the landscape of these pasturelands over the centuries : in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques mainly dairy animals with their herders, and in the Hautes-Pyrénées free-ranging animals raised for their meat.

In 2013, a transhumance livestock of 30 000 cattle, 150 000 sheep, 2 600 horses and 2 000 caprine flocks gathered at the summer pastures in the heart of the park. One of the most important missions entrusted to the national parks is to encourage pastoral activities, in order to respect both local culture and the natural assets of the area. It is doing so in a number of ways : assisting in the construction and renovation of functional huts on the high pastureland, which comply with European norms, where shepherds to and from the high pastures ; compensating shepherds whose animals are killed by bears, national park in favour of pastoralism complements that of local authorities and associations.

The future of the Pyrenees also depends on the development of a tourism which respects both the population and the environment. The Pyrenees national Park is very frequented, (1,5 million a year). It is therefore vital to monitor the impact of tourism, especially in the most popular sites at the Pont d'Espagne, the Neouvielle and in Gavarnie.





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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Ville ou village de l'aire d'adhésion<br/>(Commune adhérente à la charte du PNP pour tout ou partie de son territoire administratif)</li> <li>■ Ville ou village en aire optimale d'adhésion<br/>(Commune non adhérente à la charte du PNP)</li> <li>○ Autre ville ou village</li> <li>□ Hameau</li> <li>▲ Pic principal    ) Col principal</li> <li>🏠 Refuge gardé    🏠 Refuge non gardé    🏠 Refuge d'hiver</li> <li>🏠 Maison du Parc</li> <li>🛣️ Autoroute ou quatre voies</li> <li>🛣️ Route principale</li> <li>🛣️ Route secondaire</li> <li>👤 Sentier PNP    📍 GR10    📍 HRP</li> <li>🌊 Lac principal</li> <li>🌊 Cours d'eau</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>🟩 Zone cœur du Parc national des Pyrénées</li> <li>🟨 Aire d'adhésion du Parc national des Pyrénées</li> <li>🟩 Réserve naturelle nationale</li> <li>🟦 Réserve naturelle régionale</li> <li>🟦 Zone cœur du Parque nacional d'Ordesa y del Monte Perdido</li> <li>🔴 Limite du site "Pyrénées - Mont-Perdu" classé au patrimoine mondial de l'humanité</li> <li>🟢 Limite de l'Aire optimale d'Adhésion du PNP</li> <li>⚫ Limite de commune adhérente en aire optimale d'adhésion</li> <li>⚫ Limite de commune adhérente hors aire optimale d'adhésion</li> <li>⚫ Limite départementale</li> <li>🔴 Frontière nationale</li> <li>⚫ Limite de secteur du Parc national des Pyrénées</li> </ul> |
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