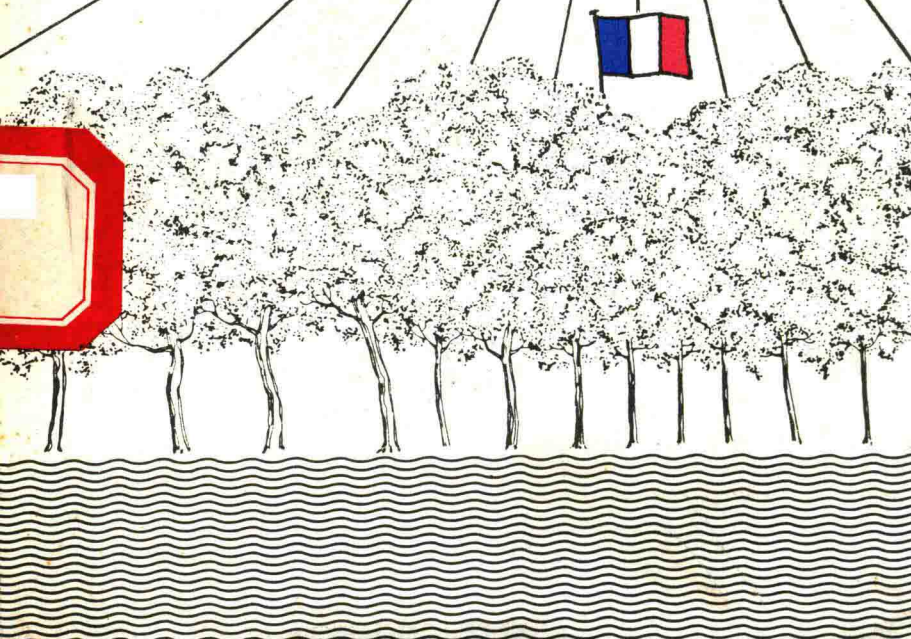


The ECOLOGIST'S GUIDE to FRANCE

Mary D. Davis



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to FRANCE

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To Carol and John
who keep me in touch with the future.

Introduction

This guide introduces ecologists from abroad to the French ecological movement. It is designed to help make their visits to France enjoyable and compatible with their ideals and also to enable them to contact French activists from their own countries. The guide makes no attempt to treat exhaustively any of the subjects it takes up. Instead, it presents a variety of entrance points to French ecological networks and background information to help put the French movement in context.

To many foreign ecologists, France is a synonym for the nuclear industry. My guide to that industry, the *Military/Civilian Nuclear Link*, did nothing to dispel this image. In the *Ecologist's Guide*, I show the other side of France: its many-faceted ecological movement. The nuclear industry reflects the authority of the state; the ecological movement, the decentralized power of individuals, small groups, and networks, helping to bring about a greener planet.

Visitors to France should use the guide in conjunction with a standard travel guide—I recommend *Let's Go: France*, written by the Harvard Student Agencies—and maps. To locate out-of-the-way places in Paris, a detailed street map is essential. You can purchase pocket-size books of maps at kiosks and bookstores throughout the city. For places outside Paris, a national atlas with an index is helpful, but better and often essential are directions from people at the sites. Contact them well ahead of a visit. Unless your French is very good, writing is better than phoning. Directions can be complex, and even the French have difficulty in finding one another. Many organizations, well aware of the problem, print maps and other directions on the flyers about

themselves that they distribute. A sample letter of inquiry is included as an appendix.

Other appendixes will assist in planning an itinerary. France is divided into regions that are subdivided into departments, roughly the equivalent of US states and British counties. In a postal address, the department is represented by the first two digits of the five-digit postal code. The guide contains a listing of departments by number. For each department is given its region, its geographic location, and the places in that department described in the book. The guide also contains a map of departments and a map of regions.

To find sites close to a given place, look up the first two digits of the place's postal code in the departmental list, note the geographic location of the department, and from the departmental map determine the numbers of adjacent departments. Then read the relevant departmental lists. The map of regions, together with the names of regions in the departmental lists, will facilitate use of the book in conjunction with French guides, often organized by region.

Whether or not you need to obtain directions, contact ahead of time places you wish to visit, unless they are obviously open to tourists during specified hours. This is an essential courtesy. Almost without exception, individuals and organizations allowing their names to be used in the guide specified that they be contacted in advance. Also a letter or phone call will prevent your making a journey only to find that hours have changed or an office has moved. Organizations, in France as elsewhere, have a tendency to change, if not to disappear.

When phoning from outside France, use the "1" in parenthesis at the beginning of certain telephone numbers. Also dial the "1" preceded by a "16" to phone the Paris region from other parts of France. Do not use the "1" when phoning within the Paris region.

To phone from Paris to the provinces, prefix the eight-digit number by a "16."

If you wish to order material from abroad, postal money orders are generally the simplest and least expensive way of paying. In the US, each costs \$2.00 plus the sum being sent. The US postal service expects customers to find out the exchange rate and calculate the number of dollars needed. In figuring charges, add postage from France. Postage-paid prices in the guide cover only postage within France.

Inclusion of an address in the guide is not a guarantee of quality. I have visited many but not all of the places described. Others are listed on the recommendation of French ecologists, whose views may not always coincide with those of visitors. What is guaranteed is that the guide can help to give foreign ecologists a familiarity with France and the French people not available to the crowds of tourists wandering up and down the Champs Elysees.

Acknowledgments

This guide is in a very real sense the work of the French ecological movement. Each entry represents the readiness of an individual or organization to answer questions and supply material. Many went out of their way not only to tell me about their own activities, but also to point out other groups and sites.

I owe a special debt to Julie Hazemann, who since 1984 has given me guidance as well as use of a phone and a place to stay in Paris. Others who have generously assisted me with information and encouragement over the years include Bruno Barrillot, Michel Bernard, Jean-Luc Thierry, and, in the United States, John Davis.

To all these people I should like to express my deep appreciation. The guide would not have been possible without their support.

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Protected Natural Areas and their Wildlife

France has a variety of types of protected natural areas, ranging from national parks of thousands of hectares to small private reserves put under government protection by their owners. Claude-Marie Vadrot surveys the assortment in *France Verte: Guide des 1000 Plus Beaux Sites Naturels* (Paris: Editions du May, 1987). His book is difficult to use because it is arranged by region and has no geographical index; and ecologists may differ with some of the views he expresses. Nevertheless, it contains a wealth of information.

National Parks

The establishment of national parks was authorized by a law of 22 July 1960. There are now six such parks, placed under the direct control of the central government. With one exception, the island of Port-Cros, all are in mountainous areas, because this is the only type of terrain with few enough residents to make the creation of large parks possible. Each park, except Port-Cros, is composed of a "central zone" and a "peripheral zone." The central zone is generally uninhabited. The peripheral zones, conceived as buffer and service areas, contain numerous towns with facilities for tourists. Boundary lines are tortuous, as a result of the effort to establish central zones free of residents. The national parks cover .7% of the area of France: 350,000 hectares in the central zones, 900,000 hectares in peripheral zones.

Park regulations vary. In the central zones, the only camping that may be permitted is pitching a small tent, at least an hour's

walk from any road, for only one night in any given place. Visitors may also sleep in dormitory-style shelters. Dogs are forbidden.

The parks are crossed by trails, and all have one or more visitor centers. Most offer programs of activities including guided hikes and classes in nature lore. They also have displays on natural history and the life of the area.

Unfortunately, there is no central office to which visitors can write for information on all the parks. To obtain maps, lists of shelters, and a schedule of activities, write to the head office of the park in question. Some charge for information; some do not.

Cévennes

The Park of the Cévennes, near the middle of France, is the only national park on the mainland with a central zone inhabited by people. Managers have therefore tried both to develop the regional economy and to preserve the natural environment. At the beginning of the century there were 2,000 residents in what is now the 91,416-hectare central zone; today there are about 500 scattered among a number of villages. Their ways of life vary with the type of rock formations on which they live: the granite of lofty Mont Lozère and Mont Aigoual, site of enduring menhirs; the schist to the south, where enormous groves of chestnut trees planted in years past as sources of food still flourish; and the great chalky plateau to the west suited to the raising of sheep.

The management allows residents to hunt, but it has been successful in protecting birds, particularly raptors, and is reintroducing bald vultures to the park.

Parc National des Cévennes
Château de Florac, 48400 Florac
66-45-01-75

Port-Cros

On the 700-hectare island of Port-Cros, visitors find the essence of the Mediterranean ecosystem, a thick vegetation of trees and shrubs, known in French as the "maquis." They also find migrating birds and the only underwater park in France, 1,800 hectares of the Mediterranean surrounding the island. Along the underwater trail, accessible to anyone who can swim, are three hundred types of algae including magnificent, tree-like posidonia.

Be forewarned, however, the tiny island is visited by 100,000 people a year, most of whom go during their summer vacations. Try to find another time. Boats take visitors from the Giens Peninsula near Hyères and from Lavandou.

While in the area, stop also at the larger island of Porquerolles. In the village near the boat dock, you can rent a bike for exploring the 1,250 hectares. Porquerolles is not a park, but since the government owns 1,000 hectares of it, environmentalists are hoping that the island will be joined with Port-Cros to become the national park of Hyères.

Parc National de Port-Cros
50, avenue Gambetta, 83400 Hyères
94-65-32-98

Pyrénées Occidentales

This mountainous park runs for one hundred kilometers along the border with Spain. Its central zone is only 1.5 kilometers wide at the narrowest point, but on the south juxtaposes the Spanish National Park of Ordesa and national hunting reserves. The northeast corner adjoins the French Réserve Naturelle de Néouvielle. The park is a prime site for rock climbing and, with 230 lakes, for fishing. Although the park has

no permanent residents, herders take their sheep and cows up to the heights in the summer and live in cabins restored for this purpose by the park management. The entire 45,700 hectares of the central zone are above 1,100 meters, but 50% is pasture and 12% is forests that are open to timber cutting.

Parc National des Pyrénées Occidentales
B.P. 300, 65000 Tarbes
62-93-30-60

Ecrins

The Park of the Ecrins is part of a chain of three parks close to or on the border with Italy. With 91,800 hectares in the central zone, it is the largest French national park, and an extension of the park of Mont Pelvoux, which was founded in 1913 and included little more than mountain tops. Ranging in altitude from 800 to 4,102 meters, the Ecrins has the most spectacular scenery of any of the parks. Within its boundaries are one third of the permanent French glaciers, some 12,000 hectares in all, and 70 lakes.

At the Col de Lauteret in the peripheral zone, the University of Grenoble runs the highest botanical garden in Europe. It has 6,000 species of plants collected from mountain ranges throughout the world. Visitors are welcome at any time, and there is no charge.

Parc National des Ecrins
7, rue du Colonel Roux, 05004 Gap Cédex
92-51-40-71

Mercantour

South of the Vanoise and north of Nice and the Ecrins, the Park

of the Mercantour, founded only in 1979, contains two justly celebrated valleys, the Vallée du Boreon, "a paradise of freshness, water, and verdure," near the summit of Mont Mercantour, and the Vallée des Merveilles. This valley, together with the park's circle of Fontanalbe, contains Europe's largest outdoor collection of rock carvings from the Bronze Age.

Flora and fauna are abundant in the park. In fact, it contains almost half the species of plants to be found in France. Forty of the species of plants as well as one hundred species of insects are endemic to the park.

Parc National du Mercantour
23, rue d'Italie, 06000 Nice
93-87-86-10

Vanoise

The Park of the Vanoise was created in 1963 to protect the ibex on the French side of the Alps. The animal had become virtually extinct after World War I. King Emmanuel II of Italy protected the few remaining couples in his hunting grounds, from which in 1922 he created the park, the Gran Paradiso. The Vanoise is adjacent to the Italian park.

The Vanoise has 107 peaks over 3,000 meters high, separated by verdant valleys; and it is complex from a geological standpoint, with crystalline sandstone, limestone, gypsum, and gneiss. As a result, it is rich in plant and animal life. It is home to chamois, marmots, blue hares, and ermines, among other animals, in addition to the ibex.

Parc National de la Vanoise
B.P. 105, 73000 Chambéry
79-62-30-54

Natural Regional Parks

The twenty-four natural regional parks are far less even in quality than the national parks. Each was established by several rural communes that decided to work together to improve the quality of life in their area. In each case, the communes formed an organization that drew up a charter and began to manage the park. Most of the parks are situated in areas that have been declining in population and losing ground financially. The charters do not need to meet any standard. Some parks do a good job of preserving the environment; some, of building the regional economy through fostering native crafts; and some, neither. The parks cover a total of more than 3 million hectares or 7% of the area of France. They are not divided into central and peripheral zones, and towns are scattered throughout. In fact, almost 1.5 million people are permanent residents of regional natural parks.

One of the finest natural regional parks from the point of view of an environmentalist is the park of the Volcans d'Auvergne in the departments of Cantal and Puy-de-Dôme, just to the west of Clermont-Ferrand. As the name indicates, the 345,000-hectare park covers an ancient massif that was the site of volcanos. The scenery is a blending of the rugged and the bucolic. There are mountains, including the Puy-de-Dôme, 1,465 meters, and the Puy de Sancy, 1,886 meters; some twenty big lakes, most of them formed in the craters of extinct volcanoes; and peat bogs, also reminders of the volcanic era. There are also lush pastures. The dominant agricultural activity is raising cows and sheep; and residents are reestablishing traditional breeds, adapted to the climate and the land. Mouflons, wild sheep, have been successfully reintroduced to the park.

The natural regional park of Brière, north of St. Nazaire, near the Atlantic Ocean is in complete contrast to the volcanic park.

Within its 40,000 hectares are 14,000 hectares of marshlands. The largest marsh, the Marais de la Grande Brière, has been owned jointly by twenty-one communes since the fifteenth century. The land is flat and threaded by canals; water seems to be everywhere.

The inhabitants of the park have been encouraged to take up activities traditional to the region, in part to prevent the marshes from filling in. Visitors can eat eels caught locally and grilled over a fire of peat, see cows grazing on tiny islands to which they have been carried by boat, and walk among houses thatched with reeds. The birds of the Brière, some 130 species, can most easily be watched from the trails of the park of Saint-Malo-de-Guersac. The wetlands of the Loire estuary and the Marais Salants (Salt Works) of Guérande are near the park and well worth including in a trip.

The Haute Vallée de Chevreuse is the regional natural park nearest to Paris. It can be reached by an RER train on the B4 line to the terminus at Saint-Rémy-les-Chevreuse or by an SNCF train from the Gare Montparnasse to Rambouillet. National hiking trail GR11 passes through Saint-Rémy-les-Chevreuse, and the GR1 trail through Rambouillet.

The park includes both wooded and agricultural lands. To the north are narrow valleys; to the south, the terrain slopes more gently as it begins to flatten out to meet the grain fields of the Beauce. Between Rambouillet and Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines, on route D27, is a 250-hectare park within a park, in which animals native to the forests of the Ile de France, including boar, red deer, and roe deer, roam freely (open except in May and June, at least on Wed. and Sat. 1–5pm, Sun. 9am–5pm).

The charter of the regional park, established in 1984, manifests the intention of the communities within it to preserve the area from urbanization. Rules are strict—for example, all-terrain vehicles are forbidden. Due to the park's nearness to Paris,