



Encouraging sustainable practices for the Mercantour National Park



Domain:
Climate Action and Environment



Place:
Nice, France



Duration:
Long-term



Target audience:
General public/
younger generation

Mission

As a mountainous national park, the Mercantour has been facing an unprecedented influx of hikers since the COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdowns. While this surge in visitors reflects a growing public interest in outdoor activities, it also presents new challenges for protecting the park's fragile biodiversity. In the past, the Mercantour mainly attracted experienced mountain enthusiasts who were familiar with good environmental practices. Today, however, it draws a younger, more urban audience and visitors who may be less aware of the delicate balance of its ecosystems and, as a result, may unintentionally engage in harmful behaviours. The management team of the Mercantour National Park, already highly active in public engagement and environmental education, sought innovative ways to raise awareness and encourage more responsible behaviour among these new visitors.

Engagement activities

The aim of this interaction was to use social media as a tool for communication and education, presenting good practices in a format that resonates with younger audiences. To this end, five short videos were produced, each designed to highlight key aspects of the park and to provide practical recommendations for visitors.

Artistic activities

For the videos to be more engaging towards the younger generation, a manga esthetic was developed.

IMPACT

Education and sharing of good practices in a fragile ecosystem

Protection of local biodiversity

Development of formats accessible to the target audience

WHAT HAPPENED?

For this interaction, DOWEL partnered with the Mercantour National Park and PlayAzur Prod, a local media company specialising in science communication and social media engagement. This collaboration brought together the scientific expertise of the Park with PlayAzur Prod's creative experience in engaging younger audiences around scientific and environmental topics.

During the concept phase, several approaches were explored, including the idea of in-person interactions. However, the decision was ultimately made to focus on digital content distributed via social media. These platforms were identified as the main channels through which younger generations seek information when planning outdoor activities.

While the Park already offers numerous on-site educational tools (such as panels) these are often overlooked by visitors eager to reach the mountain peaks. The addition of engaging, visually appealing online content therefore complements existing efforts, enriching the Park's already extensive public engagement strategy, which also includes film screenings, drawing classes on local fauna, and photography hikes.

PARTICIPANTS ENGAGEMENT

Five videos were developed, each addressing a specific topic:

- 1. Introduction to the National Park:** explaining what a National Park is and what makes it distinct from other natural areas.
- 2. Coexisting with Wildlife:** focusing on how to interact responsibly with wild animals. The Mercantour is home to a remarkable variety of species, some of them endemic, that can easily be disturbed by human activity.
- 3. External Impacts:** addressing the effects of external elements such as dogs, drones, and waste, and how these can negatively impact fragile ecosystems. Although this may seem obvious to some, the Mercantour (now seen as a refreshing refuge near a rapidly warming coastal environment) has recently witnessed the rise of inappropriate and unaware behaviours due to a growing number of visitors.
- 4. Mountain Safety:** outlining the basic principles of mountain safety in response to an increasing number of emergency calls from hikers not prepared enough.
- 5. Archaeological Heritage:** highlighting the Park's cultural richness, too often overlooked, including remarkable archaeological remains such as prehistoric rock carvings.

Beyond the local collaboration, this interaction also connects with the Interreg BiodivTourAlps project, which aims to address the challenges of preserving biodiversity by reducing the environmental impact of tourism, improving knowledge, and better managing the interactions between humans and nature in protected areas.

Artistic activities

To reach and engage the younger generation, the videos adopt a manga-inspired aesthetic. Two human-like characters (a girl and a boy) alternate as narrators throughout the series. Accompanying them is a cute mascot, similar to a Pokémon, serving as the link between the videos.

The mascot often embodies the “wrong” behaviours visitors might display in the Park (leaving waste, approaching animals too closely, or using drones irresponsibly) while the two human characters gently correct and explain the proper actions to take. This narrative choice introduces humour and lightness, making the videos both educational and entertaining. The viewer learns through empathy and laughter, rather than guilt or admonishment.

All manga-style illustrations were hand-drawn by an artist from the PlayAzur Prod network, reinforcing the project’s commitment to authentic artistic creation. From the beginning, the partners made a deliberate choice not to use AI-generated visuals, despite the efficiency it could offer. Instead, they opted for shorter, handcrafted videos to preserve the human touch and creative integrity of the artwork.

The videos combine motion design techniques to remain cost-effective without sacrificing visual quality. Though not fully animated, they feature expressive human characters and the mascot, placed within real photographs of the Mercantour landscapes. These photographs, drawn from the Park’s own image database, were captured by professional and recognised photographers, adding a layer of authenticity and grounding the animated elements in the beauty of the actual environment.

Through this fusion of real imagery and stylised art, the project achieves an engaging balance between realism and imagination, bringing the Park’s good practices to the knowledge of new audiences.

Impact of the interaction

Although dissemination of the videos has not yet begun, the initiative has already laid strong foundations for long-term impact in communication, education, and scientific outreach.

The videos are designed for multi-platform dissemination ensuring adaptability across different social media channels (Instagram, YouTube shorts, TikTok, etc.). In particular, the Park is considering launching a TikTok account, a strategic step that would allow it to reach a younger audience, which is often less active on traditional platforms but highly engaged with short, visually dynamic content.

Each video will be accompanied by links to relevant scientific research and resources in its caption, bridging popular content with reliable, evidence-based information. This approach not only strengthens the Park's educational mission but also supports a deeper understanding of the scientific principles behind biodiversity conservation, ecosystem management, and sustainable tourism. Viewers will be able to move from entertainment to education, discovering concrete studies, articles, or ongoing research related to the video's topic.

Furthermore, the connections of the Mercantour Park with other French and European National Parks (notably with Italian ones, in relation with the BiodivTourAlps project) open the door to potential replication and shared dissemination strategies. Once published, the videos could be adapted to other protected areas, fostering a common European approach to environmental education and sustainable tourism communication.

For successful replication, DOWEL provides the following lessons learnt and good practices:

- Adapt the formats to your audience. For this interaction, partners really wanted to address a specific audience. The artistic format and content came second, to propose a tailored answer to the difficulty of addressing this audience.
- Encourage local artists rather than the use of generated-AI.
- Use humour to teach behaviours without moralizing or alienating the audience. Avoid portraying visitors as “bad” or irresponsible. Instead, help them identify with a character who models good behaviour and gently educates others – so they feel empowered to share and reproduce these messages themselves.



Resources

The costs for the drawing and videos were of 3,000€.



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