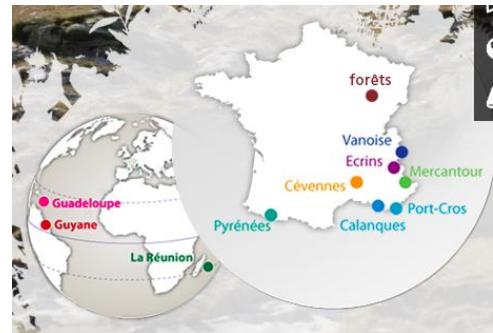


National Parks, National Treasures

While abroad in France during the fall of 2019, I conducted a 5-month research project on French National Parks. With the amazing support of the Friedberg Fellowship, which I was awarded through the Williams College French Department, I was extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to visit five different French National Parks. Although I certainly learned many basic facts, such as the climate of each park, the species each protects, and the land each encompasses, I focused my research primarily on what I couldn't discover online – that it to say the experience of visiting these amazing places. I



discovered first-hand how visitors interact with these natural spaces and how the French government works to protect and support them.

One of the parks I visited was Port Cros National Park, which encompasses a small island located in the Mediterranean, just off the coast of southeastern France. First of all, my November visit underscored the seasonal nature of national parks' popularity. Although I had certainly observed this



trend when trying to arrange my visits to various parks, it was never more evident than during my trip to Port Cros. In order to reach the park, visitors have to take a boat from the port at Hyères to the island's port. During the off-season, which extends from early November to late March, a single boat

completes this roundtrip journey only once a day, four days a week, which starkly contrasts with the frequency of shuttles during the summer, when four different trips each bring a boatload full of people to the island. In fact, during the summer, far more people wish to visit the park than are able to do so. Although this predicament could be easily addressed by employing additional boats to ferry all prospective visitors, the National Park system purposefully chooses to limit the number of tourists visiting

the island so as to keep the land as wild and natural as possible. During my visit to Port Cros, I also discovered many additional ways in which the park lives up to its ideal of protecting France's nature. For instance, dogs were not allowed on the island because they threaten to stress native bird species and disrupt the ecosystem's delicate balance. Additionally, there were frequent signs explaining that fire of any kind was prohibited because a single spark risks setting the densely wooded areas aflame, and upon speaking with a park employee, I learned that this rule is very strongly enforced. As someone who cares deeply about nature, it was lovely to see how committed France is to preserving not only the park's natural beauty for the sake of visitors, but also the environmental habitats present and the species that live there.



At Calanques National Park, I was positively impressed by how accessible the park was to visitors, although I must admit that much of this accessibility came in the form of tourist activities. Like



Port Cros, Calanques National Park includes both terrestrial and marine territories, which visitors can explore through kayaking, swimming, hiking, biking, paddle boarding, sailing, and/or taking a motorized boat tour. I was impressed by the great number of

different ways one could discover the area's beauty and I was encouraged to observe that such discovery was possible even for visitors who are physically unable to perform certain activities, such as hiking.

During my visit to Calanques National Park, I explored the park's marine territory by scuba diving, which turned out to be an unexpectedly powerful experience because it forcefully reminded me of the importance of all living creatures and ecosystems. Although I know that climate change is an incredibly far reaching problem, when I



think of its negative effects, my brain goes first to the shrinking glaciers and the poor polar bears. I don't immediately consider the fish, crustaceans, arthropods, or underwater plants whose habitat is likewise threatened by our changing planet. This experience vividly reminded me of how desperately we humans need to change our actions and begin caring properly for our magnificent planet before it's too late.

Thirdly, I also spend a weekend in Écrins National Park, which turned out to be much more difficult to visit than I had anticipated. This challenge was common throughout the entirety of my research, during which I repeatedly discovered that traveling to France's National Parks is incredibly difficult for those without their own car. I suppose this problem is not surprising due to the inherently rural nature of the places in question, but



I was still disappointed by how difficult – and nearly impossible in many cases – it was to reach certain parks. Although the French National Park system is certainly successful in many of its current endeavors, I would love to see at least parts of these natural spaces made more accessible to visitors who lack their own cars but who still want to enjoy nature. After much searching and research, I ended up visiting Écrins



National Park with a local French hiking group, which was a great experience. Although I was certainly with an unrepresentative sample of the general population, it was wonderful to see that so many locals don't take the nature near them

for granted and instead actively make time to explore and appreciate it.

Fourthly, I also visited Pyrénées National Park, which is located just along the border between France and Spain. During this visit, I learned that a difference exists between the heart of a French National Park, whose wilderness is more strictly preserved, and the surrounding protected regions, which are likewise part of the National Park system, but which have less stringent rules. I was surprised to discover that people can – and do – live inside the protected regions of a national park. In fact, while



visiting the Pyrénées, I drove through a number of small towns that exist entirely within the park's boundaries. My visit to Pyrénées National Park also underscored the impressive efficacy of French Offices de Tourisme (or Tourism Offices in English), one of which exists in essentially every French town

or city. When I stopped at an Office de Tourisme in a small town located within the national park, I was pleasantly impressed by how much valuable information and how many detailed maps I received from the women working there. The employees were incredibly knowledgeable about the park, its roads and trails, the weather, and general hiking advice, and they were happy to help visitors make the most of their time in the region. In general, this visit illustrated how much France really values and invests in its national parks. The roads up the mountains were in fantastic conditions and the hiking paths were well marked with neat, weather-proof signs that clearly showed the correct direction for a wide range of destinations.



Finally, the last park that I visited was Guadeloupe National Park, which is located on a French island in the Caribbean, rather than in continental France. Although this park is still located within the country of France, this visit was a fascinating experience from a research point of view because it offered me the opportunity to observe how an overseas park might differ from the other ones I had seen.



However, I was shocked to find no significant differences. Guadeloupe National Park was likewise well signed and the informational bulletins and trail markers were of the exact same format as those I had previously seen during my earlier research.

Furthermore, as was the case for the other parks I had

visited, the roads and trails in Guadeloupe National Park were well taken care of, posted rules reminded visitors to protect the nature around them, and the park also included both a “heart” and surrounding protected regions. If it hadn’t been for the 80°F weather in the middle of January, I could have easily believed that I was in continental France because the park itself was kept up in the same exact ways the others had been.

In general, I think France does a wonderful job with its National Parks. I was quite positively impressed by the many ways in which the country has clearly invested in the protection of these natural spaces. With that said, I do wish that the parks had been more accessible to visitors without their own cars and in the future, I hope to see the French National Park system use its popularity to encourage its many visitors to engage in more environmentally-friendly behavior in their everyday lives, so as to protect such natural spaces for future generations. This could be achieved, for instance, through the inclusion of presentations and signs that discuss not only tangible ways in which people can alter their behavior to be more ecologically friendly, but also why such changes are important.

All in all, I had a truly amazing time researching and visiting these national parks and I am beyond grateful to the Friedberg Fellowship for giving me this opportunity. I am more inspired than ever to continue exploring the beauty of this amazing world and to preserve it for future generations. With this project on my mind for the past five months, I have become increasingly aware of and passionate about environmental issues. For instance, I listened to an environmental radio program almost every day while walking to and from my class in France, and I did a great deal of personal research to discover how I can individually lessen my negative impact on the planet. For instance, I’m currently in the midst of a year-long challenge to buy no more than 10 brand new clothing items, in hopes that I can instead shop at thrift stores or trade clothes with others so as to prevent the negative environmental impacts associated with the fabrication of new material goods. I have also researched viable carbon offset programs to help counteract the carbon emissions associated with the flights I took during my semester abroad (which I greatly limited by actively choosing to travel via trains or buses whenever possible), and I’ve encouraged my family and friends to install “Ecosia,” which is a nonprofit environmentally-friendly search engine whose income is

used for reforestation projects around the world. Although I could go on for much longer, I will conclude by saying that I am so grateful for this project and all the learning it has already and will continue to encourage me to do. This research has truly had a personal and lasting impact on me and I hope that my renewed inspiration to help the environment will have many positive ripple effects on those around me.

Finally, I would like to note that although I have included my most important research findings here, I have many additional thoughts and photos (including pictures of the signs, roads, and trail markers mentioned above) that I was unable to fit into this report, so please feel free to email me at tcm2@williams.edu if you have any questions or simply want to learn more!

Note: Except for the first photo, which is a screenshot from <http://www.parcsnationaux.fr/fr>, all of the pictures included above were taken during my research project.