Via Alpina
Discover the Alps!

Methodological Guide for the evaluation of the Via Alpina

Survey Periods: Summer 2005 - Summer 2007

- COUNTRIES INVOLVED: AUSTRIA, GERMANY, ITALY, FRANCE, SWITZERLAND AND SLOVENIA -

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OBJECTIVES AND ORGANISATION:
➔ Why is an evaluation of the Via Alpina project necessary?

Origin:
The project result evaluation question was already addressed the first time in Autumn 2003, following a workshop on "The Via Alpina as a contribution to the local development", which took place at a decisive time for the Via Alpina initiative: between the first phase i.e. the development of hiking routes (2001-2004), and the second phase focusing on their local implementation by means of pilot projects on tourist and education service supply. On the proposal by the co-ordination unit, Grande Traversée des Alpes (GTA), the International Steering Committee (ISC – see below) decided to allocate part of the budget of the first implementation phase to the identification of the project impact indicators on the rural development, beyond the mere tourist supply. This work served as point of reference for the further evaluation to be planned during the second phase of the project (2005-2007) in order to justify and guide the implementation of the Via Alpina in the long term.

General Objectives:
As already pointed out by the conclusion of the feasibility study (10th ISC Meeting held in Annecy, in December 2004), the main objective of the evaluation was to measure the gap between the objectives set out by the project and the actual effects achieved in the various localities. The evaluation process was intended not only to measure the actual results, but also to analyse the effects of political choices. Evaluation was not intended as an end to itself but as a way to gather all the necessary elements to modify, adjust and tune the project to the actual local needs. Evaluation was also regarded as an opportunity to further strengthen the involvement of local actors in the general Via Alpina project. Four evaluation approaches have been identified to measure the local effects of the project: economic effects, environmental effects, effects on practices and effects on representations.

Objectives set for the different measurement phases from 2005 to 2007:
The Via Alpina evaluation process has taken place in four different phases, each one of them aimed at achieving the following specific objectives, as it will be further explained:

- **First measurement phase objectives, summer 2005:**
Given the limited progress of the project in terms of local development, the first series of measures was mainly focused on identifying an initial stage of operation of the route in the areas concerned rather than measuring the local effects of the Via Alpina, which were still very limited. Therefore, the first objective of this evaluation campaign was to understand the different spatial configurations present along the route in order to identify both positive and negative effects. The campaign was also aimed at understanding how the actors' involvement in and expectations from the Via Alpina might differ, depending on different local situations. The second objective was a more methodological one and was intended as a first "evaluation-test" in order to improve the tools and methods to be adopted during the second measurement phase envisaged for summer 2007. After a thorough analysis of this evaluation campaign, methodological readjustments were introduced to optimise the consistency of future workgroup results (cf. the evaluation objectives of summer 2007).

- **Intermediary evaluation objectives (2006):**
The Viadventure project mainly focuses on the implementation of pilot projects. The first pilot project development stage was aimed at testing initiatives in the field of sustainable tourism and the discovery of the natural heritage. It was important to draw a lesson from that experience. Furthermore, since these initiatives had been designed and launched in the framework of WP5 (tourist product development and marketing), the analysis provided by the evaluation phase was intended to serve as a contribution to guide the implementation of WP5 until the end of the Viadventure project.

- **Institutional evaluation objectives, February-March 2007:**

This evaluation stage took place just before the last summer season of the Viadventure project and was intended to provide the elements that would help to envisage the future of the Via Alpina and to establish the collaboration network outside the Interreg framework starting from January 2008.

- **Evaluation objectives - summer 2007:**

Several reasons have led the Evaluation Pole to (partially) change the objectives of the second evaluation phase in summer 2007:

- The second phase of the Via Alpina initiative (Viadventure) mainly consisted in the implementation of pilot projects with the aim to support local actors in the opening up and use of the Via Alpina along the territories involved, in furtherance of the local development.
- The implementation of the marketing and communication strategy was just launched through the development of the new website Internet and the new communication tools; hence the project was still at its initial launching phase from the communication point of view.
- Furthermore, the 2005 evaluation had already highlighted that the Via Alpina was very little known by hikers and local actors. Of course, two years were not enough to let the situation evolve in a significant way and a similar analysis would have led to the same results or, at least, to not so significantly different results.

Due to these reasons and to a need to maximise the use and usefulness of results for and by the national coordinators, the "local actors" section of this last evaluation campaign focused on the impact of pilot projects on networking. The aim was to identify the reasons for the involvement of local actors in the pilot projects and to take into account their opinion on this involvement. The visitor-oriented survey method has remained almost unchanged.

➔ Introduction of the evaluation actors and role distribution:

Introduction of stakeholders:
Four types of actors have been involved in the evaluation process of the Via Alpina, each one of them with a specific role to be played:
- The International Steering Committee
It encompasses all the project partners. It is the decision-making body of the Via Alpina, also in charge of evaluation. It contributes to the project evaluation through its national contact points (national secretariats).
- The project international secretariat
This GTA team links all the different project partners together. It makes sure that there is consistency among the various national programmes thus allowing the evaluation process.
- The international workgroup[1]
It is made up of university researchers of all the countries of the Alpine space (except for Monaco and Liechtenstein).
- The local actors and users
It is not easy to define who the Via Alpina local actors and users are. Given the federal structure of the project (network of networks), the actions that are implemented vary substantially from country to country and from territory to territory. As a matter of fact, there are different levels of users:

- The hikers (hiking practitioners) who can see the Via Alpina as a new practice ground;
- The tourism professionals in the broad sense of the term (ranging from accommodation facility managers to regional or national tourist promotion bodies) who can use the Via Alpina as a tourism promotion tool;
- The various types of associations (environmental protection and environment education associations …) and intermunicipal authorities (communities of municipalities, Regional Nature Parks …) that can consider the Via Alpina as a federating working tool focusing on their own themes;

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[1] See Annex 1

- The institutions (regions, Länder, cantons, departments, provinces, municipalities …) for which the Via Alpina can serve as a shop-window.

Role description:

The evaluation coordination task is entrusted with the international secretariat of the project,. A specific team within GTA has been in charge of steering the choices related to the methodology and design of tools. Even though it drafted all proposals, the evaluation team has involved the international workgroup in the discussion in order to modify and improve the method proposals. The Steering Committee finally validated the guidelines.

More generally, the roles played by the different stakeholders in the evaluation process can be summarized in the following diagram:
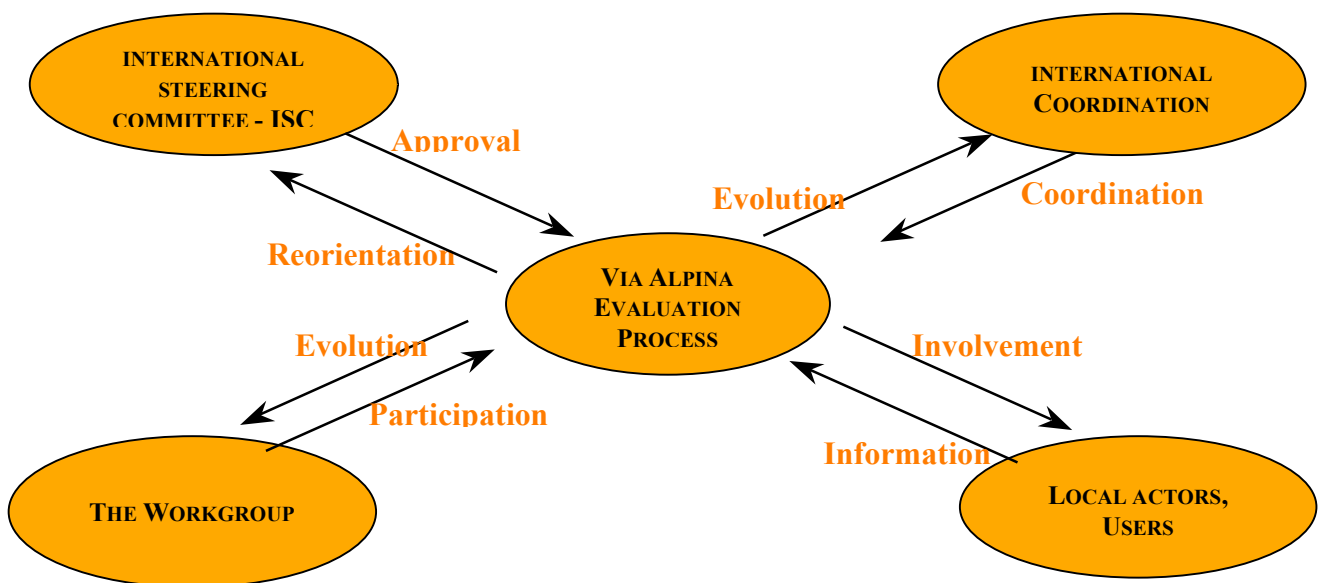
INQUIRY METHOD(S):

➜ The organisation of the different Via Alpina evaluation phases

The first measurement phase, summer 2005:
Two types of evaluation approaches have been developed: a more quantitative approach addressed to visitors (i.e. by means of questionnaires) and a qualitative approach addressed to local actors (i.e. by means of interviews). All the surveys (by means of questionnaires and interviews) were carried out in summer time (between mid-July and mid-August). Depending on the various countries, questionnaires were either self-administered (in the mountain huts or inns along the Via Alpina route) or administered on a one-to-one basis with visitors along the Via Alpina route.

Three types of actors (institutional, tourism professional or association) were interviewed by means of semi-directed interviews in the most appropriate places for them. The objective was to involve a representative group of local actors who might be potentially interested and engaged in the Via Alpina initiative.

Intermediary Evaluation (2006):
Only the Austrian team, due to specific planning constraints of the Austrian expert, carried out field investigations during summer 2006. At the same time, the international team mostly focused on an initial analysis of the pilot projects implementation. Questionnaires were sent by email to national coordinators, who filled in a questionnaire for each pilot project.

Institutional evaluation, February-March 2007:
In the framework of its project perpetuation mission, GTA carried out a survey on the perception of results, on the one hand, and on the project perspectives, on the other hand, among the representatives of the three sectors involved in the Via Alpina initiative, namely the public authorities, the tourist promotion bodies (and a few service providers) and the hiking associations, project partners taking part in different activities with different roles: in the international or local activities, with a steering, implementation and/or funding role. Questionnaires were sent out by email and were filled in either remotely or by means of telephone interviews conducted by the international coordinator (Nathalie Morelle).

Summer 2007 evaluation
The two approaches (by the local actors and hikers) were kept unchanged but the interviewed people selection criteria were substantially modified. While in 2005, the aim was to interview a wide range of actors in a few test areas representing the diversity of the Alps, in 2007 the objective was to focus more on the organisations or people concerned by the implementation of a pilot project.
Furthermore, given the low feedback rate of self-administered questionnaires in 2005, all the questionnaires addressed to visitors were administered on a one-to-one basis.

➜ The Via Alpina evaluation questions

What are the main principles applied to the design of the grid?
In order to design the questionnaire grid[2], first of all, the evaluation team applied a classic evaluation approach, consisting in the re-reading of the project objectives. This approach allowed to define four major thematic question groups: concerning economic issues, environmental issues, social practices and representation issues. During work sessions with Jacques Perret[3] the evaluation team could integrate this classic evaluation approach with his diagnostic method approach[4]. By analysing several diagnostic methods, Perret could identify

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[2] Attached in Annex 2.
[3] Retired from the departmental Division of Mountain Territories of CEMAGREF in Grenoble, and who had kindly accepted to devote part of his time to co-operates with us.
[4] Perret J., 2003, « Les méthodes de diagnostic de petites régions: ingénieur, pasteur et animateur à l'œuvre », colloque Territoire et Fonctions. Acfas, Rimouski, 12p.

three main types: the engineer's, the pastor's and the facilitator's diagnostic method. With reference to these diagnostic methods, it was possible to define three main development rationales underlying a tourist project: imposition rationale, discussion rationale and partnership rationale. For clarity's sake, these development rationales have been explained in the box here below. This approach has allowed us not to limit the choice of questions to the success of results stemming "out of nothing", but to integrate well the local development context. Indeed, this approach tries to link raw results (attendance rate, turnover, etc.) to a soft approach that highlights that what matters is to understand how and to what extent the project is actually used by users, rather than analysing whether it is well used according to its original planning. This approach seems to be all the more necessary in the framework of the Via Alpina project in which the guidelines that have jointly been decided upon are successively suited and adjusted to the specific contexts in each individual country, according to the national authority in charge.

TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT RATIONALES

The imposition rationale, i.e. «the top-down approach »
Mostly institutional actors are involved in this type of project management rationale. They consider the territory as an external entity and see it more as an object without any specificity. The project will be implemented without taking into account the specificities, needs and aspirations of the locality and of the people concerned. The project is designed outside of the territory in question. Hence, there is a certain distance between all the project stakeholders, the designers, promoters, developers and proponents and the beneficiaries. Such a distance can impair the understanding between the local realities and the project proponents and it does not allow to call into question the strategic choices that were originally made by the proponents. Hence, if the project ended up by perfectly suiting the local needs and expectations, this would happen only by chance. According to this rationale, the project proponents consider that the skills and expertise that are necessary for the effective development of the project are not available locally. They feel therefore authorized to impose their vision and show the way to be followed by the local actors. The project is not designed for the community but rather to meet the institutional needs and demands.

The discussion rationale, i.e. « it is done for »
In this case, the local community and stakeholders are treated as though they were not able to say what is good for them. It is therefore necessary to guide them towards the good solution but without imposing one's vision on them. Hence, the aim is to persuade the local actors that the project is good for them. The project is no longer imposed on them according to a top-down approach, but an attempt is made to use and enhance local resources. It is developed as the «good alternative » to the local problem. The local community is really taken into account since the project enhances its potentials with a view to improving its development and present situation. The project guidelines are predefined, but local decision-makers are involved in the decision. Yet, this consensus building approach is not likely to change the fundamentals and the main objectives of the project, but it will allow to engage local actors, or better the local decision-makers in the project. The population will be informed about the existence of the project in order to feel it as its own so that actions are undertaken "for" rather than "against" them. The project must be seen as a liaison between the local/global but it does not stem from the community, it does not belong to it: ideas come from outside, from the ones who have the expertise. It is not necessarily a question of relying upon favourable communities but rather of supporting those that are not. Coming from outside, the project promoters are able to pass a judgement and to classify the development level of the local community. The project is there to provide a vision to the community, which would otherwise remain closed within a short-term perspective.

The partnership rationale, « we do it together ».
In this case, the ideas emerge from the local community itself. The local actors, or better certain local actors are the project designers, promoters, and proponents. Hence, the project will actually meet a real local demand just because it has been launched to address a problem expressed by the community. This does not mean that there will be no external intervention, but it will come afterwards. In this case, a special attention shall have to be paid to legitimacy, representativeness of the local actors who have become the project proponents. Else, it might be possible to fall in the trap of one of the previous rationales, with a few actors that are more powerful than others and who manage to impose their vision and ideas. Here, conflicts are not ignored. The territory is not regarded as a uniform but rather as a complex picture characterised sometimes by contradictory visions. The project that will succeed will result from exchanges, tensions and compromises (but not necessarily from consensus). The different discussion phases will be disseminated locally in order to engage and motivate a larger number of people. The solution that will finally be chosen will not necessarily be the most cost-effective one from a merely economic point of view.
Local actors will use the project to introduce and promote change. In the end, what matters is not the results and objectives, but rather the underlying process itself.

The evaluation team has translated this analysis into an evaluation rationale and therefore into evaluation criteria. The point is not trying to frame the project or the project actions into one specific case or the other, but, as already previously stated, to provide a measurement tool of the interaction between the project and the local actors. The following table highlights the link between the development rationale and the type of evaluation:

| Project development rationale	Type of evaluation
Imposition rationale Top-down Development: **imposition**	Evaluation is conceived as an impact study. Actors are the agents. The quantifiable and quantified dimension prevails as well as the rationale underlying the implementation of a policy: at the institutional level. Evaluation is not triggered off by the local level but it is imposed from above according to a top-down approach. The question is to make sure that the invested financial resources really serve the purpose they are meant for. **Global, normative evaluation imposed from above (with reference to generic development criteria)**
Discussion rationale Consensus by local actors: **Dissemination**	The impact rationale prevails, yet with an eye to the degree of participation. The aim is to make sure that the local actors have well received, understood and digested the message conveyed by the project proponents. The aim is to see what are the internal dynamics specific to the local community that have been fostered by the project. Attention is paid to the positive or negative effects entailed by the project. The reference dimension is that of the project. The focus is on the objectives that have been set out by the project rather than on the ones that have been called for by the population, the local level. **Local, discussion centred evaluation**
Partnership rationale Reconciling mutual interests between the local and external realities: **fusion**	The reference framework is the interaction between the project and the actor. The aim is to identify the project opportunity and to see whether and how the project changes following the local community's reactions - since the local reactions are considered to be a dynamic force within the project itself. The reference framework is the development of a "shared project", i.e. the building process itself is taken into account here: who, how, with whom, to what extent? It is important to see how the local community will use the project, how it seizes a legitimating opportunity. **Internal, shared evaluation**

Two question grids, listing the questions to be asked both to hikers and to local actors for evaluation purposes, have been suggested by the evaluation team, based on this reasoning. They have further been processed by the workgroup and then globally validated by the Via Alpina International Steering Committee in order to serve as a basis for the development of different tools.

➔ **The Via Alpina evaluation tools**

A broad range of tools has been developed based on the grid questions:

- Interview grids[5] to interview the different local actors that are likely to be directly or indirectly concerned by the Via Alpina initiative.

- Interview grids[6] to interview the different local actors that are likely to be directly or indirectly concerned by the implementation of a pilot project.

- Questionnaires[7] addressed to hikers. The 2007 questionnaire has partially been changed in the light of the 2005 results.

- A participant observation grid: the aim is to provide the national coordinators with a critical reading grid of the events that are organised by them. Yet, this tool has never been really used.

- A pilot project self-evaluation questionnaire addressed to national coordinators, on the one hand, and to the local actors involved in the project, on the other hand[8].

- A questionnaire addressed to institutional actors about their perception on the Via Alpina initiative/Viadventure results, and in particular of their strengths, weaknesses and recommendations.[9]

Each tool responds to a specific function within the evaluation process, as illustrated by the following diagram:

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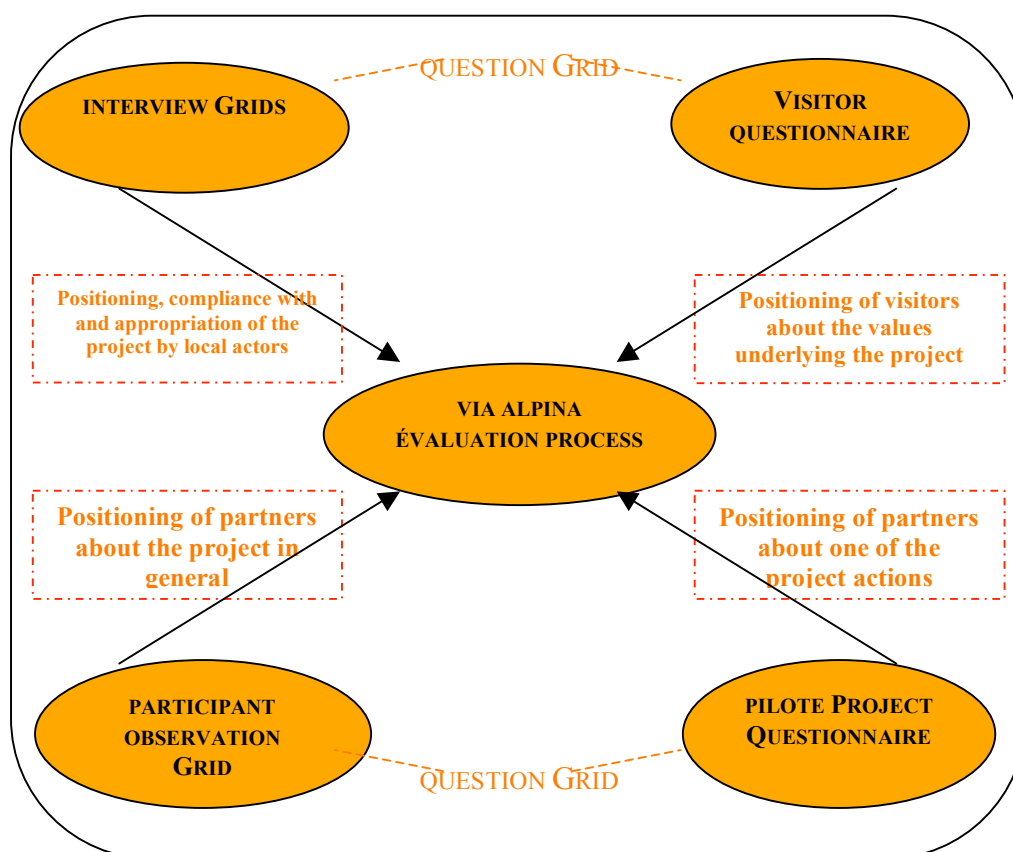
[5] cf. Annex 3
[6] cf. Annex 4
[7] cf. Annex 5
[8] cf. Annex 6
[9] cf. Annex 7

➔ **Test areas**

During the development of the Via Alpina evaluation methodology, it was necessary to think about its scale of application, namely the definition of the evaluation areas. Based on the actions developed by the French national secretariat and on the French hiking management context, it seemed to be logical to make *reference to the existing local network and in* particular to the whole hiking structure. In France, it is better to rely upon the communities of municipalities *since they are often entrusted with hiking management responsibilities and as a consequence the implementation and management of the PDIPR (Plan départemental des Itinéraires de Promenade et de Randonnée / Department Plan of Walks and Hikes).*

The idea was to interview all the actors linked to tourist development (*tourist development* to be intended in the broadest sense of the term) in the area under question. They might include the people appointed as trail managers by the communities of municipalities, politicians, protected area managers and accommodation managers.

Yet, during the workgroup meetings, this vision proved to be too exclusively French and this for several reasons:
- the homogenisation and minimisation trend of trail managers is not shared by all the Alpine space countries,
- the Via Alpina project was not perceived by local actors as such to have a more resounding effect « outside trails » and therefore far and beyond the actions undertaken by hiking actors as such,
- the territory notion is not a universal one; in Germany, for example, reference is usually made to *pilot projects*, but the meaning of the expression *pilot territory* is not very clear,
- the inter-municipal scale still gives rise to a lively debate in France, since it is often under restructuring process. Yet in other countries concerned, this scale does not exist, or if so, in a slightly different way since several years and is now very well integrated.

Hence, very often the international experts have spontaneously chosen as the definition of *test territory* a stretch of route not having any specific spatial, political or administrative dimension i.e. not shifting from a linear to a spatial and geographical rationale.
The configuration that most resembles that of France is the Italian one in terms of valleys rather than a stretch of stages along the trail.
In spite of previous common criteria, the workgroup experts have therefore adjusted their test area selection method to the areas to be studied according to the national contexts and to the prevailing *hiking culture of the countries of origin*.
This example shows the importance that can be acquired by the cultural aspect even within a scientific context.

FINAL DATA AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS:

→ The resulting data: what type and what quantity of data?

EVALUATION PHASE		TYPES OF DATAS	QUANTITY
Summer 2005 Evaluation		Interviews with local actors	**117**
		Questionnaires addressed to visitors	**680**
Evaluation (2006)	**Austrian investigation**	Questionnaires addressed to hikers[10]	**84**
		Survey of local actors	**42**
	Institutional investigation	Questionnaires addressed to national coordinators about the implementation of pilot projects	**21**
Institutional Evaluation (February-March 2007)		Institutional questionnaires	**46** (107 interviewed people , i.e. a 43% feedback)
Summer 2007 Evaluation		Interviews with local actors	**37**
		Field questionnaires	**584**

→ The use of data: from processing to dissemination

The evaluation results have been disseminated throughout the whole process (except for the Austrian investigation of 2006), combining two dissemination approaches: first, the written summaries (disseminated to the ISC members, and depending on each case, also to the interviewed people and/or different people or organisations concerned)[11], secondly, the oral report during the Steering Committee meetings.

As for the two summer evaluation campaigns (2005-2007), national summary notes have been drafted by each team and they have been reported to the respective national secretariats. An international summary report has been drafted by the international evaluation coordination unit. It carries out an overall analysis of all the results that have been obtained at a national level. The 2005 evaluation results were illustrated during the Steering Committee meeting held in June 2006. Whereas, the final data will be reported to the Committee in June 2008.

L. Berthelot/ GTA, March 2008

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10 Grouping together a list of 37 predefined questions
[11] Cf. all the summaries under Annex 8

LIST OF ANNEXES :

➔ **Annex1:** Presentation of the experts group

➔ **Annex2:** Indicators grid for the evaluation of the impact of Via Alpina (English)

➔ **Annex3:** Interview grid for local actors (French, German, English, Austria an Italian versions)

➔ **Annex4:** Interview grid for local actors of Pilot project (French, English an Italian versions)

➔ **Annex5:** Questionnaires addressed to hikers, version 2005 (French, English, Italian) and version 2007 (French, English, Italian, German)

➔ **Annex6:** Pilot project self-evaluation questionnaire (English version)

➔ **Annex7:** Questionnaire addressed to institutional actors (French, Italian, Slovenian, German versions)

➔ **Annex8:** Evaluation Syntheses 2005 (French and English versions), 2006 (English versions) et 2007 (French and English versions)