

## What is the environmental impact of winter sports pleasures?

The French Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition recently published the [Environmental Atlas of ski resorts and municipalities with ski resorts](#). This atlas gathers data for each mountain range of France and presents environmental impacts of winter tourism for each territory.

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Ski resorts, developed in France mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, attract a high number of tourists. If their creation facilitated access to mountain areas and boosted their attractiveness during wintertime, their environmental impacts are currently questioning their viability. To better understand the scope and outputs of the report, Euromontana met with Mélanie Gauche, Mountain and Tourism Officer at the Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition.

### 1. Understanding environmental impacts of ski resorts using the Environmental Atlas

**Euromontana (EM): What was the origin of this Atlas? Is this a project that will be repeated at regular intervals?**

*Mélanie Gauche (MG):* “The Atlas is part of the studies carried out by the Data and Statistical Studies Department of the Ministry for an Ecological and Solidary Transition in order to fulfil the mission of providing environmental information to the public under the Aarhus Convention<sup>1</sup>. Tourism is a sector for which the overall impact on the environment is significant and presents real peculiarities: an increased pressure due to the rise of population flows but also a high spatial and temporal concentration. In France, coastal and mountainous areas are particularly concerned by this problem.

Following the International Year of Sustainable Tourism in 2017, and in the context of the forthcoming French Presidency of the Alpine Convention for the period 2019-2020, work has been launched to particularly focus on winter mountain tourism and environmental issues in ski resorts. This work also echoes the one carried out by the international expert groups on the sustainability of tourism led by the European Environment Agency and the United Nations World Tourism Organization, in which we are involved.

Ultimately, the objective is to complete the work on mountain tourism by analysing the pressures and impacts of summer activities. More broadly, it is also a question of developing an information system on the mountain environment.”

**EM: What are the 2 or 3 key figures to remember from this report?**

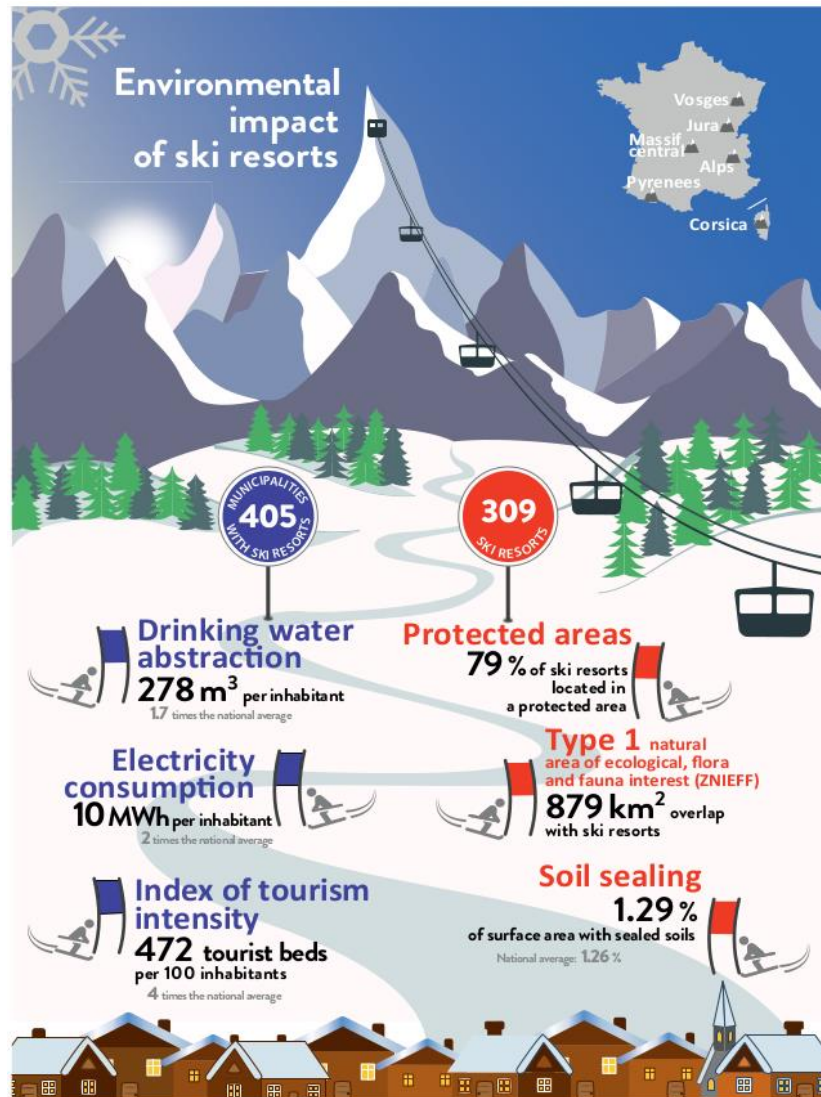
*MG:* “The use of resources shows that in the municipalities that support ski resorts, the supply volumes of drinking water are 1.7 times higher than the national average and electricity consumption is multiplied by

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<sup>1</sup> The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted on 25 June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus at the Fourth Ministerial Conference as part of the "Environment for Europe" process.



2. In terms of biodiversity, 8 out of 10 ski resorts are located in a protected area. Finally, ski resorts, although located in natural areas, have a higher rate of soil sealing than the national territory.”



Source: Environmental Atlas of ski resorts and municipalities with ski resorts – MTES/SDES  
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**EM: How can we analyse the overlap between ski stations and protected natural areas? What problems does this cause and how can they be avoided?**

MG: “Interactions between protected areas and ski resorts are complex to analyse. It is not surprising to observe a geographical proximity between protected areas and ski resorts; the latter having been developed on natural areas. When there is an overlap, or very close proximity between these two areas, environmental impacts vary both according to the type of protected area concerned (higher or lower level of protection) and also according to the size of the protected area. Overall smaller sites will tend to be more vulnerable, as a larger proportion of their surface area is likely to be impacted by infrastructures and disruption caused by human presence.



However, some impacts on biodiversity are likely to affect any kind of protected areas: disturbance of certain species linked to anthropogenic presence in winter (particularly capercaillie - the wood grouse), waste production, visual pollution generated by the construction of certain infrastructures (pylons and ski lift cables, water reservoirs for snow supply etc.). Locally, initiatives have been taken to reduce some of the impacts. In winter, in order to protect the grouse from any disturbance, some ski resorts set up action plans which for instance include anti-percussion measures, reporting of wintering areas, information panels, etc.”

**EM: How can the Atlas be taken into account by national or local policy makers?**

MG: “This Atlas is intended to provide key insights to better understand the environmental issues related to the development of ski resorts in mountain areas. It aims to raise awareness among the public and decision-makers on problems inherent to winter mountain tourism development.

By proposing an analysis by mountain range [*data is presented for the Alpine, Pyrenean, Corsican, Vosges, Jura and Massif Central mountain chains*] this publication offers to local authorities a synthetic dataset, which can be used later, in particular to draw up territorial diagnoses or environmental profiles.”

**2. How to position winter tourism in the sustainable development of mountain areas?**

The Ministry’s Atlas of ski resorts and municipalities follows the publication of the [2018 annual report of the French Court of Auditors](#), responsible for the evaluation of public policies in France. In this last report, the Court insisted on the challenges the Alps were facing in terms of climate change. In this regard, the Court regretted the lack of legally binding environmental measures in this region, where municipalities involved in ski resorts’ management are too small to be obliged to draw a “climate air energy” territorial plan. Decisions thus rely in the hands of municipalities hosting ski resorts on their territory to make winter sports more sustainable.

The Court of Auditors’ report mentions diversification as a solution for more balanced tourism flows and more sustainable tourism options. Euromontana also advocates for a more [diversified mountain tourism](#), promoting outdoor activities, natural and cultural heritage as well as regional brands and products. Such initiatives are already multiplying. The (former) Rhône-Alpes region in France, a top winter destination, has for instance been involved since 2013 in ski resorts sustainable management. By building “[Conventions of valleys stations](#)”, local municipalities intend to develop sustainable transports and housing, diversify tourism activities and guarantee qualified professionals.

The French branch of the association Mountain Riders created in 2011 a [label](#) for eco-friendly ski resorts to promote the initiatives of ski stations attempting to reduce their environmental impacts.



Tourism is expected to remain an integrated EU policy in the next European programming period 2021-2027 (see our last article [Sustainable tourism: what is at stake after 2020?](#)), promoting Europeans destinations through different channels and boosting local economies. In this context, the many initiatives linked to sustainable tourism in mountain areas need to continue being supported by European Structural Funds. Euromontana also encourages the development of coherent national tourism strategies, recognizing the great potential of mountain areas, as well as cross border cooperation to exchange expertise and [good practices](#).

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