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Encore une transition ? Conflits et trajectoires des territoires de montagne face aux changements socio-environnementaux

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Marjolaine Gros-Balthazard, Caterina Franco and Anouk Bonnemains

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Introduction

- 1 Mountain areas are often likened to sentinels of climate change due to their environmental and socio-economic vulnerabilities (Einhorn *et al.*, 2015; Hagimont *et al.*, 2021). In the context of expected socio-ecological transitions, these regions are subject to multiple challenges, particularly in diversifying their economies (Achin *et al.*, 2015), given the uncertain future of winter tourism, which is a key dependency for many of them (Bonnemains *et al.*, 2019; Tuppen, Lagenbach., 2020; Vlès, 2019). However, the concept of transition, generically defined as the “passage from one state to another” (Chabot, 2015), is not new to these territories. Over the past century, there have been several transitions, especially in tourism: from holiday tourism to winter sports tourism to, more recently, nature tourism (Duhamel *et al.*, 2011). These changes have transformed mountain areas in terms of access (railways, road building, etc.), lifestyles, development (increase in infrastructure) and environmental impact (soil artificialisation, use of natural resources, etc.). The current socio-ecological transition calls for a rethinking of tourism, characterised by an intertwining of environmental, climate and societal issues (Langenbach *et al.*, 2020; Bourdeau, 2021). There is a fairly widespread expectation, particularly from external stakeholders, of a far-reaching and rapid transition process commensurate with the current challenges. Historical analysis of development trajectories and past transitions shows that this socio-ecological transition, like previous ones, will be shaped by the specific characteristics of the

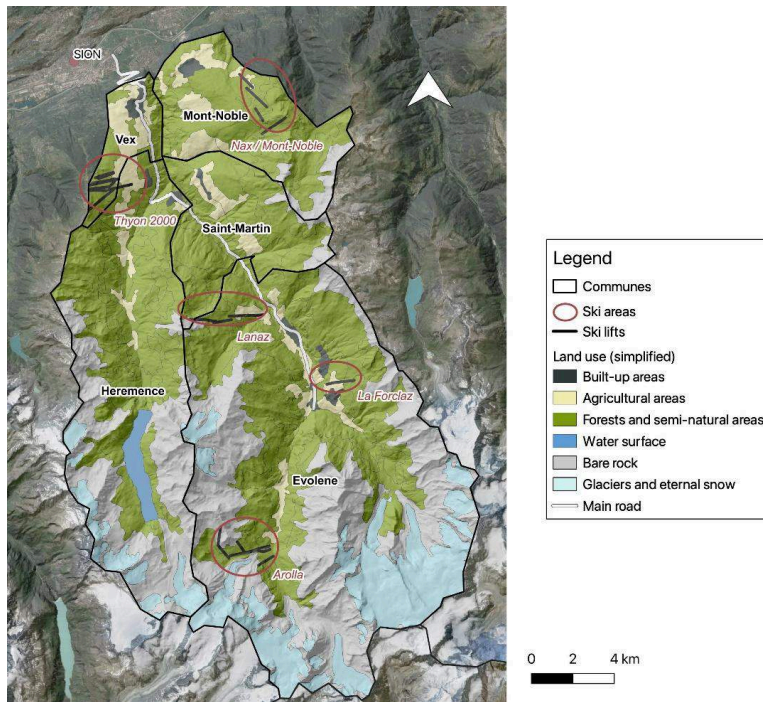
territories (location, stakeholders, resources, etc.), their history and their relationships with others (i.e., stakeholders and territories).

- 2 This article examines the Swiss Alpine valley of Val d'Hérens, located in the Canton of Valais near Sion, its capital. The valley stretches from the Rhône plain to the glaciers and peaks bordering Italy and brings together both high and medium mountain issues. This area is particularly well suited to a study of transitions, both because of the issues raised by environmental and climatic problems (melting glaciers, availability of water resources, etc.) and from a socio-cultural point of view (strong local attachment to history and traditions).
- 3 As part of the Val d'Hérens 1950–2050 project,¹ we have studied the socio-economic development of the valley by identifying major periods and turning points indicative of systemic change (Bergeret *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, we are interested in projects that did not see the light of day but represent key moments in determining the fate of the valley. These projects, all related to tourism, align with common periods of tourism transition in Alpine regions: the construction of railway lines in the early 20th century, the creation and extension of ski areas from the 1950s to the 1980s and the proposed but locally rejected regional nature park in the early 2010s. The point of analysing these projects, which can be likened to “failed” transitions, helps us to better understand the factors that have shaped the area’s trajectory. Although Val d'Hérens had all the assets needed to engage in the three major tourism transitions (i.e., holiday/mountaineering tourism, winter sports tourism and nature tourism), none materialised. What does this failure mean for tourism today?
- 4 After outlining our research framework, we look at the projects by period, shedding light on these “failed” tourism transitions. This historical exploration will enhance our understanding of the valley’s current state, as well as the potential assets or obstacles to the ongoing socio-ecological transition. It also contributes to the discussion of the territorial approach to transitions.

Research Context: Val d'Hérens

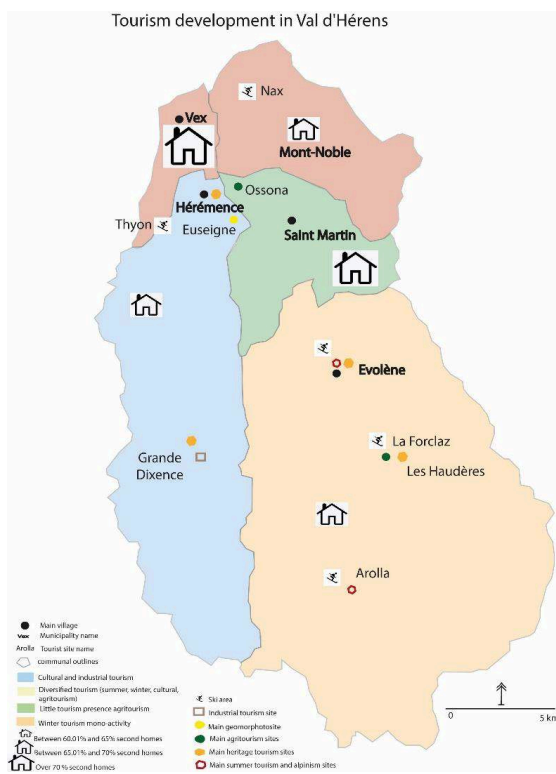
- 5 Val d'Hérens comprises five communes with a current population of 7,000 (**Figure 1**). The development of tourism in Val d'Hérens has been limited compared with the high level of infrastructure in the winter sports resorts of neighbouring valleys (e.g., Verbier and Zermatt) (Debarbieux *et al.*, 2008). However, one of the Val d'Hérens resorts, Arolla, was once a rival to Zermatt at the beginning of the 20th century. Out of the five ski areas in the valley today (**Figure 1**), four can be considered snow resorts (with a few ski lifts and little or no tourist accommodation). Only Thyon 2000 qualifies as a winter sports resort. Other forms of tourism in Val d'Hérens lean towards nature tourism, with some specific features like agro-tourism and cultural tourism (**Figure 2**). In terms of tourism governance, there is currently one entity, Val d'Hérens Tourisme, which brings together the three communes at the bottom of the valley (Saint-Martin, Evolène and Hérémence). This structure initially included all five communes but failed to maintain this unity following the unsuccessful park initiative.

Figure 1: The Val d'Hérens region



Marjolaine Gros-Balthazard

Figure 2: Diagram of the specific features of tourism in Val d'Hérens



Anouk Bonnemaïns

- 6 Outside of tourism, the region's economy is supported by several industrial and craft businesses, as well as agriculture, characterised by a strong cattle heritage: the Hérens breed, known for its fighting prowess. As in other Alpine regions, the intensity of these activities varies seasonally, and for some workers, they complement tourism. However, the valley's development also (and mainly today) stems from two income streams: hydroelectric revenue from the monumental Grande Dixence dam² and earnings of residents who commute daily, mostly to work in the Sion conurbation.
- 7 Given the physical characteristics and history of Val d'Hérens, one might expect tourism to be much more "developed" to form the mainstay of local economic activity, as is the case in many other Alpine regions. Why is this not the case? What happened in this valley during the various tourism booms? These are the questions that guide our exploration and prompt us to examine the transitions that have not yet taken place.

A Regional Approach to Transitions

- 8 Throughout the article, we use three concepts to support our analysis: trajectory (a), transition (b) and conflict (c).
- 9 The concept of trajectory (a) helps us to grasp the dynamic evolution of territories. Including the temporal dimension into spatial analysis allows us to contextualise current and future challenges facing societies in the context of their history. For example, the Alps have undergone major transformations in the past century, increasingly relegating the almost self-sufficient subsistence economy (Hagimont, 2018; Lorenzetti *et al.*, 2019) to the sidelines as industrialisation (factories in valley bottoms or hydraulic dams at altitude) and the various stages of tourism have taken hold. The "all-skiing" or "all-tourism" (Bourdeau, 2009) that characterises many of them is the result of these historical shifts. But these changes vary from one area to another, creating specific territorial "trajectories".
- 10 These can be analysed in terms of transitions (b). We define transitions as profound shifts revealing societal projects (Coudroy de Lille *et al.*, 2017), evolving over time in response to the issues at stake. Today, this notion is often associated with the adjective "socio-ecological" to emphasise the need to take account of environmental, climate, social and societal issues (Morin, 2011) in redefining development models (Smitha *et al.*, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2020). We adopt Bourdeau's definition (2021, p. 2) where the socio-ecological transition is "a medium-term transformation process (25–50 years) that aims to design and implement a societal, energy, economic, technological, cultural and political regime that is compatible with planetary limits and meets the objectives of social and spatial justice". This concept challenges governance and the balance of power within territories among various stakeholders (Avelino *et al.*, 2016). In *sustainable transitions studies*, the spatial dimension of transitions (*geography of sustainable transition*) is increasingly a focus of study (Coenen *et al.*, 2012; Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Truffer *et al.*, 2015; Köhler *et al.*, 2019; Binz *et al.*, 2020), highlighting the role of local contexts in transition processes. Our article contributes to this body of research.
- 11 Finally, examining conflict (c) is valuable for understanding territorial development issues (Lahaye, 2007) since conflict can "manufacture" territory (Melot *et al.*, 2012). By analysing it, we can identify the interplay between stakeholders and their varying interests, which may align or conflict depending on the case (Vrignon *et al.*, 2021). In

this way, the trajectory and (failed) transitions of Val d'Hérens can be viewed in a context of conflict, both within the valley itself (a major difficulty for players in reaching an agreement on a common development goal) and with external players (such as the constant fear of “interference” by the canton or the Confederation in development choices). Uncovering these conflicts makes it possible to explore territorial (re)configurations and the ever-changing identity of an area (Melot *et al.*, 2012).

- 12 Based on these three concepts, we argue that the territorial trajectory of Val d'Hérens is shaped by “failed” transitions, a consequence of conflicts among various stakeholders (internal and external to the territory).

Methodology

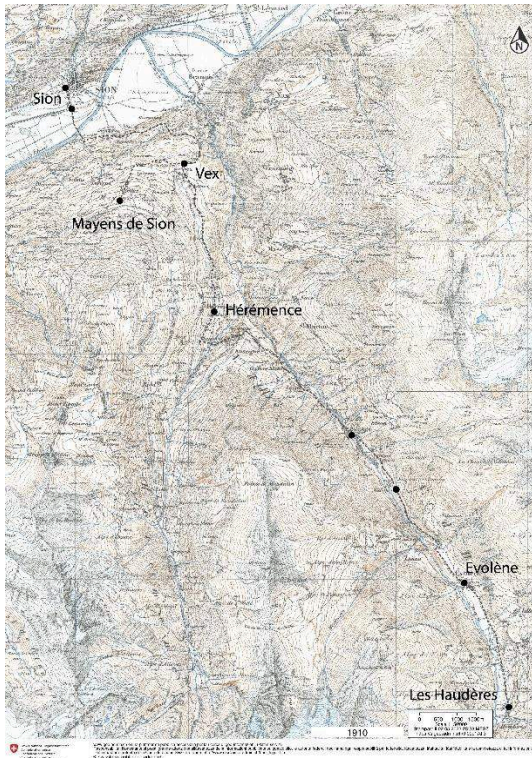
- 13 To analyse the trajectory of Val d'Hérens, we adopted a territorial approach to transitions as proposed by Pachoud *et al.* (2022). These authors claim that French geography is unique with regard to how it looks at the territory through three dimensions, whose evolution and interactions make it possible to understand transitions: the material dimension, which corresponds to all the “physical” human and non-human elements; the institutional dimension, which encompasses rules and standards, policies and regulations at different spatial scales; and the ideal dimension, which includes a territory’s cultural and identity aspects that shape our perceptions.
- 14 We use this framework to investigate the “missed” transitions in the Val d'Hérens region between 1900 and 2020. More specifically, we explore the hypothesis that the factors underlying the “failed” tourism transitions arise from the interactions (*interdependence*) between the material, institutional and ideal dimensions of the territory.
- 15 To retrace the trajectory of Val d'Hérens and identify its current challenges, particularly regarding the socio-ecological transition, we conducted a field survey from autumn 2021 to spring 2022 across the valley’s five communes. We carried out and transcribed 25 interviews, including 13 with political and tourism stakeholders. The main topics discussed were changes in the valley’s socio-economic, tourism, environmental and climatic issues over time.
- 16 This fieldwork enabled us to identify several large-scale, unfinished tourism projects in Val d'Hérens. Since the information provided by those involved was not precise enough and often biased, our understanding of these projects was supplemented by archival research, primarily in the holdings of the Cantonal Administration, at the Archives de l'État du Valais (here abbreviated as AEV) in Sion. A keyword search allowed us to locate documents relating to various projects in dispersed collections. Although municipal archives proved difficult to access or use, the holdings of the Ligue Valaisanne pour la Protection de la Nature (here abbreviated as LVPN) were a valuable source.³ A review of existing literature and an examination of the old local press⁴ complemented our analysis, and we cross-referenced these different sources to elucidate the stakeholders’ positions.

Overview of the Three “Missed” Tourism Transitions

An Unfinished summer Tourism Project

- 17 In the second half of the 19th century, the Alps, previously crossed and enjoyed by the aristocrats on the Grand Tour, became a tourist destination, frequented in the summer for mountaineering and holidaying. It was the urban middle classes who initiated tourism in the Alpine mountains (Tissot, 2017, 2023; Mathieu *et al.*, 2018). Notably, the Valais attracted international (mainly English and German) travellers. In Val d'Hérens, hotels began opening in the villages of Evolène and Arolla (Pirotta, 1997). At the same time, the Swiss Alps saw a significant expansion of rail-based infrastructure, supporting this tourism trend (Humair *et al.*, 2011). For instance, a railway line reached Sion in 1862, and numerous tourist rail projects were launched⁵ in the early 20th century, spurred on by the opening of the Simplon cross-border rail tunnel in 1906.
- 18 Against this backdrop, an application for a concession to build an electric railway line connecting Sion-Vex to the Mayens de Sion⁶ was submitted in 1908 to the Council of State and approved in 1909 by the Federal Council. This infrastructure, championed by private investors and sanctioned by the town of Sion, was intended to provide a link between Sion town centre and the Mayens de Sion, a preferred summer retreat for Sion residents at an altitude of 1,300 metres. In addition to this project, a second concession application was made for the construction of a Vex-Evolène railway. The Gazette du Valais lauded it as vital for the development of tourism in Arolla and the broader Val d'Hérens: “Arriving at Evolène refreshed, clean and ready to present yourself at the table d’hôte without prior cleaning, or to your guide perfectly uncluttered and ready for the ascent, isn’t that the ideal for tourists, one of the best advances in mountaineering?” In the meantime, the concession application was submitted to the relevant communes (Vex, Hérémente, Evolène, Saint-Martin) for approval. However, despite support from the town of Sion and cantonal and federal authorities, these projects were never built (**Figure 3**).
- 19 Why was the project abandoned? In a letter sent to the architect in May 1910, the engineers involved in the project voiced their concern about its profitability. They suggested the town of Sion make a financial contribution, either by supplying electricity free of charge or by investing capital in the company⁷ to share the financial risk. Tensions also arose between the communes over the placement of the terminus station. An article from 1912 describes the debate among the communes of Val d'Hérens over who should pay for the first project (Sion-Mayens de Sion), citing “egoism, as well as the lack of means, paralysing any means of progress”.⁸
- 20 The main reasons for the failure to complete the rail link between Sion and Vex-Mayens de Sion (and, consequently, the second section) were financial concerns and institutional disagreements among the communes (competition and project support). This failure resulted in the valley missing the initial transformation of tourism that the construction of mountain railways brought about, exemplified by destinations like Zermatt and Saint Moritz, where train accessibility remains an undeniable asset even today.

Figure 3: Reconstruction of the route of the Sion–Vex-Mayen railway line from Sion and Vex to Evolène on the SWISSTOPO 1910 topographical map



Caterina Franco

The non-intensification of Winter Tourism

- 21 After the Second World War, mountain tourism gradually transitioned towards winter tourism (Sautier, 2016). Winter sports are becoming increasingly significant in European tourism, and they also have a decisive economic impact on mountain regions, which are grappling with the risk of rural exodus. In Switzerland, the development of new winter sports infrastructure is often driven by the private sector, with no established planning at the federal or even the cantonal government level. In Val d'Hérens, the communes and their residents began exploring the potential of snowfields in the 1950s. In the mid-1950s, the Theytaz brothers, who owned a shuttle bus company that transported workers to the Grande Dixence construction site, invested in the winter tourism sector by building the first ski lifts on the Thyon mountain pasture. Then, in 1976, Thyon joined the 4 Vallées ski area, and the resort's growth took off.⁹ In Evolène, the first ski lifts were installed in the 1960s around small ski areas (Evolène, La Forclaz-La Sage, Arolla) (Mayoraz, 2003), now part of the Espace Dent-Blanche. Subsequently, in 1979, the Nax–Mont-Noble ski area opened. While these projects succeeded, others could have greatly enhanced role of winter tourism in the valley. Here we look at: **(a)** the link between the Evolène–Lanaz ski area and the 4 Vallées; **(b)** the creation of a ski area in the commune of Saint-Martin; and **(c)** the link between the Mont-Noble ski area and the Val d'Anniviers resorts (Vercorin and Grimentz).

The Project to Link the Evolène–Lanaz Ski Area with the 4 Vallées

- 22 In 1977, a report on the development of tourism in the region commissioned by the commune of Evolène¹⁰ and intended for the various development companies identified three geographical sectors for the expansion of the ski areas (and their links). These expansions would have justified the construction of more than 7,000 new tourist beds¹¹. In 1979, the municipal administration¹² of Evolène proposed the first phase of a project to develop Pic d'Artsinol (providing a link between the Lanaz–Evolène ski area and the 4 Vallées). This included constructing a chairlift and two drag lifts managed by Télé-Evolène, creating a car park and widening the access road (**Figure 4**). Despite approval from the Federal Office of Transport,¹³ the initiative faced opposition from a committee of “locals”,¹⁴ who appealed first to the LVPN (1980), then to the WWF (1981).
- 23 Conflicts arose between local stakeholders, with opponents arguing for:
- Environmental protection, stating that the project would destroy a biotope.¹⁵
 - Mountain development, advocating that it should be designed by, with and for the “natives”.
¹⁶ However, as the development of winter sports requires substantial investment, it is inevitable that external players (e.g. developers) are involved.
 - Economic competition, highlighting the conflict between tourism and agriculture for both jobs and land.¹⁷
- 24 When the Ligue Suisse de Protection de la Nature (LSPN) opposed the project and lodged an appeal with the Federal Court¹⁸ in 1981, the primary argument was landscape protection. This concept allows for a holistic assessment of infrastructural impacts by considering the different facets of the territory (environmental, social and heritage). The project was later modified and approved in a “light” version, precluding any possible links with other areas.
- 25 This, the idealistic dimension, particularly concerning landscapes and environmental protection, played a significant role in the conflict leading to the project’s failure. This dimension brought into focus the institutional aspect, namely the role of nature conservation entities at both the cantonal and federal levels.

Figure 4: Preliminary design of Pic d'Artsinol ski lifts, 1979



Guillaume Favre, LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV

The Project for an Estate in the Commune of Saint-Martin

- 26 In 1973, the communes on the right bank of the Borgne (Saint-Martin, and the three communes now forming Mont-Noble: Nax, Vernamiège and Mase) jointly commissioned a Sion-based engineering firm to study the potential for ski areas, including synergies. However, this effort “struggled to come to fruition, with each of the communes pulling out all the stops to benefit from a basic facility linking it to the planned ski area” (Mayoraz, 2003, p. 164). A local initiative in 1980 led to the revival of a ski area in Saint-Martin with the establishment of the “Comité d’Initiative pour les Remontées Mécaniques” (CIRM)¹⁹ to develop tourism in the commune and combat rural exodus.²⁰
- 27 The first concession application, submitted in 1981, included plans for three facilities. The municipality played a leading role, as did the development company, which sought a tourist boom by and for its residents. The widespread support was evident from a survey on potential subscriptions and the consortium’s decision to make land available. Financially, the project seemed feasible, with subsidies from the Confederation and the canton and support from residents and the commune. “All the endogenous conditions seem to be in place for the success of this project, which everyone in Saint-Martin wants to see through to the end” (Mayoraz, 2003, pp. 173–174).
- 28 However, the project was twice rejected by the Federal Department of Transport (1981 and 1984), and the ban was finalised by the Federal Council in 1985. The initial opposition from the LVPN was mainly on environmental protection grounds, particularly against deforestation and changes to the morphology of the land required

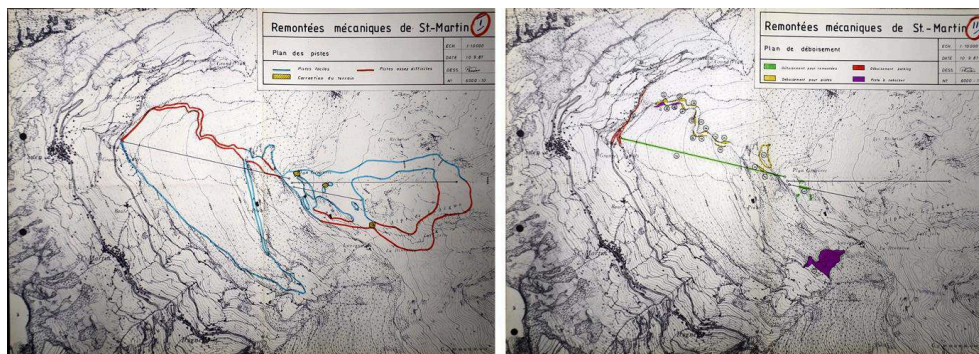
to create the pistes, and concerns about a future extension of the ski lifts, which would have affected the Vallon de Réchy, considered a remarkable site for its biodiversity of flora and fauna²¹ (Figure 5). Economic factors also played a role, especially the infrastructures' viability amid strong competition among nearby ski areas (some already struggling financially). The need to “think regionally” was also cited by the federal authorities:

Once again, it's a no, despite the favourable opinions of the cantonal authorities concerned and the absence of any opposition from environmental or other groups.

The main reason given by the appeal body was the risk of competition for other neighbouring resorts, in particular Nax and Evolène, and the difficulty of making a new facility profitable in a region that does not have sufficient accommodation facilities.²²

- 29 In 1989, the municipal authorities definitively shifted focus from winter tourism, a decision ratified by popular vote, to concentrate on rural development and promoting local heritage as a tourist attraction.

Figure 5 (a, b)



Slope plan and deforestation plan. Dossier St-Martin-remontées mécaniques, 10/09/1981.

LVPN 1985-54-7, AEV

- 30 The three dimensions of the area play a crucial role in explaining the conflicts that led to the failure of this project. The initial opposition was between institutional players (the canton and federal transport authorities) and local project proponents, focusing on the material aspect. The former expressed concerns that the project would be unprofitable, while the latter saw the construction of a ski area as vital for development and curbing rural exodus. There was also opposition from nature conservation groups, who felt that economic development should not take precedence over environmental protection (idealistic dimension) and leveraged federal authorities to halt the project (institutional dimension).

The Project to Extend the Mont-Noble Ski Area into Val d'Anniviers

- 31 The third project involved extending the Mont-Noble ski area, located on the right bank near Saint-Martin. After its creation, Télé Mont-Noble quickly explored possibilities to enhance its appeal and competitiveness. The conclusions of the engineering firm commissioned in 1983 suggested various options for expanding the ski area, especially into neighbouring Val d'Anniviers (Grimentz and Vercorin) (Mayoraz, 2003).

- 32 Conflict erupted between the link's proponents (Télé Mont-Noble's management and the private shareholders), who deemed it essential for the long-term survival of their resort, and nature conservationists (mainly the LVPN and the WWF). The contention centred on developers focused on the economic profitability of their facilities and environmental protection associations determined to preserve the Vallon de Réchy, whose biological and botanical wealth should guarantee its inclusion in the federal inventory of protected sites.
- 33 In 1987, a working group was set up to bring together all the stakeholders (communes, state, Télé-Mont-Noble and environmental associations) to find a resolution, but without success: All the variants without a link were unsatisfactory from an economic point of view, and any link with Val d'Anniviers faced environmental hurdles. In 1988, an agreement was reached for an ecologically less harmful solution with very limited economic impact: the construction of a simple ski lift. By forgoing the link, Mont-Noble remained a small-scale resort without artificial snow.
- 34 As with previous projects, the links between the ideological and institutional dimensions are central to understanding the project's failure. A vision championed by environmental protection associations prevailed, supported by their institutional role in Swiss landscape protection. The Federal Law of 1 July 1966 on the Protection of Nature and the Countryside formalised the role of certain non-governmental organisations as overseers of nature and landscape protection. Since then, these institutions have been able to challenge decisions made by cantonal and federal administrations, using the right of appeal to the cantonal and federal courts (Nahrath *et al.*, 2018).
- 35 In the end, it is challenging to determine whether these three ski area projects (or links) in Val d'Hérens could have successfully implemented together and what the current landscape of the valley would look like had they been realised. However, their non-implementation is a sign that winter tourism has not intensified in the valley and, as a result, the divergence of interests between the communes in the Hérens region is increasing. These failed projects have affected the communes in different ways. Mont-Noble and Vex, which are closer to the central valley, have gradually become residential areas within the Sion conurbation. Hérémente and Evolène, have seen their development supported thanks to substantial hydroelectric revenue.²³ In some ways (in terms of economic development), Saint-Martin suffers the most from this lack of development, as it benefits from neither a strong residential appeal nor a high hydroelectric income.
- 36 A final project, emerging as a direct result of these landscapes "protected" from heavy infrastructure development, could have linked the tourist destinies of these five communes: the creation of a regional nature park.

The failed Shift Towards "Sustainable Tourism"?

- 37 More recently, as many authors and stakeholders have pointed out the limitations of the all-skiing approach (Bourdeau, 2009), tourism diversification projects are proliferating in the mountains, taking the form of so-called "soft" or "sustainable" tourism where skiing is less central. Defining "sustainable tourism" is complex (Saarinen, 2006), given the multitude of initiatives under this umbrella, which can make blur the concept's definition (François, 2004). Nevertheless, in some respects, the

regional nature park model has emerged as a forerunner of sustainable tourism, though sometimes more in image than in practice (*ibid.*). In Val d'Hérens, this represents the most recent project and is, thus, most prominent in the memories of local residents. Its abandonment at the turn of the 2010s – another “failed” transition – strongly reflects the ongoing tensions surrounding the valley’s future.²⁴

- 38 With the failure to launch winter tourism in Saint-Martin, the municipality began exploring a “softer” form of tourism, based in particular on agro-tourism and the promotion of natural resources and heritage. Initially, the municipality shared these interests with the three villages now comprising Mont-Noble (i.e., Nax, Vernamiège and Mase) and with Grône, a neighbouring municipality, leading to the formation of the Maya Mont-Noble association in 2001. The initial goal was to obtain a UNESCO Biosphere label, addressing the central challenge of curbing rural exodus and population ageing by creating more job opportunities. The project later expanded to include the entire valley with the creation of the Association of Val d'Hérens Municipalities (ACVH), as part of the effort to create a regional nature park (PNR) under the new federal law on landscape protection (2007). The aim remained the same: to bolster sustainable economic activities, especially tourism, through increased visibility and subsidies from the Confederation (**Figure 6**). Despite the efforts of the project’s proponents, in 2011, a majority in 5 out of 7 communes voted against it, leading to the abandonment of the valley’s first large-scale tourism project.
- 39 Here again, the opposition to the NRP project was internal to Val d'Hérens. The conflict is not about the project’s ultimate goal of reducing rural exodus and attracting tourists but rather about the direction of the valley’s development. Two opposing visions of the mountains emerged: The project’s proponents saw a future centred on gentle tourism and based on the natural and cultural heritage of the Val d'Hérens, while the opponents held a modernist view, advocating for development based on heavy infrastructure like ski lifts and property development. Their belief in reviving the cable link between the ski areas of Evolène and the 4 Vallées is revealing. They also saw the NRP as a potential Trojan horse for cantonal and federal institutions to impose a certain development model on the valley and potentially reduce the autonomy of the communes, thereby turning it into an “Indian reserve”.

to the federal authorities (in particular, the Federal Office for the Environment) exerting a stranglehold on the development choices in the valley (institutional dimension) by limiting projects deemed unsustainable or not ecological (ideal dimension). Opponents point to a conflict between urban and mountain interests, using terms like “city dwellers’ playground”, “Berne’s tutelage” and “Indians’ reserve” to suggest the project emanates from the Confederation, even though it is driven by the people of Val d'Hérens, particularly its executives and commune presidents. Secondly, direct democracy, which is important in Switzerland, allows commune residents to voice their opinions such projects (institutional dimension). The leaflets clearly show the clash between two visions (ideal dimension) for the valley’s future and its development. Notably, in this third period, there is a reversal in the factors hindering the project’s realisation. The protection of the environment and landscape, a major argument in the second period against creating or expanding ski areas, now support the NRP project as a vector for attracting tourists, a point heavily criticised by opponents.

- 41 This recent socio-political heritage weighs heavily on current interactions among local players and their capacity to develop new projects. For example, the unfinished NRP project has disrupted the relationship between the political and tourism sectors in Val d'Hérens: The Val d'Hérens Tourisme structure, which used to encompass all five communes, now only operates with three communes. This latest “failed” transition ultimately raises questions about the place of tourism in the valley and, more broadly, its future development, concluding more than a century of unfulfilled tourism projects.

Conclusion

- 42 At a time when mountain areas are being urged to move away from “all-skiing”, “all-snow” or even “all-tourism” (Bourdeau, 2009), Val d'Hérens, through its failed transitions, is ultimately distinguished from many other mountain areas by its low dependence on tourism, particularly in winter. By using failure as a lens for analysing project dynamics (Devisme, Matthey, 2021), we have managed to utilize the unfinished initiatives in Val d'Hérens to retrace the history of the major tourism phases that mountain areas have undergone and prompted a local examination of why these infrastructures or organisations were never established. These factors were examined by analysing the interactions between the territory’s ideal, material and institutional dimensions. These aspects evolve and are influenced by the stakeholder actions and more general societal trends, as well as the physical and topographical characteristics of the area. The specific configurations of each territory and time period shape the arrangements among these dimensions specific to Val d'Hérens at the different stages mentioned. This means that conflicts, opposition or obstacles to transitions can arise from these different dimensions but also, and above all, interactions between them, which can only vary from one territory to another, calling for more studies on the geography of transitions
- 43 In the example of Val d'Hérens, the institutional dimension is marked by the local population’s significant involvement and participation in decision-making (particularly through voting), the communes’ high level of autonomy in fiscal and planning choices and the prominence of environmental protection organisations like the LSPN or the WWF. Tensions often arise between local administrations (difficulty for communes to

federate) and in the relationship between local bodies and decisions taken at the federal level (perceived as impositions). The material dimension shows the constant importance of economic viability for projects like railways and ski lifts. Meanwhile, the ideal dimension highlights the tension in choosing development models for the area, oscillating between a developmentalist perception (link between ski areas) and protection (regional nature park). Today, the valley faces political and tourism-related divisions, and constructing major infrastructure might have unified the players around a common project.

- 44 Our analysis indicates that these three dimensions should be viewed from both (1) a diachronic and (2) a multi-scalar perspective. The former reveals the territory's history through its tangible and intangible legacies. While completed projects often leave a physical trace, unfinished projects can also have a degree of permanence (as in the case of the Evolène–4 Vallées link, which is still included in the cantonal master plan, or the vertical connection between Vex and Sion, which is once again a topical issue) and leave other types of traces (e.g., the position of the stakeholders). The latter perspective acknowledges that many challenges extend beyond local concerns, encompassing political, societal and climate issues. The transitions in Val d'Hérens reveal the interactions among local, cantonal and federal institutional players, as well as mountain dwellers and other inhabitants. The aborted Val d'Hérens NRP project exemplifies this tension and the varied perceptions (sometimes real, sometimes fantasised by project detractors) associated with mountain regions (e.g., the concept of “rewilding”). Thus, the spatial perimeter of the transitions that have taken place and are still taking place in Val d'Hérens transcends the boundaries of the communes. All the projects mentioned have—in one way or another—brought to light relations with the Val d'Hérens outside. Mountain areas, despite their (relative) remoteness, are not islands but part of a highly complex network of flows.
- 45 Today, Val d'Hérens is divided politically and in terms of tourism. While the realisation of these tourism projects might have had the effect of bringing the players together around a common project, the low level of tourism activity that results today could open a joint reflection on the future of the area and the form that its commitment to a socio-ecological transition might take.

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NOTES

1. Val d'Hérens 1950–2050 is an interdisciplinary project combining participatory research, scientific mediation and artistic methods. It is managed by the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur la montagne (CIRM) and the Service Culture et Médiation Scientifique at the University of Lausanne. The project aims to explore the challenges posed by mountain life amid climate change, viewed through a tripartite lens of past, present and future, across various thematic areas.

2. The construction of the dam, which replaced the old Dixence structure built in the 1930s, spanned from 1953 to 1961. The creation of new infrastructure, the upheaval in social and gender relations in the villages, an influx of foreign labour, technological innovation and profound economic impact all represented a real bifurcation in the valley's trajectory, which deserves further exploration (Vouilloz-Burnier 2009, 2019).

3. See Part 3, point 2.

4. Thanks to the document collections on the www.e-newspaperarchives.ch portal.

5. In 1915, *La Gazette du Valais* listed 23 railway concessions that had been granted but were pending financial justification, in addition to 16 other concession applications submitted for investigation. Source: "Chemin de fer de montagne", *Gazette du Valais*, 31/08/1915, p. 2.
6. The project was signed by Mr Corboz, an engineer from Sion, and Mr Lapalud, an engineer from Geneva, on behalf of an initiative committee.
7. Letter from Messrs Brémont and Vaucher to the architect Alph. De Kalbermatten, 26/03/1910. De Kalbermatten Architectes 75, AEV.
8. "Route des Mayens", *Gazette du Valais*, 09/11/1912, p. 2.
9. "La liaison entre Thyon - Veysonnaz et Verbier assurée dès cet hiver", *Le Nouvelliste*, 14/08/1976.
10. Géo Bétrisey, economist, *Rapport touristique de la commune de Evolène*, August 1977, 39 p. LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
11. *Ibid*, p. 11.
12. Designed by the Guillaume Favre technical office as part of the federal law on aid for investment in mountain regions (LIM).
13. Concession dated 31/01/1981. LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
14. Notably, the three signatories include Mr Bernard Sartorius from and the president of a competing ski development company at La Forclaz. Letter from the Collectif to Philippe Roch, WWF Secretary for French-speaking Switzerland, 02/01/1981. LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
15. Letter from Bernard Sartorius to Fritz Zwicky, LVPN President, 19/03/1980. LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
16. Term used by the project's opponents in their letter from the "Gens du Pays" collective to Philippe Roch.
17. Brochure Association pour le développement harmonieux du Haut Val d'Hérens, 09/1981. Tourist documents VH, 1981-09, AEV.
18. Appeal of 19/05/1981. LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
19. The committee had 110 members in 1980 and 125 in 1981, all of whom lived in or came from the commune.
20. For example, the population of Saint Martin declined from 1,155 in 1960 to 829 in 2018. Figures from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.
21. We refer to the numerous letters between the CIRM and the LVPN from 1981 to 1985. LVPN 1985-54-7, Dossier St-Martin-remontées mécaniques, and LVPN 1983/74-21 vol. 2, AEV.
22. "Remontées mécaniques de Saint-Martin. Le Conseil fédéral dit non", *Le Nouvelliste*, 31-03-1985, LVPN, Evolène, 1981-3, AEV.
23. For the former, it supports a high level of services and accounts for the town's disinterest (until recently) in any tourism projects. By contrast, it contributes to financing the ski areas, which operate at a loss.
24. This section draws on our interviews, a review of all the *Nouveliste* articles relating to the project from the early 2000s to 2020 and an analysis of the Hérens-Maya-Mont-Noble NRP application file - Étude de faisabilité du projet (ACVH, December 2008).

ABSTRACTS

Since the early 20th century, various transformations (economic, social, environmental, climatic etc.) have changed the way people live in the Alpine regions. While tourism, as a development model, has been one of the vectors of these transformations, it is now adapting to address socio-environmental and climate issues. Based on a case study of the Val d'Hérens in the Swiss Valais and adopting a diachronic perspective, this article examines the factors behind three phases of past tourism transformations, which we propose to view as territorial transitions.

The originality of this work lies in its focus on a range of unfulfilled tourism development projects in a mountain valley drawn up between 1900 and 2020. The study of the relationships between the (material, ideal and institutional) dimensions within the concept of territory and constitutive of the projectual processes makes it possible to reveal the explanatory factors of the tourist transitions, which did not happen but were "missed". It allows us to emphasise the value of diachronic analysis and the need to recognise the multi-scalar nature of transitions. In addition, it presents opportunities for reflection on the lessons learned from what we might consider to be failures and their influence on territorial dynamics.

INDEX

Keywords: transition, trajectory, tourism development, unfinished projects, Swiss Alps

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