



Switzerland.
by train, bus and boat.

Sustainability I:

The Gotthard Base Tunnel – a gigantic environmental project

The Swiss population is calling for the environmental protection of the Alps; Europe is calling for an efficient transport link through the Alps. The Gotthard Base Tunnel provides a sustainable solution. And with a key focus on environmentally friendly construction on this 152 kilometre-long tunnel network, Mother Nature is a major beneficiary.

By adopting the Alpine Initiative proposal in 1994, the Swiss electorate took a stand against the swelling tide of traffic on the country's transit routes. In the search for a solution, the federal government drew up the New Railway Link through the Alps (NRLA), a project aimed at moving heavy goods traffic from road to rail. The Gotthard Base Tunnel is the centrepiece of the puzzle. And Switzerland is preaching by example – the longest train tunnel in the world is one of the largest environmental protection projects ever to be undertaken in Europe.

The construction company was tasked with completing the work in an as environmentally compatible manner as possible. The man responsible for this is Alex Regli, head of Environment and Planning at Alp Transit Gotthard Ltd. He speaks with enthusiasm about the numerous measures implemented to benefit people, flora and fauna, water and air quality. And it fills him with particular satisfaction that in some places, an improvement on the original state could be achieved – for instance at the north portal, where a stream has been rerouted and re-naturalised, or in the area of the southern access, where a chestnut forest has been strengthened. Newly erected dry stone walls offer reptiles and other small animals a new habitat. This enabled the compensation for the inevitable environmental impact of building a tunnel. The re-naturalisation processes are already well advanced. At the north and south portals, it is difficult to detect the traces of almost two decades of drilling, blasting and concreting.

Alex Regli has been involved in the construction of the flat rail link through the Alps since 1992, at the time as an engineer at Swiss Federal Railways. Since 1999, he has been working for Alp Transit Gotthard Ltd., the company in charge of building the Gotthard Base Tunnel, where he heads the Environment and Planning department.

Environmental measures: Streams were rerouted and temporary storage sites for excavated rock irrigated in order to protect the population and environment from dust. Purposely planted bitter vetch and other natural protection systems provided small reptiles and other animals with a transitional habitat. Springs, groundwater, surface water, wastewater and air were constantly monitored and sludge carefully disposed of. Environmental construction specialists supported the site managers throughout all stages of construction.

Environmental organizations: Alp Transit Gotthard Ltd. involved environmental organizations in the project from the onset. The construction company and a representative of the association of environmental organizations have been in regular dialogue throughout. This dialogue is ongoing.