

CONSERVATION THROUGH DEVELOPMENT: PATHS OF INNOVATION FOR PROTECTED AREAS

Abstract

This paper explores the idea that protected areas, with particular reference to the national parks of Italy, could become the focus of an alternative way of perceiving and implementing development.

Previous research has highlighted the fact that protected areas are often coincident with territories left on the fringes of industrial development and that they share common problems (e.g., local economic decline, depopulation, and loss of traditional ways of territorial management). This paper analyses the role played by parks' particular administrative legislation in accentuating these issues. It illustrates how the consequent risk of loss of territorial heritage could result in a failure of the goals of the national parks themselves.

It argues that innovations in the tools of territorial governance might lead to a more effective way of actively protecting landscapes that express coevolutionary relationships.

Keywords: national parks, commoning, coevolution

Introduction

Throughout history, the relationship between man and the natural environment has assumed a variety of anthropological, philosophical, and practical forms. The civilizations that have followed one another over the centuries have established ever-new relationships with the territories from which they emerged, expressing their cultural legacy in the morphological structures of the environment that they gradually built [1].

The aforementioned interactive processes gradually modified environmental balances, through both planned interventions and the daily livelihood of the populations. Therefore, they triggered processes of cyclical adaptation of biotic communities, and led to changes in the living environment. In this way, humans became over time the dominant ecological factor [2] within the environments in which they have inserted themselves, with a fundamental contribution in triggering local environmental peculiarities and in creating neo-ecosystems, namely "high-complexity living systems" [3].

Human activity has therefore generated identity landscapes, a "stratified structure of signs, through which human work acquires a deeply

cultural value" [4]. They consist of the physical shaping of the territorial morphology and of the particular complex ecosystems that, through the landscape, represent "long-term coevolutionary relations between human settlement and environment, nature and culture" [3]. The advent of industrial development interrupted the processes of mutual adaptation that over the centuries have contributed to the construction of landscapes [5]. It was the historical moment in which the territory began to be seen only as *a support on which lean production clusters, rather than as a place with which mutual relations could be created* [6]¹. This overturning of perspective led to the creation of new *territorial peripheries*, areas that remained excluded from a development model based on the concentration of productive and social functions in a few main polarities, at the expense of large territories that were increasingly marginalised. In addition to the well-known depopulation and abandonment trends that were triggered in these latter territories, peripheralisation also helped to preserve them from certain aggressive development dynamics that, instead, became typical in the new polarities of the coasts and valleys.

As a result, protected areas have often been established in the peripheral areas, still rich in environmental quality. In the Italian case, which is the focus of this study, it is possible to find (Fig. 1) a high frequency of overlap between parks² and peripheral areas³, especially in the Alps and the Apennines. As previous works have stated [7]–[8]–[9], this phenomenon can be considered as excluding the peripheral territories from the dynamics of development, in the manner of a large-scale compensation to nature for the environmental impact of the industrial and service centres, with an evident inequality of rights [10] between environmental "creditors" and "debtors." Such an approach to environmental protection, however, results in a sort of *crystallisation* of processes that, by their nature, are instead dynamic. In the worst case, where the protection takes particularly rigid forms, this leads to the intensification of the marginal conditions of these territories, causing the almost total interruption of the aforementioned coevolutionary relationships and, consequently, the loss of the cultural landscapes that have been created over centuries [2]. For this reason, and in light of the frequent overlapping between natural parks and

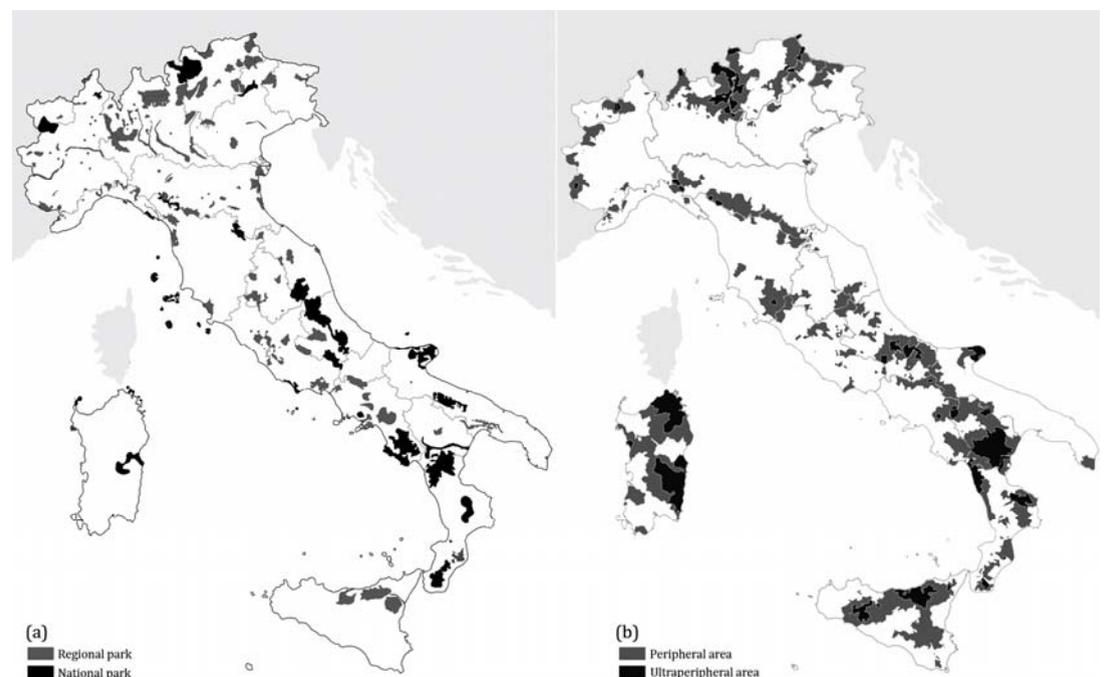


Fig. 1. Comparison between "parks" (a) and "peripheral areas" (b) as defined in notes 2 and 3 (source: graphic processing by the author, based on data from Federparchi (a) and the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (b)).

marginal territories, innovating tools for the governance of protected areas is of absolute relevance if the goals set by national environmental⁴ and landscape⁵ laws, as well as by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the European Landscape Convention, are to be achieved.

Methodology

The present study proposes a hypothesis of innovation in the governance of protected areas, based on case studies that have been evaluated as being of relevance to the incremental construction of an abductive “patterns abstraction” [11] that may be useful for a *fertile synthesis* of the results from the case studies themselves. This approach, in fact, is particularly suitable in addressing a theme rich in complexity and specificity (in territorial, administrative, and social terms), maintaining a high level of flexibility and adaptability to different contexts of the hypothesis that stems from it.

The case of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park (PNGSL) has been chosen for its representativeness as a protected area that embraces large portions of territory that can be considered peripheral, and characterised by the well-known socio-economic difficulties common to such places, however aggravated they may be by specific environmental vulnerabilities⁶. The PNGSL has been studied with particular reference to the planning process and the socio-political interrelationships that have developed around it.

The present research reconstructed the previous part⁷ of the approval process of the plan for the park (henceforth, the plan), then directly followed the phases carried out up until its approval⁸. A qualitative analysis was carried out of official documentation⁹ and interlocutions with stakeholders¹⁰. The case of the Consorzio degli Uomini di Massenzatica (henceforth, CUM) has been studied as an example of a representative body of a collective property¹¹ that successfully innovated its governance to achieve improvements in the local society, environment, and landscape¹². It has affinities with PNGSL in terms of territorial traits (marginality, socio-economic and environmental fragility, and widespread ecological qualities) and of diffusion of collective domains in the park area (and, in general, in the Apennine and Alpine areas). The present study made use of existing bibliographic sources to outline the historical evolution of the management of the collective property, then deepening the knowledge about relevant governance innovations of recent years. The cases described herein were selected because they can make a significant contribution to the debate – which is still very open and current – concerning innovation paths for interpreting the protection of the environment and the landscape, especially in fragile socio-economic contexts.

Results and discussion

The study of the PNGSL highlighted the negative positions expressed by the populations towards it. These were often related to the rigidity – real

or perceived – of planning and governance tools.¹³ The park authority is seen as a foreign element in the territory, imposed by a top-down approach, and mainly – if not exclusively – devoted to limiting the possibilities of use and transformation of resources and places. This idea has led to widespread resistance from the population and local authorities, which makes it generally difficult to establish protected areas and further to approve planning and management tools [12].

Eventually, there is an open-ended validity to safeguarding measures, which makes difficult to continue traditional activities; in this way, it aggravates the socio-economic fragilities of these territories and leads to a progressive dismantling of the coevolutionary relationships that generate cultural landscapes.

On the other hand, the CUM case has highlighted how recent innovation in the collective property governance made it possible to transform a centuries-old condition of marginality and strenuous survival into a new and effective way to position itself within increasingly competitive markets. The CUM operated a gradual opening of proprietary devices, while maintaining the focus on the represented community. Moreover, looking at the territory overall, the socio-economic needs and care of the territory were integrated, and a pact tool (the “pact of landscape,” see note 12) was arranged for bottom-up territorial governance. The experience of the CUM demonstrates that innovation in collective dominions can play a substantial role in reducing the exposure of territories to the risks deriving from their marginalisation in the face of global economic flows.

Previous studies have reported on the high effectiveness of collective resources management in the history of Italian *high lands* [13] and have advanced the thesis that a retro-innovation of collective domains can play a central role in the process of returning to the territory [14].

The case of the CUM has shown how the creative innovation of its management produces beneficial results¹⁴ in terms of inter-generational, social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The patterns that can be abstracted from the two case studies allows us to suppose that innovation in protected areas’ management tools could foster a convergence between environmental and landscape policies through the recovery of territoriality [15]. This would be beneficial both for the protection of territorial heritage and for the continuation of its production process.

If we consider the planning act as a particular case of the broad complex of interrelations between man and the environment [16], we can clearly affirm that changing the approach to planning in a more territorialist way is itself a new form of co-evolutionary relationship.

Conclusions

Having presented the results and discussed the case studies it is therefore possible to draw the following conclusions:

- 1) The revitalisation of the collective management of parks’ natural resources is

fundamental in making *everyone’s* what is now perceived as *nobody’s*;

- 2) The review of the charters of the bodies that represent collective domains is essential to allow new inhabitants to access – in diversified and context-specific forms – common resources;
- 3) The aforementioned access of new *collective owners* has the potential to revitalise the communities that hold collective domains, which over the decades became divested of their social heritage;
- 4) A new approach to protected areas planning, open to the dynamic processes of territorial co-design by means of a renewed social ecology, has the potential to trigger virtuous sub-processes of territorial heritage production;
- 5) Such a new *co-planning and co-designing ecosystem* can contribute actively to halting the process of abandonment of biocultural landscapes, laying the foundations for a recovered co-evolutionary perspective for today’s marginal areas;
- 6) In a long-term scenario, a reduction of the current centre-periphery regional imbalances in favour of a greater capacity of the territory to respond chorally to global challenges is conceivable.

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NOTES

1. With the partial exception of the industrial districts in peripheral areas. These represented the main local development path, in the form of small-medium enterprises. These realities have often been characterised by the continuation, albeit in an industrialised form, of an intense relationship with the territory [17].
2. Both national and regional, as defined under the national law n. 394/1991.
3. Represented, in this case, according to their peripherality by the National Strategy for Inner Areas.
4. The national law n. 394/1991 (art. 1, clause 3, lett. b) establishes that one of the purposes of the parks is the realisation of "(...) an integration between man and the natural environment, also by safeguarding anthropological, archaeological, historical, and architectural values, and agro-forestry-pastoral and traditional activities" (own translation from the original).
5. The legislative decree n. 42/2004 (art. 1, clause 2) states that "the protection and promotion of cultural heritage contribute to preserve the memory of the national community and its territory (...)." Art. 2, clause 3 states that the protected landscape assets are an expression "(...) of the historical, cultural, natural, morphological and aesthetic values of the territory (...)" (own translation from the original).
6. In recent years, the territory of PNGSL has been affected by the earthquakes of L'Aquila (2009) and Central Italy (2016), both resulting in many casualties and huge damage to the settled communities.
7. The regional adoptions of the plan took place between 1999 and 2014 (Abruzzo, 2004, Lazio, 2005, and Marche, 2006) and public observations took place between 2007 and 2008.
8. The Marche region was the last of the three regions to approve the plan, in December 2019. The previous approvals occurred in August 2017 (Abruzzo) and August 2019 (Lazio).
9. Primarily, observations for the plan, and contributions to and observations for the Environmental Report for the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).
10. Correspondence memos with involved authorities and institutions and meetings with institutional and non-institutional stakeholders.
11. Collective properties are a particular form of local commons [18], regulated in Italy by national law n. 168/2017. They have a particular kind of ownership, neither public nor private; rather, they belong to a specific community as a whole. They are widespread across most of Italy and Europe, in different forms and under different names. The CUM collective property nowadays consists of 350 hectares of agricultural land, and originates from a first concession of grazing lands during the 11th century.
12. Starting from a new charter in 1967, the major innovations of CUM's governance and policies during the years are: i. the accessibility of the common goods to new residents of the community as well as old; ii. the possibility of leasing, at market prices, part of the common land to external operators; iii. the protection, in the allocation of land, of the social and economic needs of the community; iv. the support for agronomic innovation and research; v. the improvement of the environmental and landscape qualities of the territory; vi. the arrangement of a "pact of landscape," which enables owners of land outside the collective property to adopt the same social, economic, and environmental values of the CUM, in exchange for the possibility of using the "Terre Pomposiane" quality trademark. The innovative practices of the CUM are described in more detail in [19].
13. For a more comprehensive discussion of the topic, see [20].
14. The landscape-environmental actions implemented by the CUM won the 2019 National Landscape Award of Italy, which is promoted by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and for Tourism. Later, it also received a special mention at the European Landscape Council Award 2018-19, thus entering by right into "The Landscape Award Alliance of the Council of Europe."