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Protecting landscape as a network of relations: Challenges and perspectives in the case of Imerhev (Meydancik) Valley, Turkey

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Abstract

Identifying and protecting a network of relations is challenging since it deals with natural and social processes, but it is essential for a comprehensive understanding of landscapes. Rural areas are the best representatives of networks of relations in landscapes due to direct interactions with nature through economic activities and traditional socio-cultural practices. However, today, rural landscapes encounter forces leading to major changes. In order to overcome these forces, a landscape approach is required to provide integrated, unitary and comprehensive approaches in identification, protection, management and planning of landscapes. Imerhev Valley is selected as a case study. It has multiple values characterized by traditional practices, but is encountering forces of change both in its natural and cultural landscape. In this regard, this paper first describes the landscape as a network of relations and applies the approach to the selected case study. As the second step, the paper focuses on the dynamics and drivers of change. Finally, the paper identifies key issues of challenges that have to be addressed in protecting landscape values.

Keywords

Landscape as network of relations, historic rural landscapes, landscape change, landscape approach.

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Protecting landscape as a network of relations

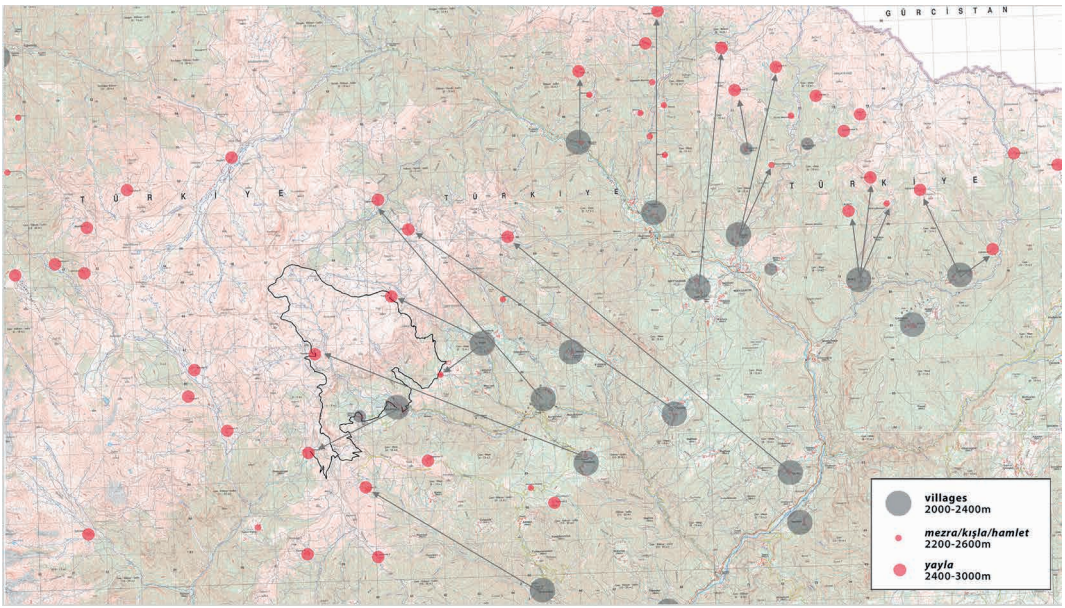
Landscape comprises networks of interactions and relations among people and nature at multiple scales within a *longue durée* process. In this process, a landscape system is constituted as a set of natural, historical-cultural, social, economic, perceptive, political, ideological, symbolic, environmental and ecological components (Claval, 2008; Ingold, 2000; Palang and Fry, 2003; Cassatella and Peano, 2011). While each component defines specific features, the interrelations among them give the landscape its characteristic features [1].

Relations among nature and culture define the living environment and lifestyle; tangible and intangible relations determine the identity, and natural and cultural processes leave records in the landscape (Philips, 2005). These multiple relations make landscape a complex phenomenon so that unitary and comprehensive approaches become important. For this reason, it's necessary to extend notions about landscape and provide integrated and multidisciplinary approaches to better identify landscape values and future solutions for landscape conservation, management and planning.

Identifying and conserving a system of relations is challenging, yet essential, since it deals with natural and social processes. Natural processes are easier to monitor and assess; however, social processes act toward subjective value judgements that make them difficult to identify. Still, social processes are important indicators since they are constituted through interrelations among natural processes and human activities and cover perceptional, aesthetical, artistic and existential meanings (Lowenthal 1975 ; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988).

Landscapes undergo long-term change and adaptation since they are a living and dynamic social metabolism (de Molina and Toledo, 2014). Here, local communities provide adaptation with past experiences and knowledge since they are the active agents of landscape (Oliver, 1997). Therefore, it's important to understand the interrelations and local dynamics in the landscape and provide participation of local communities and diverse stakeholders.

Rural areas are the best representatives of networks of relations in landscape since they are places where nearness to nature and the surrounding environment is common (Singh, 2011). Rural communities establish direct relations with nature through economic activities and traditional socio-cultural practices. These define the local dynamics, local characteristics and lifecycle in the landscape. Therefore, natural processes, human activities and economic drivers are the main determinants of the rural life.



Rural areas are considered as sources of food and knowledge. Traditional knowledge constitutes the basis of ongoing life and brings ecological/environmental wisdom. It is gained through the transfer of experiences of past societies dealing with natural conditions, shaping the land to create living environment and to deal with production activities; such as agriculture, animal breeding.

Today, both the natural and socio-cultural components of rural landscapes are at risk, and thus the interrelations among them. Imerhev Valley is chosen as a case study as it is a strong representative of an active network of relations in landscape. Its values are characterized by close relations among nature-culture and traditional activities that are under dramatic processes of change today. The main driving forces are improper legislation and policy framework for conservation and management, profit-oriented decisions on natural sources and traditional cultural values, and upper scale development and spatial policies. These forces threaten landscape components and their interrelations, and thus the local character and values. Even though these forces are related to separate components of landscape, in the long-term, they affect relations in the landscape and cause irreversible changes in the physical environment and in the ongoing rural life. Therefore, it's essential to consider networks of relations in landscape in decision-making processes and provide holistic and integrated approaches to achieve comprehensive results.

The paper presents the network of relations in the landscape and forces leading to change and perspectives for its holistic and comprehensive conservation, management and planning in Imerhev Valley. The main sources of the study were gathered during the field survey held in Summer 2018. In addition to the field work, in-depth interviews and guided walks were done with the local community, local representatives and local administrators in order to understand local dynamics and the network of relations at multiple scales.

The guided walks were conducted through three different settlement types; *köy* (village), *mezra* and *yayla* in Imerhev Valley (the path followed is indicated with a black line in (Figure 1). As walking evoked the memories and place attachment for each guide, in-depth interviews and semi-struc-

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Fig. 1 – Network of settlements (author's interpretation, original scale: 1/25.000).

tured talks expressed further information about historical-cultural relations with nature, uses of landscape, its place in the minds of people, and areas of importance. Furthermore, the reactions of locals and local representatives to the changing conditions in their living environment and their ideas about what can be done for the landscape conservation were gathered.

The network of relations in imerhev valley historic rural landscape

Imerhev Valley is located on the north-east of Turkey, at the border with Georgia. It's a remote mountainous area which represents a network of relations with landscape and has strong connections between nature and culture that shape its socio-cultural and economic life. According to the UNESCO WHC Cultural Landscape Categorizations (UNESCO 1992), Imerhev Valley is an organically evolved and continuing rural landscape where traditional activities are still practiced. Among rural areas in the whole country, the region presents prominent characteristics due to its unique natural features and multi-ethnic inheritance. The whole landscape is important for the ongoing rural life in Imerhev Valley. There are inter-scale and multiple relations with landscape for various purposes that define its specificity. From a single unit of a house to the wider geography, the whole landscape is used for daily and seasonal activities as part of active rural life. In this section, multiple and multi-scale relations of Imerhev Valley with its landscape will be presented.

Historical-Cultural Relations

The region has been under the domination of diverse semi-nomadic societies and civilizations over time such as Arabs, Seljukids, Armenia, Russia, Georgia (Queen Tamara period), the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The diverse religious and multi-ethnic origins of these societies left tangible and intangible inheritances. Although tangible traces are not so evident in the landscape, intangible inheritance can be still observed in the daily life, traditional and cultural acts and activities, in the diversity of dialects, languages and toponomy. The villages in Imerhev Valley have undergone a process within their own natural and cultural dynamics with less influence from outside due to its being a remote mountainous area. Thus, its multiple heritage was sustained and remained intact.

The Network of Settlements

In the Black Sea Region, rural settlements are different from Anatolian villages in terms of their settlement morphology, location within the geography and land use characteristics. In the region, in gener-

Fig. 2 – Köy (above) and yayla settlements (below) (author, 2018).

al, the settlements are dispersed, dwellings are far apart and independent from each other. The houses are located mostly on the slopes, while flat lands are used for agriculture (Sümerkan, 1990).

In Imerhev Valley, there are 18 villages with different settlement characteristics. Depending on the geographical features, the settlements are either scattered or concentrated and accessibility among them is hard in general. There are three different types of settlements as *köy* (village), *mezra/kışla/hamlet* and *yayla* (Figure 1, Figure 2) that the locals use in different periods of the year. The *köys*, located at between 2000-2400m, are the main settlements used during the whole year. The locals move to *yaylas* during summer period for transhumance activities and due to hot and humid weather conditions in the lower altitudes. *Yaylas* are the highest settlements in the region, located at between 2400-3000 m, where the villagers spend their summer period between May and October. *Yaylas* are not necessarily located close to the villages. They are scattered in the highlands. The places are chosen according to the availability of plain lands, orientation towards sun, closeness to the water source and meadows (Figure 2). *Mezras/kışlas/hamlets*, located at between 2200-26000 m, are the transitionary settlements between villages and *yaylas* that villagers use temporarily, almost for a month, before and after the *yayla* period. The areas between these settlements are used for agricultural activities, grazing, transhumance and beekeeping.

Architectural Relations

The local architecture is the physical expression formed by the dialogue between natural character of regions and cultural interpretations (Kavas, 2011) that can be followed in architecture, settlement characteristics and land use. Relations with settlement and environment represent how a society lives, while houses are the best representative of social order representing how a family lives (Özgüner, 1970).

In Imerhev Valley, the architectural relations are shaped around socio-cultural structure and economic activities. The buildings are constructed as timber frame structures and the plan organization of the houses is arranged according to functional purposes. There are rooms for production and

Fig. 3 – Multi-scale socio-economic relations in Imerhev Valley (author, 2018).

storage in the houses, while the long balconies are used to dry food. Each house has a guest room for hospitability of the villagers and the long distances between villages that prevent travelling within a day. In addition to the houses, there are auxiliary structures such as *mereks*, mills and bridges. *Mereks* are used to store grass, straw, clove and maize to be given to the animals during winter period. Mills are used to grind corn, wheat and barley to produce flour. Most of the mills in the villagers were demolished or not used but still, in every villages there are at least 1-2 mills in active use.

Socio-Economic Relations with Landscape

Daily life in Imerhev Valley is shaped around economic activities. The traditional economic activities are forestry, animal husbandry, transhumance, agriculture and beekeeping (Figure 3). Considering that they are still practiced actively today, there is self-sufficient life ongoing in Imerhev Valley.

Animal husbandry is the main economic activity in Imerhev Valley. The animals are very important for the locals since dairy products are their main food source. The animals are pastured in the high meadows during summer period. While cows return to *yayla* houses in the evening, oxen remain overnight in some plain areas called öküz *yatağı* (ox-beds). There are shepherds dealing and staying with them during the whole summer. For this reason, shepherd shelters are seen in different parts of the landscape. Agriculture activities include both cultivation of vegetables and fruits for locals, and also plant cultivation, mainly cloves, as fodder for animals. The agriculture fields are either in the gardens near houses or spread around the villages. Almost every family in the village deals with beekeeping. Since the region is very rich in flora and pine trees, high quality honey is produced in Imerhev Valley. Beehives remain in the village during spring time; however, they are carried to the highlands close to endemic plants when summer starts.

In addition to these activities, craftsmanship also has an important place. The locals provide their needs by handmade works. They engage in woodcraft both for construction, furniture and ornaments, and also for daily objects such as harrows, plows, baskets and shovels. They also weave their clothes, rugs and carpets.

Socio-Cultural Relations with Landscape

The multi-ethnic background of the locals gives richness to the diversity of culture and traditional practices. The area has been inhabited over generations and not been affected by outer conditions, so socio-cultural inheritance and traditional knowledge have been transmitted almost unchanged

until the present day. This determines daily life routines, festivities, celebrations, wedding ceremonies, craftsmanship, dress & finery, local music and dance and constitutes the basis of life skills for dealing with socio-economic activities as well as harsh weather and hard life conditions.

In Imerhev Valley, there's strong tradition of *yayla* festivals (Figure 4). There are many festivals in specific periods of the year that are organized before and after the *yayla* period, and sometimes in the middle of it, mostly in mid-August. Some of the festivals are Marioba/Mariyoba, Satave Gevrek/Svantoba and Pancar Festival. During festivals, all the people living in the villages take a break from work and participate in the celebrations. Relatives and friends living abroad come to their villages for the festivals. The traditional music is played and they dance till morning. There are various places in the landscape where these festivals are organized. Collective work, called as *imece*, is another particular feature of the region. The men come together to deal with hard jobs such as carrying cowpat to the fields, ploughing the fields, carrying wood from the forest, constructing a house. Women come together mostly to prepare food for winter. Besides, wool spinning with wool card, selection of corn, harvesting barley and wheat are the jobs mostly done by women collectively.

Visual, Perceptive and Symbolic Relations with Landscape

The mountainous landscape provides visual characteristics and scenic features in terms of landforms, land cover, colours and vision of depth. In Imerhev Valley, there are visual, perceptive, symbolic and spiritual relations between local communities and

opposite page
Fig. 4 – Socio-cultural relations in the landscape: yayla festivals (author, 2018).

Fig. 5 – Visual relations and symbolic places in Imerhev Valley; yayla settlements in the plains of higlands (left), crossroads of yaylas called as Sazgirel Crest by locals (right) (author, 2018).

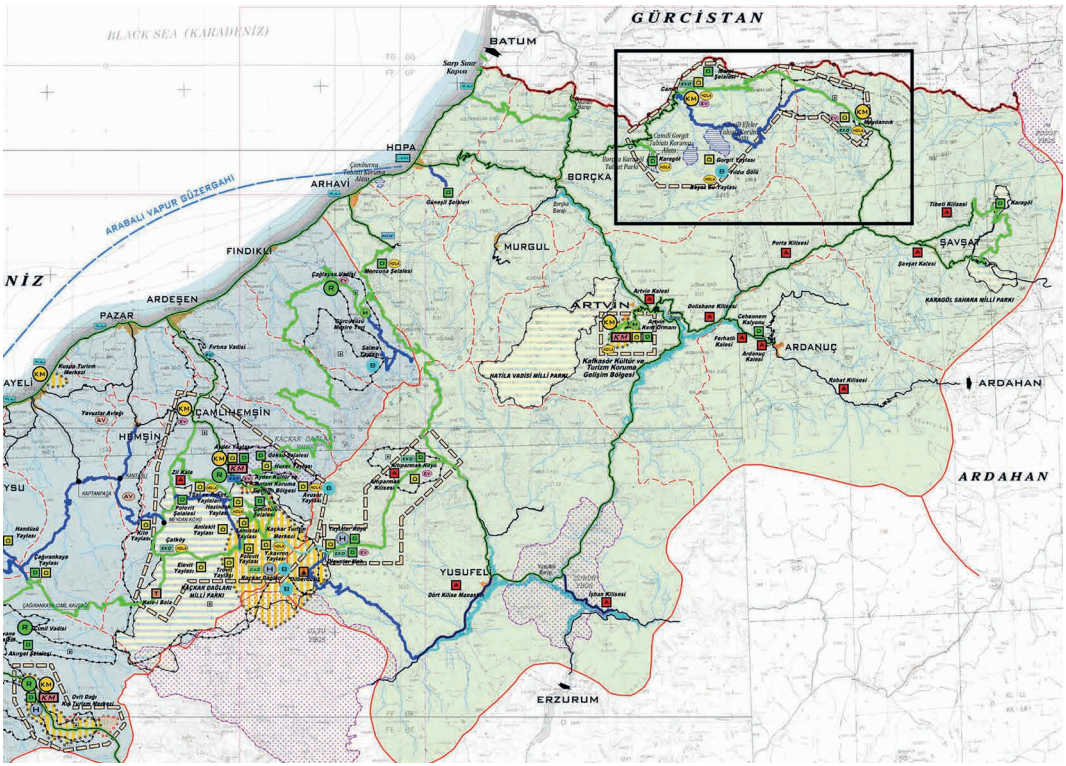
their daily life places. The visual connections between *köys*, *mezra/kışla/hamlet* and *yayla* settlements in high altitudes (Figure 5) are prominent. The locals have constructed attachments to their landscape through individual and collective memory places, symbolic areas, places of legend, landmarks, panorama points and places of hunting, grazing and suchlike as narrated by them during in-depth interviews and guided walks. These features enrich the values of Imerhev Valley in the eyes of the locals.

Seasonal Relations in the Landscape

Seasons define lifestyles and so do socio-cultural and economic activities, everyday practices and life-cycle, productivity, accessibility, population density, rituals and celebrations, tourism activities, images of landscape and perceptions (Palang, Soovali and Printsmann, 2007). In Imerhev Valley, the multi-scale relations and life patterns change over seasons. Summer is the production period for the whole year, thus, everyone works hard dealing with transhumance and agricultural activities. For this reason, there is continuous movement between different settlements and the areas within them. The population increases during the summer period due to hard work and *yayla* festivals. In winter, the locals only deal with animals. In the evenings, they come together in some houses to chat, sing and play accordion. It snows so excessively that routes change and the snow provides easier movement as sleighs are used with oxen. This means, the locals can do some hard jobs in winter time such as carrying wood from the forests. It has further benefits; the wood dries slowly by spring and becomes more durable for construction work that is done in spring and summer periods.

Recognition and misrecognition of landscape values in imerhev valley

The active networks of relations among natural, historical-cultural, socio-economic and perceptive components represent the actual values, characteristics and identity of Imerhev Valley. These multiple values and characteristics have been recognized by local, national and international bodies lately which means that many decisions for its protection, management, development and promotion have started to be given. However, these decisions contradict the local dynamics that have been practiced by the locals over years and lead to the destruction of networks of relations in its landscape, and thus, the loss of natural and cultural values.



Decisions and Designations by Local, National and International Authorities

Imerhev Valley has various conservation and protection policies given by national and international bodies[2]. These policies, except *cittaslow*, were made considering the prominent natural values of the region such as its rich flora and fauna, wide natural forest ecosystems and wildlife. However, *cittaslow* considers the traditional cultural and local values that are still present in the region. Although it has initiated many projects for the conservation of the villages in Imerhev Valley, this designation by itself will not be enough to conserve overall cultural values. Additionally, recent planning decisions have affected villagers in different ways, both directly and indirectly. There are two current plans for the region as the Regional Environmental Plan (ÇDP) (1/100000) and the Eastern Black Sea Tourism Master Plan 2014-2019 (Figure 6). While the Environmental Plan did not have a big effect, the Tourism Master Plan caused major changes on the landscape on which the livelihood, production activities and socio-cultural life of villagers depend.

The Tourism Master Plan proposes tourism based development by opening *yaylas* to tourism. The 'Green Road Project' is planned for this purpose. The Green Road connects *yayla* settlements over the mountains and proposes construction of recreational areas and tourism centres. In the map (Figure 6), the green line presents primary, magenta secondary and blue tertiary Green Road Route. It is called Green Road but it causes the extraction of earth and construction of asphalt pavement in the highlands following the traditional paths leading to *yaylas*. Consequently, nature is destroyed, thus the whole ecosystem, and climate changes, traditional paths are lost, *yayla* settlements that used to have functional purpose of transhumance activities are gentrified.

opposite page
Fig. 6 – Tourism Master Plan 2014-2019, 2018 (the study area is indicated in black frame).

The Green Road project and other decisions create economic-oriented pressures on the rural areas in the Black Sea Region. The region has the potentials of *yayla* tourism, eco-tourism, nature tourism and winter sports tourism. However, the tourism-based strategies cause the loss of the traditional environment mainly due to gentrification and excessive construction of tourism facilities.

Lately, many decisions have been taken to get benefit from natural sources of Imerhev Valley. Since they are profit-oriented and top-down disregarding the local life and scientific studies, they cause destruction of the nature and deprivation of natural sources in the long-term. In addition to the Green Road Project, Hydroelectric Power Plants (HES), copper & gold mining and dam projects have already been realized. Their wider effects on the landscape are clearly seen (Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9). These projects continue to threaten the whole region since they cause irreversible changes in the morphological structure of the landscape, environmental pollution, risks of erosion, change in ecosystem, ecological and environmental balances and climate change.

Even though there are various designations related to the conservation and protection of landscape values in Imerhev Valley, this cannot be achieved totally due to improper legislative framework. There are two legislative decisions that are influential in Imerhev Valley. They are the Metropolitan Municipality Law decreed in 2012 and the Zoning Amnesty Law which has been in force since 2018. The Metropolitan Municipality Law changes the authority areas of the metropolitan municipalities. With this law, the village status is abolished in many places and villages are redefined as neighbourhoods of metropolitan municipalities that allow different interventions on them. In the case of Imerhev Valley, construction activities become possible on meadows, agricultural areas and areas having important role in the ongoing rural life. Zoning Amnesty legitimizes the illegal construction built until 2018 even though they are not in harmony with the current setting. After this amnesty, the illegal construction especially in the *yaylas* started to be certified.

Local Reactions to the Decisions

The Green Road, HES, mining and dam projects have caused major changes in the *köys*, *yaylas*, rivers, meadows, fields and forests which the livelihood activities and socio-cultural life of the locals depend on. Thus, the locals object to the decisions and implementations since they are affected directly and drastically.

The villagers express that the Green Road project leads excessive cut of trees in the forests that cause

avalanche in their villages. This creates destruction of built-up areas and closure of roads for many days. The HES projects use the waters in their rivers to produce electricity. While the villagers cannot get benefit from this electricity, they cannot even find water for their fields and obliged to pay for the water. They declare that the fishes in the rivers are dying. The mining cause serious environmental impacts due to destruction of trees, extraction of earth and radiation scattering. The dam projects change the debits of the rivers and increase the humidity in the environment. As a result, the ecosystem and climate change in the long-term that affect the agricultural activities, quality of dairy products and honey. The villagers complain that their agricultural products get mouldy in the field and they harvest less products than before. They also state that the herbs in the mountains are affected by the environmental pollution so thus their animal husbandry and beekeeping activities.

Fig. 10 – The locals are protesting against mine extraction in Cerattepe (http://yesilartvindernegi.org/).

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Fig. 7 – Green Road Project (Yeşil Artvin Derneği, http://yesilartvindernegi.org/).

Fig. 8 – Construction of Hydroelectric Power Plants (author, 2018).

Fig. 9 – Copper and Gold Mining (Yeşil Artvin Derneği, http://yesilartvindernegi.org/).

For these reasons, the locals protest against these decisions (Figure 10). They don't let interventions on their nature. Their resilience is supported by various NGOs, lawyers, professional chambers, political parties, member of parliament, syndicates, environmental organizations, universities and also by the scientists, researchers and experts of the field[3]. They support local action and make a professional contribution by releasing expert reports and following judicial processes. They disseminate the local resilience by documentaries, bulletins and press release. Even though they create a big awareness in the whole country and they prevent some of the interventions in the region, the source of the problems are still in force.

Concluding remarks: towards a landscape approach

Identifying and protecting networks of relations is essential to identify overall values and to deal with challenges at all scales. This can be achieved through a landscape approach considering networks of relations and natural and social processes in landscape. In Imerhev Valley, there are multiple and multi-scale networks of relations among natural, historical-cultural, socio-economic and perceptive components that are still active today. These networks of relations constitute the basis of ongoing life and represent its actual values, characteristics and identity. Here, the locals are of utmost importance since they are the active users and guardians of their landscape. However, the locals suffer from upper scale development and spatial policies, profit-oriented and top-down decisions on the natural and cultur-

al values of their landscape. These decisions create major changes in the landscape thus they affect their ongoing life directly and drastically. The case of Imerhev Valley demonstrates the importance of networks of relations in landscape for the livelihood of the locals and environmental reasons. Thus, the case shows the necessity of widened notions about landscape and integrated knowledge focusing on networks of relations. As it is seen in Imerhev Valley, the local resilience can prevent damaging interventions in the short term, but information exchanges and coalescence among locals, experts, policy makers and diverse stakeholders should be provided to eliminate devastating and improper results and to achieve more efficient and sustainable results in the long term. In order to achieve this, a landscape approach is required through multidisciplinary and participatory processes to identify and assess overall landscape values and to provide future solutions for its conservation, management and planning.

Endnotes

[1] As indicated in ELC definition of landscape: ¨...an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors¨ (CoE, 2000).

[2] Natural Conservation Area, National Park, Important Natural Area (ÖDA) and Camili Görgit & Efeler Protected Wildlife Reserve Area decisions are given by the national authorities. In addition to these, the region is designated as 'Caucasus and North Anatolian Temperate Forests' by WWF and IUCN in 1994. The area is also included in Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program as 'Camili/Macahel Biosphere Reserve' by UNESCO in 2005. Moreover, Imerhev Valley was included to the list of *cittaslow* in 2011.

[3] Yeşil Artvin Derneği (Green Artvin Association, http://yesilartvindernegi.org/) and Mekanda Adalet Derneği (MAD) (Justice in Place Association, https://beyond.istanbul/mad/home) are two of the most influential NGOs working against the HES, mining and dam projects. They hold projects to lead local action and raising awareness all over the country. They also release documentaries to explain the seriousness of the situation such as 'As far as my strength permits' by MAD (https://beyond.istanbul/as-far-as-my-strength-permits-ceb1a1da170a). In addition to the NGOS, the Commission on Environment and Urban Law of the Union of Turkish Bar Association brings a law suit against these decisions and releases bulletins.

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