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The 'Corona Verde' Strategic Plan: an integrated vision for protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage

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The 'Corona Verde' [Green Crown] Strategic Plan is a net of ecological corridors, greenways, rural areas and UNESCO sites, including all the open spaces in the metropolitan area of Turin (Italy). Its main goal is to link together policies for nature, landscape and cultural heritage, creating a new and alternative vision of the territory, based on the quality of the environment and of life. Since 2000, when the project started, more than €23 million have been invested by the European Union and the Piedmont Region, and, now, the first results can be analysed. Corona Verde introduces innovative approaches to environmental and urban strategies and in governance processes.

Keywords: environmental and landscape strategies; open spaces and greenways; cultural heritage; multifunctionality; strategic planning

Introduction

This article presents the case of the Corona Verde, a Strategic Plan for the environmental enhancement of the metropolitan area of Turin in northern Italy. The idea of Corona Verde arises from a broader context of innovations in conservation issues, in relation to nature, historical heritage and landscape conservation. Recent trends in conservation policies suggest that they should not be confined to the boundaries of protected areas, but should be considered as a part of the system of rules and strategies regarding the territory as a whole. This vision currently orients the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN) strategies for nature conservation, as well as the landscape policies of the Council of Europe. In particular, the European Landscape Convention (CoE 2000) addresses all the territory of the member countries, even the areas that are not considered to be of scenic beauty or to represent other 'landscape values'.

This challenge is very relevant in metropolitan areas, where environmental problems affect a mosaic of very diverse areas (i.e. rural and urban, abandoned areas or areas under pressure). Thus, the extension of environmental and landscape policies to the entire territory requires an innovative approach, integrating the protection of natural resources into ordinary territorial planning.

From concept to implementation

The territory of Turin has a very rich natural and cultural heritage. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) placed the Residences of the Royal House of Savoy on the World Heritage List. These 12 residences were conceived in the seventeenth century to form a 'Crown of delights' around the former Capital City (see Figures 1 and 2). Their large parks are ecological resources too, and part of the system of protected areas, which include the Po River and its five tributaries. The idea of the 'Corona Verde' project started from these treasures and linked together the best of the area in a green network, a 'Green Crown', under the slogan 'Art and Nature' (see Figure 3). The original idea was promoted by the Regional Park Planning Service, but it has since been further developed: today, the 'Corona Verde' project concerns all open spaces (both protected and not) in an area of 81 municipalities (about 250,000 hectares).

The main objectives of the project are:

- to link together policies for the conservation and enhancement of natural, landscape and cultural heritage;

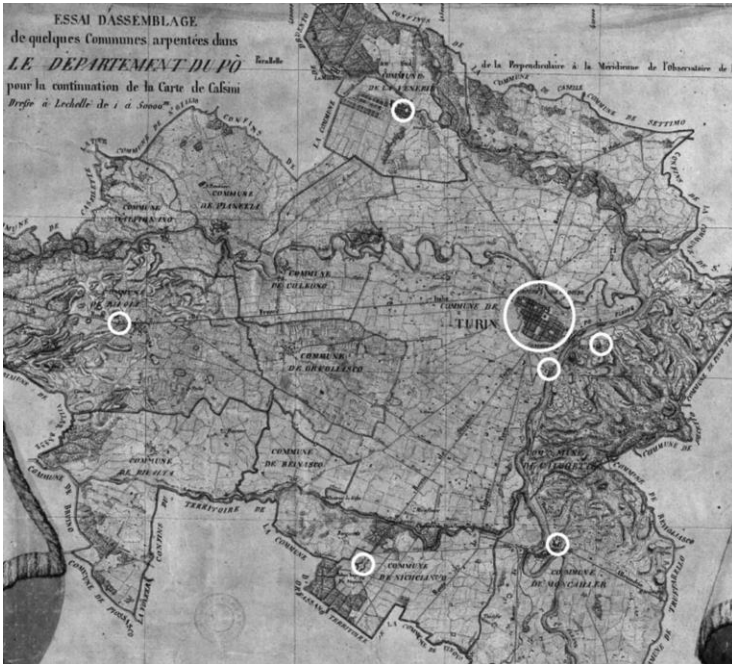


Figure 1. Location of some of the residences of the Royal House of Savoy around Turin, which were conceived as a 'Crown of delights' in the seventeenth century and, nowadays, has been inscribed in the World Heritage List.

Source: Author's elaboration on a map of the beginning of the nineteenth century



Figure 2. The Palazzina di Caccia [hunting lodge] at Stupinigi shows the baroque mark on the territory and the strong relationship between architectural assets, parks and rural landscape.

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- to go beyond a 'passive' protection system (based on restraints) and stimulate projects and strategies for enhancing and restoring the environment;
- to support the multifunctionality of rural areas in a periurban context;
- to create a sustainable mobility infrastructure through a network of cycling paths, which not only links tourist attractions but also serves local people;
- to create a new alliance between city and nature and an alternative vision of the Turin metropolitan area, based on environmental quality and quality of life, and to promote landscape quality in suburban areas.

The first phase of the project, from 2000 to 2006, was financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and regional funds: C12.5 million were assigned to projects presented by the local municipalities and by the park authorities. These projects mainly focused on the open spaces around the Royal Residences, cycling paths and recreational

equipment, ecological restoration of riverbanks, and green infrastructures (see Figures 4 and 5).

As a result, Turin gained 30 new green spaces and cycling paths, although it still lacked a general network. A Master Plan was necessary, so the Piedmont Region commissioned the study 'Corona Verde: Strategic planning and governance' to be carried out by the Polytechnic of Turin (Cassatella and Bagliani 2007; DITER 2007). During the subsequent economic programme (2007–2013), the Region decided to assign the financial resources for the implementation phase (C10 million from ERDF) to groups of municipalities, rather than to individual ones, in order to stimulate large projects and to achieve territorial effects (see Figure 6).

In 2012, the main Royal Residences were connected in a 90 km long cycling loop route (see Figure 7). Moreover, 15 intercommunal projects were selected and are currently being implemented (see Table 1). Some examples are: improvement in the accessibility of parks and signage systems; maintenance of scenic routes; equipment for recreational uses; mitigation of infrastructural barriers and renaturation; landscaping of green spaces in the rural-urban interface and conservation of the rural heritage.

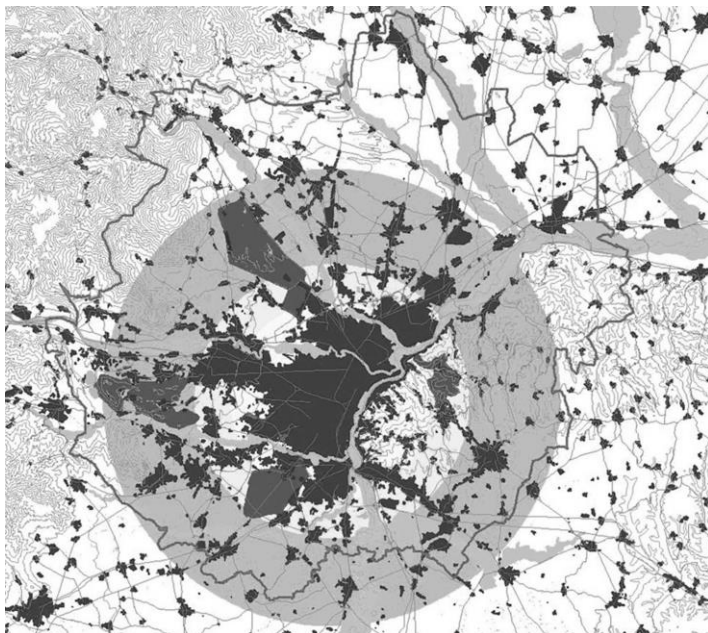


Figure 3. Corona Verde conceptual scheme. The river corridors are the main green infrastructure; the suburban rural areas form a ring which connects the large historical parks.

Source: Polytechnic of Turin.

Vision, strategy, governance and perspectives

The Corona Verde was not conceived as a 'green belt' or a defensive limit to urban development, but rather aims to be a new form of development which brings environmental quality into the city. This is in line with other European experiences, such as Stuttgart (Esswein and Kiwtt 2012) or Frankfurt, but Corona Verde strongly focuses on the innovative integration between cultural and natural resources. For example, in its first phase, it supported the environmental restoration and landscaping of riversides near to the important tourist attraction Reggia di Venaria, with the result of facilitating tourist flows to nearby parks and towns. Now, other historical sites see the opportunity to invest in their landscape to attract a wider public.

The results of the first phase and, above all, the new vision of the Green Crown have had a profound effect on local governments, orienting their projects, and stimulating the municipalities to change their statutory town plans in order to welcome new opportunities,

which obviously include the financial one as well. In 2009, the Regional Landscape Plan 'adopted' the Corona Verde Project. As a consequence, the main elements of the green infrastructure have been safeguarded. Nevertheless, many objectives remain to be put into practice through local action, private initiatives (for example, rural development), statutory town planning and urban development schemes. In 2011, the Corona Verde Agreement was signed by 81 municipalities, the County of Turin, the Regional Authority and 20 other stakeholders.

Probably, the best effect of the Project is the creation of a new vision for Turin: the image of the Green Crown (Cassatella and Gambino 2008). In Italy, strategic planning is seldom used. The City of Turin was the first Italian town to adopt, in 2000, a 'Strategic Plan for the promotion of the city', that became a 'Strategic Plan for Turin's Metropolitan Area' from 2006 (Associazione Torino Internazionale 2006), thanks to a self-organized process of networking at the metropolitan level, which involved public and private stakeholders (territorial entities, private foundations, universities, tourism promoters, associations of companies and other economic actors). These plans are concerned with urban development, and give little attention to the role of the open spaces.



Figure 4. A new cycling path in the countryside, which has been realized thanks to the Corona Verde Project.

Source: Reproduced by permission of Piedmont Region, Direzione Ambiente.



Figure 5. A new pedestrian bridge.

Source: Reproduced by permission of Piedmont Region, Direzione Ambiente.

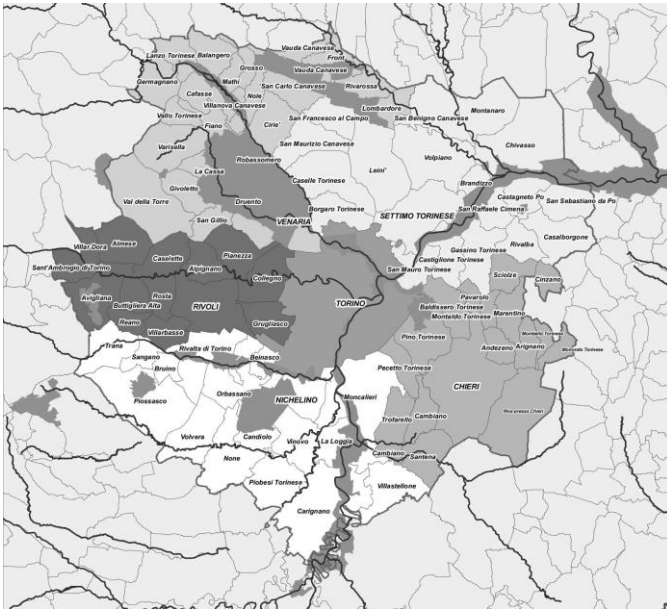


Figure 6. The Project involves 81 municipalities, which have been grouped to organize intercommunal master plans.

Source: Reproduced by permission of Piedmont Region,

The Corona Verde Master Plan introduced a different and innovative vision of urban quality and urban development, giving 'colour' (e.g. giving new value) to the 'white areas' in the cartographies of the city. The margins of the cities became the centres of new projects and suburban rural areas gained new ecological and amenity values in a large-area perspective. Moreover, it widened the type of stakeholders involved in the arena, including park authorities, farmers and so on.

Currently, a new phase of dedicated ERDF resources is uncertain; as a consequence, the Project future development has to rely on the ordinary administration and policies. Some new infrastructure exists, and, above all, an established governance attitude, a common vision for the future and great expectations from the stakeholders and the public are already in place.

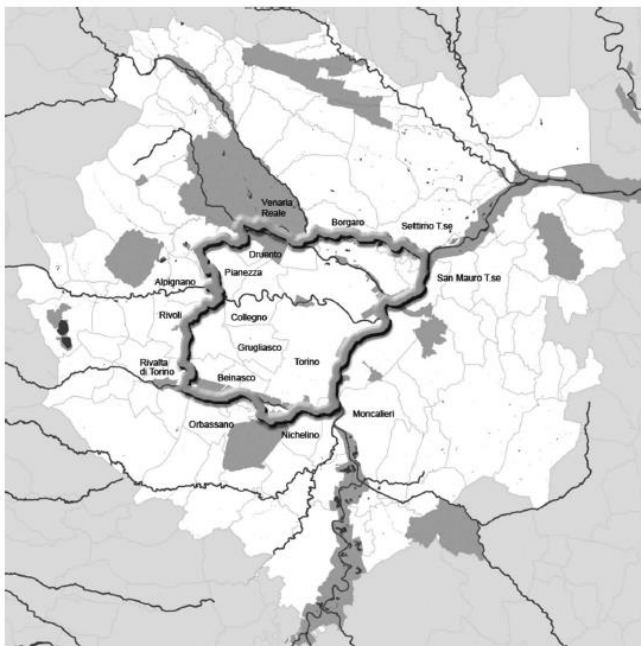


Figure 7. The 'Crown of delights by bike', a 90 km loop itinerary, is one of the main achievements of the Corona Verde Project.

Source: Reproduced by permission of Piedmont Region, Direzione Ambiente.

Table 1. Corona Verde process of funding and implementation (the investments include EU funds and local resources).

Time	Investments	Main outputs	Involved actors
2000 Phase I 2003–2006	€12.5 million	Ideation and studies 30 local projects	Regional authority 24 municipalities
Phase II 2007–2013		Master Plan Dissemination and awareness raising Agreement	Regional authority 81 municipalities, 18 private and public stakeholders
	€13 million	Local master plans 15 intercommunal projects	Steering committee 23 municipalities

Recommendations

From the experience of Corona Verde, some suggestions for environmental planning can be identified:

- a strong vision is needed, that is easy to communicate to the stakeholders as much as to the public; landscape is the best medium to integrate sectoral visions and to develop large-scale scenarios;
- protected areas could constitute a ‘green link’ between urban, rural and natural resources, instead of a ‘green belt’;
- environmental strategies should be integrated into urban development, by multisectoral projects;
- in order to maximize the territorial effects, a regional organization is necessary, with the permanent task of coordination and control;
- financial instruments, in particular EU funds, are useful to stimulate the governance process and the awareness raising.

At the same time, the long-term process encounters difficulties and risks:

- municipalities tend to underestimate the cost of managing green and open spaces and greenways; a cost that they find difficult to cover entirely after the co-funded initial investment. The lack of maintenance of the areas may affect public opinion and cast a shadow over the general aura of the Corona Verde, and, finally, its perspectives, because the endorsement of public opinion is a key element in strategic planning;
- multipurpose projects could be too ambitious and lead to the dispersion of forces: the environmental targets must be well defined at the start of the project, otherwise greenways and multifunctional agriculture may result in a generic and weak solution.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Project has already achieved important goals, demonstrating that the innovative proposition inherent in its premise – a new alliance between nature, landscape and urban strategies – can work, by capturing the attention of stakeholders and favouring the sharing (or better targeting) of economic resources, bridging divide between the public concern with historic sites and the lovers of open spaces and enhancing the quality of life of the metropolitan area. Is it a win–win game? Perhaps the conceptual approach contains an underlying risk that has to be borne in mind: considering every remaining open space in a metropolitan area as a resource for human needs (including environmental and recreational needs) may lead to the superimposition of an overarching ‘urban’ culture and logic onto the entire territory.

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General links for further information

- Piedmont Region, Corona Verde Project official website: <http://www.regione.piemonte.it/ambiente/coronaverde/>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre, World Heritage List, Residences of the Royal House of Savoy: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/823>