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PROMOTING THE SMART, SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF INNER AREAS. WHAT CHANCES FOR EUROPE AND EAST ASIA?

Claudia Cassatella

From remote wilderness to livable place. Evolution of an alpine park in the framework of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism

Protected areas are considered to be on-site and on-going workshops for testing sustainable development strategies. The Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe (EUROPARC) promotes the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST, 2010) with the motto "Good for Parks, Good for People!". The ECST is a label which can be obtained thanks to a participatory process focused on defining, implementing and monitoring an Action Plan. The Val Grande National Park (Piedmont, Italy) is highly engaged in sustainable development strategies. In 2013, joining the ECST gave momentum and a model.
This paper will discuss how the Park took this new pathway of sustainable development, changing a long-lasting paradigm, in particular, adopting the "protected landscape approach" (Brown, Mitchell, Beresford 2005; Philips 2003), and so shifting its goal from being a mere "nature sanctuary" to becoming a place to live.

Italian National Parks usually were established in inner areas, marked by natural processes. However, no portions of the Italian territory may be considered to be "wild", according to international standards (see for instance IUCN, and EU 2013). In fact, the entire territory was inhabited or affected by human activities since remote times, so that part of the richness of habitats and species is due to pasture, agriculture or forestry. In the past Century, the designation of protected areas was often opposed by local people, worried about restrictions to activities as hunting, fishing and such. For this reason, protected areas' boundaries usually exclude main settlements.
More recently, thanks to International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN) initiatives and Congresses, in the parks' community a new paradigm emerged (Philips 2003), which identifies protected areas as places meant not for separating Man and Nature, but for testing forms of coexistence, so also promoting the economic development of local communities. Italian Natural Parks are particularly open to this perspective. It has to be noticed that the most part of our parks can be classified as "protected landscapes", the IUCN V category of protected areas, which is increasing in Italy as well as in Europe. Using the "landscape" concept instead of "nature" has many implications, among which paying attention to cultural and perceptual dimensions, to local identity, material and immaterial heritage and traditional activities (Philips, 2005).

The Val Grande National Park fully adhere to the above mentioned perspective of sustainable development, but adopting the landscape approach means changing its long-lasting image. In Val Grande a Nature Reserve exists since 1964, and, in 1993 the National Park was established under the motto "the widest Wilderness area in Europe" (today, "the widest Wilderness area in Italy"). The area is located in the Alps, between Italy and Switzerland, near to Monte Rosa, one of the highest picks of the European Continent. Its peculiar and spectacular geology deserved the designation as UNESCO Geopark. It can only be reached by trails traced by shepherds, by military army during the wars, and, more recently, by hikers. Being famous for its remoteness, the Park attracts visitors from all over the world interested in extreme adventures, or even in spiritual experiences such as hermitage (one hermit actually lives there). The consequence of this fame is that the Park has to manage the rescue of visitors, and a few mortal accidents occurred.

No surprise that the Park would prefer to attract a different kind of visitors, such as ordinary backpackers and families. To this aim, the Park focused on the resources which may be mobilized, enhanced or re-invented in order to change its image from a wild and remote area to an accessible and livable one. How to do? The landscape concept provided a new narrative (Bagnati T., in Cassatella 2016). The Park Authority carried out and commissioned a series of studies on its cultural heritage and historical features (PNVG, 2018), besides the ordinary research activity on biodiversity and geology. Among the recent ones, a specific study on the park's landscape dimensions was commissioned to Politecnico di Torino – DIST (Cassatella C., editor, 2016).

The strategies aimed at innovating the park perception according to the landscape approach include re-positioning the park, heritage storytelling and participative processes. The first step is positioning the park in the accessibility network. In fact, despite its remoteness, the area is very close the one of the main corridor between Italy and Switzerland, the Ossola Valley, and to the Maggiore Lake, one of the major Italian touristic spots. One of the strategies is to extend the park's territory so to have a direct gate on the Lake, adding the so-called "Terre di mezzo" [In-between territories]. This may lead to more visibility among the lake's tourists. The second step is heritage storytelling. History is always about selecting specific times, themes, and resources, building upon them for today needs. The park is interesting in the story of how its valleys were inhabited and cultivated, so to re-discover the conditions for an actual new process of re-colonization. The Ecomuseum of the "Terre di mezzo" was set up.
Historically, the life of the inhabitants was marked by the seasonal changes: in summertime, the shepherds move the herds up to the pastures on upper mountains, while in wintertime they lived in settlements located at middle-height. In order to cultivate, where some forms of agriculture and forestry where hardly carried on for their own subsistence. Here, to cope with the slope, the mountain was terraced, creating artificial soil and a peculiar landscape. The main material was stone, which gives a special character to both architecture, villages, terraces, and infrastructures.
Nowadays, the shepherds' shelters on the picks, which were more than 300 in the past century, almost disappeared. The most part of the historical settlements and terraced landscape is abandoned and covered by forest, due to natural processes of colonization. Nevertheless, the Park Authority would like to bring back inhabitants, as well as tourists.
The third step then is to involve people in the identification of landscape values so to straighten local community. The ECST Action Plan was draft thanks to the participation of local entrepreneurs as well as ordinary people and associations. A peculiar and interesting role was and is played by the "Parks' Women Association", as they are engaged, since 20 years now, in preserving and transferring knowledge related to local products, receipts, handcrafts, costumes, tales and religious legends, which they show and tell during special events but also into the classrooms.
The research commissioned to the Politecnico di Torino was entitled "From landscapes of subsistence to wilderness. The Val Grande National Park's territory as a workshop for assessing landscape diachronic processes" (2015) and was aimed at identifying the useful resources for the new development perspective and future scenario looking at landscape values and their possible perception. Besides some thematic and multidisciplinary analysis, a series of interviews were carried out (Seardo, in Cassatella 2016), exploring social perception in two directions: values that people relate to places and landscape features, and aspirations for the future. The second is the most difficult task, and a specific set of questions was set up to facilitate the discussion. The results are twofold.
People value as place for community life the churches with their iconic tower (each one symbol of a specific community), market places, but also woods and pastures which were used in common, as well as springs, fountains, and infrastructures. Forest, on the contrary, is a negative element in local perception.
Reducing forest in order to re-gain farmland is a shared hope, along with examples in other alpine areas, which were promoted by associations or cooperatives. Still, the new inhabitants who come into the area for creating new business (rural tourism, cheese production) are felt to be not integrated in the community. In general, there is a feeling of weakening of sense of community.
The recent works for improving trails and their signage system are considered as highly positive both for locals and for tourists, as well as the promotion of local receipts and related products.

Tourists are increasing in the area, while the number of inhabitants, 434, is stable at the moment (Corrado F. & Pettenati G. in Cassatella 2016), despite a few "amenity migrants" who decided to move there.
Finally, the research results gave some answers to the Park Authority, but not all of them in line with its expectation, or profitable for the new storytelling. Living in Val Grande, when analyzed in an historical perspective (Tosco C., in Cassatella 2016), shows a picture of suffering conditions and hard struggles against natural agents. Cultivating Val Grande was made possible by huge works which moved stone and soil, but nowadays, after the colonization processes, cutting trees is not a simple solution. In fact, on one hand, trees and dry-stones walls are definitively intertwined, so that removing trees would eventually result in demolishing the walls and inducing landslides too. On the other hand, the soil changed its intrinsic quality, so that bringing new soil would be needed in order to cultivate again (Larcher F., in Cassatella 2016).
In conclusion, while some experts correctly indicate the path of "coming back to living in the mountains" as a sustainable development perspective, the landscape approach gives some cautions. Landscape is a made of irreversible processes that cannot be inverted. This means both that attention to preserve existing livable conditions must be kept, and that the future can only be created by innovation.

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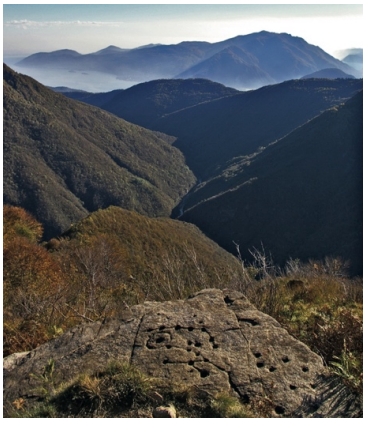
Parco Nazionale della Val Grande (PNVG) [Val Grande National Park], 2018, Official website: http://www.parcovalgrande.it/

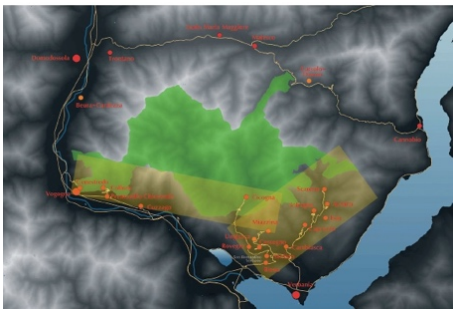
Figures (All the images: Archive and Copyright Val Grande National Park)

Despite the classification as a wilderness area, in Valgrande the presence of humans dates back to prehistoric times. Some environments are the result of natural processes of re-colonization after abandonment by human activities



Val Grande National Park can only be reached by trails.

The “Women of the Park” Association is engaged in preservinbg and transferring traditional knowledge, tales, costumes, receipts and techniques.

The “in-between” territories , according to the Park’s strategies, may be re-inhabited and re-cultivated.

Van Grande National Park is located in Northern Italy, close to Mount Rosa, to the Italy-Switzerland corridor, and to the Maggiore Lake, among the major Italian touristic spots.