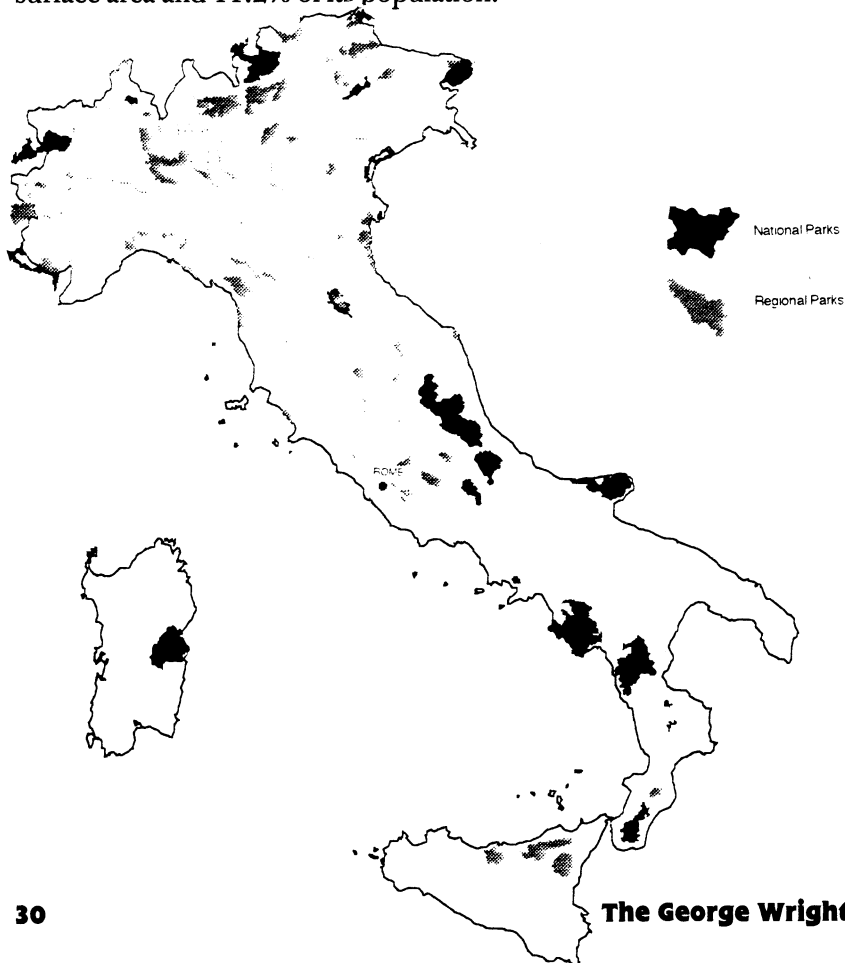


Parks and Protected Areas in Italy:

An Overview

Situation and Tendencies

In recent decades, the Italian park and protected area system has assumed a growing importance in the European framework. First of all, the surface covered by our national and regional parks now comes to 2,886,035 hectares; that is, nearly 10% of the nation's area and 11.7% of the total surface area covered by Europe's natural parks (excluding those in the former Soviet Union). By comparison, Italy as a whole comprises 6.04% of Europe's surface area and 11.2% of its population.



Secondly, the Italian protected areas, mostly scattered along the Alpine and Appennine chains, play a crucial role in bridging Central Europe with the Mediterranean arch, both in ecological and cultural terms. The Appennine chain constitutes in fact a southern branch of the Euro-Siberian region, penetrating into the Mediterranean region: here, five national parks and a number of regional parks are located (Pedrotti 1996). While the Alpine parks are distributed along the southern border of Central Europe, the whole of the Italian natural system is tightly tied in with cultures that in the past played a central role in the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, Italian parks and their surrounding areas are characterized by an exceptional richness of historic and cultural heritage and a high intensity of anthropic land uses. Their management and planning thus may offer significant experiences for European research on nature conservation and sustainable development.

This prominent position in the European framework is mainly due to the rapid growth of protected areas taking place in Italy, as in most European countries, in the last decades. Until the 1960s, the only natural parks were Gran Paradiso (instituted in 1922), Abruzzo (1923), Circeo (1934), Stelvio (1935), and Calabria (1968). The number of natural parks (national and regional) grew from these five in the 1960s to 122 in the 1990s, while their total extent grew

from 257,402 to 2,886,035 hectares. We may remember that in the same period the number of the European natural parks grew from 126 to 626 and their surface area from 6,206,176 to 24,641,970 hectares, and that most of the change was due to increases in the number of regional parks (now constituting 85% of the total number of parks in Italy, 60% in Europe). We may also notice that in Italy (unlike in other countries, such as Germany or France) regional parks often have size and natural characteristics quite comparable to national parks.

As a consequence of this spectacular growth, the location and environmental character of the Italian parks are very different from the past. Only a small part of them (7.4%) are now located in natural contexts, far from metropolitan and urban cores, as is the case for the older parks like Gran Paradiso, Abruzzo, and Stelvio; for a few of them the old image of the "nature sanctuary" may look still suitable. While a part (24.6%) still remain in rural landscapes, most are very close to urban and industrial areas or even inside them, like "besieged isles" (36.9%) or really urban parks (12.3%). Furthermore, for some of them even the appellation of "natural" park may look inappropriate, given the prevailing importance of their cultural resources. Even after revision, the IUCN protected area classification (IUCN-CNPPA 1994) reflects this ambig-

uous situation, placing six Italian protected areas in Category II ("national park") and 61 more in Category V ("protected landscapes"), while leaving the remaining 55 unclassified.

Problems and Conflicts

The above-mentioned growth process, in relation to the strong evolution of the economic, social, and cultural conditions observed in Italy as in other Western countries in the second half of the century, has deeply changed the problems to be faced within the protected areas and around them. While the main worry of Italian lawmakers instituting the first parks in the 1920s was related to shooting and traditional exploitation of natural resources, and to perturbations, ravages, and threats deriving from infrastructures, currently urbanisation and tourism are much more aggressive and irreversible. In Gran Paradiso National Park, for instance, major changes have come from the building of dams and plants for hydroelectric production, roads, and power lines; in Abruzzo National Park, the park authority had to fight a hard battle against tourist buildings and development pressures; in Stelvio National Park, cableways, hotels, and other facilities for skiing have largely disfigured the landscape. Long-distance environmental risks and impacts are more and more widespread: they can influence protected area conditions even when these processes take place outside

their borders. Changes in agriculture, sheep-raising, and forestry (both through technological innovations and modernisation of practises, on the one hand, and desertification and abandonment—above all in mountain areas—on the other) also have important effects on environmental conditions and the landscape, both inside and outside the protected areas.

While the growth of protected areas has increased remarkably the territorial, economic, and cultural impact of park policies, their problems and objectives are more and more interrelated with the problems of social and economic development. This interrelation is particularly apparent for the regional parks. Very often their purpose—prior to the traditional double purpose of conservation and public enjoyment—concerns the improvement of the social and economic conditions of local communities, according to the regional laws. The general goal of sustainable development thus assumes a special significance in Italian nature park management. A growing number of park managers are becoming conscious that their efforts to maintain landscapes and natural resources cannot be successful if present patterns of development cannot be exchanged for more sustainable ones; that their actions to improve the environmental conditions and control the threats of urbanisation require the partnership of local authorities; that

attempts to promote tourism and public enjoyment without encouraging waste and ravages require important changes in tourism strategies within their regional context.

If “collaborative management is an essential feature of the emerging face of conservation” (IUCN 1996), then this is particularly true for Italian parks, which are often small parts of broader systems of natural and cultural resources, within complex and densely inhabited territories.

This is why in the Italian parks experience—above all at the regional level—two crucial and interrelated problems are receiving growing attention: the relationship between parks and their territorial contexts, and the relationship between protection and promotion policies.

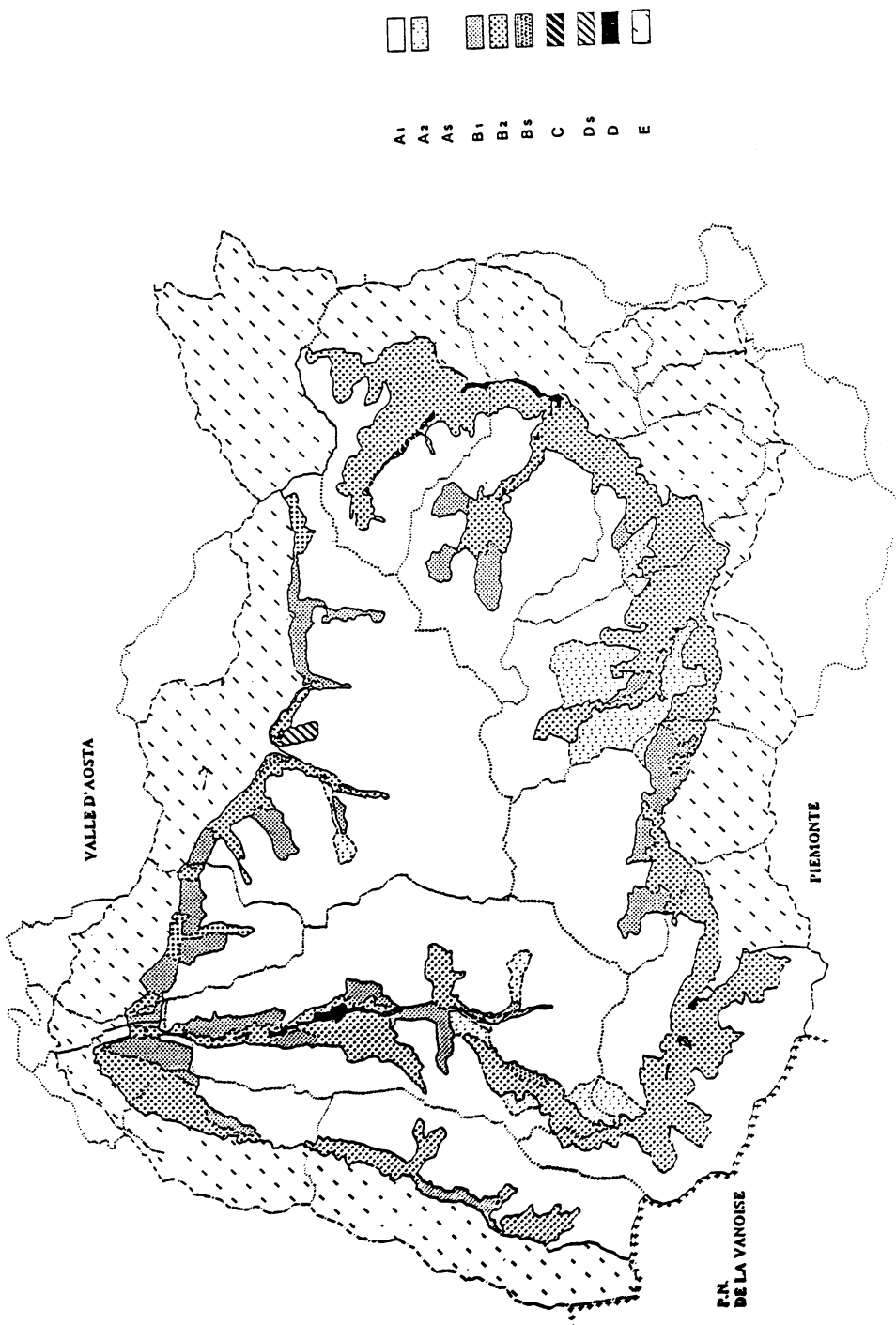
It is worth noticing that these issues are assuming a central place in all Italian regions (as in most European countries) regardless of their environmental, economic, and political differences. But the relationship of park and context is much more worrisome when the delimitation of the park borders is too reductive as to the spatial extension of ecosystems and landscape wholeness, while buffer zones around parks are lacking. This happens often in the Italian situation, both for national and regional parks. Also, the relationship of protection and promotion is much more worrisome when local communities are poor and weak, spoiled by past emigration and the economic

marginality typical of mountain areas.

Legislation and Planning

Although the first national parks were instituted in the 1920s, and in the 1970s many Regions had issued special laws on the matter, it was only in 1991 that the Italian protected area system became ruled by a General Act (L. 394) aimed at promoting the conservation and valorisation of the natural heritage. It identifies several designations:

- *National Parks*, areas “containing one or more ecosystems unaltered or partially altered by anthropic interventions, one or more physical, geological, geomorphological or biological forms of international or national relevance for naturalist, scientific, aesthetic, cultural, educational and recreational values, requiring State intervention for their conservation for present and future generations”;
- *Natural Regional Parks*, areas “of naturalist and environmental value, constituting, in the limits of one or more contiguous regions, a homogeneous system defined by natural local assets, landscape and artistic values and cultural traditions of local people”;
- *Natural Reserves*, areas “containing one or more flora and fauna species of naturalistic relevance, or presenting one or more ecosystems important for biodiversity or genetic resource conservation. They may be national or



Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso, Schema di Piano del Parco: Zonizzazione, 1983 (Gran Paradiso National Park: Zoning Plan, 1983)

First Italian national park, established 1922 (a royal hunting reserve since 1856). Area: 70,200 ha: 32,500 in the Region of Piemonte, 37,500 in the Region of Val d'Aosta. Fourteen km border on the Parc national de la Vanoise in France; together, one of the largest protected areas in Western Europe. Alpine environment with glaciers, woods, outstanding Alpine pastures, watercourses; remarkable floral, faunal, historic-cultural heritage. Thirteen municipalities involved, with 8,000 inhabitants; 300 of which inside park borders. Main economic activities: forestry, sheep-raising, tourism.

The drawing up of the park plan is still in progress. The most complete existing plan dates from 1983, drawn up by a special commission set up by the Park Authority and both the Regions. It contains guidelines for regulations, resource and environmental protection, public information and interpretation, accessibility, visitor facilities, research, and education.

Zone	Objective	Extent
A	Integral reserves, for complete nature conservation	70.6%
A1	Wilderness	
A2	Semi-wilderness	
AS	Area of special interest	
B1, B2,	General reserves: traditional forestry & sheep-raising	28.5%
BS	allowed	
C	Visitor & tourist areas	0.2%
D, Ds	Controlled development areas (farms, villages, etc.)	0.7%
E	Contiguous zones: 34,000 ha around park borders where local development is to be coordinated with park purposes	—

regional according to the relevance of the represented interests"; and

- Other categories, such as marine areas and Ramsar wetlands.

One of the basic points of Act 394/1991 concerns the planning activity, both at the national level (through triennial programs) and locally. Each park's management must be based on three tools: (1) regulations, delineating allowed activities; (2) the park plan, defining the spatial organisation and zoning, land-use constraints, accessibility systems, facilities and services, and environmental management criteria; and (3) the socio-economic plurannual plan (SEPP), defining the promotion of compatible activities and initiatives fostering the local development within and around the park.

Pointing out the importance of planning, the Italian Act reflects of course an emerging European orientation. We must remember that, while the United States National Park Service (USNPS) recommended planning as a basic tool for management since the beginning of this century, it was, up to the 1980s, very rarely practised in most European countries, even those with a sound tradition in nature conservation such as Norway. In fact, spatial planning is needed by the above-mentioned change in park policy problems, particularly for:

- Assuring the protection of "non-tradable" values (such as the con-

servation of natural habitats and cultural heritage, or the survival of threatened species) by a proper differentiation of limits and constraints;

- Setting out strategic, comprehensive frameworks for long-term objectives and highlighting environmental systemic interactions, in order to coordinate different policies concerning the same sites or resources;
- Pointing out stakes, costs, and benefits of different strategies of development and land use, in order to justify protective choices and to foster partnership between local authorities, economic actors, and park managers.

Now a good share of Italian parks have a management plan (64.7%, as compared with 55.3% in Europe as a whole). But in the Italian and European experience, park planning provides a great variety of answers to the above demands, with very different approaches, philosophies, and tools (e.g., the zoning of the French or British or Dutch National Parks are totally different). This makes for a big difference from the American system, which is coordinated by the USNPS Guidelines. And it raises growing problems of harmonization, first of all in the transborder areas, such as the Alpine system.

However, park planning is going to contribute decidedly to "territorialising" environmental policies,

joining protection and promotion with more coherent socio-environmental assets and fostering sustainable development. To this purpose, a crucial condition is the integration of park planning in local and regional planning and policies. This is just the suggestion of the US-NPS (1988): "Through planning, parks will be considered within the broader context of the surrounding region. Cooperative regional planning will be undertaken to integrate parks into their regional environments and to address adjacent land use issues that influence park resources."

As in other countries, some Italian experiences, both in national parks (e.g., Gran Paradiso) and in regional ones (Colli Euganei, Po River), have tried to define an effective interaction among park, local, and regional planning—have tried to start, in other words, a real co-planning process. This is an open problem, not yet solved at the legislative level, because our basic Act 394/1991 doesn't provide any linkage between park and local-regional planning, giving to the park plan the ambitious role of "substituting" for every other plan within the borders of the park (what is often seen as an abuse conflicting with the autonomy of the local administrations).

Another crucial condition for joining protection and promotion is the integration of economic programs into park planning. We must remem-

ber that the separation between physical planning and the economic decision process (unlike what happens in other European countries) is a peculiar weakness of the Italian system. Despite the efforts of some Italian regions in trying to mitigate such separation within the limits of their legislation, and despite the practical actions of some park authorities, it remains an open problem, as even the Act 394/1991 provides two different tools—park plans and SEPPs—referring to different institutional subjects and procedures. This separation is one of the main reasons why many Italian parks are still considered "paper parks."

This need for integrating park and territorial plans has relevant implications for the content of the plans themselves, particularly in the role and character of zoning. According to Act 394/1991, the park plan shall divide the park's territory into four zones: a) integral reserves, for complete natural conservation; b) general-oriented reserves, where traditional resource exploitation, management, and maintenance may be permitted; c) protection areas, where agriculture, sheep-raising, forestry, and local craftsmanship are allowed or encouraged, as well as the restoration of existing buildings and infrastructures; d) socio-economic promotion areas, where every compatible activity may be permitted, aiming at the improvement of local living conditions and public enjoyment of

the park.

This zoning was often criticized even before its inception in the law (Giacomini and Romani 1982), as it can favour a simplifying functional division of the protected space, contrasting with the ecological principle of "separating when necessary, interweaving when possible" (Centrum voor Milieukunde 1990). In many planning experiences, it has been overcome in favour of more complex approaches based on the acknowledgment of the interrelations characterizing places and landscape units. But these approaches imply, of course, a strong orientation towards co-management.

Perspectives

The increasing interweaving of conservation and development is deeply changing the role of nature parks, in the Italian experience. They can't any longer be considered as nature sanctuaries, different and separate from their territorial context, since they are nodes of broader ecological networks, needing to involve the whole territory. They can't any longer be considered as special areas, conceived essentially for the public enjoyment, since they are always (at least in the Italian and European experience) inhabited territories and cultural landscapes, where public enjoyment must be admitted or promoted only when and if it can improve or, at least, doesn't disturb the ecological, cultural, and economic local balance. They can't any longer

be considered as mere recreational areas or leisure parks or even a spectacular show for urban visitors, since their identity is strictly tied with local culture and dynamics. And they can't even be conceived as mere tools for improving local development, drawing on national or regional funding, since sustainable development goals can't be pursued inside the park boundaries and require strategies involving the regional context (WCED 1987).

Certainly, nature parks are essential workshops for searching out more sustainable development paths, experimenting with new models of interaction between social and natural processes, creating new jobs based on nature conservation instead of nature despoliation. But these goals do not concern exclusively park designation and management, they concern the whole territory. So, what is or could be the specific role of nature parks?

Some believe that nature parks are only a temporary tool, and park policies have to be substituted by broader environmental policies, organically involving territorial systems and networks. This is, in fact, the choice of some countries, well interested in nature conservation, like Denmark. But the Italian and European experience shows that nature parks can play a powerful role in heightening public awareness of—and respect for—the natural and cultural heritage. Despite their limits and problems, they make visible environmental stakes and

stress the priority of conservation values over development choices. Further, they make a fundamental contribution to the recognition of regional and national identities. In other terms, they play an essential role as social communication tools, highly representative symbols and living metaphors of what could and should be done in the whole territory. The growing importance of interpretation (as a basic interaction between resources and visitors) in park management testifies that the educational and cultural purposes, clearly identified also in Italy when the first national park was designated, are even more important in a communications-oriented society. They can be pursued today only if parks are no longer conceived of as individual entities, separate from their context, but as excellent nodes of highly connected environmental networks.

This is why there is in Italy a growing consciousness that a serious park policy must be framed in a European perspective, particularly contributing to the building of a national protected area system, as a part of a pan-European system. Such a system may be seen as an essential integration of urban and infrastructure networks, aiming to re-design the European space to ensure sustainable development (European Community Commission 1993).

In this direction, many programs and initiatives have been undertaken in the last decades, aiming to stimu-

late twinning, cooperation, exchange of information and expertise, common actions, and networking among Italian and European parks. In the case of the parks located along the Alpine border, such initiatives are particularly important as they can be a prelude to a real integration of different contiguous parks in new trans-border protected areas of great size and prestige. This could be the case of the Gran Paradiso National Park (Italy) with Vanoise National Park (France), Argentera Regional Park (Italy) with Mercantour National Park (France), Stelvio National Park (Italy) with Engadina National Park (Switzerland), or perhaps of the "Espace Mont Blanc," a French-Italian-Swiss initiative aiming to the protection-valorisation of the entire region dominated by this famous mountain (CTMB 1994). Such co-operative initiatives will be important steps in implementing the Alpine Convention (1995), signed by all countries encompassing the mountain range.

The national parks scattered along the Appennines (Foreste Casentinesi, Monti Sibillini, Laga-Gran Sasso, Abruzzo, Maiella, Cilento, Pollino, Calabria, Aspromonte), together with a wide number of regional parks, are also interested in an important project, the "Appennine Park of Europe" (APE), aiming to link them in a very long chain of extraordinary natural and cultural richness, of international relevance. But it is ever more

necessary to go far beyond the park policies.

An effective protected area system cannot be conceived outside a strategic framework of policies affecting the whole territory. Parks cannot be efficiently protected if the land uses and the development processes of the surrounding regions are not effectively controlled, and they cannot continue to play their magnificent role if they are not integrated into broader environmental networks.

In this direction, the most important effort concerns the creation of the European Ecological Network (Eeconet, launched at the Maastricht Conference on Natural Heritage 1993) aiming to apply the sustainability principle in the whole European space and particularly "to improve the resilience of its natural systems to adverse environmental changes." The project, characterized by a proactive and trans-scale approach (at the European, national, and local level), is basically oriented towards the creation and the safeguard of a network of "ecological corridors" connecting the "core areas" of particular biological value (existing and to be created), their protection with "buffer zones" and the improvement of environmental conditions in the countryside (IPEE 1991; Bennett 1994; European Centre for Nature Conservation 1996). The Eeconet criteria have been experimented with in studies concerning the APE project (Romano

1996), and in some plans, such as for Colli Euganei Regional Park (Parco dei Colli Euganei 1994), Po River Regional Park (Regione Piemonte 1994), Pavia Province (Malcevschi 1996) Lambro-Seveso-Olona basin. The building of Eeconet is very important for Italy, because most of its natural parks are located along the Alpine and the Appennine chains, which are (together with the great rivers, like the Po, and the coastal systems) amongst the basic components of the network (European Environment Agency 1995).

Such studies, as well as some park experiences, have also highlighted the relevance of networks in connecting parks and protected areas for the enrichment and enlargement of the public enjoyment. These connections, mostly based on historical networks of roads and paths, forests, or other natural features, can foster the enjoyment, in soft and proper forms, of natural and cultural resources within and outside the protected areas, "making sense" of the landscapes to be protected and valorised. On one hand, this concept may be referred to the "environmental corridors" of Lewis (1964) or even the "greenway" concept. But, on the other hand, it refers to the strategies for the conservation of "cultural landscapes" recently designed by the Council of Europe (1997). It is in fact in these "working" landscapes, where natural resources have long been elaborated through history, work, human suffer-

ing, and creativity, that we can find the best expression of the Italian heritage, as happens in most European countries. And it is also in these landscapes that most of the changes threatening parks and protected areas

take place. It is therefore not surprising that park policies in the Italian experience are more and more related to landscape management and planning.

Most of the data and information presented here refer to the European Centre of Documentation on Nature Park Planning (CED-PPN), c/o Polytechnic of Turin, c. Trento 26/c, 10129 Turin, Italy. Data on nature parks (national and regional) refer to the original classification adopted by CED, crossing the different categories used by the different countries. Data on other protected areas are not available in homogeneous terms.

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