

Ideas from Overseas:

American Preservation and Italian Restoration

In 1976 the American historian Roderick Nash delivered a series of lectures (sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation) to Italian leaders at Bellagio, a picturesque village on the shores of Lake Como fringed by the Alps. Nash, a wilderness expert, spoke on nature and world development. "While Italy is in the vanguard in the protection of man's cultural and artistic heritage," he asserted, "the United States has led the world in nature protection." Nature appreciation and nature preservation, he told his audience, "are characteristic of highly civilized societies. They are full-stomach phenomena." Nash went on to explain that older nations, when establishing national parks, must often incorporate cultural artifacts within park borders. Even in the high valleys that lead to the peaks above Lake Como, he reminded his listeners, hikers cannot escape the "paraphernalia" of civilization: "Spectacular, yes; dangerous, yes; wild, no." Concerning the prospects of preserving wilderness in Italy, Nash remained skeptical. "One reason that wilderness preservation has made so little progress in Europe," Nash summarized, "is that, by many definitions, there is no wilderness left to preserve."¹

But in surprising defiance to Nash's analysis, several Italian environmental groups have recently identified wilderness areas from the Apennines to the Alps. Part of the reason for this expansion of Italian wilderness lies in the accelerated abandonment of marginal agricultural lands, which has resulted in dense vegetation and enlarged habitats for some kinds of wildlife, such as deer, boar—even wolves and bears. Yet most of the reason for an expanding Italian wilderness depends not on agricultural abandonment, but on redefining the landscape. Instead of

Nash's narrow concept of wilderness, which apparently includes only limitless vistas, old-growth forests, and fierce grizzly bears, Italian wilderness encompasses smaller areas, brambled woods, and the occasional *stambecco* or *camoscio*. The Italian concept of wilderness has been expanded to encompass greater varieties of landscapes. Bianca Vetrino, an Italian delegate at the Fourth World Wilderness Congress held in 1987 at Denver, assumed this wider definition of wilderness when she nominated a hidden valley in northwestern Italy, Val Grande, to be included

within the world's wilderness system. In 1992, this valley became one of Italy's newest national parks, yet its official wilderness status was still being debated by the government. Undoubtedly, the lack of an Italian consensus for "wilderness" lies, in part, with the unfamiliarity of Italians with the American wilderness idea; indeed this word's imperfect translation and closest equivalent, *deserto*, usually implies an empty and inhospitable wasteland. One begins to realize that in Italy nature appreciation and nature preservation usually include the human element.²

But there is another reason for the recent expansion of Italian wilderness beyond the effects of land abandonment and broader definitions of wilderness. This other reason was highlighted by wilderness advocate, Franco Zunino, who wrote in a recent newsletter of the Italian Wilderness Association that "the maximum utopia for the wilderness movement is the actual restoration of the original state by erasing signs of human influence." Zunino explained that although the restoration movement comes from America, it can be applied to Italian land management. While he admitted that not all areas can be restored to a pristine state, many nature reserves, like Italian national parks, could theoretically be made wild again. Italians especially, and Europeans generally, he asserted, "could re-create at least a semblance of what our ancestors experienced."

Like the Americans who plan increasingly elaborate projects of environmental restoration, he concluded, Italians should also begin renewing wetlands, mountainsides, and forests, while erasing the ubiquitous scars arising from human activities: "some of our domesticated nature must be returned to the wild, for itself and for our spirit." As if responding to Zunino's plea, programs of *rinaturazione*, *ripristinazione*, or *ingegneria naturalistica* reflect the recent push for re-naturalizing and re-wilding some of Italy's natural heritage.³

Yet unbeknownst to some Italian and American land managers, restorative land management has long been present in Italy and across Europe. Indeed, Italians have long been at the vanguard of the restoration movement. Italian foresters, civil engineers, and agriculturists have long labored to find the best ways to repair exhausted lands and reforest ravaged hillsides. When checking the records, one discovers that several American land-use experts traveled to Italy precisely for observing the tried-and-tested techniques of ancient land management: in the period between the world wars, for example, the U.S. Forest Service's Arthur Ringland studied Italian reforestation methods, the Soil Conservation Service's Walter Lowdermilk observed Italian erosion control, and the Department of Agriculture's Rexford Tugwell applauded the successes of an Italian

conservation corps which he mentioned to Franklin Roosevelt as a model for the United States' own Civilian Conservation Corps.⁴ Thus when Roderick Nash, while lecturing to Italians about nature protection, claimed that "the needs and situations of Italians and Americans ... are similar enough to raise hopes that the experience of the United States can be instructive," in fact, the opposite may be even truer: the experience of Italy can be instructive to the United States. If Italian land managers can benefit by observing how Americans preserve nature within reserves and parks, American land managers can learn by observing how Italians *restore* nature inside or outside formal reserves and parks.

Another expert who recognized the rich Italian tradition of restoration was George Perkins Marsh, the first U.S. ambassador to Italy from 1861 to 1882, and a major inspiration for the American conservation movement. In his masterpiece, *Man and Nature* (1864), which Marsh wrote almost entirely in Italy, he not only clarified the dangers of interfering "with the spontaneous arrangements of the organic or the inorganic world," but he also emphasized the "possibility and the importance of the restoration of disturbed harmonies." In numerous publications and speeches, in fact, Marsh called attention to Italy's expertise in restoring its heavily consumed lands. During one such speech to his fellow New Eng-

landers, Marsh described how Italian engineers as early as the eighteenth century had periodically diverted silt-laden rivers onto eroded swamplands in Tuscany's *Val di Chiana*, in order to rebuild soils, eventually "restoring them to fertility and salubrity." According to Marsh, these restored areas, called *colmate*, are "among the most remarkable triumphs of humanity over physical nature, and they possess special interest as exhibiting almost the only instance where a soil, which man has once used, abused, exhausted, and at last abandoned, has been restored to his dominion...."⁵

Like the soils, Marsh advocated restoring the forests and wildlife, again praising Italian precedents. Serving briefly as Vermont's State Fish Commissioner, for instance, Marsh recommended ways for restoring New England's devastated fisheries. Because fishing closures had brought few reversals in the declining nineteenth-century fish runs, Marsh called for active fish restoration: preservation was not enough. He recommended that Americans study European ways of fish propagation, noting that fish hatcheries dated from the Romans, with medieval monks perfecting fish rearing techniques. He also predicted that some day, after sufficient observation and experiment, Americans will pass laws "for restoring the primitive abundance of the public waters" such as Lake Champlain. Concerning forest restoration, Marsh again ap-

plauded the Italians, as when he saw them re-planting forests on the extensive barren hillsides in the western Alps near Turin: "Hundreds of acres are annually planted with oaks, larches, and other timber trees." Marsh also toured the arboretum at Vallombrosa near Florence, where he talked with Italian foresters about silvicultural techniques, and provided them with seeds of promising varieties of North American conifers. After highlighting Italian successes with reforestation, he pleaded with his readers that "we have now felled forest enough everywhere, in many districts far too much. Let us restore this one element of material life to its normal proportions...." Even though Marsh observed Italians re-creating stable, productive lands, instead of re-creating pristine, wild lands, he had nevertheless witnessed early precedents to today's endeavor of ecological restoration: the conversion of damaged areas into ideal landscapes.⁶

Importantly, just as *Man and Nature* is considered the "fountainhead" of such crucial laws as the U.S. Forest Reserve Act of 1891, its Italian translation, *L'Uomo e la Natura* (1870), can be considered an important inspiration for the major Italian Forest Law of 1877. During the Italian parliamentary debates leading to the enactment of this forestry law, in fact, Marsh's work was cited more than that of any other expert. And with some refinements to the 1877

law, the Italian government passed a new, improved "reforestation" law of 1888, which forestry expert Bernard Fernow labeled in his international survey of forest legislation as "one of the best laws of its kind in existence anywhere." Thus, it seems that Marsh not only helped spearhead the American preservation movement, as through laws for creating the first forest preserves from the Rockies to the Adirondacks, but he also helped promote the Italian restoration movement, as through laws for reforesting denuded hillsides from the Apennines to the Alps.⁷

If "America's Best Idea," according to recent slogans at Yellowstone, was to create national parks in order to preserve pristine nature for posterity, then perhaps Italy's best idea was to help refine restoration in order to recover some of the Earth's natural and cultural heritage. Good land managers keep one eye on the past and the other on the future, always seeking to recognize the degradation that has been done, always learning to identify the remediation that needs doing. I believe that in both Italy and the U.S., one can manage for wilderness as well as for *restored*-wilderness, and that nature lovers in both countries can begin to appreciate many types of natures. As Americans and Italians learn from each other about preserving and restoring, they will also learn to better appreciate both wild and cultural nature. One of the best ways to learn better land

management, after all, is to follow the example of George Perkins Marsh by traveling overseas: he once declared that the considerable contrasts between Italian and American land-uses “impresses you much more powerfully, and you are more likely

to derive instruction from such observation.”⁸ While Italians can learn from the American experience of displaying a nature that excludes people, Americans can learn from the Italian experience of displaying a nature that incorporates people.

Endnotes

1. Roderick Nash, *Nature in World Development: Patterns in the Preservation of Scenic and Outdoor Recreation Resources*; A series of lectures delivered to Italian leaders in nature protection at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy, 4-5 December 1976 (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1978), vii, 42-55.
2. Vance Martin, ed., *For the Conservation of Earth* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1988), 131-133; Stefano Ardito, *Wilderness: Guida alle aree selvagge in Italia* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1992); “Wilderness areas in Europe: Resolution adopted on behalf of the Fifth World Wilderness Congress, Tromsø, Norway, 1993,” in *Wilderness Associazione Italiana*, 16 January 16 1994; Franco Tassi, “Abruzzo’s bears: Reconciling the interests of wildlife and people in Abruzzo National Park, Italy,” in *National Parks, Conservation, and Development* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984), 446-9.
3. Franco Zunino, “Ripristinare la Natura Selvaggia,” *Documenti Wilderness* 7:1 (January-March 1992), 1; Donato Forenza, “Ricostruzione ecologica del territorio forestale,” *Protecta* 11 (1992): 87-89; Giovanni Sala, “Rinaturazione: la nuova frontiera del recupero ambientale,” *ACER* 11:5 (Sett-Ott, 1995), 3; D. Zavalloni, ed., *Come Progettare il Parco Fluviale: rinaturazione, tutela, e valorizzazione delle aree fluviali*, Atti del convegno Cesena, 2 giugno 1995 (Cesana: Macroedizioni, 1997).
4. Arthur Ringland, “Mussolini’s Sybarites,” *American Forestry* 39:7 (July 1933), 290-297, 334; Walter Clay Lowdermilk, “Lessons from the Old World to the Americas in land use,” *The Smithsonian Report for 1943* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 413-428. During a private meeting with Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell had suggested the vestiges of the CCC program, whereby large numbers of unemployed Americans might be usefully hired to rehabilitate neglected U.S. national forests: “I was able to startle [Roosevelt],” Tugwell wrote, “by saying that such a scheme had been worked out already by Mussolini in Italy. This he did not much like. But he gradually got used to Mussolini’s priority and evidenced so much curiosity about it that I had, after all, to do some research. There was a likeness between the Corps and the Italian experiment which was never mentioned publicly—for obvious political reasons. And most of those whose recollections are now appearing evidence no knowledge of the connection.” From the Rexford Guy Tugwell Papers (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library): Diary Notes, 1958-61, Box 38, Folder 5:2.
5. George P. Marsh, *Man and Nature; Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864; reprint edition Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1965, with a foreword by David Lowenthal); George P. Marsh, “Oration” [before the New

Hampshire State Agricultural Society, Oct. 10, 1856], in *Transactions of the New Hampshire State Agricultural Society, 1856* (Concord, N.H.: Amos Hadley, 1857), 77. On the importance of Marsh in the history of conservation see Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 72; David Lowenthal, "George Perkins Marsh on the nature and purpose of geography," *The Geographical Journal* 126 (1960), 413; Michael Lacey, "Man, nature, and the ecological perspective," *American Studies* 8:1-3 (Spring 1970), 15; Daniel W. Gade, "The growing recognition of George Perkins Marsh," *The Geographical Review* 73:3 (1983), 341.

6. George P. Marsh, *Report Made Under Authority of the Legislature of Vermont on the Artificial Propagation of Fish* (Burlington: Free Press, 1857), 12, 18, 20; Marsh, "Oration," 55, 75-6; see the footnote in the *Nuova Rivista Forestale* anno II (1879), 219, explaining that Marsh donated seeds of *Pinus monophylla* to the Vallombrosa Forestry School; David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 241-44; George P. Marsh, *The Earth as Modified by Human Action: A New Edition of Man and Nature* (1874; reprint edition New York: Arno Press, 1970), 396-7. Marcus Hall, "The early restoration movement," *Proceedings of the 15th Permanent European Conference on Rural Landscape*, Turin, Italy, September 1994.
7. On the Italian parliamentary debates for the 1877 forest law, see Bruno Vecchio, "La Questione Forestale in Italia nel Secondo '800: Le Cognizioni dei Parlamentari nei Dibattiti sulla Prima Legge Forestale Unitaria (1869-1877)," *Relazione presentata al convegno 'La Cultura del Bosco'* (Caronia, ottobre 1987), 35, 1-47; Demetrio Balestreri, "Discorso sopra la coltura dei boschi e sua relazione con la legge forestale," *Atti della Reale Accademia economico agraria del Georgofili* ser.4,v.2 (1871), 125-147; Bernard Fernow, *A Brief History of Forestry* (1913). On Marsh's experiences in Italy see Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter*, 230-340; Marcus Hall, "Restoring the countryside: George Perkins Marsh and the Italian land ethic (1861-1882)," *Environment and History* 4:1 (February 1998), 1-14. For an overview of the history of environmental restoration see Marcus Hall, "Co-workers with nature: The deeper roots of restoration," *Restoration and Management Notes* 15:2 (Winter 1997), 173-78.
8. Marsh, "Oration," 40-1.

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