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Italy's Leap Forward

in Nature Protection Legislation

The First Parks

Nature protection in Italy today is anchored around the two "historic parks," the Abruzzo National Park in the central Apennines and the Gran Paradiso National Park in the Graian Alps, both created in 1922. Though Abruzzo is an area noted for its history of sheep herding and transhumance, it is also an area where wilderness still reigns. The wolf's howl echoes through its mountains and the bear's track imprints the terrain. Both these big fauna were spared extinction in the late nineteenth century thanks to a royal hunting preserve. When the royal house renounced its hunting rights around the turn of the century, Italy's nascent nature protection movement helped create the nation's first national park.

A royal hunting preserve also formed the nucleus of the Gran Paradiso National Park in northwestern Italy. This wilderness area is home to the ibex, a species hunted almost to extinction in the nineteenth century. The Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III ceded his hunting preserve in Gran Paradiso to the state in 1919 with the intention of creating a national park. The fact that both Abruzzo and Gran Paradiso had once been hunting preserves not only spared the big fauna from extinction, it also eased the transition to national parks for a local population for which the words "national park" "sound strange," as one naturalist put it.

In 1934, a third national park was added in the Pontine Marshes south

of Rome. Italian bureaucrats had long dreamed of turning this thick tangle of forest and swamp into an ordered and regimented landscape. A land wet with bubbling springs, overflowing lakes, and brackish sea water, it was split open and drained by canals. In the core area of about 30,000 acres, a dense jungle of oak and umbrella pine, the forest was blasted with dynamite.

Amid the destruction, however, the government set aside a portion of wilderness area, a small sample of the great diversity of swamp, forest, lake, dunes, and sea. Out of the devastation of the Pontine Marshes, the Circeo National Park, Italy's third, was created in 1934. And with the addition of the Stelvio National Park along the

border of the Swiss National Park, by the mid-1930s Italy had four national parks with a combined area of over 500,000 acres at a time when most European countries still had none.

Random Stabs at Nature Protection

Despite the early successes, Italy's nature reserves were the result of episodic attention, not coordinated planning. It took the near-extinction of wildlife in Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo before action was taken. Many natural areas in Italy did not even receive the afterthought given to the Pontine Marshes. They were simply dug under, rolled over, paved up.

The first attempt at some planning in the protection of natural beauty, i.e. nature, came in 1939, with act number 1497. This new law empowered the Ministry of Public Instruction—renamed the Ministry of National Education under the Fascists—to draw up what may loosely be described as land-use plans for all the areas to be protected, so that they were not “utilized in a way that could damage their panoramic beauty.” Under this law, nature protection was the responsibility of the central authority in Rome, which decided in advance on the protection of a few areas of undisputed environmental value.

As with many other Italian laws, however, the usual problem of turning statute directives into practical

applications stunted their effectiveness. Local superintendents of the education ministry were charged with drawing up plans according to ministerial directives. These low-level provincial bureaucrats by and large had no training in land-use planning. The 1939 law was successful, however, in protecting a few prestigious natural monuments.

The Economic Miracle

After World War II, act number 1497 remained in force as Italy's only environmental protection law. With little muscle to begin with, the law fell flat under the stampede of Italy's economic miracle. The country's economic revival was underway, and cement flowed freely. The central Adriatic coast became a parking lot. Even the national parks were thrown open to speculators, loggers, and ski operators. Meanwhile, construction firms across Italy had free rein, and they built fast: 73,400 new houses in 1950, 273,500 in 1957, and 450,000 in 1964. Environmental protection was left to a handful of private groups and the isolated efforts of local politicians and individual judges.

Land Use and the Environment

In 1972, Italy was divided into 20 administrative regions, which took on many of the functions formerly held by the national government in Rome. Environmental regulations, the establishment of protected areas, town and land-use planning—all became

concerns for regional authorities. Although the development of nature-protection regulations among the regions was uneven, some key concepts regarding protected areas have generally been accepted throughout Italy. First, the presence of people and their economic activities within a national park or nature reserve are not viewed as incompatible with the park, as long as they are integrated with it. Second, nature reserves must not be artificially separated from the areas surrounding them.

Though many regional governments had established protected areas, the old 1939 law still served as the basis for nature protection. Change came at the national level with a sweeping new law of August 8, 1985, act number 431. A sense of integration and globality replaced the old notion of isolating and protecting only those elements of nature with a high aesthetic value. In short, the concept of environment—including flora, fauna, and ecosystems—was introduced to decision-making procedures. The new law also broke away from the concept of imposing prohibitive restrictions piecemeal to save threatened areas; rather, it required each administrative region in Italy to draw up detailed land-use plans with ecosystems in mind, along with “equal preoccupation for cultural and historic sites.”

In its application, however, the Galasso Law, named after its author, reflected the kind of inaction that of-

ten accompanies Italian legislation. Ten years after the law's promulgation, for instance, only a handful of Italy's 20 regions had actually drawn up a land-use plan. Italy's most important region—Lombardy—was without a plan up to 1994. In some regions, local authorities worked out land-use plans that more closely resembled land-abuse plans. Other regional authorities drew up excellent plans that were never implemented on a daily basis. As one critic put it: “It would be difficult to say there has been any real encounter with planning if we look at the dire situation of delay, apathy, and bureaucratic withdrawal that seems to characterize the Galasso Law's application, even in the more ‘advanced’ regions.”

The core problem has been a lack of environmental and land-use expertise in many regional governments. Moreover, the central government has been reluctant to step in when regional authorities fail to fulfill their obligations. A further complication was the law's unrealistic expectation that each region should draw up detailed land-use scheme's in only sixteen months, with a ban on any new construction during that period.

Though at times woefully ignored, the Galasso Law has had the merit of making government officials at all levels aware of the need for integrated land-use planning. The law has opened the way for an interdisciplinary approach to land-use plan-

ning, away from the urban technocrats and toward ecologists, naturalists, geographers, and geologists. In the past, land-use planning had meant the draining of wetlands for agriculture and the paving over of farmland for industry. The Galasso Law, along with the creation of the Ministry of Environment in 1986, brought to the halls of government the long-overdue attention to environmental issues. This new awareness had positive results: the institution of six new national parks between 1986 and 1989.

Integrating Man and Nature

On December 6, 1991, the Italian legislature approved act number 394, the Framework Law on Protected Areas. This is a comprehensive law for the creation, planning, and integration of protected natural areas that encourages input from national, regional, and local agencies as well as private environmental organizations, and even from individuals. The inspiration for the new law was not merely conservation, but a dynamic and active management of the land that emphasizes the social character of the landscape. The law states that the main goal in setting up reserves is "the integration of man and the natural environment through the protection of anthropological, archaeological, historical and architectural values, of traditional activities, of agricultural, pastoral, and forestry practices." One legal scholar has interpreted the law as meaning that the protection of na-

ture does not imply the exclusion of human activity: humans are part of nature, and their actions, inasmuch as they are rigorously held within the limits of ecological equilibrium, are not incompatible with the conservation of nature.

Dynamic Management

Act number 394 also states that natural reserves must restore or preserve "species of animals and plants, forest and plant associations, geological and paleontological formations, biological communities, biotopes, scenic and panoramic values, and ecological harmony." The emphasis on biological and ecological preservation indicates a shift from protecting natural beauty to protecting nature. But the law also recognizes one important aspect of the nature-culture dialectic: where humans have intervened, the results have sometimes been beautiful, not merely destructive. Culture, society, history, and nature can coexist in a system of land-use management that allows for both conservation and sustainable human use. The director of Argentera Nature Park in Piedmont summed up the new vision of protected areas:

Increasingly, parks are seen not only as a goal for conservation but as an instrument for it, not as a destination but as a take-off point, not as an "alibi-island" for plundering the remaining territory but as a stronghold on which to build a sustainable relationship with the environment.

The basis of the law is a four-tier planning system, starting with com

prehensive reserves in which the integrity of the natural environment is to be preserved in its entirety. The second level is one of general reserves in which there is a ban on any infrastructure development, except in connection with the management of the reserve. The third level, protected areas, allows for the continuation and development of sustainable practices such as organic farming, the harvesting and use of natural products, and small-scale industry based on artisan production. And finally, the law envisions zones to promote economic and social activities. These are areas whose natural environments have been heavily modified by human activity. Only those activities compatible with the aims of the protected area will be allowed in these zones.

All these activities are to be worked out locally by the so-called *Comunità del parco*, which consists of government representatives at the regional, provincial, and municipal level. Local leaders from the *Comunità del parco* also form part of the park agency, along with leaders from environmental groups and scientists. Only in cases of disagreement among the various parties does the national government get involved directly, with the Ministry of Environment responsible for mediation and arbitration.

One of Italy's newest national parks is the *Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi*, Monte Falterona e Campigna, in the mountains

of Tuscany and Romagna. The debate over what kind of park it should be is typical of environmental thinking in establishing protected areas. Within the park area, forestry practices must be ecologically sound. Organic farming and agricultural tourism are preferred. There is limited access for cars, unlimited access for hikers. In the core area, access for humans is limited as well. In villages within the park, old buildings and housing must be renovated, while new construction is severely restricted. Businesses and industries interested in conserving nature, rather than exploiting it, are encouraged through preferential treatment.

This new park also signals a return to earlier notions of an aesthetic construction of the landscape that takes into account the needs of people and society. Here, in the highlands along the border between Tuscany and Romagna, "the old balance of nature, society, and livelihood that marked both the land and the landscape of the mountains can be revived, once the lacerations and traumas of the twentieth century have been overcome. This can be accomplished with a land-use management capable of fostering the inventiveness and the versatility—in short, the culture—that has for centuries characterized the mountain way of life."

The Critics

Critics of the Framework Law are not hard to find. One of Italy's lead-

ing theorists of landscape planning, Roberto Gambino of the University of Turin, calls the idea of zoning in national parks and natural reserves "an unrealistic and pernicious division of the landscape into protected and unprotected areas." Gambino sees the various zoning levels as a separation, not an integration. And looking to the U.S. National Park Service, Gambino notes that zones should be seen not in terms of restrictions, but rather in terms of planning goals.

Other critics claim that the Framework Law puts too much power in the hands of local authorities. The result is that some of Italy's national parks are managed not by professional naturalists, wildlife experts, or land-use specialists, but by local politicians, who may just as easily decide to spend funds allotted to parks for the restoration of a church, not landscapes.

Critics also point out that the Framework Law favors quantity over quality. Too many new protected areas were established too quickly. Indeed, some parks exist only on paper. Furthermore, there is a serious dearth of adequately trained people in park and wildlife management. What many of the new national parks have in common is a lack of the infrastructure normally found in a U.S. national park: an information center, signage and well marked nature trails. The Framework Law in this sense is typical of much legislation in Italy:

the ideals race ahead of the realities.

Network of Reserves

Another flaw in the new legislation, critics point out, is the lack of interconnectedness between the protected areas. But where the law is remiss in addressing the question of environmental corridors, private groups have been taking up the slack. In fact, Europe's most ambitious plan to link protected areas is taking place in Italy's central Apennines in a project called the South European Park. Under this plan, the Abruzzo National Park will anchor a chain of parks in the central Apennines that also comprises three new national parks: Gran Sasso-Laga, Majella, and Monti Sibillini. In addition, numerous regional and inter-regional parks, along with nature reserves and refuges, will form part of the network as well, for a total surface area of 1.25 million acres.

Conclusion

Creating national parks and reserves in Italy and maintaining the integrity of existing ones is a tough job. Franco Tassi, who has been the superintendent of the Abruzzo National Park for nearly three decades, has called it a mission impossible. Nevertheless, under Tassi's leadership, Abruzzo has become a model for Europe in running a park efficiently, balancing the needs of nature with the needs those of people living in the park. Abruzzo National Park has spearheaded the change in public and private attitude's in Italy regard-

ing nature protection over the last two decades. For example, the Abruzzo village of Civitella Alfedena gained much national attention when Italy's leading financial newspaper reported that this hamlet of a few hundred was the richest in Italy.

In fact, the national parks may now be a victim of their own success. Small towns in Italy that once viewed national parks as potential local disasters are now clamoring to be included within the boundaries of national parks or reserves. Though on a whole this trend may be good, the motives are not always pure. The creation of a national park opens the spigot of public money for some small towns, which may not spend the money wisely if informed leadership is lacking. Moreover, some municipalities within national parks are encouraging the repopulation of areas deserted during the past 50 years of the economic miracle. Many naturalists doubt the wisdom of such policies, maintaining it is better to abandon many of these areas to nature rather

than to encourage their resettlement. The purpose of national parks in Italy is now under scrutiny. Some conservationists say that with the new Framework Law, Italy's national parks, by trying to embrace too much, seem to have moved away from the essential purpose of protecting nature. Franco Tassi has noted that Italy today is "in a situation in which a park is meant to please everybody. Now that the environment has become a trendy topic, there is a strong tendency at the political, cultural and economic level to consider a park as a container for just about anything but conservation."

Back in 1922, Italy was Europe's leader in establishing of national parks. After a long period in which its achievements were neglected, Italy is once again at the forefront of environmental legislation and protection. The outcome of the debate in Italy over how human activities are to be integrated in national parks and other reserves will have a resounding impact on the rest of Europe.

Reference

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