

From the National Park to Regional Systems of Linked National Parks and Protected Areas

Abruzzo National Park, created in 1922 and therefore the oldest in Italy, is proud of its international recognition as a pilot organization in nature conservation. It was organized by a few enlightened men, among them Erminio Sipari (a cousin of the great philosopher Benedetto Croce), who was the real conceiver and founder, with the active support of a young naturalist organization known as the Pro Montibus et Sylvis Federation of Bologna. Today, Abruzzo is in the vanguard of linking the national parks and protected areas in the various regions of Italy to better meet the urgent needs of nature protection.

Over seventy years have passed, and, like any other Italian park, Abruzzo has not had an easy life, having to overcome all kinds of political and financial issues, right up to fearing for its own survival in the 1960s. However, since 1969 there has been a real (albeit gradual) gradual recovery with new ideas, new persons, and new programs leading to a different chapter in its history in this corner of the Central Apennines, both with regard to life and activities which are still ongoing.

In the last quarter of a century, the park has grown from 30,000 to 44,000 hectares. It has established a buffer zone of 70,000 hectares which has practically taken on the function of being a complementary area, almost as protected and rich in wildlife as the park itself. This promoted a lively and constant dialogue by inte-

grating very strict conservation with the most sustainable modern development: in other words, with ecodevelopment based on the revival of cultural and traditional activities, as well as on modern ecotourism.

Abruzzo protects and fosters not only ungulate populations (such as the Abruzzo chamois—the boast of the park—and the red deer and the roe deer, which have been gradually reintroduced) to the point where they thrive, but also the surviving groups of large carnivorous predators (among them the Marsican brown bear, the Apennine wolf, and the European lynx). This has not been a simple feat in contemporary Italy.

Abruzzo National Park set many firsts, including having the first visitor centre among the Italian national parks, created in 1969 in Pescasseroli; the first scientific group

working in a European park, the Apennine Centre for Ecological Research, created in 1972; the first wildlife area for Apennine wolves at Civitella Alfedena, created in 1971; and the first strict nature reserve, the Camosciara, created in 1972.

It is now recognized that what has been achieved in the park could succeed even better if one could safeguard vaster areas, somehow connected to each other. The greater Abruzzo region and its surrounding territories seems to have begun to accept this striking vision.

This is how a whole series of events developed to create a project known as the South European Park to make the Central Apennines a real protected "Nature Eden," representing a pilot model for the unified Europe of the Third Millennium. Since the Castelli Conference in 1976, inspired by the deceased Senator Giovanni Spagnoli, president of the Italian Alpine Club, to the Round Table Meeting of 1988, presided over by Professor Franco Pedrotti, president of the Italian Botanical Society, this project has been gradually taking shape. It took definite form at the beginning of 1990 when, thanks to a group of environmentalists, the ARVE Club (Abruzzo Regione Verde d'Europa, the Green Region of Europe) was set up. This club—with the support of all cultural, social, and political forces concerned about the fate of the Central Apennine natural environment—advocates a large

system of parks and protected areas in the Central Apennines which radiates out from the natural and historical hub of Abruzzo National Park.

This idea has continued to gain allies, and strengthened old, long-forgotten, and languishing proposals which found and continue to find a specific reference point in the national park. Critical elements of the project have started becoming a reality: the big national parks of Monti Sibillini, Gran Sasso-Laga, and Maiella were set up, including the Sirente-Velino Regional Natural Park. These three new national parks and one regional park will, along with Abruzzo National Park, make up the core of a grand South European Park.

Complementary activities are also taking place. In the greater Abruzzo region and in neighbouring ones 43 minor areas have emerged or were consolidated, among which are various types of reserves, refuges, and oases (natural areas managed by World Wildlife Fund-Italy) partly destined to be absorbed in or connected with the new parks mentioned above that will be part of the South European Park.

In addition, across Italy proposals are being studied for many future natural reserves (including marine areas). To complete the picture, two very important inter-regional parks will need to be created: Monti Ernici-Simbruini Natural Park between Abruzzo and Lazio, and Matese Natural Park between Molise and Cam-

pania. All future efforts of ARVE will be focused on creating a whole system of parks and protected areas.

It is obvious that once the basic framework for linking parks and protected areas into systems has been set up, it will have to develop active, modern promotional programs with creative management for each park and protected area in the system. These systems must be more than a vision on paper. For example, there is no doubt that to properly complete the system of the South European Park (destined to protect over 600,000 hectares of extraordinary Apennine natural environment) there must be a substantial series of wildlife ecological corridors among the various parks in order to attain one of the main goals of the project.

Conservation of the rarest, most precious, and important animals, such as the Marsican brown bear, the Abruzzo chamois, the Apennine wolf, and the European lynx, will be the most demanding task. These are the real "stars" of the adventure: living creatures from the huge "symbolic change" or "guide" species, species which are capable of expressing "maximum values," acting as "indicators" of the completeness of the ecosystem or as "quality brands" of Nature. However one wants to define these "animal-leaders" (or, according to some people, "animal-totems"), they have already carried out the duty of "park ambassador" by sweeping away any strong

preconceived resistance. The best example was at Maiella, where discussions about the park went on for at least 15 years. In spite of this, the public's concern for wildlife was sufficient to create a wildlife area for chamois at Lama dei Peligni, eventually leading to the successful relaunch of an old park proposal with substantial consensus by all the communities concerned.

Something similar is also happening, though more slowly and with some difficulty, in the rest of the Apennines from the Casentinesi forests to Aspromonte, from Cilento to Gargano. Pollino National Park, which was the most inspired by the Abruzzo experience and indeed has been living for 40 years in cultural symbiosis with it, is having difficulty taking off due to numerous political intrigues, local conflicts, and managerial inability.

Meanwhile, additional systems of parks and protected areas are being envisioned in other well-characterized geographical regions of peninsular Italy that are rich in special features and natural values, such as Maremma of Tuscany and Latium; Calabria, "the green point of Europe"; and Campania felix, the ancient and wealthy land around Naples and its environs.

The National Parks Committee, which from 1980 onwards aimed tenaciously to protect at least 10% of the "Bel Paese" (Italy), has carried out a very successful campaign (in the

Abruzzo region more than 30% of the regional territory is already protected). Beyond its environmental and cultural meaning, this new strategy of creating systems of parks and protected areas is turning out to be dynamic from a social and economic standpoint because it has already demonstrated by incontrovertible

facts that the best way to re-animate declining communities and attract consistent flows of wealth from the "strong" areas to the "weak" and peripheral ones is to focus on natural resources. Hence a national park, or a system of parks and protected areas, can be the best solution for the future.

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