

Roberto Gambino

Parks for the Future: A European Perspective

Which are the parks of the future? Or rather, which role can they play in shaping our future? The second question is much more interesting if we are trying to understand the limits and weaknesses of current policies in establishing and managing protected areas and to envisage new strategies for nature conservation. The answer to such a question may be, in fact, highly uncertain—at least from a European perspective. Despite the spectacular growth of nature parks (over the whole of Europe, a tenfold increase in less than 40 years)—or, better put, *thanks* to such growth—their role and even their conception are going through the deepest crisis since their birth in the 19th century. Paradoxically, the striking success of park policies has pointed out their limitations and the necessity of “going beyond” parks in light of their changing relationship with social processes. In Europe, scientists and politicians, park managers, tour operators, and environmentalists are realizing that effective nature conservation requires broader and more complex strategies. Some countries with sound traditions in nature conservation, such as Denmark, do not consider park policies to be the most effective answer to the social demands concerning nature and environmental quality. The social, economic, and cultural impacts of parks have, in any event, increased considerably throughout Europe. There is no doubt that parks and protected areas have strongly contributed to shaping our attitudes toward our natural heritage during the last century. In the recent past, they increasingly have helped us to deal with the values of the land where we live. Can they continue in helping us to shape our future? What is their specific contribution, if any? In the attempt to answer these questions, we may start from some preliminary observations on how the role and conception of parks are changing.

In the early history of parks, celebration of nature was the focal point. It was so in the mind of Frederick Law Olmsted (who, in the 1860s, was instrumental in the creation of what would eventually become Yosemite National Park), and it was so in the

establishment of the first European parks, such as the Swiss National Park (1914) or the Gran Paradiso National Park in Italy (1922). Along with providing for public enjoyment they had to fulfill their mission as nature sanctuaries, monuments of a

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distinctive national heritage. Much of this conception still remains in international definitions of protected areas (particularly in IUCN's Category II, national park) and in many European national laws.

But this conception now covers only a small proportion of European parks. Their expansion in the second half of the 20th century, whereby they increasingly encompass humanized territories and cultural landscapes, has deeply changed their character and role. It is not by chance that most European protected areas are classified by IUCN as Category V protected landscapes. Indeed, in 1998 one of the largest Italian parks, Cilento e Vallo di Diano National Park (1,800 sq km), was recognized by UNESCO as a "cultural landscape" of worldwide relevance under the World Heritage Convention (as have others). In Europe, of course, natural values are always mixed with cultural ones. A resolution adopted in 1998 by the Council of Europe for the European Landscape Convention recognizes this by observing that the landscape, which always results from the interaction between natural and cultural factors, represents a basic component of natural and cultural heritage. The resolution further states that landscape protection "applies to the whole European territory, affecting natural, rural, urban and peri-urban spaces," covering both "remarkable and ordinary landscapes, all conditioning the quality of life of

people." Obviously, this is particularly true in the "inhabited parks"; the large majority of regional parks, the *Lander* parks in Germany, and a good share of the national parks are in fact lived-in landscapes. And it is even more true in parks that include a high density of historical remains and cultural values, as very frequently happens in Italy and other European countries.

But overcoming the traditional separation between nature and culture has a more general meaning. It draws our attention to cultural relevance, which must be recognized even in areas where natural values are dominant, as in many large parks of northern Europe and in remote mountain areas, or where previously existing ancient settlements have been abandoned. As stated in the Alpine Convention (signed in 1991), mountain regions, including those never exploited by humans, have an inherent cultural meaning that is recognized around the world. As a consequence of this new attention, the processes of economic and demographic decline, which affect a large portion of Europe's rural regions, are becoming a crucial problem, especially where landscape conservation and cultural interests may conflict with growing opportunities for "re-naturalisation" and "rewilding." While these processes outline new and promising scenarios, whereby human pressures on and interference with natural dynamics may be erased

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or substantially reduced, cultural options and landscape protection may often require policies aiming to maintain the human presence and associated traditional activities, so as to take care of the territory. Such policies also are often required for soil conservation and prevention of hydrogeological risks. Furthermore, problems of maintaining regional identities are linked with worries concerning the conservation of biodiversity. In Europe, there is in fact a growing awareness of the historical connection between biodiversity and landscape and cultural diversification, the conservation of which often requires active management of highly unstable successional stages, strictly tied to the landscape fragmentation and the economic, social, and cultural diversification that took place in the past. This implies that the biosphere and natural values cannot be separated from cultural meanings. This should increasingly influence the role and conception of parks in the near future.

With regard to policies, a focal issue is the integration of parks into their regional contexts. The growing relevance of this issue relates, first of all, to the above-mentioned diffusion of nature parks. Most of them are now located very close to urban or industrial areas, or even inside them. Most also are exposed to growing pressures, which are even more threatening as their size is very small (less than 400 sq km on average, 32% less

than 50 sq km). An important share (21%) are like “besieged islands”: small natural or semi-natural spaces surrounded by an increasingly hostile context, while another 3% really look like urban parks. Many, as we have noted, include important human settlements, or are surrounded by them. The expansion of European parks has been shaped by evolving economic, social, and cultural processes—first among them the urban diffusion of the last decades—that have deeply changed the problems facing protected areas. Pollution, perturbations, ravages, and other threats deriving from urbanization, infrastructure development, tourism, or from technological innovations in agriculture, sheep-raising, and forestry, can have an impact on park conditions much more detrimental and irreversible than the traditional threats related to hunting, grazing, or farming, even if those processes take place outside their borders. And the reaction of the parks’ internal ecosystems depends on what happens in the surrounding bioregions. Given the small size of many European parks, the risks of “insularisation,” with its negative consequences on biodiversity, are widespread.

The problems of environmental protection and nature conservation inside the parks are therefore more and more inter-related with conflicts over social and economic development outside their boundaries. Issues of sustainable development are as-

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suming a very specific significance for most European parks. This is why they are increasingly conceived of as being essential workshops for searching out more sustainable paths of development, pioneering new models of interaction between social and natural processes and creating new jobs based on nature conservation instead of despoliation. In many cases, the establishment of a park simply reflects the hope that it can work as a "development engine" for a disfavoured or marginal area.

But these goals do not concern protected areas exclusively; they concern the whole territory. Therefore, park policies have to be integrated with broader policies in a regional approach. As IUCN stated in 1996, it requires adopting "ecosystems or bioregions as the appropriate geographic scale for resource management programmes, within which protected areas are enveloped as components in a diverse landscape, including farms, harvested forests, fishing grounds, human settlements and infrastructure." If we look at park planning in Europe (66% of the parks have a either a completed or pending management plan), we can observe an emergent tendency towards attempting to connect parks and other natural spaces within ecological networks. Local and regional networks may be conceived as part of the European Ecological Network, launched at the Maastricht Conference on Natural Heritage in 1993.

The network aims to apply sustainability principles to the whole of Europe and particularly to "improve the resilience of its natural systems to adverse environmental changes," thus reducing the risks of insularisation. In this trans-scale frame, parks may be seen as important nodes of inter-regional networks and, at the same time, as local networks of nodes constituted by different resources. And this conception may be enriched by taking into account, besides ecological connections, environmental corridors based on roads and paths, as well as forests and other natural features that can foster proper enjoyment of natural and cultural resources within and outside the protected areas. This is, for instance, the idea behind such important projects as the Appennino Parco d'Europa in Italy.

Despite their strategic interest, ecological networks are inadequate to deal with the complexity of actual ecosystems, above all in those areas characterized by "diffused naturalness," which constitute a large share of rural Europe. In these areas, the main problem is to preserve the quality and the continuity of the ecological matrix, resulting from the interaction of human and natural components, in which parks and other natural spaces are located. Policies must take into account the needs and attitudes of the rural communities, as some European directives have recently suggested. More generally, the expansion of environmental protec-

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tion to the entire region relates to landscape planning and management, which are now developing in many European countries. These tendencies suggest the emergence of parks as an integral and inseparable part of broader systems. This consideration may have a great effect on institutional frameworks for nature conservation in years to come.

The above consideration may be stressed if we keep in mind the growing pluralism of decision processes in regional governance. The spatial expansion of conservation policies must be based on cooperation among a number of actors and institutions. As IUCN stated in 1996, it has to be supported "with actions which encourage cooperation between private landowners, indigenous peoples, other local communities, industry and resource users; the use of economic incentives, tax arrangements, land exchanges, and other mechanisms to promote biodiversity conservation; and the development of administrative and technical capacities which encourage local stakeholders, academic and research institutions and public agencies to harmonize their efforts." The cooperative approach reflects, of course, the necessity of consensus—something already largely reflected in European park policies. "Protected areas," it has been said, "will survive only if they are seen to be of value, in the widest sense, to the nation as a whole and to local people in particu-

lar." But cooperative management and planning also implies a search for synergies and complementarities that can produce "added value" and that allow the achievement of results unobtainable by any single actor. Particularly, a cooperative approach can foster the empowerment of local government and local actors, directly involving them in resource management, thereby strengthening their responsibility. It is worth noting that in Europe, despite differences in institutional and political contexts, a vigorous tendency towards intergovernmental and co-operative approaches may be observed even in those countries (such as Italy) whose legislation is still characterized by a hierarchical, top-down order.

As a consequence of the cooperative orientation, we can observe in the last decade an important shift in the attention of planners, managers, and politicians from the *products* of their activities (plans, projects, regulations, and realizations) to the *processes* by which they are achieved. Experiences in management and planning have shown, in fact, that the social processes for making decisions and implementing plans (how to do, with whom, by which means) are often more important than their results. This is, for instance, the basic perspective of the Scottish programme (entitled "Working with Scotland's People to Take Care of Our Natural Heritage") or the recent programme of the Peak District National Park,

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U.K. ("Shaping the Future," the first document in its new management plan). These and other experiences are akin to the American greenways concept of working together. In this perspective, negotiation processes among different stakeholders are assuming a growing importance for resolving environmental conflicts, as well as in mediating confrontations among different interests, by taking into account the costs and benefits associated with development or conservation choices. Planning a park is becoming more and more a complex process of social and institutional interaction, based on agreements and consultations, exchange of documents and cross-evaluations. Cooperative or "compact" planning is becoming the rule, even when it is not explicitly provided for within the institutional and legal frameworks. Increasingly, a park must be seen as a social, economic, and cultural process instead of an institutional event, dropped from above like some alien reality.

In the light of the above considerations, we can try to answer the initial question. In the near future—at least from a European perspective—parks will probably play a significant role as important social processes, actively conserving and valorising unique sets of natural and cultural resources, and also serving as nodes within networks that aim to support the sustainable development of whole regions. Parks can no longer

be conceived of as mere islands of unendangered nature, set aside from social and cultural processes and ruled by aloof institutions—even though most of them will continue to offer an essential experience of nature, and will generally continue to need special institutional protections against many human threats. But this answer is still not satisfactory. In fact, the goals of natural and cultural heritage conservation and valorisation, the search for sustainable development, do not concern only parks, but the entire areas used (directly or indirectly) by human society. What, in this larger context, is the specific role of parks? Is there a mission that only parks can efficiently perform in shaping our future?

It is, perhaps, precisely the expansion and differentiation of conservation policies that can give parks a more specific role—in symbolic, cognitive, and cultural terms. In fact, a distinctive feature of parks is now, and always has been, their prominent symbolic value. This goes far beyond ecological value. It relates to a peculiar mix of natural beauty, landscape uniqueness, historical meaning, and cultural significance. As a track of our relationship with nature, parks are a powerful "living metaphor" of a new alliance between humans and the earth. This is not far from the spiritual and educational missions envisaged by the founders of the first nature parks in the 19th century, but it is becoming even more important in our

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contemporary communications-oriented society. Now and into the near future, the parks' own communication role should prevail in every functional mission. A new partnership between social and natural processes implies a sound understanding of how ecological dynamics and environmental constraints influence human choices and are influenced by them. Nature parks have offered, since their birth, an extraordinary ground of experience for scientific research. Park planning and management have substantially contributed to the advancement of scientific knowledge and attempts to "design with nature" (as Ian McHarg recommended). In Europe, this contribution is becoming more and more irreplaceable owing to the progressive wasting and degradation of natural spaces. Moreover, parks are becoming focal points for environmental education. Through their communi-

cation and interpretation activities, park authorities can significantly help people to learn how to live in harmony with nature.

Finally, park policies play a growing role in the valorisation of local identities. In the European experience, parks are more and more being conceived of as essential tools for enhancing and improving local values, specificities, and cultures. Since they are very often located in "losing" areas affected by economic, social, and cultural decline, the image of the parks can be seen by local communities as a powerful means for asserting their rights, competencies and identities. And, what is even more important, parks can help avoid the risk of conservation of local values falling back on a nostalgic, hopeless defence of the past by instead inserting these values into broader, open networks of social and cultural development.

Roberto Gambino, Politecnico di Torino, Dipartimento Interateneo Territorio, Viale Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino, Italy

