

# Marsh and Mayors: With David Lowenthal in Italy

*Rolf Diamant*

ABOUT 15 YEARS AGO, Nora Mitchell, then the director of the National Park Service's Conservation Study Institute, was teaching at the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome when she received an invitation to lunch at the American Embassy with the deputy chief of mission and the minister of the Council for Economic Affairs. The embassy officials had recently heard about the newly established Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, where Mitchell's organization was based and where I was superintendent, and wanted to learn more about park and institute programs.

The new national park and the imposing US embassy on the Via Veneto share an important connection—the great conservationist George Perkins Marsh. The park interprets the life and work of Marsh, known around the world for his landmark 1864 publication *Man and Nature*. The book was written while Marsh was in Italy, after being appointed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1861 as the first ambassador to that emergent republic. Marsh would remain in Italy as ambassador until he died in 1882, a remarkable 21-year tenure serving six consecutive US presidents.

Upon learning from Mitchell that the preeminent geographer, historian, and Marsh scholar, David Lowenthal, was releasing a revised edition of his standard biography,<sup>1</sup> the embassy proposed a book/lecture tour in Italy for him. Lowenthal would speak on the legacy of Marsh and the relevance of his vision of stewardship to contemporary Italy at a series of roundtable discussions with invited historians, conservationists, and public officials. Mitchell and I, as institute director and park superintendent, respectively, were asked to join Lowenthal to describe the emerging role of our new national park and institute, and help lay the groundwork for a US State Department exchange program between the US National Park Service and Italian protected area professionals, established in honor of Marsh.

Our lecture tour took us to various cities; however, our visit to Naples was particularly memorable. We arrived to find the meeting room at the US Consulate filled with representatives from national parks and other protected areas, local mayors and regional government

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officials, foundations, nongovernmental organizations, and universities. After lunch and introductions we gathered around a large table where Lowenthal, in his customary fashion, began the program recounting Marsh's impact on the nascent 19th-century Italian conservation movement and the creation of the Italian republic.

In his introduction to *Man and Nature*, Lowenthal has written: "As amateur citizens, all of us need to care enough for our environment to become capable of shaping and ready to promote the reforms essential to its sustenance."<sup>2</sup> In Naples, Lowenthal elaborated on Marsh's belief in the crucial role of the citizen environmentalist in a democratic society. Marsh did not trust leaving key decisions in the hands of experts only. Rather, he believed that every citizen in a democracy had to be knowledgeable enough about the issues of the day to participate in the decision-making process and not become over-reliant on specialists.<sup>3</sup>

In his foreword to John Elder's *Pilgrimage To Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh*, Lowenthal had also written, "History like ecology humbles Earth's stewards.... Conservation is the crux of Marsh's partnership between the living, the dead, and those who are to be born. It is the duty we owe our descendants on behalf of our ancestors."<sup>4</sup> That afternoon Lowenthal described Ambassador Marsh's belief in progress, his faith in reform, and how conservation is inherently inseparable from heritage.

Attendees at previous tour venues would usually at this point in the program join in with questions and observations. But the Naples participants still wanted to hear more. So he continued, pointing out that many of the numerous obstacles to conservation in Marsh's day still exist in today's world, and are not unique to Italy—we encounter them on both sides of the Atlantic. "Immediate urgent crises, restless mobility, faceless corporate irresponsibility, the fraying of community ties, the democratic process itself," Lowenthal wrote in his biography of Marsh, "all impose a tyranny of the present that threatens to throttle stewardship."<sup>5</sup> In an article that he would write some years later for the National Park Service's *CRM Journal*, he would warn "that resource stewardship of nature and culture and of both together cannot be only an occasional, one-off activity; it must be embedded in everyday behavior towards land ... [and] the places we live in as well as those we visit and dream about." Marsh, he said, had long ago recognized "widespread popular support is essential to sustain heritage stewardship over the long term."<sup>6</sup>

Lowenthal concluded his remarks that afternoon in Naples with the observation that Marsh was also a realist and cer-



Roundtable discussion in Naples. Photo courtesy of the author.

tainly understood the obstacles “amateur citizens” would face in trying to be good stewards of the land and heritage. Those barriers could only be surmounted by a well-grounded sense of place and of heritage, and a growing sense of local, regional, and national obligation.

As he put his notes down, the group appeared to take a collective breath and then the room exploded with everyone talking at once. The conversation at first centered on the lack of respect for public lands in the region around Naples and an unchecked epidemic of “eco-crime.” Most egregious, in the opinion of many in the room, was the illegal tipping or dumping of hazardous industrial wastes on public lands, including national parks and protected areas, most of it facilitated by organized criminal gangs. One person after another lamented that too many people in Italy view this kind of environmental crime as only a crime against the state rather than a crime against all humanity and all living creatures. This situation is further exacerbated by the weakness of Italy’s central government and its environmental statutes. In response, environmental organizations initiated thousands of civil actions against illegal dumping.

Everyone in the room agreed, however, that what was really needed was a fundamental shift in public thinking and behavior. Local officials spoke about steps they were taking to strengthen the credibility and accountability of regional and central governments. They were also working to broaden public engagement and participation in civic institutions, and to establish confidence in the basic rule of law—all elements essential for a functional modern democracy. This is why Lowenthal’s remarks about inclusiveness, civic behavior, and stewardship had resonated so powerfully that afternoon.

As Lowenthal, Mitchell, and I watched this dialogue unfold it became clearer that this was no ordinary book tour. Our tour had served a larger agenda as a catalyst for dialogue on the pressing environmental issues facing Italy at that moment in time. The tour organizers understood well William Faulkner’s maxim that “The past is not dead. It’s not even past.” In the same spirit as Ambassador Marsh’s mission to encourage Italy’s *risorgimento* and the new nation-state that was then taking shape, in a small way, Lowenthal’s book tour, 135 years later, was also aimed at strengthening Italy’s democratic governance and civic institutions.

My other epiphany was all about David Lowenthal. Like a skilled musician, with near-perfect pitch and timing, I had seen him deftly transition a lecture on George Perkins Marsh to a larger conversation about civic environmentalism and contemporary stewardship—a performance I will not forget.

## Endnotes

1. David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
2. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature* (reprint edition; originally published 1864), David Lowenthal, ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p. 15.
3. Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh*, pp. 427–428.
4. John Elder, *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. xi.
5. Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh*, p. 428.

6. David Lowenthal, "Pioneering Stewardship: New Challenges for CRM," *CRM Journal* (Fall 2003), pp. 10–12.

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