

Between propaganda and preservation: The Italian National Parks in the Alps

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Summary

This essay looks at the early history of the two most ancient Italian Alpine national parks: the Gran Paradiso and the Stelvio. Central in this investigation is the analysis of the role of preservation, tourism and propaganda in the constitution of both parks, with comparative remarks to other planned parks and paying attention to conflicts between parks and local population under Fascist rule. As a general trend the early history of Italian Alpine preservation shows that the parks have not always followed ecological interest, but often just the aims of propaganda and tourism promotion.

Keywords

Gran Paradiso, Stelvio, tourism, mountaineering, national identity, rare species

Even if traditionally Italy lacked an Alpine culture, and wilderness in general was perceived as dangerous and unhealthy, there are at least two symbolic reasons and a practical one that have stimulated the attention for nature preservation on the Alps: their role as “wardens of the fatherland”, the value of some particularly rare animal species, such as the ibex or the brown bear, as icons of the uniqueness of Italian nature, and the promotion of tourism.¹

Nonetheless, the idea of national parks did not have an easy start in Italy. One prominent preservationist, mainly interested in landscapes and natural monuments, even wrote: “I do not think that the presence of an ibex makes the natural framework more beautiful”.² However in the 1910s the idea got momentum and about twenty-five parks were proposed, including at least four Alpine parks: one in the Graian Alps, two in Trentino, and another in the Venetian Alps.³ One of the earliest, unsuccessful, plans was for a park in the Livigno area, that would have constituted a sort of buffer area for the Swiss National Park. The project obtained the support of some important Italian preservationists, even if they held that in the area there were no peculiar elements of flora or fauna to preserve and that the valley was geographically not part of Italy. The idea was probably that any park was better than no park.⁴

The first Italian national park, the *Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso*, was established only in December 1922 in a completely different area: the Graian Alps, north of Turin. The debate about the institution of a park in this region, at the same time physically at the extreme periphery of the Italian state and symbolically at the centre of its history because of its bonds to the Royal House,

¹ G. Andreotti, *Scorci di uomini in movimento. Migrazioni, Pellegrinaggi, Viaggi* (Trento: Valentina Trentini, 2006), 256; G. Zanetto, F. Vallerani, S. Soriani, *Nature, Environment, Landscape: European Attitudes and Discourses in the Modern Period, the Italian Case 1920-1970* (Padova: Università di Padova, 1996), 66-67; J. Sievert, *The Origins of Nature Conservation in Italy* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 101-16. The quotation is by Quintino Sella and cited in A. Pastore, *Alpinismo e storia d'Italia. Dall'Unità alla Resistenza* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2003), 18.

² Giovanni Rosadi, quoted in F. Ventura, *Alle origini della tutela delle «bellezze naturali» in Italia*, in *Storia Urbana* 40(1987), 26.

³ J. Sievert, *The Origins of Nature Conservation*, cit., 173; L. Piccioni, *Il volto amato della Patria. Il primo movimento per la protezione della natura in Italia 1880-1894* (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 1999), 198.

⁴ A. F. Saba, *Cultura, natura, riciclaggio. Il fascismo e l'ambiente dal movimento ruralista alle necessità autarchiche*, in A.F. Saba-E. Meyer (eds.) *Storia ambientale. Una nuova frontiera storiografica* (Milano: Teti Editore, 2001), 81; F. Pedrotti, *Notizie storiche sul Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio* (Trento: Temi Editrice, 2005), 46; R. Pampanini, *Per la protezione della flora italiana. Relazione presentata alla riunione generale della Società Botanica Italiana in Roma (12-16 ottobre 1911)*, in *Bollettino della Società Botanica Italiana*, XX, 7(1911), 57; Lino Vaccari, *Per la protezione della fauna italiana. Comunicazione alla Società Zoologica Italiana*, in *Bollettino della Società Zoologica Italiana*, s. III, I, 1-4(1912), 60.

had gained momentum because of the King's 1919 decision to donate his hunting reserve on the Gran Paradiso massif, provided that the State created there a park. Managed by an autonomous scientific commission the park focussed on research and the conservation of ibex. As the previous Royal hunting reserve, it was however based on a complex system of tenancies with private landowners, an issue that led to a state of constant conflict about hunting and grazing rights between park and local communities. This partially jeopardized the park's ability to pursue its tasks in nature conservation.⁵

The government lost soon interest in the park, and the management was left to the scientific commission, which obtained a rather positive record: ibex population increased between 1922 and 1933 by more than 60%, reaching 3865 units.⁶ Disrespect for the park's role as wildlife refuge under Fascist rule went as far as allowing the Army to perform military drills within it and starting in the 1930s the sale of hunting permits. In 1934 the park's autonomous administration was disbanded and put under the control of the paramilitary *Milizia Forestale Nazionale*, as to allow the regime to create an eminently Fascist approach to nature conservation. This marked the temporary end of the park's role in ibex conservation and the beginning of a period of decline: by the end of WWII the ibex population had plummeted to only 419 units. Moreover the change caused a renewed upsurge in conflict with local population.

The *Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio* in Trentino was established in April 1935, with the statutory aim to preserve the environment and promote tourism, in an area that – having been until less than 20 years before under Austrian rule – was particularly representative of the role of the Alps as ramparts of Italian national identity. Various plans for a similar endeavour, focussing however mainly on the neighbouring Livigno valley or the Adamello-Brenta massif, had been made since the beginning of the century. In the case of Livigno, the area was preferred, as we have seen, because of its continuity with the Swiss National Park and, not incidentally for the plans made before WWI, because it was already part of Italy. The first of many projects for a national park on the Adamello-Brenta, hosting an endangered brown bear colony, was drafted in 1919.⁷

Even if the area presented some exceptional natural features, such as the only deer colony in the central Alps, the real aim of the Stelvio park, planned by representatives of the *Club Alpino Italiano* and the *Touring Club* and then managed by the *Milizia Forestale Nazionale*, was not conservation but to foster outdoor leisure activities and mountaineering through the improvement of the recreational infrastructures, within a major plan drafted by the regime in those years to promote mass tourism. Another aim was to accord the *Milizia Forestale Nazionale* a further scenario to practise its power politics.⁸ Even the name of the park had been chosen because it was shorter than Ortles-Cevedale, the actual name of the massif, and more effective as a marketing tool. Only fleeting hints were made to the area's environmental features, while the aim was to create a park that did not demand too much in terms of limitations as regards, for example, public works and transports. Later, one of the proponents even affirmed that he was ready to sacrifice the growth and conservation of a chamois herd if it would allow to build a road with the money saved for bans, signposts, and wardens.⁹

As a consequence of the limited role of the Stelvio park in actually preserving its natural assets, from a first cursory survey in the archives it seems that it was not felt as a direct menace to the local population's customary rights to use natural resources. Nonetheless, there were conflicts between the municipalities and the park about the issue of land management, but it seems to me that these conflicts regarded more issues of principle rather than a real impact of the park on the mountain-dwellers' rights of access and use. As far as may be confidently stated at this early point of my research it seems that the *Milizia Forestale Nazionale* was focussed on a business-as-usual policy, without even taking notice of the area's fauna, flora and natural monuments.¹⁰

⁵ W. Graf von Hardenberg, *Fascist Nature. Environmental policies and conflicts in Italy, 1922-1945*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Cambridge: Department of Geography, 2007), 122-183.

⁶ The data on ibex population are taken from *Diagrammi delle variazioni degli stambecchi, delle guardaparco e degli amministratori del Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso dal 1922 al*, not dated (Archivio PNGP XI/2)

⁷ F. Pedrotti, *Notizie storiche sul Parco Naturale Adamello Brenta* (Trento: Temi, 2008), 143-178,

⁸ G. Bertarelli, Il gruppo dell'Ortles-Cevedale (Alpi Retiche Centrali), in *Le vie d'Italia*, XXXV, 8(1929), 621-630; P. Dogliani, Territorio e identità nazionale: parchi naturali e parchi storici nelle regioni d'Europa e del Nord America, in *Memoria e Ricerca*, 1(1998), 34; Piccioni, *Il volto amato*, cit., 265-268 and 271-275.

⁹ G. Bertarelli, Il Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio. Lettera aperta al professor Renzo Videsott, in *Lo Scarpone*, November 16, 1947; Pedrotti, *Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio*, cit., 49-52.

¹⁰ A. Leonardi, Il proporsi e il consolidarsi di una coscienza ambientale: l'esperienza quarantennale dei parchi naturali del Trentino, in *Storia e Futuro*, 18(October 2008), www.storiaefuturo.com; see also *Bollettino degli Usi Civici*, various issues, 1930-1943 and *Amministrazione Forestali di Trento, Ispettorato ripartimentale delle foreste di Trento*, bb. 1-636, Archivio Provinciale di Trento.

Many regional parks have been set up since the end of the 1960s in the Italian Alps (e.g. the Adamello-Brenta), but it was necessary to wait 1990 before a third national park was set up in the Dolomites near Belluno, a belated realization of the park of the Venetian Alps proposed in 1919 as a refuge for an endangered colony of wild grouse.

As has been shown above both scientific research (the Swiss model) and recreation (the American model), besides the ever present defence of national identity, had a peculiar role in the planning and management of Italian parks. In particular, it may be said that, at least after 1934, propaganda and tourism superseded preservation as the main aims of Alpine parks in Fascist Italy. The combination of these factors, combined with increasing economic problems and indifference towards preservation, had foreseeable negative effects on the parks' flora and fauna in their early history.

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