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Spiritual Values of Landscape for a Recomposition between Nature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

The natural, cultural and spiritual values that local communities assign to holy lands is a fundamental concept to consider in landscape conservation. In sacred sites, people meet and express their spiritual meanings through their individual experience.

Among these holy lands are the sacred natural sites, with habitats and ecosystems which comprise endangered or sacred species. Sacred natural sites support nature conservation, expand human well-being, encompass tangible and intangible values and create that spiritual relationship between people and the web of life.

Sacred sites, moreover, embeds natural, cultural and spiritual values that communities put into holy land, which in turn become a sacred landscape. As outlined in this special issue of Alma Tourism, in sacred landscape the connection between nature and culture is explicated by the values that people attribute to a holy area.

Natural, cultural and spiritual values of landscape are the main aspects analysed in this research, which starts from the hypothesis that sacred landscapes serve to conserve both natural and cultural heritage. It also analyses and evaluates sacred landscapes under threat, and proposes measures to preserve them.

Natural, cultural and spiritual values of sacred landscape are here introduced and discussed through European and global conventions, and are described with several examples in Italy in general, and with a case study in Tuscany in particular.

Keywords: Sacred Landscape; Natural, Cultural and Spiritual Values; Landscape and Nature

I valori naturali, culturali e spirituali che le comunità locali pongono sulle terre sante sono concetti fondamentali da considerare nella conservazione del paesaggio. Nei luoghi sacri la gente si incontra ed esprime il proprio significato spirituale attraverso la

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propria esperienza.

Tra queste terre sante vi sono i luoghi sacri naturali, con habitat ed ecosistemi che comprendono specie sacre o endemiche. I luoghi sacri naturali supportano la conservazione della natura, espandono il benessere umano, includono valori tangibili ed intangibili, e creano quelle relazioni tra la gente e la rete della vita.

I luoghi sacri, inoltre, racchiudono valori naturali, culturali e spirituali che le comunità pongono nella terra santa, che a sua volta diventa un paesaggio sacro. Come evidenziato in questa edizione speciale di Almatourism, nel paesaggio sacro la connessione tra natura e cultura è esplicitata dai valori che la gente gli attribuisce.

I valori naturali, culturali e spirituali del paesaggio sono gli aspetti principali analizzati in questa ricerca, che prende avvio dall'ipotesi che i paesaggi sacri aiutano a conservare il patrimonio sia naturale che culturale. Inoltre analizza e valuta i paesaggi sacri minacciati, e propone misure per preservarli.

I valori naturali, culturali e spirituali dei paesaggi sacri sono qui introdotti e discussi attraverso le convenzioni europee e mondiali, e sono descritti con diversi esempi in Italia in generale, e in Toscana in particolare.

Keywords: Paesaggio Sacro; Valori Naturali, Culturali e Spiritual; Paesaggio e Natura

Introducing the context: sacred landscape and people in European and global conventions

One of the theoretical foundations of the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000) is to identify and assess landscape using research fields in a particular conjunction with the local people. Each research field should consider both natural and artificial components, together with external drivers that can induce changes to the general picture. However, while various studies have considered beauty, scenery and the aesthetics of landscape, past research has focussed more on the physical characters of landscape, taking into account morphology, patterns, land use, nature and its wildlife habitats.

Another theoretical foundation of the Florence Convention is to consider landscape as the basis of local identity (Berti, 2012). With the assumption that the well-being of landscape is closely related to the level of public awareness and public involvement in decisions affecting living environments, the Convention includes people at the very heart of landscape conservation and management.

This calls for a stronger consideration of cultural heritage in our European landscapes, strictly connected to the people that have shaped them, and have attached to them for centuries their values and meanings. Therefore, the integration of cultural and spiritual values of land and local communities into landscape conservation becomes imperative in Europe.

At global level, recognition has been given to sacred natural sites by worldwide organisations: IUCN (The World Conservation Union), WWF International (World Wildlife Found), ARC (Alliance of Religions and Conservation), and lastly the UN (United Nations) with CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) and the UNESCO WHC (World Heritage Convention).

In 1998, UNESCO, WWF and IUCN, together with indigenous groups, have discussed ways to integrate sacred natural sites in their conservation work. Several workshops and conferences with case studies conducted by both scientists and practitioners have been developed from then, especially from UNESCO-IUCN collaboration (Schaaf and Lee, 2006) and from the IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA). Among the latter, four initiatives have been crucial for the advance of sacred natural sites knowledge: the Sacred Land Film Project by McLeod, the Sacred Natural Sites Guidelines for Protected Area Managers (Wild and McLeod, 2008), the Delos Initiative on Sacred Protected Areas in Developed Countries (Papayannis and Mallarach, 2009), and the 3S Initiative on Sacred Specie and Sites (Pungetti et al., 2012a).

Moreover, it is notable the work of WWF International on Sacred Sites in one hundred protected areas (Dudley et al., 2005). Furthermore, the CBD in 2004 developed the Akwe Kon voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessments regarding proposed developments that may affect sacred sites on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities (CBD Secretariat, 2004). Finally, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted to support appropriate policies for the protection and

recognition of sacred natural sites at national level. In particular, UN declares that "indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains" (UNDRIP, 2007).

Cultural and spiritual values of landscape are the focus of our research, which examines the importance of these values in some outstanding sacred landscapes.

1. Cultural and spiritual values of landscape and nature

"For many people around the world, protected areas are perceived not so much as in-situ repositories of genetic wealth, but as primal landscapes of the creation that deeply touch the spiritual, cultural, aesthetic and relational dimensions of human existence" (Putney, 2006). Sacred natural sites and other places of importance to faith groups, accordingly, have been identified both inside and outside parks.

On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that sacred natural sites are rich in biodiversity and represent a strong biodiversity conservation opportunity (Verschuuren et al., 2010; Pungetti et al., 2012a). On the other hand, sacred natural sites represent ancient cultural values. The custodians of sacred sites from indigenous, local communities and mainstream religions express devoted efforts in conserving the sacred aspect of landscape, and the care they have for nature in a variety of ways.

While sacred natural sites are connected to intangible heritage, they also retain tangible heritage. They provide resources and ecosystem services (Bhagwat, 2009) as well as host spiritual, traditional and educational events. Linking to livelihoods, in addition, they provide cultural services and human wellbeing associated with them (Bassa and Kiss, 2016). Finally, they support religious tourism, as they are destination of sacred sites and pilgrimage routes with their associated service sectors and economic growth (Timothy, 2011).

Although European landscapes contain values important to one or more faiths, the predominant relation is with the mainstream faiths. Projects and initiatives of the IUCN Task Force on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas, like the 3S by CCLP (Cambridge Centre for Landscape and People) and Delos by MED-INA, have outlined this relation. In particular, they have proved that sacred landscapes retain also high conservation values (Mallarach and Papayannis, 2007; McIvor and Pungetti, 2008) and therefore are important for studies on the relationship between nature and culture.

Cultural and spiritual values of sacred landscapes are at the core of the 3S Initiative on Sacred Species and Sites by CCLP, which is a focal point on sacred landscapes for the European Landscape Convention. With a global network of universities which links UNESCO, IUCN and WWF with the Council of Europe, CCLP has carried out studies (see Pungetti et al., 2012a) which promote interdisciplinary cooperation and dialogue on sacred landscape and the people that live in it.

2. Sacred landscapes

Sacred landscapes are areas of spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They include: a) natural areas recognised as sacred by indigenous and traditional peoples, and by religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance; and b) cultural areas with archaeological, architectonic, historical and traditional heritage.

Landscapes can be sacred regardless their age. Although many sacred landscapes have survived during times, their contribution to heritage conservation is still undervalued by national and international policies and laws. Yet, they are integral parts of ethnic identity and play a key role in traditional cultures and lifestyles.

Sacred landscapes with certain natural values have been protected by local communities. However, rural people are generally vulnerable to political and economic pressures outside their control. It is therefore necessary to develop security of tenure and active participation in decisions making about them. As Oviedo et al. (2005) puts it, without this it is impossible for such communities to effectively protect their lands and resources.

Many sacred natural landscapes are important areas for the conservation of biodiversity. Local communities throughout the world have assigned a sacred status to natural sites such as mountains, rivers, lakes, caves, forest groves, waters and islands. These natural sites, with their abiotic, biotic and human features, form a sacred natural landscape.

Conversely, sacred cultural landscapes are important areas for the conservation of heritage. People give a sacred status to cultural heritage such as archaeological sites, churches, temples, churchyards, burial grounds of ancestors, cemeteries, places of pilgrimage, or sites associated with special spiritual experience. These cultural sites, with their abiotic, biotic and human features, form a sacred cultural landscape.

Whether natural or cultural, the reasons for their sacredness lay between community and individual realms. These reasons are diverse: sacred landscapes are perceived as home of deities and ancestral spirits; as sources of healing water and plants; places of contact with the spiritual reality; and sites of revelation and transformation.

Like all other landscape types, sacred landscapes are dynamic. While many of the them have historical significance, they are not static in space and time, and new sites can be created according to the circumstances.

3. Italian sacred landscapes

In Italy, nature and culture have shown a clear interface. Traditional practices have demonstrated that a balance between nature and culture is still achievable (Makhzoumi and Pungetti, 1999; Pungetti 1995, 1996). However, when these practices decline due to land use changes, nature expands with comprehensible consequences to the landscape. Nature spontaneously takes over, in some cases with reduction of biological and landscape diversity, in other cases with the re-establishment of

ecosystems and ecological improvement (Pungetti and Romano, 2004).

In Italy, moreover, the link between natural habitats and human practices is evident and marks a dynamic and co-existent evolution of the resulting landscapes. Moreover, there is here a long-standing relationship between people and their landscape. The construction or destruction of sacred landscapes in Roman times, for example, can be linked in some regions to particular community stress or socio-political instability.

Furthermore, sacred landscapes can be referred to as a network of smaller and larger sanctuaries with different functions and appeals. Areas of historical and spiritual importance in Roman and Italic periods are found in Molise, in particular in two sanctuaries in the heartland of Samnium: San Giovanni in Galdo and Gildone in the province of Campobasso (Pelgrom and Stek, 2006).

Later than these are the archaeological sites of Paestum and Velia from classical times, and the Certosa of Padula in the Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park from the medieval times. They were listed Heritage Sites by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 1988. Cilento is indeed an outstanding cultural and spiritual landscape with groups of sanctuaries and settlements along its mountain ridges. History has deeply marked the Cilento region, as it was a major route not only for trade, but also for cultural and political interaction during the prehistoric and medieval times (Indelli, 1999). The Cilento was in fact the boundary between the Greek colonies of Magna Graecia and the indigenous Etruscan and Lucanian peoples.

Italy is scattered with sacred sites connected with Christian saints and monks; the best known are those of Saint Francis and his followers. Although his native home was Assisi in Umbria, he favoured La Verna in Tuscany and was also fond of the Valley of Rieti in Latium where he performed many miracles. For this reason, the area is called "The Sacred Valley". Four Franciscan sanctuaries are situated here. Among these are: Santa Maria della Foresta, where it is told that the Canticle of All Creatures and the Rule of the Franciscan Order were produced; and Rivodutri, with the "Saint Francis Beech Tree", famous for the remarkable way its branches intertwine and create gnarls of unusual beauty.

In the adjacent region of Abruzzo, the National Park of Majella, Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga counts over 40 churches, abbeys and hermitages related to Piero Angeleri, who became Pope Celestino V in 1294, and numerous cultural heritage sites especially on the slopes of the Majella Mountain. On the one hand, the mountains of Abruzzo have been for centuries an ideal place for meditation and retreat; they count in fact nearly 100 hermitages (Micati, 2000). On the other hand, they retain a rich wildlife, fascinating views and interesting population, elements that make their landscape particularly precious (Ardito, 2000).

Lastly, the nine Sacred Mountains of northern Italy, the so called 'Sacri Monti', present groups of chapels and other architectural features created in the late 16th and the 17th centuries and dedicated to different aspects of the Christian faith (Melis, 2005). In addition to their symbolic and spiritual meaning, these chapels are attractive and well integrated in the surrounding natural landscape of hills, forests and lakes. They house not only wall paintings and statues of artistic interest (Fontana et al., 2004), but also Franciscan priests likewise in some other areas illustrated before. The area was listed Heritage Site by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2003.

4. Case study: the Casentino Forests

The Casentino Forests (**Figure 1**) are in the National Park of Casentino Forests, Mount Falterona and Campigna. The Park covers a territory of around 36,000 hectares (i.e. 360 square kilometres) in the Apennines where the river Arno rises. In this area between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna there are three points of main spiritual importance: the Sanctuary of La Verna, the Monastery of Camaldoli and the Hermitage of Camaldoli.

The park stands as one of the most valuable forest areas of Europe. The Casentino State Forests are the core of the park, which includes the Integral Nature Reserve of Sasso Fratino. It is rich in spiritual and cultural values, with sacred species and cultural heritage in the forest.



Figure 1. The Casentino Forests

Source: Photo by author

5. Sacred species in the forest

Sacred species are plants and animals that are considered sacred by some communities, regardless their development in space and time. They are species that have spiritual values, and can have positive or negative impact on the environment according to their protection or exploitation (Pungetti, 2012) (**Figure 2**).

The silver fir is a sacred species among the vegetation of the Casentino forest. The fir was favoured at Camaldoli because its evergreen foliage and the incorruptible nature of pine resin were symbols of regeneration and immortality (Licciardello, 2004).

The fir trunk suggested spiritual aspiration, contemplation and communication

between heaven and earth. A crown of firs protects the Camaldoli Hermitage on the ridge to the north, and its practical purpose was given deeper significance by a symbolic association with Christ's crown of thorns and martyrdom (Pungetti et al., 2012b).

The most significant predator of the area, the Apennine wolf, is a sacred species among the fauna of the Casentino forest. It shares the territory with the wild boar, the roe deer, the fallow deer, the common deer and the mountain sheep.

Other biotic features of this sacred landscape, although some not sacred species, are pine, beech and mountain maple, which make up ancient and mixed woodlands rich in biodiversity. Over 1000 species of flora have been recorded (ibidem), the most valuable collection being found in the Mount Falco-Falterona massif.

Nearly 100 species of birds, in addition, can be found in the park (ibidem). They are typical of central Europe, e.g. the alpine tree-creeper, the bullfinch and the ring ouzel, or of the Mediterranean, e.g. the Sardinian warbler, the whitethroat and the black-headed bunting. The birds of prey include the sparrow hawk and goshawk, the golden eagle and the peregrine falcon. The spectacled salamander, the alpine newt, the spotted salamander and the small Italian geotritona are only a few of the 13 species of amphibians. The insect life is extremely rich, and the most famous reptile is the viper.



Figure 2. Beechwood in Casentino

Source: Photo by author

6. Cultural heritage in the forests

Stone bridges are significant culturally related values of the site. They still enable visitors to reach towns, villages, the hermitage and monasteries on foot, and mark ancient roads rich in history and art. Others include the Etruscan settlements and the “Pilgrims’ Way” which begins in far-off Germany, and follows the Via Roma (Roman Way) till descending into the Casentino and continuing to Rome.

There are also other signs of ancient habitation: country cottages, some isolated and

some clustered in small villages, abandoned and ruined castles and strongholds, and small stone shrines. This cultural heritage has been preserved during times by monks and local authorities, like the Sanctuary of La Verna (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3. Sanctuary of La Verna

Source: Photo by author

7. Sacred landscape and people

In the Casentino Forests the relationship between spiritual values and specific faith is evident. The main sacred sites of the area are the Roman Catholic Benedictine Hermitage and Monastery of Camaldoli, and the Franciscan Sanctuary of La Verna.

The Sanctuary of La Verna has been Hermitage of Saint Francis since 1213, while the Hermitage of Camaldoli was founded in 1024 by Saint Romuald (Cetoloni et al., 2003). The former is surrounded by firs and beech trees, and the latter by white firs. Today the natural heritage of the area, and part of its cultural heritage, are mainly managed by the Park.

The religious communities and the pilgrims are the most relevant social groups connected to the spiritual values of the area. Other groups however, such as the naturalists, cyclists, equestrian riders and tourists, for the most part appreciate both

the spiritual and natural values of the place and the relationship between them. The bodies responsible for the cultural and spiritual heritage of the place are the National Park of the Casentino Forests, Mount Falterona and Campigna, together with the Hermitage of Camaldoli, the Monastery of Camaldoli and the Sanctuary of La Verna (**Figure 4**). The work of secular and spiritual communities, and the values of these landscapes, are significantly respected by both the local population and visitors.



Figure 4. Monks and nuns in La Verna

Source: Photo by author

8. Driving forces of the Casentino landscape

Casentino has always shown the signs of its people and their shaping of the landscape. With the Second World War, however, a mass exodus began, leaving today just 1,500 inhabitants inside the Park (Casentino National Park, 2003).

The most dynamic activities here are connected to the religious orders on the one side, and to culture, nature and the forests on the other. Among pilgrimage, forest management, hiking and tourism, the latter is the main driving force.

There are no major economic or industrial activities having an impact on the site, and those present today do not compromise the natural environment.

Likewise, the impact of such activities on the spiritual and cultural aspects of the site is contained. Tourism, however, has a major impact both on the forest and the religious institutions within it. The relationship of dialogue between the religious institutions

and the management of the forest can help to avoid conflict and to clarify policy in the interests of promoting both conservation, and spiritual and cultural values.

Potential conflict arises between the protection of natural heritage and of spiritual and cultural values. Moreover, the monoculture management of the forest itself, which has traditionally favoured the silver fir, is not in sympathy with nature conservation because it reduces biodiversity.

The first reference to land use, planning and management of the area is to be found in the Constitutions of Camaldoli Hermitage of 1080, which began a history of regulation transformed into legislation as the Forestry Code of Camaldoli in 1520 and continuing in force until 1866 when, with the suppression of the monastic order, the forest became state property and a part of the National Park administered by the State Forestry Service.

All this has a major impact both on the landscape of the forest and the religious institutions within it. Continuous cooperation between the religious and laic institutions is imperative in a place where the religious community has such a long-lasting presence. These forests have been preserved for about eight centuries by the Camaldolesi and Franciscan monastic orders (**Figure 5**), which set up the roles for their forest management in 1520 with the Forestry Code of Camaldoli, continuing in force until 1866 when the forest became state property and a part of the National Park (Frigerio, 1991).



Figure 5. The Sanctuary of La Verna from the woodland

Source: Photo by author

9. A sustainable conservation perspective

The contribution of spiritual values to the conservation of the natural environment in the Casentino Forests is very much related to their natural and religious history. Saint Romuald chose the forest of Camaldoli for retreat and meditation, while Saint Francis

preferred the forest of Mount La Verna as a place of hermitage. These forests have been preserved for about eight centuries by the Camaldoli and Franciscan monastic orders.

The spiritual values of these orders are still contributing to the conservation of the natural environment in a twofold way. The first is direct, and does not involve the legal responsibility of the forest by the monks, but allows for their suggestions on nature conservation. The second is indirect, and it recalls the necessary relationship between the forest and the natural environment. Indeed, potential ways to safeguard the spiritual values of the site could be identified in a clear policy for site management, setting out ways in which people can be introduced to the values of the place.

Past and present synergies between the conservation of the natural heritage and the protection of spiritual and cultural values are evident in the area. The champions for this cause have been for centuries the two monastic orders of the area. The future champions for a more integrated approach can be surely seen in a cooperation between these monastic orders, the Park, the local authorities and population.

The contribution of well-preserved natural, cultural and spiritual wealth to the balanced socio-economic development of the area is tied to the trends of population and visitors, and above all to tourism which has now a more relevant impact on the economic structure of the site. It is therefore necessary to work in that direction to explore possible avenues for a sustainable development of the area in harmony with the natural, cultural and spiritual assets.

Conclusion

Case studies around the world have confirmed the hypothesis that sacred natural sites and sacred landscapes serve to conserve both natural and cultural values (Putney, 2006; Mallarach and Papayannis, 2007; McIvor and Pungetti, 2008). Nevertheless, these landscapes are also under increasing pressure and urgent measures to preserve them are necessary.

In the Casentino Forests, for example, the natural, cultural and spiritual heritage of the site is understood and accepted not only by the monastic communities and the park authorities, but also by local authorities and people. However, better planning and management are necessary to reduce the conflicts between the needs of the religious communities and those of the visitors.

Local communities, whether lay or religious, should take part in landscape planning and management implementing a participatory approach, educating people and raising awareness of the importance of natural, cultural and spiritual values of sacred landscapes.

In doing so, it would be possible to promote a holistic view of the whole area of study combining natural, cultural and spiritual heritage, with the aim of fostering a more sustainable development of sacred landscapes in tune with both their natural and spiritual values, as it has been for centuries.

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