

Proceeding Paper

Inland Areas, Protected Natural Areas and Sustainable Development[†]

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Abstract: In recent years, policies implemented by many countries have resulted in the deterioration of the Earth's environment rather than the protection of environmental resources. The impact on the environment and territories, particularly those in the Mediterranean basin, is now evident in all its gravity. Even in Italy, the development policies pursued until 2010 favored urban settlements, neglecting the rest of the territory and, in particular, areas far from the traffic flows of people and goods. In the last decade, Italy has also begun to invest in 'inland areas' and protected natural areas that, if well analyzed, organized and managed, can become the promoter of sustainable development for the entire country. Starting from the potential expressed by local communities, landscape resources, cultural, intangible and tangible heritage, the aim is to provide direction and potential scenarios for enhancing economic opportunities, unexpressed and possible drivers of sustainable development.

Keywords: Italian inland areas; protected natural areas; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

Over the last 60 years, the Italian development model has focused mainly on urban settlements, neglecting the rest of the territory and, in particular, areas far from the traffic flows of goods and people. It is only recently that non-densely urbanized areas have been taken into consideration, analyzed and observed, and that organic decisions have been made that respond to true and proper concerted programming and planning that affects the entire country. In Italy, areas that are distant, both from the most important urban centers and from communication infrastructures—in particular the digital one—have been defined as 'inland areas' since 2013, and have been illustrated in a comprehensive planning document drawn up by the Ministry for Territorial Cohesion and the South, called '*National Strategy for Inland Areas*' [1,2].

Inland areas are 'fragile' areas from a socio-demographic point of view, due to the ageing process of the population. They are unstable areas from an environmental, physical and eco-systemic point of view, due to widespread hydrogeological instability, loss of biodiversity and a slow but cumulative process of degradation of landscape values. The municipalities concerned number 3101; the population involved amounts to 4,171,667 inhabitants; and the available resources are 210 million euros [3].

To ensure that the analyses of the '*National Strategy for Inland Areas*' had effective consequences, the 'Support Fund for Economic, Artisan and Commercial Activities' was established, for each of the years from 2020 to 2022 [4].

In this context, some municipalities have initiated cooperation processes, involving local communities, for the production of essential services, and for the protection of environmental and cultural resources to enhance them. At the same time, other inland areas—many of which are located in the central and northern regions of Italy, and a few in southern Italy—have generated good policies and good practices that have made it possible to retain

the population, in some cases even recording an increase in the number of settled inhabitants. In central and northern Italy, inland areas are not synonymous with depressed or poor areas: as a result of national public policies such as the expansion of the welfare state and the promotion of local development projects, together with private initiative, some areas have reached an adequate level of per capita material well-being. In the south of Italy, on the other hand, despite having significant territorial capital (buildings and settlement systems, cultivable surface area, practical knowledge, landscapes and ecosystems), it has not been possible to create that virtuous circle capable of promoting and enhancing the territory [5].

This study, after outlining a brief examination of the current situation, examines the potential and problems of inland areas, in order to define a framework of guidance for sustainable planning in areas rich in raw materials—i.e., biodiversity and cultural, material and intangible heritage—but scarce in initiatives. The aim is to help create real sustainable development, considering that future generations must be handed down not only heritage but a civilization—our civilization [6].

2. National and International Policies and Strategies for Inland Areas

A recent report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) notes that the current rate of species extinction is a thousand times higher than the average rate for the entire history of life on Earth. Nevertheless, eight years after the approval of the 2030 Agenda, and after the 10-year World Biodiversity Strategy 2011–2020, the state of planetary biodiversity continues to deteriorate.

The theme of environmental quality has been the center of debate at key world summits (Earth Summit, Climate Convention, Kyoto Protocol, Agenda 21) and in most policies conducted in recent years. In Europe, 2% of agricultural land has been lost since 1970—in Italy, 20%—and an irreversible process has been generated that impacts not only the territories suffering transformation but also the entire national territory, due to the fragmentation that ecosystems are facing [7]. The global context provides reference for policies on the conservation and management of the natural and environmental heritage, derived from a more consolidated and articulated programmatic regulatory apparatus at international and EU level, which has been developing for almost thirty years, and which has undergone powerful acceleration in recent years. Progressively, the subject is better-understood, and studied as a complex reality, formed by natural resources, potentials, risks, sedimentation of culture, economic activities and history [8]. The subject is considered a particularly diverse one, and in this sense it must be studied, because in it the works and transformations of the environment—planned and executed for the needs of society—interact with the rules of nature [9]. On a European scale, protected areas show strong connections with land management because they are key elements of environmental policies, although there is a known lack of systematic information on planning and management experiences.

However, in recent years, policy and planning coordination in Europe has made significant progress, which can be outlined as follows: a growth of protected areas is taking place on the continent; conflicts between parks and local contexts have been alleviated due to a shift from the concept of constrained resources to resources for development; the relationship between planning and management has been consolidated, with the integration of the different dimensions present in protected areas. The quantitative increase in protected areas has implied, and will increasingly imply, the overlapping of parks with areas affected by strong processes of urbanization and productive development. This is leading to an increase in the number of issues relating to protected areas in the overall management of these territories, which can no longer be separated from the reference contexts in which they are located. At the same time, a widespread process of environmental degradation and alteration is ongoing, with global repercussions. These facts generate conflicts between economic, social and cultural interests and the protection of natural resources that are profoundly different than those faced at the birth of nature conservation policies [10]. This has also led to the development of environmental law, and the spread of the need for

sustainable growth and territorial identities [11]. However, it is possible to highlight some negative trends that profoundly affect these policies and more general land policies:

- difference in procedures between planning of protected areas and 'ordinary' territory, which also negatively affects the parks and reserves themselves;
- underestimation of local development plans;
- lack of appropriate integration between plans and programs.

A balance must exist between the environmental conditions of protected areas and the needs of tourism development. European indications also point towards an integrated approach that is able to meet the needs of protecting the natural environment, increasing tourist flows and managing the flow of new inhabitants who choose to live in protected areas [12].

3. Protected Natural Areas in Italy

In Italy, many of the protected natural areas fall within the 'inland areas', and cover 3,100,000 hectares or approximately 10% of the national land surface. There are also 27 protected marine areas and the 'International Marine Mammal Sanctuary', which is shared between Italy, France and the Principality of Monaco, while the two underwater archaeological parks of Baia and Gaiola, both in the Gulf of Naples, constitute two rarities of considerable interest [13].

The number of residents in all the Italian parks is a total of 4,407,741, while the population accounts for 23.7% of the total (around 14 million inhabitants) [14]. At the same time, 68% of Italian municipalities have a territory that contributes in part or in full to the formation of the protected area, whether at national or regional level, and of these, 35% are municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

The system of Italy's protected natural areas is characterized by remarkable biodiversity, which coexists with an extraordinary cultural heritage made up of historical-architectural-artistic emergencies and intangible assets. The 'Law on Protected Natural Areas' No. 394 of 1991, one of the best nature conservation laws in Europe, defined an integrated system of national protected areas and introduced the concepts of valorization and experimentation of productive activities compatible with the conservation of natural heritage and biodiversity. The law aimed to combine the conservation of nature, landscape, history, anthropology and local culture with economic opportunities and sustainable development possibilities.

However, especially in southern Italy, the policy, strategies and opportunities indicated by the law were only partially implemented. In southern Italy in particular, most parks are having difficulty getting developed, due to a lack of participation by local communities in the pursuit of sustainable development objectives, and a lack of capacity on the part of the park authorities and the park community to be proactive, driving forces in addressing the realities involved [15].

Inland areas and protected natural areas, especially Italian parks when analyzed as a whole, are not just synonymous with depressed or poor areas. In fact, the residents in these areas have a reasonable standard of living commensurate with their needs. Most of the people who live in these somewhat secluded areas do not have much incentive to improve their economic condition, as they find their standard of living balanced against their expectations. For the most part, they are people who prefer to live away from the hectic life of densely populated areas, in an environment where the environmental quality is better, and where human relationships are daily and constant over time, and therefore more satisfying. This condition has not led to a social and economic crisis, as many think, but has relegated these communities to a sort of limbo in which there are few incentives to invest in activities that create growth, change the status quo, and develop and therefore also enhance the rich heritage of these places [16].

4. For Sustainable Tourism in Inland and Protected Areas

In 1995, at the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism held in Lanzarote (Canary Islands, Spain), the World Charter for Sustainable Tourism was signed, which represents a reference for defining the priorities, objectives and instruments needed to promote future tourism.

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) has defined tourism activities as sustainable when they “develop in such a way that they remain viable in a tourist area for an unlimited time, do not alter the natural, social and artistic environment and do not hinder or inhibit the development of other social and economic activities”.

On 19 October 2007, ‘The Agenda for a Sustainable and Competitive European Tourism’ marked the official start of planning for such tourism, which aims at economic prosperity, equity and social cohesion, and environmental and cultural protection.

In line with the Lisbon Treaty and the commitments ratified by EU ministers at the Madrid Conference on 14 April 2010, a new framework for EU action on European tourism was defined, which included, among other things, the development of sustainable management of tourist destinations and local enterprises.

In the wake of these premises and shared regulatory and cultural references, many and diverse attempts have been made to revive the fortunes of protected areas, but with scarce and, above all, limited results. In many areas of Italy, investments have been made in tourism activities, a sector that accounts for about 10% of European GDP, and is the third sector, with the greatest potential for economic growth in the Union, rightly considered a powerful driver of local development and employment in European countries. The factors of tourist interest in Italy have often been treated as separate compartments, which instead could have had a greater attractive force precisely from their coexistence: lakes and rivers, wine and food routes, religious tourism, ancient and historical centers, archaeological nature sites, archaeological nature trails, craft activities, including identity activities, more than 50 UNESCO sites, etc. Environments were rich in diversified tourist proposals, in which to study and propose ideas while avoiding the environmental depauperate [17,18].

In the context of protected natural areas falling within the inland areas, another widespread, consistent and culturally relevant heritage is constituted by the ‘small towns’ where, in some cases, a few hundred families live, and which for the most part maintain a close environmental, morphological and landscape relationship, if not still functional, with the surrounding territory. The number of small towns is substantial, and reaches 72% of Italy’s municipalities; their surface area covers 55% of the national territory, and 17% of the Italian population lives there (on average there are 64 inhabitants per km). Small towns also have a significant economic, settlement and infrastructural value. The relatively recent affirmation of new policies tending to promote local dimensions, networking the widespread and articulated diversities of experience, culture and identity, and constituting a tendentially multifaceted offer, has determined a favorable climate for a relaunch of the issue of small towns in new development contexts, making previously unusual resources, instruments and availability accessible [19].

5. Conclusions for the Sustainable Development of The Protected Inland Areas of Southern Italy

One of the most agreeable and convincing approaches to dealing more effectively with the problem of a concerted strategy of actions in the inland and protected areas is that of the ‘Smart land’, i.e., a territorial sphere of diffuse and shared experimental policies which have the objective of increasing the attractiveness of the territory, taking due account of social cohesion, the diffusion of knowledge, accessibility, freedom of movement, the usability of the environment, the quality of the landscape and the daily life of the local communities that live in those places. The aim is to attempt to rebuild a ‘middle society’ made up of those residents interested in and capable of transforming the premises into real economic, social and cultural practices capable of turning local potential into economic activities [20].

Most local regeneration and development projects remain hetero-directed and top-down because the involvement of the communities occurs later, thus lacking the direct involvement of local populations, especially for the implementation of specific projects. More successful, and growing more successful still, is the implementation of bottom-up projects, which arise from the mechanisms of protection and enhancement of local identities, which constitute a driver of lasting and sustainable development according to the logic of sharing [21].

In this context, in recent years, some administrations of those municipalities suffering from significant depopulation (this phenomenon does not spare the south or even central and northern Italy, concentrating in small and mountainous centers) are offering economic and social incentives, giving away abandoned houses to encourage the return of emigrants, or welcoming new communities to revive agricultural and craft activities. Nevertheless, the conditions of peripheral location persist, not only because of geographical issues but also because of the lack of socio-economic and political connections between metropolitan and urban areas in general and inland areas. After having created the material conditions for a return to the inland areas, the next step, where possible, is to transform the community into a ‘project community’, a partnership, that is, between those who plan, those who reside, and those who benefit from the services offered [22].

In our opinion, it is in the encounter between the top-down and bottom-up processes that a balance that generates real development opportunities can be achieved. Furthermore, targeted policies and direct funding for the development of essential services are crucial if good practices are to become an effective incentive for communities to remain in inland and protected areas. This process is also contemplated in the ‘*National Recovery and Resilience Plan*’, which could help to bridge the existing gaps between northern, central and southern Italy, and demonstrate institutions’ renewed awareness of marginal areas.

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