

Comment

Consensus and coordination in park policy¹

Ugo Leone

I would like to start with a brief news item in the August 1999 issue of *National Geographic* which gives some food for thought: “With 5,000 climbing routes, such as Double Dogleg and Walk on the Wild Side, California’s Joshua Tree National Park attracts about 140,000 enthusiasts a year to test their skill on granite boulders. But some visitors view their metal bolts as defacements hammered into rocks. New and replacement bolts had been temporarily prohibited in park wilderness areas since 1993. Last year, after park officials proposed banning all bolts permanently, climbers sent them a loud message. ‘We had 1,200 responses, so we went back and revised our thinking’, says assistant superintendent Mary Risser. A plan expected to be issued soon will allow climbers to replace worn bolts – safety hazards – in non-wilderness areas. In wilderness new bolts will require a permit and will have to be camouflaged, and some existing bolts may have to be removed”.

This news item may raise a smile but, as I was saying, it gives some food for thought, in particular, as far as the actual problem of parks in Italy is concerned: their establishment, the expectations they create, the deficiencies in park policy, the innovations which need to be made in the process of selecting and managing the areas to be protected. In short, the possibility of accomplishing what is now fashionably called a “sustainable” park system or a sustainable protection policy.

The establishment of parks is an excellent way of putting the principle of sustainability into practice according to the formal definition of sustainable development provided by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. What is actually a park and why is it established? We could say that a park is an area where natural features of exceptional importance can be found, features that are often “unique” in their kind. Their protection from possible human aggressions is seen as a duty so that such features can be passed on to future generations.

Can such a park be considered sustainable? I believe that the question of sustainability is one that we should carefully ponder almost 130 years after Yellowstone or at the dawn of the 21st century, as they say, because the concept of park is not static, but rather, dynamic. This is not only because nature is “dynamic” but also because the way of understanding and realising the concept of protection should be “dynamic”. John Galbraith once wrote “the conservationist is the man who is concerned about the beauties of nature in inverse proportion to the people who can enjoy them”.

Nowadays, such an approach to protection has been outmoded by reality and a great number of cases can back this assertion. Indeed, for some time now the slogan which invites us to see parks not as just a set of constraints which need to be respected but also as an opportunity for development has been used more and more often. This is a new approach which also implies the acknowledgement of the difficulty of achieving the acceptance of a park or even a protected area without obstacles.

In as early as 1920, the then Italian Minister for Education, Benedetto Croce, emphasised that parks can also be considered an element of economic development. But now that, as it was hoped, parks and protected areas have grown so much as to reach nearly 8% of the Italian territory (and the aim is to reach the exceptional figure of 10%), the interests against protection are obviously becoming more widespread. Therefore, if we want to convince the public of the importance of protection, we also need to convince it of its usefulness.

As is known, in these cases the example that is usually quoted is the Abruzzo National Park which is seen as a point of reference for demonstrating that constraints can become profitable opportunities for development. However, we should remember that the Abruzzo National Park has existed for nearly 80 years and has arduously achieved such results. Actually, there have been long periods of hostility on the part of the people living within the protected area who felt the protection of wolves and bears posed a

threat to their right to breed sheep, for example. Therefore, the building of consensus has been a long and arduous process.

On the other hand, although ecology has existed for more than 30 years, I think that nowadays interest in it is waning. Such a lack of interest is recorded despite the fact that the objectives which led to the birth of environmental movements 30 years ago haven't been achieved. One of those objectives was the protection of natural areas of great value. It is clear that if sensitivity towards such issues diminishes, implementing and extending a park policy becomes even more difficult. This is why the two essential requirements of a successful park policy are: consensus and coordination.

As I was saying regarding the Abruzzo National Park, building consensus is a long and arduous process, but it is an essential step if we want to avoid the park being seen as a decision imposed from above without the participation of the community in the decision-making process. In order to achieve the above-mentioned consensus, there are ways that have been tried and tested in other fields but can be applied equally well in park policy.

Due to the fact that today's decisions involve various stakeholders, following the example of recent cases in Northern European countries that have been strongly encouraged by the European Union, the current aim is to create liaison groups that will advocate acceptance. Each group shall be made up by representatives of the local communities which take part in an initiative such as the establishment of a park. These representatives, who will belong to different social classes and must enjoy the confidence of their fellow citizens in their community, shall actively take part in putting together proposals, shall be informed of their meaning, their implications and their consequences for employment and they shall ask for all the explanations and analyses necessary for a full understanding of the real impact of such a venture on the environment and on their interests. Therefore, they shall have to be the interface between the management of the park and the stakeholders. Such participation has numerous aims that are summarised below:

- raise participants' awareness of the role they could have in promoting change in their local community;
- identify and clarify the respective roles of protection, public policies, private initiatives and citizens in promoting sustainable development models;
- allow experts in environmental management, citizens, representatives of the private sector and public administrators to exchange information, opinions and ideas;
- identify and discuss between the various social categories involved the similarities and differences of their perception of the problems and their possible solutions;
- stimulate public debate in local communities on the role of protection in sustainable development.

As a result, social participation, aimed at achieving a better equilibrium between the protection of the environment and social development, becomes more effective².

The method implemented in Northern European countries consists of a discussion that allows the representatives of the various groups of the local community to be guided through a decision-making process. This process aims at promoting their active participation in resolving the problems which affect the community they live in.

This method was initially used in order to resolve environmental problems in urban contexts and promote sustainable models of development but, as I was saying, it seems to me it can be applied perfectly well to park policy too.

In order to be realistic and avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to note that the "opportunities" that can arise because of the establishment of a park will not arise in the short-term. Even if its establishment can create immediately (though not indefinitely) new LSU³ posts for larger or smaller groups of unemployed people, as is the case in many parks in the south of Italy, this is not the end of it. Therefore, it is essential to demonstrate convincingly that protection is also a middle-term investment.

Some may be disheartened (and rightly so) by the fact that the success of such an important venture, i.e. the protection of nature, can only be achieved through economic incentives; but we need to be realistic.

As I have already mentioned, interest in the environment has gradually waned over the years. So much so that one wonders if the phrase "environmental value" is still meaningful in a society which

increasingly considers the market and its laws its most important parameter and objective. The answer to such questions can possibly be found in statements such as “in this kind of society, there is definitely space for the environment as long as it is useful to the market” or “if money makes the world go round, the environment must have a value in order to be taken seriously”.

Another point that, in my opinion, can innovate park policy in Italy is coordination, i.e. coordination between parks regarding their policies and initiatives and the coordination of these policies and initiatives with the territorial and economic policies of the country.

Therefore, what needs to be done in the short term is stress the creation of LSU posts but also introduce park policy into a broader policy context where the protection of the environment also emphasises all the aspects concerning the safeguard and enhancement of local resources. If not a real choice for development, this is at least an “agro-ecological” way to it and it is the opportunity to ponder over the possibilities offered by a kind of development which seriously aims at creating environmentally compatible tourism and agricultural practices.

This “compatibility” and the possibilities it offers are not just a bunch of commonplace slogans. On the contrary, they can be translated into concrete situations such as organic farming, regeneration, reforestation, nature conservation through the park system and bio-monitoring in order to guarantee the “eco-label”, i.e. a certification of ecological guarantee, to the entire area where environmentally compatible activities take place.

If we take a careful look at the protected areas on the map, we can immediately see that the majority of them are located in hill and mountain regions, that is to say those areas that are usually called “inland areas”, particularly in the Apennines. If we also take into consideration what we know about the foreseeable consequences of “global change”, a number of fairly probable hypotheses which deserve further analysis can be formulated.

The most important consideration is the evaluation of the bleak and alarming predictions of global change associated with the much-dreaded climate change. As a great number of signs shows, if there is no rapid and substantial intervention in order to cut the gases which provoke the greenhouse effect, other than the merely good intentions declared in the Kyoto Protocol and other similar conventions, it is scientifically justified to put forward the hypothesis that the resulting climate change, with temperatures going up and coastal areas being compromised, will be at least one of the causes of the increased interest in “inland areas”.

For some areas in the Apennines, especially in Southern Italy, there are much more reasons for this attention shift, reasons that are more concrete than the consequences of global change. These reasons are related, sometimes as mere slogans but, more and more often, as explicit observations, to a new model of development and “sustainable development”.

If originality and sustainability are to be the characteristics of a different kind of economic development, they most likely concern not just the ways and sectors where development occurs, but also the geographical areas that can be involved in such development. In this sense, inland areas possess an extensive land-surface that has been traditionally excluded by a model of development which only considered plains and coastal areas. The area in question is morphologically and environmentally homogeneous and can easily be identified as a continuum ranging from Abruzzo in Central Italy to Aspromonte in Southern Italy. It covers the entire Southern part of the Apennines and belongs to a project known as *APE-Appennino parco d'Europa* (Apennine Park of Europe).

APE is a project in accordance with the contents of outline Law n. 394/91 on “protected natural areas” and the guidelines provided by the European Union and its Fifth environmental action programme. This programme was “launched” in L'Aquila in Abruzzo during a conference on “Apennine Park of Europe” which was held on 1st and 2nd December 1995. As it was an initiative originating in Abruzzo, attention was initially focused on that region; but Abruzzo was conceived as a hinge between the more backward rural areas in the South of Italy and the richer and more developed areas in the North of the country.

Since the area in question is a mountainous one, it has always been marginalised by the development policies adopted in Italy and in other countries with more developed economies (except Austria and Switzerland). However, nowadays in the light of the careful reconsideration of the concept of “resource” and the rethinking of development in terms of sustainability, this area tends to be re-evaluated.

So far, we cannot say that “coordination” has been achieved; in theory, it exists but in practice, it does not, because there is no park system. And yet, the actual creation of such a system could be a further

successful move in order to establish active, dynamic protection schemes, thus further earning the consensus of the communities that are more closely involved in the making of park policy.

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Notes and references

¹ Article published in *Ecologia politica CNS, rivista telematica di politica e cultura*, 3, September-October 1999, year IX, issue 27.

² For a more in-depth analysis of such topics and the relevant experience acquired in the field so far, see L. Amodio (ed.), *Atelier del futuro. La metodologia European Awareness Scenario Workshop per promuovere la partecipazione nei processi di innovazione e sviluppo sostenibile*, Cuen, Naples, 1999.

³ Translator's note: LSU stands for *Lavori Socialmente Utili*, i.e. socially useful jobs. It is a labour policy introduced in Italy in the 1980s and provides temporary employment in public utility projects to young, unemployed people, especially in the South of Italy.

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