

The role of protected areas for rural tourism: a depiction of Swiss and Italian cases

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Abstract

This study aims to verify how and at what extent protected areas can contribute to protect and enhance the production of high quality regional products through the promotion of particular niche tourism. The reasoning is based on the assumption according to which the interaction between environmental policies, agriculture and destination promotion generates a situation that fosters quality in local development of mountainous regions of Italy and Switzerland and maintains agricultural biodiversity.

The research adopts a depictive comparative approach. Referring to the two different models of parks management in Switzerland and in Italy, the authors focus their attention on some destinations in the protected areas of Gran Sasso - Laga National Park and UNESCO Biosphäre Entlebuch. Thereby the enhancement of high quality productions in rural tourism is considered.

Keywords

agricultural biodiversity, niche tourism, protected area management

Introduction

Within the reflexive frame social sciences have been elaborating with special concern to the paradigm of socio-economic development and to the link between this frame and sustainable tourism (MARETTI & SALVATORE 2012), the study predicts on the analysis of the processes that local development in a protected area can trigger. The possibility to succeed in such a challenge seems to be particularly linked to the level of interrelation between natural environment and the different social and economic systems. This can be favoured by protected areas' policies and objectives, through the promotion of sustainable tourism. When adequately managed, this latter can represent useful mean able to activate virtuous dynamics at a local level, especially in the enhancement of high quality regional products, of micro-hospitality and in turn, in the safeguard of biodiversity richness.

Looking at the experience of Italian parks, this approach had already been highlighted on a national level by the first frame law about protected areas (L. 394/1991). In its article 1 (describing the main objective of a protected area) the law explains that the conservation goals must be reached through the application of management methods able to realize «an integration between man and natural environment which can ensure at the same time the safeguard of anthropological, historical, architectural, archaeological values and the agro-sylvo-pastoral activities». Thus, it has become more and more evident that natural parks will realize their conservation goal as far as the use of territory by human activities will happen according to a deeper synergy with an active maintenance of biodiversity. That is why some parks have started to promote specific projects aspiring to rediscover and enhance both biological and cultivated varieties at risk. This has represented a way to “give a new value” to ecosystems not only in preservation terms but also in economical ones. Thanks to virtuous examples of cooperation between parks and farmers, it has been possible to safeguard a natural resource without risking the scarcity of it and to ensure lively local communities.

Thanks to new policies in parks' management the synergy between the promotion of naturalistic values, landscape and rural activities in Switzerland has become even more meaningful. After the integration to federal law about the protection of nature and landscape entered into force in 2007, the will of safeguarding their territories expressed by local populations was recognised officially and a new model of protected land started to be realized. This new model, which was applied to three different kinds of parks of national importance (national parks, regional natural parks, and periurban natural parks) aims at preserving the peculiar naturalistic values of a region while enhancing biodiversity richness, landscape beauty, ecosystems functionality, cultural goods through the promotion of social local development (BAUMGARTNER 2011). In order to support such kind of approach, the park authority can grant individuals or organisations whose products and services are sustainably produced and provided within the grounds of the park with a special product label. By consuming labelled local goods and services, visitors contribute to preserve and improve the local biodiversity and countryside, to promote specific cultural values and to vitalise the regional economy.

Gran Sasso Laga National Park and UNESCO Biosphäre Entlebuch

The Gran Sasso Laga National Park (GSLNP) enlarges upon a surface of around 150,000 ha in the Apennines Mountains in Center Italy; the administrative borders of the park involve three regions (Abruzzo, Lazio and

Marche) and 44 municipalities (40 in the Abruzzo region). In an orographic point of view, the park includes hill and mountainous areas from the minimum of 219 meters to the highest peak of the Apennines, Corno Grande (2,912 meters). The park was instituted by law in 1991, but the constitution of the administrative unit came four years later (see table 1).

Table 1: General information about the two Parks (Source: own elaboration on ISTAT (Italian Institute for Statistics) and LUSTAT Statistik Luzern)

General information	GRAN SASSO		UNESCO BIOSPHÄRE	
	LAGA		ENTLEBUCH	
Number of municipalities *	40		7	
Municipalities' surface (ha)	227,800		39,451	
Park Surface (ha)	125,284		39,451	
Altitude of municipalities <i>mslm</i> (min / max)	263	1,420	620	1,159
Population, year 2010**	62,615		16,638	
<i>Var. % population 2010/2000</i>			-1.4	
<i>Average population for municipality</i>			1,606	
			2,377	

* Only Abruzzo Region (in total 44 Municipalities and 150,000 ha Park surface)

** excluded the city of L'Aquila, 72,696 inhabitants in 2010

The territory is represented by deep naturalistic features, which have been modified during the centuries by the human action for a better organization of the territory in political, economical and social terms. The signs of agricultural and pastoral economies, as well as the network of historical villages (229 minor historical settlements have been counted in the park area), still represent the matrix in which the landscape is organized. Nevertheless, the economical changes occurred in the second half of the twentieth century modified the centuries-old rules of the socio-economical organization of this territory substantially. This transformation put at risk the conservation of that landscape matrix since it is no longer supported by its related traditional economies, which are slowly but progressively disappearing (CIALONE & CHIODO 2007).

The socio-economical characteristics are similar to those expressed by many mountainous areas in Europe: small villages with a high percentage of aged residents, daily or weekly commuting to the cities and valleys surrounding the Park and low entrepreneurial vivacity. The area represents an important pole for alpine tourism and eco-tourist activities such as climbing, hiking, horse riding. Some destinations provide winter tourism offers (e.g. alpine and cross-country skiing).

The UNESCO Biosphäre Entlebuch (UBE) instead is a major valley of the river Emme between the cities of Berne and Lucerne in Central Switzerland and it is home to some 17.000 inhabitants. The surface covers 39,451 ha, and made up of woods (43%), farmland (30%), mountain pastures (18%), human settlement (3%) and unproductive surface of moor and rocks (7%). More than 50% of the UBE surface is under special protection, mainly to preserve moors. The elevation ranges from 620 meters in the municipality of Doppelschwand to the peak of the Brienzler Rothorn in the very south, as a border to the canton of Berne.

In 2001 Entlebuch was registered as a biosphere reserve by the UNESCO. This label proves that the man-made landscape with its precious value of nature is of international relevance. The UBE has received attention as a model region for responsible economic activity and sensible management. Even skis and electric power are produced by 'partners' of the UBE.

Looking at the agricultural sector, the Gran Sasso Laga National Park still presents diverse and important characteristics. A characteristic trait is the quantity of small and often nonprofessional farms intensively imbedded in the social context. These farms produce either for self-consumption or for the local market, a supplement for their income. Many farms practice direct selling (see table 2).

Table 2: Agricultural farms and surfaces (Source: own elaboration on ISTAT and LUSTAT Statistik Luzern, Herzog)

Agricultural farms and surfaces	GRAN SASSO LAGA*	Variation % 2010/2000	UNESCO BIOSPHÄRE	
			ENTLEBUCH	
Number of farms	5,176	-13.5	974	
<i>Organic</i>	163	n.s.	60	
<i>With direct selling</i>	1,730	n.s.	25	
UAA (Utilized Agricultural Area) (ha)	61,554	+2.8	18,568	
<i>UAA / Territorial surface (%)</i>	27.0		47.1	

* data referred to the municipalities

During the last decade the reorganization of agricultural production affected the sector, with the consequence of a stronger professionalization. Mainly, an increase of the agricultural land is to notice that represents a turning point and a peculiar phenomenon of the Abruzzo mountainous areas compared to the tendencies in the last decades and to regional and national trends. This tendency, accompanied by the reduction of the number of farms, leads to a bigger average surface and to more professional farms. The process of reorganization was mainly of interest for cattle breeding (reduction of the number of enterprises, growth of the number of cattle and of the surface for pastures and grasslands) whereas sheep breeding, used to be the main economic activity of the area, still shows great difficulties. Also other productions gain importance such as legumes (especially autochthonous lentils) in the mountains and olive oil in the hills.

Farms in Entlebuch are considerably bigger compared to the farms in Gran Sasso. Mother cows and dairy farming are the main agricultural products. A big share of up to 40% derives from additional income, like agritourism and other multifunctional activities (HERZOG 2012).

With special concern to the tourist structure, Abruzzo showed a deep transformation in the last decade. Against a reduction of hotels both in the number of establishments and beds, we can notice a meaningful increase of B&B, agritourism offers and other types of accommodations (huts, camp sites, apartments, etc.). These are characterized by a smaller average dimension (twelve beds places for establishment) and often for the objective of income diversification. The total amount of beds increased strongly (+43%), which proves the vivacity of the tourism sector and a strong entrepreneurial push (see tables 3 and 4).

Table 3 – Tourist establishments (Gran Sasso Laga National Park, 2000-2010) (Source: own elaboration on ISTAT)

Establishment typology	2000		2010		var. % 2000-2010	
	Number	Beds	Number	Beds	Number	Beds
Hotels	45	1,605	43	1,557	-4.4	-3.0
B&B	-	-	42	240	-	-
Agritourism	53	456	62	635	17.0	39.3
Other establishments	19	397	65	1,078	242.1	171.5
Total other establishments	72	853	169	1,953	134.7	129.0
Total	117	2,458	212	3,510	81.2	42.8

The weakness points of the system concern the lack of self-impulsion expressed by these small companies, the necessity of coordination in the promotion and in the destination management, the role of public communication and a lack of integrated tourist products such as itineraries and packages. A general reinforcement of the sector would be needed.

Table 4 – Tourists' demand (Gran Sasso Laga National Park, 2000-2010) (Source: own elaboration on ISTAT)

Establishment typology	2000		2010		var. % 2000-2010	
	Arrivals	Overnights	Arrivals	Overnights	Arrivals	Overnights
Hotels	18,192	76,599	23,881	97,231	31	27
Other establishments	2,991	12,239	8,004	25,068	168	105
Total	21,183	88,838	31,885	122,299	51	38

Beside agricultural and forest products also the UBE offers a wide variety of tourism attractions all linked to outdoor-experiences, sports in a hilly and alpine surrounding. It offers tourism attractions for day guests and overnight guests alike. Main attractions are outdoor experiences like hiking, skiing, biking and culinary experiences. The destination management adapted a structural change with a concentration of competencies at the head office in Schüpfheim and Sörenberg. Further tasks of national and international marketing are run by the Lucerne Tourism AG which operates worldwide. This kind of marketing and organization may explain in part a double value in the occupancy rate, and a higher level in the tourism intensity, compared to the Italian Park (see tables 5 and 6).

Table 5 – Tourist establishments and demand (UNESCO Biosphäre Entlebuch, 2010) (Source: own elaboration on LUSTAT Statistik Luzern)

Establishment typology	Number	Beds	Arrivals	Overnights
Hotels	23	664	21,716	51,065

Table 6 – Tourist indexes (Gran Sasso Laga National Park and UBE, 2010) (Source: own elaboration on ISTAT and LUSTAT Statistik Luzern)

Tourism indexes	GRAN SASSO	UNESCO
	LAGA*	BIOSPHERE ENTLEBUCH
Average stay (days)	4.1	1.9
Occupancy rate (days)	62	77
Tourist function (%)	2.5	4.0
Tourist density	0.9	1.7
Tourism intensity	1.6	3.1

* Only hotels; excluded the city of L'Aquila

The Slow Food presidia and the “network of custodian farmers”: the Gran Sasso Laga National Parks' projects to enhance agro-biodiversity

Among Italian parks, the GSLNP is one of the fewest who has dedicated a specific department to the agro-sylvo-pastoral development aimed at giving technical support to agriculturists and farmers. Since 2000, within the publication of “Atlante dei prodotti tipici dei parchi italiani” (Slow Food 2002), they have successfully been cooperated with local farmers for the qualitative and quantitative enhancement of their work and on working on the mapping of regional productions

While working at the “Atlante”, the park's agronomists discovered that many traditional products and cultivations were heavily jeopardised in their survival. In order to preserve this biodiversity, the park decided to join the new Slow Food's project by the identification and recognition of some *presidia*. A *presidia* is a network of willing agriculturists, retailers, cooks, scientific experts and deliberate consumers who advocate scarce breeds, organic food and cultural landscape (Slow Food 2013).

According to the park's experts, this venture could play a pivotal role towards a virtuous model of agriculture based on quality as far as it also implied the recovery of knowledge and traditional production techniques.

Since then, the park has promoted four “presidia”: two pecorino (sheep milk) cheeses (“Pecorino di Farindola” and “Canestrato di Castel del Monte”), a special salami (“Mortadella di Campotosto”) and some particular small lentils (“Lenticchie di Santo Stefano”). The objectives linked to the enhancement of these certified selected products have also led to important improvements in terms of social and economical organization. Little by little, producers and farmers have learnt the significance of cooperation and networking opening up new opportunities for contemporary rural development (MURDOCH 2000). Through the constant park’s support, they have clustered around the projects and given birth to associations and consortiums. Being part of such organizations has enabled re-thinking the way of farming radically. From a context in which the products were very limited and their selling was confined to the direct acquaintance of the buyers, the farmers unclosed more structured forms of safeguard and guarantee of the products. The certification through the medium of the presidia has enabled these productions to be showed within the most important fairs of the sector as well as to be clearly visible and recognisable to visitors, experts and enthusiasts. In other words, an informal and fragmented way of producing has been translated into a skill of being constantly on the market.

The success of the “presidia experience” has encouraged the park’s experts in seeking further strategies to look for and to conserve other autochthonous products at risk. So in 2008 they started a new project, based on the network approach, in order to map - and eventually to preserve - also the cultivated biodiversity of the park. They called the project “the network of guardian agriculturists”. The first phase was dedicated in particular to yearly herbaceous crops. After mapping the already existing cultivations, they started to organize a yearly event called “SeminLibertà” (“Seeds in Freedom”) on St. Martin’s day (11th November) during which farmers (both amateurs and professionals) can deposit some seeds of their cultivations at risk and exchange them with others. The park will keep some of the seeds in order to maintain its own “bank of autochthonous seeds”. The event is an occasion also to share and rediscover knowledge, utilisation and local traditions related to these cultivations. At the moment the network is composed by almost 140 farmers, distributed in the four provinces of the park. They have contributed in safeguarding eleven varieties of cereals, fifteen varieties of beans, thirteen varieties of vegetables.

Once ensured the rescue of the species and the safeguard of agricultural landscapes as first goals to reach, a way of enhancing them needed to be found. The revenues coming from tourist movements usually represent a very efficient mean to obtain this. That is why the park has recently launched a new project and a new network called “Guardian Restaurants and Inns” which involve those restaurants and inns available to use the protected and autochthonous species in their recipes. The final consumption of these products from tourists, and eventually their visits at farms to buy them, close the circle of an “active” conservation.

Along this process, the Park has played the role of a «society in the middle» (BONOMI 2002). It has worked as an intermediate subject, which has had a linkage function between local societies (the farmers’ ones) and national institutions (the Ministry of Agriculture and Slow Food), between living places and productions, producers and consumers. In other words, it has put itself in the middle between global economy of fluxes and the local lack of high competence in doing business. It has become interpreter of local cultural values whilst keeping on respecting the general objectives of conservation defined by the national environmental policies.

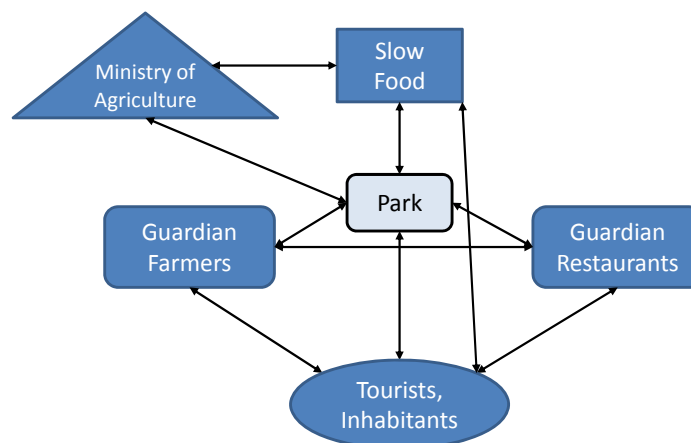


Figure 1: The park’s role in enhancing local productions (compiled by the authors)

A similar process of enhancement happened also in the UBE, thanks to the establishment of a particular label, the ECHT ENTLEBUCH (real Entlebuch) which is now well known for its rural character and distinctive historical grown and well maintained sense of culture and origin. The people are proud of their over 300 products of comestibles and natural products, generated by over 50 farms/enterprises with their outstanding quality. Typically labeled products are dairy, meat, herbs, tea, honey, jams, syrup, liquors and pastry. Besides comestibles, also handcrafts have been involved by the label, especially wooden and further art products. A part from ECHT ENTLEBUCH, this protected land can also refer to UNESCO labeled marketing pool and attracts by this other label a big share of its guests.

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