FROM THE PROTECTION OF LANDSCAPE AND “NATURAL BEAUTIES” TO THE DEFENCE OF ECOSYSTEMS IN ITALY

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Abstract: Between the end of the 19th Century and the first decades of the 20th, in the wake of similar North American and European experience, a movement of public opinion began to develop in Italy, aimed at protecting nature and the natural environment. It was principally launched and supported by small scientific societies, often created for just such purposes.

The dedicated activity of these early groups succeeded in stimulating public bodies (in particular the Italian National Parliament and Government) to preserve some natural monuments and create the first national parks. Some positive outcomes were thus achieved; and fauna, flora and geological formations started to have a destiny other than mere human spoilage, lack of concern, and destructive threats as a result of ever-increasing industrial activities (such as exploitation of the water resources for hydro-electric dams and power plants) and the occupation of coastal areas for tourism and bathing beaches.

At first, nature was merely regarded as deserving protection for “natural beauty” or because it was inherently linked with sites of historical, artistic or literary heritage. Later, nature protection became mostly a means to conserve landscape beauty. At last, starting a new third era, nature conservation began more correctly to be considered as implying the preservation of relevant natural and ecological values.

The present paper aims to explain this progressive evolution of both the Italian cultural scene and the actual regulations, thus showing the basic reasons why conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity in Italy has been so long delayed, and still must face so many obstacles.

Introduction

Under the Italian legal system, nature and landscape protection has undergone a long, slow process that is still far from complete, and as a consequence the outstanding Italian natural heritage is still in great danger.

The causes of this slowness lie in the blind spots of Italian environmental legislation, the ethical and political frailty of those who should enforce it (a situation I have called “eco-liability”), the aggressive abrasiveness of so many businessmen, and that lack of a true naturalistic culture that a great naturalist, Alessandro Chigi, duly deplored over 50 years ago (1954): “Italy, unfortunately, is one of those countries where a culture about the natural sciences is almost lacking, not only among the general public but also among the ruling classes, a lack which is one of the main causes of greatest disasters, such as mountain deforestation and degradation, abandonment of highlands, lowland floods”.

In the early 20th century all nature conservation proposals met with open opposition and covert resistance, as can still be experienced at the present day too.
in an even stronger, more vehement and overt manner, both in Italian society and Parliament, even if a better awareness of environmental problems has admittedly spread greatly in the meantime – and is still increasing.

Between the end of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, a small number of natural scientists (mostly botanists), officials of the Ministry of Education, isolated politicians, tourism enthusiasts, and prominent intellectuals such as the philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and writer and journalist Ugo Ojetti, helped transplant into Italy the culture and the experiences of the USA (Yellowstone National Park) and some European countries such as Switzerland.

Scientific and naturalist groups such as the Italian Botanical Society (Florence, 1888), the Ragazzoni Naturalist Group (Brescia, 1898), and the Emilian Society “Pro Montibus et Sylvis” (Bologna, 1899), developed profound cultural debate and actively lobbied Parliament and Government. These institutions, however, mirrored the same educational deficiencies as the general public, coupled with the indifference of the socialist movement (occupied as it was in wage claims for the working classes), and were conditioned by the conservatism of the emerging industrial economy.

The protection of landscape “beauties” dependent upon history, arts and literature

The very first Italian law aimed at nature protection was issued in 1905, on the initiative of the Minister of Agriculture, the Hon. Rava, for making “inalienable” the remnants of the famous Ravenna pinewoods.

Apparently in order to justify such a law and facilitate its passage, a link was suggested between these pinewoods and the “dark wood” (“selva oscura”) where Italy’s national poet, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), found himself “nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”, in the opening section of his “Divina Commedia”.

Reporting speaker for this law before the Chamber of Deputies was Giovanni Rosadi, a Florentine lawyer who was very active in favour of the country’s historical, artistic and natural heritage.

Coinciding with the final vote on the special law for the Ravenna pinewoods, a resolution was also approved which read as follows: “The Chamber invites the Government to present a bill for the conservation of natural beauties which are linked to literature, arts, and history”.

At that time (1905), the Government did not heed such an invitation.

The official inspirational reason for the declaration of the “inalienable” status of the Ravenna pinewoods, as well as the tenor of Rosadi’s resolution, clearly and significantly indicated that at that time the protection of landscape and of “natural beauties” was necessarily correlated either with some artistic or literary works or with important battlefields. Other examples of this attitude were the protection of Mt. Tabor at Recanati (inspiration for Giacomo Leopardi’s famous poem “L’infinito”), the hills around Urbino (the background of some famous