The Mosquera Valley in Sierra de Espadán Natural Park, Spain, as a Designed Mountain Landscape. Past and Present Uses

Pablo Vidal-González 1,*, and Antoni Vidal-Matzanke 2

1 Anthropology Research Institute, Universidad Católica de Valencia, 46003 Valencia, Spain
2 Doctoral School, Universidad Católica de Valencia, 46003 Valencia, Spain; Antonio.vidal@mail.ucv.es
* Correspondence: pablo.vidal@ucv.es

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Abstract: The Mosquera valley, in the heart of the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park, is known for being a true natural treasure, one of the best preserved and most renowned spaces in the Park. However, since the mid-19th century, this space has been profoundly altered by people making commercial use of the forest. Paradoxically, it is precisely this anthropic transformation that makes the place more attractive to visitors, to the extent that it continues to be a leading destination for nature observation and outdoor sports. Since the area was designated as a natural park, visitor numbers have increased exponentially, whilst its use as a managed forest has gone into decline. Both situations pose a challenge for the maintenance and preservation of this mountain area. The aim of this research is to present the strong symbolic component of the Mosquera valley and to evaluate the new uses of this privileged space, the new forms of tourism, the rise of sports practice, the enhancement of heritage or the improvement of behaviour in favour of sustainability.

Keywords: protected area; anthropization; landscape anthropology; cork; outdoor sports

1. Introduction

It seems contradictory to talk about human intervention in a protected natural area like a natural park, although it is evident that the mere statement of its classification as such is by itself an intervention, underlining the value of an area and highlighting it as an example to be preserved. It is also a place for visiting, for enjoying contact with “natural nature”, to use an expression coined by Santamaria [1] (p. 318), mainly by city dwellers, people who do not live in contact with the environment being safeguarded. This article sets out to discuss a particularly symbolic place, the Mosquera valley in the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park in Castellón, Spain. It is a space that has undergone a great deal of anthropization [2], but is nevertheless an example of a location of great interest in terms of plants and wildlife. The lengthy process of transformation, modulation, and landscape construction, has resulted in an outstanding area that is praised by all natural environment specialists, as well as by the many nature lovers who choose this place to come and explore.

This natural park was created in 1988 by decree of the government of the autonomous region of Valencia. All the natural parks in the region share management guidelines.

This protected area, considered by many to be the heart of the natural park, has, however, been permanently modified by humans. We intend to find out how the inhabitants of the nearby villages perceive this space. We also want to find out about the new sports uses of this space and the possible conflicts between conservation and sports use that arise in this area.

The framework document that includes each and every one of the guidelines that must be applied in the management will be the so-called “Management Plan”. Among them, it is important to highlight
those referring to the compatibility between heritage protection and economic development; the regulation of uses in favour of the conservation of ecosystems; the organisation of economic and social activities, both public and private; the use of resources for the development of tourism; or breaking the relative isolation of the region, improving the infrastructures and the quality of life of its inhabitants, among others.

2. The Espadán Sierra and Park

The Sierra de Espadán is the final section of the Iberian System mountain range in the south of the province of Castellón, before it meets the Mediterranean Sea coastline (Figure 1). The mountains here descend towards the sea, leaving behind the high peaks of the range in the neighbouring province of Teruel, where the summits are slightly above 2000 m NW-SE. The range forms a natural corridor from the town of Fuente La Reina until, after 50 km it meets the coast in the narrow coastal corridor at La Vilavella. The Sierra runs between the Palencia and Mijares river basins.

![Figure 1. Map of the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park. In-house production.](image)

Espadán is a remarkably steep mountain range, with precipitous valleys and sharp slopes; in fact its name “Espadán” comes from the Spanish word “espadas”, meaning “swords”. In just a few kilometres the terrain goes from sea level to a maximum height of 1106 m on the summit of Rápita. The range is formed by a huge anticline, in which the arrangement of the materials that shape it is modified by numerous folds, faults, simple and inverse buckling, giving it great tectonic significance.

The Sierra de Espadán is a unique environment, with a Mediterranean climate consisting of a lengthy dry period in the summer and most rainfall occurring in the autumn, depending on the influence of maritime and continental weather patterns.

In this introduction, we want to emphasise the importance of the cork oak forest, one of the earliest to colonise the Sierra and that represents a special and scarce type of vegetation across the Region of Valencia. Cork oak forests are dense and well structured, thriving on siliceous soils and in areas with ombroclimates, at least sub-humid in type, with rainfall of between 600 and 1000 mm. If rainfall is lower, they need the presence of crypto precipitation in the form of dew and mist for their development. The layer of trees is dominated by cork oaks together with a layer of bushy vegetation made up of numerous plants species as well as a large number of creepers. The shady, moist conditions
in these forests enable plants like terebinth, common hawthorn, Butcher’s-broom and ferns to thrive. In some parts of the Sierra, these cork oak forests provide a habitat for plants like evergreen oaks and in warmer areas, palms. The best cork oak forests in the Sierra are in the heart of the region, around Almedíjar, Azuébar, Chívar and Eslida, Aín, Alcudia de Veo and Algimia de Almonacid. Away from these locations, there are also pockets of well-preserved cork oak forests in Villamalur and in the area around the Benitantus reservoir. The cork oak (Quercus suber) has the peculiar trait of being fire-resistant, giving it great ecological value. Its tough cork bark also gives it huge biological value, as the many nooks and crannies all over the trunk provide great shelter for numerous animal species. When correctly managed, cork, as we shall see, is a valuable economic resource for towns and villages across the Sierra.

The Natural Park is the biggest of its kind in the Region of Valencia, covering more than 31,000 hectares, and it has one particular feature that makes it very special, namely its 19 villages, 11 of which have their entire municipal area within the park boundaries. However, most of these little villages have a very low population, no more than 150 inhabitants on the census in places like Aín, Fuentes de Ayodar, Higuera, Mate, Pávias, Torralba del Pinar and Villamalur (Table 1), a situation that repeats itself in the vast majority of the villages in Spain’s rural interior and that of many other villages across Europe [3].

### Table 1. List of villages and number of inhabitants (years 2019, 2001, 1991,1981) belonging to the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park.

| Village            | No.of Inhabitants (2019) | No. of Inhabitants (2001) | No. of Inhabitants (1991) | No. of Inhabitants (1981) |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Ain                | 127                      | 166                       | 131                       | 152                       |
| Alcudia de Veo     | 190                      | 214                       | 191                       | 274                       |
| Alfondeguilla      | 866                      | 908                       | 919                       | 928                       |
| Algimia de Almonacid | 263                  | 288                       | 333                       | 418                       |
| Almedíjar          | 254                      | 273                       | 298                       | 295                       |
| Artana             | 1947                     | 1835                      | 1905                      | 2024                      |
| Ayódar             | 159                      | 241                       | 215                       | 211                       |
| Azuébar            | 315                      | 340                       | 414                       | 428                       |
| Chívar             | 288                      | 380                       | 420                       | 421                       |
| Eslida             | 759                      | 757                       | 846                       | 849                       |
| Fuentes de Ayódar  | 87                       | 105                       | 80                        | 83                        |
| Higuera            | 54                       | 44                        | 33                        | 51                        |
| Mate              | 84                       | 132                       | 142                       | 158                       |
| Pávias            | 61                       | 61                        | 65                        | 86                        |
| Sueras/Suera      | 525                      | 558                       | 590                       | 598                       |
| Tales             | 825                      | 748                       | 785                       | 822                       |
| Torralba del Pinar | 69                       | 78                        | 67                        | 80                        |
| Vall de Almonacid    | 269                   | 292                       | 271                       | 309                       |
| Villamalur         | 62                       | 127                       | 150                       | 199                       |

Note. Own production based on INE (2019) data. [4].

The Sierra de Espadán Natural Park is probably the protected area with the greatest management problems in the entire Region of Valencia, as it has 19 villages inside the park boundaries. It is not an isolated area far away from civilisation, but an inhabited rural area where people have always made their living from the resources available to them, and they want to continue doing so. This cohabitation between the population and the natural park requires an important balance between nature conservation and the promotion of sustainable development of its inhabitants. As our informant 1 says “managing a park with 17 villages inside is not easy”. This is an unresolved challenge, as shown by the increasing depopulation of these villages.
The area was declared a Natural Park in 1998 as part of a third wave following the designation of coastal parks and lake system areas, mainly to protect them from the growing pressure of urban expansion affecting the Valencian coastline.

This means that one of the most distinctive features of this protected space is precisely that approximately 8000 people live inside it.

3. Methodology. Past and Present Uses

The landscape is a cultural construct and is therefore in permanent evolution. Our research question was to know what have been the changes in the landscape of this protected area in the last 100 years, highlighting in particular the changes that have taken place since the declaration of the Natural Park in 1998 and the significant increase in visitors and outdoor sports practitioners.

In order to know this evolution, we have carried out a qualitative research, based on interviews to qualified actors, by their professional activity or their place of residence. Accordingly, the authors conducted numerous semi-structured interviews with older people in the park’s villages. Similarly, key factors such as mayors and managers of the natural park were interviewed to better understand the challenges of managing this protected area, as well as the new recreational, tourist and sporting uses. More than 30 field interviews were conducted (Table 2). Thanks to these interviews we have been able to reconstruct the working method in the cork oak forest, the local ways of life, as well as the recent evolution observed after the declaration of the space as a natural park. The results of the interviews have been transcribed and classified into categories for ethnographic analysis. Belonging, landscape, identity, change, evolution, tourism, sport practice or impact of the park have been the categories analyzed that have allowed us to trace the vision about this singular space along more than a century. The different sections of this paper are the result of the analysis of these interviews, which has allowed us to reconstruct the vision of this singular space.

Table 2. Informant data.

| Informant | Home Population | Type of Work                     | Age |
|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1         | Vall de Almonacid | Former Park Director             | 52  |
| 2         | Valencia        | Park Director                    | 46  |
| 3         | Sagunt          | Park Officer                     | 38  |
| 4         | Almedijar        | Park Officer                     | 43  |
| 5         | Esida           | Former Park Officer              | 46  |
| 6         | Ain             | Former Mayor                     | 68  |
| 7         | Ain             | Neighbor                          | 78  |
| 8         | Barcelona       | Former Mosquera Owner            | 78  |
| 9         | Villareal       | Mosquera caretaker descendant    | 83  |
| 10        | Villareal       | Mosquera caretaker descendant    | 84  |
| 11        | Almedijar       | Former Mayor                     | 76  |
| 12        | Almedijar       | Former Mosquera guardian         | 75  |
| 13        | Almedijar       | Former Mosquera worker           | 84  |
| 14        | Almedijar       | Mosquera cork collector          | 46  |
| 15        | Poitiers (France) | Mosquera caretaker descendant    | 74  |
| 16        | Soneja          | Former Mayor                     | 58  |
| 17        | Soneja          | Former shepherd                  | 76  |
| 18        | Linares de Mora | Former shepherd                  | 66  |
| 19        | Almedijar       | Neighbor                          | 74  |
| 20        | Valencia        | Outdoor runner                   | 36  |
| 21        | Esida           | Cork businessman                 | 56  |
| 22        | Almedijar       | Outdoor sports                   | 42  |
| 23        | Ain             | Neighbor                          | 77  |
| 24        | Soneja          | Neighbor                          | 79  |
| 25        | Nules           | Ecologist association            | 62  |
| 26        | Valencia        | Former Environmental politician  | 64  |
| 27        | Valencia        | Outdoor sports                   | 54  |
| 28        | Castellón       | Geographer                       | 52  |
| 29        | Esida           | Outdoor sports                   | 36  |
| 30        | Almedijar       | Cork worker                      | 64  |
| 31        | Soneja          | Cork businessman                 | 52  |
| 32        | Almedijar       | Neighbor                          | 80  |
| 33        | Soneja          | Outdoor sports runner             | 46  |
The interviews have allowed us to reconstruct the collective memory of this new protected space and the participating observation has allowed us to verify the intensity of the new uses, mostly by visitors, of this place. Without a doubt, the visibility given by the declaration as a natural park has generated a significant increase in the number of visitors and in the activities they carry out.

3.1. Mosquera and the Story of Cork Harvesting

The Sierra de Espadán is also an island, an exception, with the only Mediterranean cork oak forests across the entire Region of Valencia, largely due to the local acid sandy soil.

Intensive cork harvesting did not start in the Sierra until the second half of the 19th century, in response to the sharp rise in demand for cork bottle stoppers from manufacturers based in Girona. The local economy changed dramatically when interest in this new type of production began to grow. Cork from Espadán, highly prized by cork stopper manufacturers, can only be taken from the tree every 12 years. The process can only be carried out in the hottest months of the year, as this is the one time when it is easy to remove.

Removing the cork is done by specialist teams (known as “sacadores”) equipped with axes and poles to separate the bark – the cork – that has been forming on the tree during the 12 previous years. The harvesting process (known locally as the “saca”) is difficult on the steep slopes of the Sierra Mountains and the teams have to work hard climbing up to the trees, removing the cork and then taking it down to a point where the horses can take over. Teams of horses are still used to haul the harvested cork from the forests to where it is stored before being collected by trucks.

The use of cork harvested from cork oaks led to an interesting phenomenon in the Sierra, as in the early days of cork harvesting, a new professional collective emerged, the “sacadores”, whose work lasted, as commented earlier, only two or three months of the year. However, they were a highly respected group of workers, well-trained and able to command high wages for the forestry work they were hired to do. “To be one of the sacadores in the farm was a real privilege”, mentions informant 29. Their activity was extended over longer periods of time to include clearing undergrowth from the forests. This was done in the spring months before harvesting, to make access easier for the work teams. Another of the jobs they were hired to do was forest clearance and maintenance work, removing dead trees and broken branches, as well as felling pine trees that competed with the cork oaks, hindering their growth. All this material from the forestry work was used by carbon burners, a very common occupation in the Sierra, to transform this raw material into wood charcoal. The carbon burners, who were very active during the winter months, carried out systematic forest clearance, combined with a felling regime that could be quite abusive when prices were high. The carbon pyres they built would remain red-hot for several days, with a slow burning system that involved very low oxygen levels.

Another traditional use of the Espadán forest was that of cutting down low-growing vegetation for use in pottery and plaster kilns in the nearby towns of Onda and Soneja. This clearance work was an everyday occurrence in the Sierra, and played an important role in ensuring undergrowth was not allowed to become too dense.

One of the consequences of the whole maintenance process was that the forest was always cleared, accessible and ready, so forest fires were very rare events. Making use of the resources produced by the forest was essential to maintaining the nearby villages, so great care was taken to preserve it in excellent condition. Everyone saw the forest as their own, as a source of wealth, so they did their best to avoid endangering it.

Making good use of resources has enabled a highly important cork oak forest in the Sierra to be preserved in excellent condition and has generated employment across the region, doing much to keep the population steady in places with already very few inhabitants due to the exodus that took place in the 1960s. Cork harvesting also historically favoured the creation of small factories making cork bottle stoppers, some dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. They are still operating today, emphasising the importance of this sustainable industry in the area’s already fragile economy.
As has already been said in the introduction, the cork oak forest is not only an extremely valuable ecosystem for nature lovers, it is also a rich habitat for many associated plant and animal species that find this an ideal place to call home.

3.2. Mosquera as a Tended Garden

As we have already mentioned, the Sierra Espadán is home to an important cork oak forest. Cork was historically used in various ways for building as well as for other less obvious and more occasional uses such as fishing net floats, stoppers for earthenware jars and beehives. Evidence of these uses has been found in the artefacts unearthed in the Moorish settlement of Benialí [5] and in references found on taxes payable for harvesting cork by residents of villages in the Espadán area in the Sierra de Eslida Repopulation Charter of 1612. There are also accounts of a stately visit of 1765 [6] (p. 4). However, references to the cork oak forest immediately after this time by the botanist Cavanilles [7] (book III, pp. 103 and 107), an illustrious geographer who promoted agriculture as an element of development, link it to untended land that was very difficult to farm.

In 1830 the cork stopper manufacturing industry in northern Catalonia started looking for new cork oak forests, mainly in Andalusia but also in Extremadura and Portugal, to supply their factories so they could satisfy the increased demand from their customers. Espadán remained distanced from this “cork fever” until in 1861, taking advantage of the public auction of mountain areas triggered by the Madoz expropriation (1855), a Catalan businessman acquired ownership of the entire valley with a view to starting a cork harvesting industry there [2].

This was the start of the industrial use of the Mosquera valley forest, which would result in major changes to the surrounding landscape. Firstly, an existing farmhouse was extended and converted to serve as the logistics and operations centre for the new business activity taking place in the valley. As early as 1868 the house was permanently occupied by successive families of caretakers, with the exception of the Spanish Civil War period (1936–39) until in 1958 the last caretakers went to live in the nearby village of Almedijar, after which the house fell into decline and was eventually completely abandoned in the late 1960s [8].

The fact that there were caretakers in Mosquera all year round may seem strange, especially considering that the really critical time for harvesting cork was concentrated into a little over one month in the summer. However, interest was so great and the value of the production was so high that the main purpose of having the caretakers was to watch over the forest to ensure it was kept in top condition so as to increase cork production and therefore make more profit. There were many jobs to do to make sure this happened. The first was to ensure only certain trees were felled, selecting only dead trees, dry, fallen or split branches and of course, all the pine trees on the estate had to be felled too. In natural conditions, pine trees live alongside cork oaks, but they compete with them for light, thereby considerably hindering the growth of the cork oak trees. As a result of this first round of felling, the valley was the centre of operations for charcoal burners, who used the felled trees to make their log pyres from which, after a laborious and delicate process of burning, they would obtain charcoal, which was highly valued in nearby towns and cities for heating and cooking [9] (p. 33).

The caretaker’s job was extremely important, as the charcoal burners were keen on felling as many trees as possible, whereas the estate caretaker’s task was to ensure that not a single branch was cut over and above what was absolutely necessary. Only his attentive eye could make sure that the charcoal burner’s pyre was not getting too big.

Laguna Lumbreras [10] (p. 65) refers to the dangers and attacks that other unmonitored forested land suffered. These forests were “systematically subjected to grazing, charcoal burning, abusive removal of branches and pruning, as well as the removal of most of the undergrowth biomass”, leaving the local area in a terrible situation as a result of all the pressure inflicted on its resources by people.

Another of the jobs systematically carried out in the valley was clearing the low-growing mountain vegetation, mainly shrubs like box, gorse and juniper to fuel the lime kilns in nearby Soneja.
The importance of this work can be seen from the contract stipulating that a truck would collect 3000 kilos of fuel every day, an operation involving three dedicated workers all year round.

Similarly, during the six months of winter, from November through to March, traditionally since ancient times, the area served as pasture land for nomadic livestock [11]. The livestock would generally come from the nearby province of Teruel accompanied by a shepherd, to make the most of the mild weather in the valley to feed the sheep over the winter months. The surrounding area has rich pastures as well as acorns that drop from the cork oaks, supplying the 250 or so sheep and goats that grazed on the shoots and grass growing in the valley for six months of the year with one of their favourite foods. “This space was a fantastic place to spend the winter with the herd”, informant 17 points out.

Another major transformation was carried out in the land surrounding the estate house, with land being terraced in order to grow various irrigated and dry land crops. Land on the upper part was prepared for planting almond trees and the lower part, fed by water from the nearby spring, was used for a series of vegetable crops, including broad beans, tomatoes, onions and potatoes. A number of fruit trees were also planted, along with vines and even tobacco plants, to supply the inhabitants of the house with food. They could almost be self-sufficient as the vegetable crop was abundant enough to satisfy the needs of the whole family.

A network of tracks was also laid for horses and carts to make their way through and collect the bundles of cork that the harvesters had piled up around the mountainside after harvesting.

Lastly, but no less importantly, the valley was divided into 12 imaginary parcels of land, so each year cork was harvested in just one of these parcels. This ensured a yearly production, providing the owner with a constant stream of income and regular work every year for the group of cork harvesters. The most experienced harvesters knew every single tree in the valley and showed their veteran status by the number of full rounds they had completed of all the trees in the valley. It was considered quite a feat to have done “three rounds”, in other words, to have harvested cork non-stop for 36 years in the Mosquera valley. The relationship between harvesters and trees was so close that when the cork was removed from the larger trees the men would make a mark identifying who had done the job, plus the last number of the year when the operation took place, leaving a lasting reminder of their journey through this unique forest.

All these operations were carried out in a valley that had barely been touched by humans until the first signs of interest from cork bottle stopper producers from factories in the north of Girona. The result of this interest was that huge transformations occurred across the whole area. Very soon, the valley began to show signs of being altered by people, with a forest where only cork oaks grew and an absence of pine trees. Another major change was the existence of a forest structured like grassland, with no low-growing mountain vegetation or undergrowth and large cleared areas between the trees. Lastly, the valley was criss-crossed with tracks and trails used by shepherds, cork harvesters, haulers and the mules carrying the cork down to the estate farmhouse. The mountain was being permanently trodden by workers carrying out various estate maintenance and operations tasks. All the jobs involved in cork harvesting have been discussed in detail in a previous study [12].

There is no doubt that the valley’s historic and geographical development has happened alongside the social and cultural adaptation of its people. As in each and every region, a necessary two-way relationship has been set up, in which people have gradually changed their environment to suit their needs, based on the possibilities it gives them. This is precisely what should be valued in the present: knowing the place we are in, based on where we came from and with the aim of setting future goals [13].

3.3. How the Local Community Sees the Valley

Since the estate house was occupied once again back in 1868, being the estate caretaker was a privilege only within the reach of a well-chosen family known to the administrator. Successive caretakers, right up to the end of the Spanish Civil War, would have been residents of Ain, the home village of the intermediary who arranged the purchase of the estate. Being caretaker meant being allowed to tend the vegetable plot surrounding the house, as well as receiving a percentage
cut on the sale of almonds and cork harvested on the estate. Even today, local residents remember the good fortune associated with being the Mosquera caretaker, as the position was linked to life without hardship or shortages. “This space was the closest thing to paradise”, confesses informant 18. (Figure 2).

Other factors helped create the idea of this particularly attractive spot. One of them was that running water arrived at the farmhouse before reaching nearby villages. Another was that there was an upper floor reserved for the few visits from the owners of the house, with period furniture and walls painted with attractive designs. All this helped to shape the idyllic picture referred to above.

One of the moments that triggered the greatest excitement amongst the neighbours was the arrival of the owners, a wealthy middle-class family from Barcelona. The family came to Mosquera in the summer to supervise cork-harvesting tasks. As might be expected, the event always caused commotion for the novelty factor of a wealthy family from the big city arriving to live in an area so remote and difficult to get to and bringing their cosmopolitan customs and habits with them.

A brief piece in the Diario de Castellón newspaper on 19 June 1929 read:

**Distinguished guests:**

Yesterday, Doña Dolores Mónico de Lluelles, accompanied by her distinguished and virtuous daughter Josefina, arrived in our town (Almedíjar) in order to spend some time at her picturesque house in Mosquera. Welcome, may your stay in such a healthy and beautiful landscape with delicious water and pure air be a pleasant and profitable one.

Following the trail of the adjectives in the article, we can imagine the image that had already been formed of the valley and its farmhouse. It is worth highlighting words like picturesque, beautiful and pure air, emphasising how the local people regarded this as an exceptional part of the countryside. The construction of a new identity for the valley is clearly apparent even in this early period, forming the image of an idyllic spot that is very unlike the unpromising descriptions made by Cavanilles of this same place 200 years before.

However, it is entirely probable that Mosquera’s greatest moment came on the last day of the cork-harvesting campaign, at the final wrap-up party, when the last wages were handed out, usually accompanied by a tip. This was followed by a copious meal and dancing [12]. This would have been an exceptional event, bringing together the most influential people from the surrounding villages, along with the cork harvesters and their families, as well as the caretakers and the owners with their

The caretakers were also the ones who, alongside the administrator, picked the workers who would do the cork harvesting each year. This was privileged work, as it was one of the few options for employment in the valley and came with cash wages, a rarity in the mountain and subsistence farming that prevailed in this area. Plus, the wages were quite generous, proportionate to the boom in the cork bottle stoppers sector. Local people still talk about how in the 1920s, thieves stole the sack with the wages, which were paid out to the workers at the house every Saturday, and how the robbery involved a considerable sum of money.

The memory, the unanimous image held of the estate by all local residents was that of a wonderful location, in a beautiful setting, which soon became a reference point for the whole area. From the outset, the farmhouse was visited daily by the postman, who walked along the traditional footpath from Ain to Almedíjar, delivering mail and keeping residents up to date with the latest local news. When the forest track was built to link the house with the new road between the two villages, the doctor visited frequently to greet and check up on the people living there. Many local residents in the nearby villages also share memories of Mosquera as a place for family picnics on special occasions, mainly at Easter. “Mosquera is something very much our own”, informant 31 told us. The abundance of water, shade and the possibility of buying a chicken or rabbit at the house to add to the country-style paella were just some of the added benefits.

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3.4. Neglect

As we said earlier, in 1958 the farmhouse was no longer inhabited. The modernisation of the villages with the arrival of electricity, running water, domestic appliances and the exodus of people to the big towns and cities meant it was impossible to find new caretakers for the estate. From that time onwards, Mosquera fell into a slow decline, which would become more accentuated over the years. From then onwards, the estate caretakers would live in Almedijar, only visiting Mosquera from time to time. Crops were abandoned, both on dry and on irrigated land and the house inevitably started to deteriorate. It was only opened to accommodate the cork-harvesting teams in summer and on rare occasions when the owners visited, which was the only time when the caretakers would stay in the house. The cork harvest parties were no longer held and the harvesters adapted to a regime of working all morning and then returning to the village for lunch.

Mosquera was left empty and the numbers of workers, shepherds, charcoal burners, cork harvesters, caretakers and bee-keepers gave way to inexorable neglect, returning the silence that had prevailed before the estate was purchased in 1861, with the sole exception of the cork harvest on short working days in the summer. This practice has continued until very recently, but investment in maintaining the cork forest to improve yield has mostly dried up.

3.5. Mosquera Today

The valley still retains the farmhouse as its focal point, even though the building is now in ruins and none of its previous attractiveness remains. The cork oak forest is also undergoing a gradual
transformation through neglect into a mixed forest. There is an increasing presence of *Pinus alepensis*, a dominant species that competes with cork oaks in native forests and gradually takes over as the dominant species. This transformation is accompanied by the invasion, or rather recovery, of the forest into the terrain it lost years ago to terracing for food crops. The forest undergrowth is also returning after having been removed by people, as described earlier, to artificially favour the growth of the cork oaks and prevent other species from competing with them. We are seeing a gradual decline of the cork oak forest alongside the deterioration of the farmhouse, which once stood as a symbol and a stronghold in the valley. As informant 23 pointed out, “for many of us it’s a real shame to see the state of deterioration of the estate”.

Mosquera has been part of the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park since 1998, signalling a stronger commitment to protecting this highly valuable natural environment. Since then, visitors have been encouraged to come to this area, now known as “natural”, for its great ecological value, and it is known as “one of the best-preserved cork oak forests in the park”, to quote the tourism leaflet on this popular part of the Natural Park. The valley has been receiving a very large number of hikers, walkers and mountain bike enthusiasts, all touring an area that has become the heart of the Park. This is now one of the best-preserved and most attractive locations, ecologically and botanically speaking, in the whole area.

As it goes through a process of regression and neglect, Mosquera is now given space in park guides and brochures, as well as in the various publications that praise the natural qualities of this countryside setting. However, most people are unaware that they are looking at a “built garden”, a forest-garden or forest-park, to use an expression coined by Laguna Lumbreras [10] (p. 66), who refers to the valley as an “impressive cork oak forest” and “a monumental expanse of forest”.

Folch i Guillem [14] (p. 300) also describes the valley as the place to find “the best examples of cork oak forest in the entire Valencian landscape”.

Local historians and the elderly inhabitants of nearby villages, especially Ain and Almedijar, regard Mosquera as very much their own, very closely connected to their identity. We have found this to be true in the many interviews carried out with residents in both villages, whose faces light up when Mosquera is mentioned. “Is part of our life and our memories”, confessed to us informant 22. As far as they are concerned, the name is linked to a glorious past, a bygone time of splendour and wonderful memories. These people are, in a way, part of the landscape, just as they were part of the cork harvests, the festivities or the day trips made there to enjoy some free time.

3.6. The Sierra de Espadán: A New Reality on the Recreation and Sports Scene

In recent decades, we have seen an exponential increase in the practise of sports of all types and at all levels [15]. Many of the sporting disciplines attracting more practitioners are those that take place in natural environments, where people can not only do their sport but where the focus is on the intrinsic values of the surrounding area, like nature, animal life, plants or heritage [16].

Two sporting disciplines in particular have seen a growing number of people show an interest in becoming involved over the last few years. One of them is hiking, which does not involve spending huge amounts of money and is a sport that can be practised by the vast majority of the population [17].

The other is mountain trail running and trail races, which at first focused on attracting more experienced runners with relatively demanding race courses. However, the results of good market analysis have shown organisers that there are gains to be made in diversifying distances, race types and the range of reasons in order to attract athletes/users [18].

This has become so prevalent that every weekend a great many mountain trail races take place in our countryside over various distances and are usually focused on getting everyone involved: families, experienced runners, novice runners, children, etc.

The Sierra de Espadán Natural Park is a geographical area that is perfect for practising these kinds of sports. A wide range of hiking activities is on offer, with trails and routes marked by the Spanish
Federation of Mountain Sports and Climbing (FEDME) via its “miSendaFEDME” app plus a series of mountain trail running races.

FEDME uses a unified marking system in the national territory. This system distinguishes three types of trails: the long distance trail (GR), used for trails longer than 50 km and represented by the colors white and red; on the other hand, the short distance trail (PR), to mark distances between 10 and 50 km, identified by the colors white and yellow. Finally, the local trails (SL), of less than 10 km are identified with the colors white and green. [19].

In terms of hiking trails, there is a very interesting option known as the Trans-Espadán route (GR36). Starting and finishing in the city of Castellón, this route crosses the entire Sierra de Espadán Natural Park over a distance of 60 kilometres, passing through the villages of Eslida, Aín, Veo, Alcudia de Veo and Torralba del Pinar. It also gives walkers the option of linking up with the GR7, which runs along the whole of the eastern side of Spain.

Other less demanding hiking trails include the PR-CV-276 in Ayódar, the PR-CV 352 in the village of Eslida, plus the huge number of local footpaths that have been promoted by the local authorities in each village.

In terms of mountain trail running races, there is a huge range of options spread across the year, giving runners the chance to take part in races over distances that vary from 10 through to 60 kilometres (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mountain trail running races organised in the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park.

| Village               | Name                        | Disciplines                  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Aín                   | Marató dels Dements        | 42.5 km, 21.5 km, 22.5 km and 21.5/22.5 (in stages) |
| Alcudia de Veo         | ADV Trail                   | 45 km and 21 km              |
| Alfondeguilla         | Cursa Muntanya Castro d’Alfondeguilla | 18 km                   |
| Algimia de Almonacid  | Jabali Trail                | 25 km and 18 km              |
| Almedijar             | Trail Almedijar             | 28 km and 17.8 km            |
| Artana                | Volta a l’Ombria d’Artana  | 16.5 km                      |
| Ayódar                | —                           |                              |
| Azuebar               | Carrera de Montaña Azuebar  | 23 km and 14 km              |
| Chóvar                | Gran Premio Agua de Chóvar  | 20 km and 11 km              |
| Eslida                | Volta a les Fonts d’Eslida  | 15.2 km                      |
| Fuentes de Ayódar     | —                           |                              |
| Higueras              | Garrote Trail               | 26 km and 16 km              |
| Matet                 | —                           |                              |
| Pavías                | Garrote Trail               | 26 km and 16 km              |
| Sueras/Suera          | Volta a la Campana          | 23 km and 11.2 km            |
| Tales                 | Cursa de Muntanya Serra de Tales | 30 km and 15 km           |
| Torralba del Pinar    | —                           |                              |
| Vall de Almonacid     | Moriscos Trail              | 23 km and 13 km              |
| Villamalur            | Carrera de Montaña Villamalur | 13 km                      |

Note. Source: Produced by the authors.

As shown above, a huge number of races are available in nearly all the villages within the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park. Such variety enables people to live and experience all kinds of natural, heritage and gastronomic elements in the region as part of their sport. Even so, some of the options described here deserve a special mention.

Firstly, Marató dels Dements is a race that brings together a substantial number of runners, both from Spain and from abroad. The wide variety of distances, the two-stages option and the ambitious height gain in each race are a magnet for serious, well-trained runners.

Secondly, the Garrote Trail, which takes place in and around the villages of Higueras and Pavías, is very interesting, as in 2018 the organisers took a step further forward in making mountain racing an inclusive sport by providing the option of teams competing in a specific category of joëlettes. These
are special chairs adapted to mountain racing and able to move along the trails, enabling people with disabilities to enjoy being out in the mountains.

A final word of praise goes to the organisers of many races whose commercial names are linked to aspects of their region and its historic heritage (Moriscos Trail), animal life (Wild Boar Trail) and natural features (Esliđa Fountains).

The explosion of sporting events, mainly mountain races, in the space of the park should force a more specific regulation. “We demand to regulate the mountain races in the park”, declares informant 24. At present, the park’s managers limit themselves to recommending good practices and to monitoring possible incidents detected (erosion, repeated passage through particularly sensitive areas, pollution). “We have proposed diverting the route of some races to protect nature”, informant 2 told us.

The conflict between recreational use and nature protection is probably increasing, since there is a growing number of runners and more mountain races that bring together thousands of people.

4. Conclusions

The landscape is an area that has been modified and adapted by people to suit their needs, modelling a space that we label in modern times, as beautiful and worthy of admiration, adjusting it to our search for paradise lost, the image of a past way of life, in contact with nature, which is already part of history. The Sierra de Espadán, in general, and the Mosquera valley in particular is a landscape that has been strongly anthropized since ancient times and that, precisely because of that continuous respectful adaptation to the needs of the people who lived there, has reached the present in a good state of health. As Mitchell says [20] (p. 90) “landscapes are created, and they are created in social relations” and we believe that the space under discussion here is a clear example of this social construction. Firstly the local inhabitants and now a growing number of hikers, walkers and nature lovers, as interviews have shown, label and regard this area as a magical place, without knowing that it was their ancestors who shaped and configured this space. When the estate purchased in the 19th century fell into decline, the cork oak forest also came to an abrupt end and a process of terracing was put in place on the mountain slopes in order to make the most of the land for growing grains and fruit trees. Mosquera has been saved and preserved, as it was the object of a special transformation for a particular use, that of harvesting cork. Thanks to that anthropization, paradoxically, “nature” has survived to the present day.

The classification of this area as a natural park seems to suggest a space in which plant and animal species take precedence over people, when in fact one of the main agents of the enormous attractiveness of this area is precisely its people. This is proved by the 19 villages that remain within the park boundaries, an indicator of the strong relationship between people and the environment in Espadán.

Mosquera is actually an amazing paradox. It is a built landscape, in which people have made their mark, but when visitors come here it appears to them as a primeval, pristine place, one of the unknown hidden treasures tucked away inside the park. This is the view taken by Cebrián [21], for example, when he talks about Mosquera as “the quintessential sanctuary of the cork oak forest and one of the prettiest forest landscapes in the Valencian Mountains” or “an authentic relic”. Fede [22] expresses himself in similar terms, describing the valley as “magical, sublime”. All these descriptions seem to want to lead us to a place that, inexplicably, has remained oblivious to human ups and downs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We are looking at a great contradiction, because the most significant spot in the Park, the one that prompts the greatest admiration out of the entire protected area, is a place that was shaped and altered by people to make the most of the possibilities it offered, even though most observers are completely unaware of its history. In fact, visitors perceive this to be a strongly wild and original space. Nowadays, and thanks to this human intervention, we can all enjoy the valley that has been praised so highly by experts.
Mosquera is a “dynamic”, “living” landscape, in the words of Martínez de Pisón [23] (pp. 329 and 331). Its history makes us aware of the various stages it has been through and, today, it is still undergoing a process of change. We can only guess the outcome in the medium term.

The interaction between nature and culture, between the environment and the actions of humans that shaped it have made this space an authentic cultural landscape, a concept that takes a step further, as it highlights human interaction with the surrounding landscape. In the words of Bunce [24] (p. 87), “cultural landscapes are those in which the ecosystems that make them up have developed over many centuries by the interaction between humans and the environment”. This is the new added value that the area discussed in this article contributes.

The territory and environment of the Mosquera Valley has great potential to generate a new socio-economic model. Just as decades ago they saw cork extraction as an opportunity, now the new social and economic paradigm must be taken advantage of.

Valencian and Spanish society are increasingly practising sport and are looking to increase tourism linked to nature and the countryside. The strategic lines of the spaces of the interior must direct their efforts towards the generation and creation of activities that manage to satisfy this need.

A new model of positive tax discrimination should be established to make the rural environment more attractive and thus create new projects, as proposed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) [25]. Similarly, consideration should be given to amending public procurement law for the rural environment, as it currently has to compete on equal terms with large urban territories, which makes it less attractive.

However, Mosquera has now been abandoned. It was sold to a new owner and the decline of both the farmhouse and the cork-harvesting industry have left the valley in a new situation, sadly making it more vulnerable to the devastating forest fires that never attacked the estate while it was being used for cork. The valley continues to change, undergoing a continuous transformation, like all landscapes. The neglect that the local inhabitants regret is what attracts the city’s sportsmen and women, consumers of a strange nature. The dichotomy is clear. It will be interesting to see what has become of Mosquera in 30 or 40 years’ time.

In any case, this small slice of nature is a legacy from our forebears, whose efforts and hard work gave us this area that we can unarguably classify nowadays as prodigious. It is up to us to pass it down to future generations.

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