Italian Historical Rural Landscapes

Cultural Values for the Environment and Rural Development
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Editor

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Patronages:
- UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE
- Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage
- Under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe
  Mr. Thorbjørn Jagland

Springer
Landscape, intended as an expression of the complex interaction between society and nature and the stratification of the processes that accompanied productive transformations in the course of time, is one of the most important categories in the World Heritage List. It was introduced in the system of the World Heritage Convention of 1992 under the qualification of “cultural landscape”. This category was used by many states in different continents to identify and designate for protection areas of special beauty and great cultural and spiritual value. Today, there are 66 cultural landscapes in the World Heritage List, located in regions and cultures all over the world. They are a testimony to the importance of landscape for the cultural identities of peoples.

In this context, Italy has a very special and privileged role. Its physical morphology, geographical position and rich history have favored the rise, within a relatively small territory, of a remarkable variety of cultural landscapes of extraordinary beauty, with few parallels elsewhere. The National Catalogue initiative is of great importance for our understanding of the Italian landscape and its conservation. Besides, from the point of view of UNESCO, it stands as an example, even outside of Italy, of a methodology that many states could adopt to improve their knowledge of the nature of their landscape and the issues affecting it, as well as their landscape conservation and management systems.

As the Catalogue clearly shows, landscape is a very vulnerable heritage, exposed to threats arising from international economic and social processes that have witnessed a sharp acceleration over the last decades. The crisis of traditional production systems brought about by the globalization of economic exchanges is certainly not the only threat to landscape conservation, but it is certainly the one producing the most dramatic and irreversible effects. The deterioration of the terraced rice paddies of the Philippines, included in the List of World Heritage in Danger, is only an example among many all over the world of the effects of these processes. Even in Italy, many traditional mountain and hill rural landscapes are at risk today. Urbanization and construction for tourism are posing another serious threat to the landscape. As in many other countries in the world, whole coastal or hill landscapes were completely destroyed just in the last two or three decades.

Italy’s engagement in the conservation of its landscape heritage, confirmed by its ratification of the European Landscape Convention, requires a collective effort
that must include public administrations, research and education institutions, and the private sector. Today this innovative instrument, offered to us thanks to an initiative by the Ministry of Agrarian and Forest Policies, stands as an important reference for the development of Italy’s national landscape conservation policy, which UNESCO will be able to accompany and use in support of its own task of providing technical assistance at the international level.

Francesco Bandarin
Italy still boasts a rich heritage of rural landscapes built up over thousands of years; landscapes that, while continuing to evolve, still retain evident testimonies of their historical origin and maintain an active role in society and economy. These landscapes are indissolubly tied to traditional practices handed down from one generation of farmers, shepherds and woodsmen to the next, complex sets of ingenious and diversified techniques that have contributed in a fundamental way to the construction and conservation of our historical, cultural and natural heritage. These techniques were a means to continuously adapt to difficult environmental conditions to provide multiple goods and services, and thereby improving people’s standard of living as well as giving rise to landscapes of great beauty. Landscape heritage and the related traditional knowledge are fundamental resources that need to be safeguarded. The speed and extension of the technological, cultural and economic changes that have taken place over the last few decades are threatening landscapes and the rural societies associated with them. Multiple pressures are constraining farmers innovation, this often leads to unsustainable practices, resource depletion, productivity decline, and excessive specialization, placing the preservation of landscapes as an economic, cultural and environmental resource in serious jeopardy. The result is not only an interruption in the transmission of the traditional knowledge required for local landscape maintenance, but also socioeconomic destabilization of rural areas and a loss of competitiveness of agriculture. This work intends to lay a foundation for the identification, conservation and dynamic management of historical landscape systems and traditional practices, in the face of economic, environmental and cultural globalization, climate changes, and inappropriate policies, in view of the creation of a national register of historical landscapes and traditional practices.

Nowadays we are witnessing increasing interest in landscape at the European level, as stated by the European Landscape Convention¹, signed in Florence in 2000, which addresses the deep changes in course in modern society. As Roberto Gambino

¹ The research has received the patronage of the Council of Europe for its contribution to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention. Article 6.C.1 of the convention requires identification and assessment, which states that each party undertakes: to assess the landscapes thus identified, taking into account the particular values assigned to them by the interested parties and the population concerned.
explains, the need to preserve the identity and meaning of places expressed by the current “demand for landscape” reflects a deeper malaise that certainly has to do with globalization processes and their effects: on the one hand, homologation and modernization; on the other, imbalances and inequalities, that need to be addressed.\(^2\) In this perspective, the introduction of landscape as a strategic objective of the national rural policies, reflects a change in the conception of the role of this resource, as well as that of rural territory in general. The role of landscape and its perception has indeed changed over time. Today it is no longer an elite aesthetic and cultural construct, isolated from its socioeconomic context; it has become, instead, an essential element in the definition of an adequate development model for the national rural context.

The prevalence of aesthetic considerations in past conceptions of landscape, as well as the more recent approaches studying and managing landscape with the same scientific tools used for nature conservation, has led to an emphasis on deterioration caused by urban dynamics, industrialization, as well as to criteria for the assessment of landscape quality based on ecological characteristics, reductively understood as its flora and fauna, or as a series of natural habitats. All this has pushed in the background both the strong human print on the Italian landscape and the fact that, while urban expansion certainly played a role in this, the transformation of the rural landscape was largely endogenous, something that few have remarked. While it is evident, as Emilio Sereni explained,\(^3\) the agrarian landscape is “the form that man, in the course and for the ends of his agricultural productive activities, impresses on the natural landscape”, it is equally evident that not all agricultures produce good landscapes, especially considering industrial agriculture. Unfortunately, as is confirmed by the data presented in the chapter on vulnerability, ordinary conservation legislation based on nature conservation, protected area systems or landscape restrictions are not only ineffective as a means to preserve the rural landscape, but are instead favoring abandonment and degradation. It is this realization that persuaded all of the scholars who contributed this to research of the need to draw it up, and that it is finally time for the issue to be addressed by agricultural policies. Conserving the quality of a rural landscape, which by its own nature is always evolving, can only be done by setting up a socioeconomic system capable of supporting and reproducing it; hence the decisive importance of strategies and actions undertaken in the framework of agricultural policies. The new guidelines for rural development policies associating them with local development are a major step forward in this direction. The objective is to make the most of all the resources of rural areas, emphasizing the local dimension, the new role of farmers, and the involvement of new actors in the social and


\(^3\) Sereni E. (1961), Storia del Paesaggio agrario italiano, Laterza, Bari. A broad discussion of Sereni’s scientific legacy has been lacking so far. For different possible views, cf. Moreno D., Raggio O. (1999): Dalla storia del paesaggio agrario alla storia rurale. L’irrinunciabile eredità scientifica di Emilio Sereni, Quaderni Storici, n. 100, 89–104.
geographical space designated today as “rural”. Important landmarks for the rise of this new vision of rural policies in Europe were the *Rural White Paper* published by the English government in 2000 and the *National Agenda for a Living Countryside* produced by Holland (2004), but a growing interest in landscape is evident in the development of the European Common Agricultural Policies. However, at international level, relevant institutions are today offering important political and scientific opportunities for putting this work into a larger framework. The Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems projects managed by FAO is actually developing a similar approach, with the aim to identify rural landscapes all over the world. On the other hand the recent Joint Program between UNESCO and CBD on biocultural diversity is finally recognizing that traditional rural landscapes, especially those having a long history, basically presents not a “natural biodiversity”, but rather a biodiversity resulting from the reciprocating influence between man and nature over the time. It is interesting to note that even in the forest sector, usually concentrated on the natural, climatic and economic role of the Forest there is a growing interest in understanding the role of traditional knowledge and traditional landscapes. This evidence suggest a new direction for research, not any longer concentrated in introducing more nature in the countryside or in separating nature from humans considered as a factor of “disturbance” for the ecosystem. There is rather the need to finally integrate man and nature into a different paradigm including environment, society and economy, but also to find good examples of this integration. This research is an attempt to locate this areas and study them as good cases for small scale production strongly linked to their landscapes, as good examples of adaptation to difficult and changing climatic conditions, of biodiversity due to human action, but also for the fundamental role played by farmers in preventing hydrogeological risk. Last but not least, the quality of life of rural and urban population largely depend on the quality of the rural landscapes and it is good news that the National Statistical Agency has finally decided to introduce the quality of rural landscape as an indicator for the well being of the Italian population.

In the local dimension of Italian rural policies, the landscape dimension plays a paradigmatic role, as it corresponds to the transition from individual business or agricultural sectors, to at territorial scale, for which a landscape-oriented approach is undoubtedly more suitable, because of the peculiar characteristics of our country, than an industrial or environmental one, even in a development perspective. Indeed, today the notion that conservation is an obstacle to development in any form has given way to the realization that conservation is instead one of the new faces of innovation in contemporary society. An authentic innovation is one that adds to a store of values slowly accumulated over the ages. Conversely, there can be no

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5 The research work on this subject is carried out by the Research Group on Forest History and Traditional Knowledge of the International Union of Forest Research Organization (IUFRO), chaired by the author. See also: Parrotta J.A., Trosper R. L., editors, Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge, Springer Verlag, Dordrecht, 2011.
authentic conservation without the production of new values. In this perspective, the restoration and promotion actions implemented in Italy by the recent National Rural Development Plan (2007–2013) have already introduced instruments by which the Italian regions can begin to modify the orientation of Rural Development Programs to address landscape issues. The reorganization of the Italian ministries, occurred in 2012, has allowed the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry to take the responsibility of the policies for the rural landscape, this is an important change since the whole Italian landscape was under the rule of the Ministry of Culture. In this new perspective, the current register has offered the background for a new law proposal for establishing the National Register of Traditional Rural landscape and traditional practices, currently under way, as well as the already approved law for the restoration of rural landscape that will be discussed further on in this text. These initiatives marked an important change in Italian history, since rural landscape, as a part of the National Cultural Heritage, has always been managed by the Ministry of Culture, affecting also the legal framework concerning planning, management and conservation of rural landscape.
Acknowledgments

For the Realization of This Book We Thank the Following Collaborators

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Over the last few decades, sustainable development and rural development policies have pursued strategies where farming has often been regarded as a factor disturbing or deteriorating the ecosystem. But the current economic, social and environmental problems of the Earth probably call for a different perspective. We should look for examples of a positive integration between human society and nature, study them, and apply the lesson learnt. This research work—a preliminary study conducted in view of the compilation of a national register of historical rural landscapes and traditional practices—presents more than a hundred case studies where the historical relationships between man and nature have generated, not deterioration, but cultural, environmental, social and economic values. The project has seen the participation of 14 universities and more than 80 researchers over 3 years. The results show that it is not only the economic face of globalization that is negatively affecting the landscape, but also inappropriate environmental policies denying the importance of cultural values. Now, however, something is beginning to change at the political and operational level. The recent CBD-UNESCO joint program on biocultural diversity acknowledges the importance of cultural values in landscape preservation, as do the FAO Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems project and several projects promoted by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations. In Europe, rural policies are showing a growing interest in the preservation of biodiversity and the landscape structure of a continent deeply shaped by its history and culture. The European Landscape Convention is inviting EU member states to develop specific policies in this regard, and Italy has included landscape as a strategic objective in its national plan for rural development. This research intends to support these new perspectives.