

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg

A Monastery for the Ibex: Conservation, State, and Conflicts on the Gran Paradiso, 1919-1949

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On 18 September 1919, the Italian parliament welcomed the decision of king of Italy Vittorio Emanuele III to donate to the state—among other properties—a 2,200 hectare hunting reserve in the Gran Paradiso massif, in north-western Italy. The donation marked a turning point in the development of the area and occurred when the debate on nature conservation had led to the first concrete steps toward conservation both in Italy and abroad. It occurred also in a decisive year when Italy, after the First World War, found itself in dire economic conditions and suffered from political instability. Three years later, on 3 December 1922, a decree ruled the creation of a national park of over fifty-six thousand hectares—inclusive of the royal hunting reserve—of thinly forested mountainous landscape in the area.

This essential chronology and the time frame indicated in the title (1919 to 1949) introduce the first key element of the book. Putting the history of the conservation of and in the Gran Paradiso at the centre of the analysis, the book's narrative cuts across three different political states—liberal, fascist, and republican. It traces the park's back-and-forth trajectory between an autonomous agency and a centrally controlled institution. By chance, the park—the first national park established in the country—was instituted under fascist rule. Indeed, the 1922 decree was modelled on the bill drafted and discussed during the liberal era. It summed up previous ideas of nature conservation. It drew particularly on the aesthetic and cultural value of so-called “natural monuments,” according to the U.S. model of national parks. In addition, it invoked the ecological role of mostly untouched reserves in preserving endangered flora, fauna, and peculiar geological formations, following to the Swiss model. The regime took almost a decade to achieve the “fascistization of the park” (87). Due to political decisions in the 1930s, the original projects underwent a radical transformation. Research work gave progressive way to tourism; the population of ibex and chamois fell drastically; local wardens were replaced by militiamen that had hardly seen a glacier before. After the Second World War, in a very solid rebuttal of fascist centralization, the park was redesigned as an autonomous body in 1947.

The title also introduces another key and innovative aspect of the volume, namely focusing on the role of animals in enhancing conservation policies and shaping the *nature state* in Italy, in opposition to a historiography that has mainly focussed on the role of vegetation and landscapes. The ibex is the leading character of this story—as other animals feature in other stories of protected areas in the country—, but the active role of animals does not limit itself to the link between a

well-confined area and the last bastion of a micro- and macrofauna. In the Gran Paradiso park, animals and humans were involved in acclimatization and economic experiments, as in the case of the introduction of reindeer from Norway or mouflons from Sardinia. Humans tried to artificially ensure ecological balance and limit the number of predators by shooting eagles and foxes. Animal actions and movements intertwine with social and economic dynamics as the “interspecific competition” (51) between domesticated and wild species that worsened the network of human conflicts over the use of pastures, for instance. Conflicts over grazing resources are not the only link between animal and human spheres addressed in the book. Hunting rights represent the other crucial overlapping space, and the author thoroughly illustrates negotiations for a delicate and flexible balance between ideas of conservation and local communities’ needs.

Nature conservation policies are both the core theme of the book and tools to reflect upon the building of the fascist regime in Italy. The conceptual framework of this history of the Gran Paradiso massif in modern times is the nature state, a concept that the author and others have already developed and tested in recent publications in the area of nature conservation. The nature state is defined as “the conceptualization of conservation as a national task” (6) and “a solid state organization dedicated to preserving natural assets and landscapes” (21). It suits particularly well sites of national interest due to their eco-systemic functions. The book critically discusses the limits and potential of the Italian nature state, its unexpected achievements in the midst of competing understandings and goals of conservation, and its systemic lack of funds and of a planned research agenda. On the one hand, the book shows the nationalization trajectory of a peripheral area via the implementation of protection measures, research initiatives, and its transformation into a good of mass consumption. It highlights the ambiguous role of things such as severe depopulation, forms of resistance, symbolic legacies, infrastructures, and economic relevance. On the other hand, the narrative traces the process of the building of a fascist state out of liberal institutions and personnel and the emergence of political and militarised uses of the natural Alpine environment. The combination of these two paths support the historiographical interpretation of fascism as a pragmatic exercise of power and a continuous adaptation strategy of government, rather than a firm and stable ideology.

The Gran Paradiso park has undergone repeated attempts at “naturalization” by the means of politics and science. In *A Monastery for the Ibex*, Wilko Graf von Hardenberg guides the reader through the complex network of paths and crossroads of nature conservation in Italy. Via a case-study approach, he clearly demonstrates how the environment acts as a hub for human and non-human actors, social and political history, demographic and economic dynamics, and memories. Based on

solid research and on archival materials never explored before by historians, the contents of this historical reconstruction of the environment convey a strong sense of materiality and concreteness. Thanks to a methodology that narrows the investigation down to the local level and that sheds lights on everyday practices and bureaucratic implementation of policies, readers can learn about a variety of things: fascist conceptualizations of nature; ibex dishes served in Alpine hotels; international debates on pristine nature; the mix of saltpeter and strychnine used in 1926 by locals to poison ibex in sign of protest. The structure of the book follows a chronological structure until chapter 4 and devotes chapters 4 and 5 to the role of scientific inquiry and the controversial promotion of mountain tourism respectively.

A Monastery for the Ibex is a valuable example of how environmental historians should not be too much concerned with limiting their scope to a narrow definition of the environment and how very elitist environmental objects—such as parks in twentieth-century Italy—can disclose everyday practices both of conservation and resistance. It contributes to international scholarship on nature conservation and supplies a road map for the study of Italian national parks.

Roberta Biasillo, Utrecht University, The Netherlands