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The struggle between two opposite views of tourism development in the Abruzzo National Park (Central Appenines) in the years 1960-1980


1. A Case of Ecotourism before Ecotourism

The term “ecotourism” was coined only about thirty years ago and received an official definition by The International Ecotourism Society in 1990. Nowadays Wikipedia defines ecotourism as “a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism”. Wikipedia adds: “Since the mid-1980s [...] ecotourism has experienced arguably the fastest growth of all sub-sectors in the tourism industry. The popularity represents a change in tourist perceptions, increased environmental awareness, and a desire to explore natural environments”.

The case study I’m talking about is interesting for three reasons. First, it represented a very early example of ecotourism, both theoretically and practically. Second, it resulted from an exceptionally conscious, coherent and complex effort. Third, it came as a strategic response to a deadly threat to the integrity of an ancient and celebrated national park.
2. Local, National and International dimension of the “Abruzzo National Park Battle”

Abruzzo National Park is a 40,000 hectares natural reservation created in 1923 and dominated by large beech forests where two rare European mammals live: the Marsican brown bear and the Abruzzo chamois. Several villages lay inside its borders where hundreds of people live and work. Around 1955 the area drew the attention of some touristic and real estate entrepreneurs from Rome and Naples. They planned to transform the main village of the National Park, Pescasseroli, into a big winter resort for the urban elites, equipped with ski-lifts, big hotels, residences and dozens of scattered cottages in the outskirts of the village.

Between 1955 and 1962 this project went on undisturbed and the few public officials and local politicians that did not agree were marginalized. In 1963 even the Director of the National Park was thrown out because of his growing opposition to the devastation of landscape and ecosystems.
Since 1962, however, a growing number of press reports denounced the big amount of illegal actions perpetrated in Pescasseroli and the virtual disappearance of the Park Authority’s control role. This campaign reached soon a national and in some cases international audience, so that the Abruzzo National Park remained for many years at the center of a huge scandal. All this meant that already in 1964 some of the worst building projects had been suspended or abandoned and the heaviest attacks to the integrity of protected area were relenting. During the same year a governmental commission was created to investigate the abuses and the State Forestry Corps officer that had been in charge of the National Park Presidency in the previous years was removed and replaced by an older and more authoritative colleague, not involved in the scandal.
3. A Pioneering Effort from the Environmental Associations

These events made a profound impression on a group of young members of the “Italia Nostra” association engaged in a modernization of Italian environmentalism.

In 1967, this group conceived a complete reorganization plan for the Abruzzo National Park and realized it through a team including zoologists, botanists, lawyers, architects and economists. The effort of the “Italia Nostra” environmental group was the first Italian example - and maybe one of the first in Europe - of a global plan for a protected area, including not only the naturalistic aspects but also the ones relative to land use planning and socio-economic development. Indeed the authors believed it wasn’t possible to achieve a good level of environmental protection without taking on the economic problems of the local populations, which at the moment envisaged the ventures of Roman and Neapolitan businessmen as the only alternative to emigration. In regards to economic development the plan suggested to strengthen and modernize agriculture and breeding, to promote the recovery of existing buildings but especially to operate a radical conversion of
the touristic sector, that should become the engine of growth of the entire area, not only of Pescasseroli.

The plan appeared in the Spring 1968, when in Pescasseroli the “heavy tourism” was still dominating the scene and the National Park Authority - after five years - still lacked its director.

But just in the same weeks a new director was being designated: Franco Tassi, lawyer, twenty-nine years old, which came from a recent experience at the European Community in Bruxelles and had been one of the experts of the “Italia Nostra” plan team.

4. The conceptual frame: a “heavy” tourism versus a “light” and self-centered tourism. And a new key category: the visitor

Barely in his new office, Tassi began immediately to apply the “Italia Nostra” plan recommendations about tourism.

The tourism that was compromising the Park’s environmental integrity had been characterized since the beginning by an extensive use of luxury hotels, big residences, a large number of cottages and ski-lifts. It was a very concentrated activity, limited spatially to the village of Pescasseroli and temporally to the short snow period and the months of July and August. Moreover, it was an elite tourism, with a relatively small catchment area and very limited development potentialities. Finally, it was promoted almost exclusively by non local investors, so that its economic returns in the Valley were marginal. In the vision
of Tassi and the “Italia Nostra” group this kind of tourism had to be frozen at the current state and any further expansion had to be crushed.

On the contrary, it was necessary to substitute it with a kind of tourism:

. with a low environmental impact;
. not designed for resident vacationers but for the much larger category of the visitors;
. oriented, consequently, towards a wide set of users both Italians and foreigners;
. based on a large variety of accommodation facilities;
. deseasonalized according to the slogan “a Park for every season”;
. diffused on the territory, therefore able to benefit all the villages of the Park;
. able to make the most of all the resources of the area: climate, landscape, folklore, handicraft, gastronomy and so on;
. essentially promoted, implemented and managed by a dense network of small local firms with the collaboration of the municipalities and the National Park Authority.

In the implementation of this model the National Park Authority should have to play a strategic role, working in different ways.

First of all, it had to push actively the new tourism philosophy among the local dwellers and administrators. Second, it had to make known the area as an high value tourist destination in first person. Third, it had to create an infrastructure network of its own based on the American model and consisting in pic-nic and camping areas, small museums and tourist offices, fauna parks, observation points, marked paths and so on. Fourth, it had to drive the municipalities to invest in a “light” and self-centered tourism and to incite the local population to engage actively in it.
These guidelines - already present in the “Italia Nostra” plan of 1968 - were stated in a more and more detailed and structured way through a series of studies and publications issued by the National Park Authority since 1971.

5. The main achievements of the Seventies: the stop to heavy infrastructures and the development of a light and multicentered tourism network focused on nature and traditional culture

The years between the end of the Sixties and the end of the Seventies were the period in which the National Park’s endeavour to reshape the tourism in the Valley was more intense and creative.

First of all, between 1969 and 1976 all the new attempt all the new attempt to build in
environmentally sensitive areas were fought with determination and many buildings still in construction were blocked. This implied a hard and long-lasting conflict in many villages of the area: between the Park Authority and the municipalities but often also between the Park Authority and many single citizens. Most of the disputes concerned small abuses, but some of them assumed a much larger significance and became turning points in the history of the Valley.

This is the case, in particular, of the victory against a big ski-lift project that should have been realized in an area very important from the biological point of view, but located outside the Park’s borders: the Monte Marsicano. This was a project endorsed by the christian democratic majority of Pescasseroli since the beginning of the Sixties, but when a left-wing coalition won for the first time the local elections in 1974 many thought it should have been abandoned. On the contrary, the new administration relaunched the project and this provoked a very harsh confrontation between Park Authority and Pescasseroli Municipality that soon went well beyond the local dimension.

In fact, between 1974 and 1976 the Park Authority and the environmental associations were able to convince the national direction of the Communist Party that the Pescasseroli majority was making a big mistake about the Monte Marsicano; at the same time they were able to convince the Agriculture and Forestry Minister, Giovanni Marcora, that an
enlargement of the Park borders to include the Monte Marsicano was indispensable. This double success marked the end of the long age of “heavy tourism” that had begun twenty years before.

As we already know, the second frontline for the Park Authority was the promotion and construction of new forms of tourism.

Since the first days of the new Direction, in spring 1969, a new logo for the Park was adopted carrying a sitting bear bound to an enduring and widespread fame. At the same time measures against the abuse of the “Abruzzo National Park” denomination, often used in the advertising by subjects hostile to the Park, were taken. Tassi and his collaborators coined also a series of incisive and successful catch phrases such as “a Park for every season”, “here nature is protected”, “the Park clean is more beautiful” and “my friend the bear” that were massively utilized.

Moreover, during 1970 a better knowledge of the protected area was encouraged through the
publication of the first official map of the Park carrying the path network under construction, the launch of the first series of official postcards after about fifty years and the organization of several voluntary work-camps for young people coming from all over Italy.

The increasing number of visitors, fostered by all these dogged initiatives, was helped and conveyed through the creation of the “uffici di zona”, that is the village information offices. By breaking with the “heavy tourism model” - that had focused only on Pescasseroli totally neglecting the other villages - of the area these offices were conceived since the beginning as small but lively information and education points to be created in each village, whether big or small, central or marginal. Even in Summer 1970 the Park Authority activated six offices of this kind, in Pescasseroli but also in very small villages like Civitella Alfedena or in very marginal villages like Picinisco.
In 1970 too, finally, an ordinance was adopted to regulate the practice of camping and the use of the twelve mountain shelters owned by the Park Authority. This ordinance was heavily contested because many villagers considered intolerable the restrictions imposed. However, today it appears clear that it was aiming at two different but complementary goals. On the one hand, in fact, it had been conceived to curb the illegal behaviours and the activities not environmentally compatible; but on the other hand it was conceived mainly to strengthen and rationalise eco-friendly tourism practices such as the camping and
the use of mountain shelter and to favour the creation of a class of small entrepreneurs among the young villagers.

The first year of the Tassi leadership laid therefore the foundation of a visible and credible touristic alternative to the elite model that had dominated the Pescasseroli and the Upper Sangro Valley scene in the preceding fifteen years. This alternative strengthened considerably during the Seventies making the Abruzzo National Park a leading experience in Italy and slowly gained the consensus of the Valley dwellers.

A crucial contribution to this success came from the collaboration between the National Park Authority and the small Municipality of Civitella Alfedena, a village housing at the time just 315 people. Here, since the beginning of the Seventies, a group of young activists had launched the idea that local economy could be reanimated through an audacious tourism development program deliberately focused on nature protection and local entrepreneurship. Not casually the group was led by Giuseppe Rossi, a twenty-five years old functionary that had joined the National Park Authority in the same year of Franco Tassi and had soon become one of his main collaborators.

Though the young activists were members of the left minority of the town council, they were able to convince the old Christian Democrat major that their program was promising and feasible. The project was therefore started in 1973 with the collaboration of Tassi and Carmelo Bordone, a Florentine architect that was creating a sort of architectural corporate
image for the Park Authority and would have later chosen Civitella Alfedena as his main residence. The process was further accelerated in 1975 when the left won the elections and Rossi became the new major. Over the years a remarkable amount of touristic infrastructures have consequently been realized by the National Park Authority, by the Municipality but also by private citizens making the small village one of the most known places of Central Apennines. This meant that Civitella Alfedena has been able since the first half of the Seventies to prove that a tourism visitors oriented, deseasonalised, focused on
landscape, environment, local traditions and small entrepreneurship is a valid alternative to the model focused on few rich customers and based on heavy structures.

The example of the small village has been indeed followed by the most part of the Park’s villages, including Pescasseroli, so that today is possible to say that the challenge posed by the “Italia Nostra” Plan in 1968 and by Franco Tassi and the Abruzzo National Park Authority since 1969 has been won.

6. Conclusions

Since the time available is very limited I can’t push this analysis beyond the years 1969-1976. However the actual visitor who compared the villages of the Upper Sangro Valley
with other mountain villages of the Apennines with a story of “heavy tourism” would easily discover a double success by the formers, because they could display both a competitive economy and an environment in a very good state.

Concerning the historical research, on the contrary, there’s still a hard and long work to better know and understand the different elements of an experiment that has been unique in Italy and has anticipated all the main themes of what would have been defined later as ecotourism.

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