Green Rhetoric in Blackshirts: Italian Fascism and the Environment

MARCO ARMIERO

Senior Researcher, National Research Council, Italy
Director, Environmental Humanities Lab
KTH - Avdelningen för historiska studier av teknik, vetenskap och miljö
Brinellvägen 32, 3 tr
114 28 Stockholm, Sweden
Email: marco.armiero@gmail.com

WILKO GRAF VON HARDENBERG

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Ludwig-Maximilians Universität
Munich, Germany

ABSTRACT

In comparison with the significant historiographical work on the German case, specifically on Nazi environmental policies and ideology, studies on such issues for other Fascist regimes are still rather rare. This article attempts partially to fill this gap, at least as regards the Italian case, offering a general overview of the Fascist regime and its environmental politics and narratives. Analysing how Fascists appropriated Italian landscapes through both discourses and concrete policies, this paper examines the construction of a Fascist nature as a rhetorical, symbolic and geographical space. In particular, this essay explores the combined process of appropriation and expropriation through the analysis of two diverse but intertwined issues: firstly, Fascist rural ideology as a narrative on the mutual constituency of nature and people and secondly, the creation of the first Italian national parks, their successes and failures as institutions of nature conservation and their role as symbols of the nature/society divide. While blending the ideas of race, landscape, history, modernity and ruralism, Fascists shaped both the national environment and general ideas about nature in a narrative which affected the very object of the narration – that is, nature itself.

KEYWORDS

Fascism; Italy; landscape; rurality; nature conservation

Environment and History **19** (2013): 283–311
 doi: 10.3197/096734013X13690716950064

1. INTRODUCTION

For those who travel from Rome to Abruzzo the connection between Fascism and landscape slowly becomes obvious. Passing through the Apennines near the village of Antrodoco, a gigantic DUX materialises on the slope of Mount Giano, taking everyone back to a time when Italian mountains and the entire country lived under a dark shadow. Fortunately for Italians, and for the landscape, the Fascist regime did not have enough resources to transform Mount Giano or any other mountain into an Italian version of Mount Rushmore, impressing the rocks with Mussolini's feisty profile.[1] Nevertheless, they did leave a trace within the soil. In 1938–39 the recruits of the new Fascist Forestry Corps (*Milizia Forestale*)[2] planted pines on the slope of Mount Giano, using trees to write an impressive DUX that is still visible today (Figure 1).[3] Actually, the Fascist regime left much more than that word inscribed into the Italian landscape; its politics, rhetoric and economic policies shaped the nature of the country.

No one expressed this concept better than Mussolini himself. Speaking in Reggio Emilia on 26 October 1926, he announced:

> It is imperative that we create; we, people from this epoch and this generation, because we have the duty to remake the face of the Fatherland both spiritually and materially. In ten years, comrades, Italy will be unrecognisable! This is because we will have transformed it, we will have made a new one, from the mountains which we will have covered with a green coat [of trees], to the fields which will be completely reclaimed...[4]

In comparison with imposing transformations such as reforestation and reclamation, as well as the construction of railways, dams, new towns and national parks, the tree composition on Mount Giano, that gigantic living DUX written with pines, looks quite modest in the landscape. Nevertheless, the Mount Giano case can serve as a metaphor, symbolising the power of the word over nature; as is evident on that slope, rhetoric became the mould in which the Italian landscape was forged. Indeed, on the slope of Mount Giano nature mirrored the verbal narratives of the regime.

Analysing how Fascists appropriated Italian landscapes through both discourses and concrete policies, we will examine the construction of Fascist nature as both a rhetorical and a geographical space. We will follow this combined process of appropriation and expropriation through the analysis of two

1. On Mount Rushmore, see Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995).
2. On the creation of the new *National Forest Militia*, see Aldo Pavari, 'The Fascist Government and the Restoration of Italian Forests', *Forestry* **8** (1934): 72–74.
3. 'Duce', *Il Bosco* **16** (1937): 1.
4. Benito Mussolini, *Discorso del 30 ottobre* 1926, Reggio Emilia, available online at http://www.dittatori.it/discorso30ottobre1926.htm (accessed 15 November 2011).

Figure 1. Mount Giano. Photograph: Pasquale Chiuppi. Courtesy of Pasquale Chiuppi's Photo Studio, Antrodoco.

diverse but intertwined issues, both of which address the construction of a narrative of nature and nation. These two paths of enquiry are, firstly, rural ideology as a narrative on the mutual constituency of nature and people and, secondly, the creation of the earliest Italian national parks and their role in symbolising the nature/society divide.

In the background, obviously, lies the controversial question of a potential environmentalist attitude within Fascism. While the German case has been studied, starting with Anna Bramwell's contentious thesis on the green wing of the Nazis,[5] the environmental cultures and politics of other Fascist regimes still remain largely unresearched. Although John R. McNeill wrote about the 'intellectual hodge-podge' at the root of Mediterranean Fascism, that is, discourses linking national identity, the integrity of rural populations, the sanctity of the land and preservation of nature, scholarship on this topic is scant.[6] This might be because Bramwell herself was always sceptical about the Fascist

5. Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's 'Green Party'* (Abbotsbrook, Bourne End, Buckinghamshire: Kensal Press, 1985); Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller (eds.), *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); Frank Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown. A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 329.

interest in environmental issues, at least in the Italian case.[7] Moreover, we should consider the underdeveloped condition of Italian environmental history, which partly explains the neglect of this important aspect of the nation's past.[8] The idealistic substratum of Fascist cultures and a strong inclination toward classical studies rather than to scientific or natural sciences – after all it was the Fascist Minister of Education who banned natural sciences from Italian schools – seemed to confirm the irrelevance of environmental concerns during Mussolini's rule.[9] Nevertheless, national parks, ruralism, reforestation, reclamation, implementation of hydroelectric power plants, colonisation, autarchic policies and new urban planning were all part of Fascist politics and culture. Blending together ideas of race, landscape, history, modernity and ruralism, Fascists shaped both the national environment and general ideas about nature in a narrative which affected the very object of the narration. This mutual constituency of narratives and landscapes is the focus of our article.

2. THE RHETORIC OF RURALITY AND NATURE: RACE AND SOIL MADE IN ITALY[10]

In October 1934 the Fascist regime celebrated twelve years of its forestry policy with a colossal exposition in Bari. Among several objects displayed there, a double-sided model was especially persuasive in illustrating the Fascist narrative of nature and its salvation. It reproduced in miniature a mountain valley before and after the intervention of the new Fascist *Milizia Forestale*: degraded lands, poor forests, ruined pastures, landslides and wild watercourses on one hand, while on the other there were new woods, improved meadows, forest roads and hydro-geological works to protect against landslides and floods.[11] To avoid any misunderstanding, at the centre of the exposition a sculpture represented similar twin landscapes, blending together the symbols of *wilderness* – mountain peaks, eagles and waterfalls – and those of *humanscapes* – rock climbers, reforestation and hydraulic works.[12]

This exposition may be considered a prototype of the Fascist idea of nature, beauty, and improvement. Wild nature might be beautiful, as shown in the

7. Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 169–171.
8. On Italian environmental history see Marco Armiero and Stefania Barca, *Storia dell'ambiente. Una introduzione* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), pp. 49–55.
9. On the dominance of humanistic culture in Gentile's reform see Livia Giacardi, 'From Euclid as Textbook to the Giovanni Gentile Reform (1867–1923): Problems, Methods and Debates in Mathematics Teaching in Italy', *Paedagogica Historica* **42**/4&5 (2006): 608–613.
10. A deeper discussion of these topics is in Marco Armiero, *A Rugged Nation. Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2011), chapter 4.
11. Amedeo Verger, 'La milizia forestale alla fiera del Levante di Bari', *Alpe* **10** (1934): 408.
12. Ibid. 407.

artistic sculpture more than in the model, but it needed to be reclaimed and improved to become safe and useful. In the Italian forestry journal *Alpe*, Ulderico Tegani wrote in 1932:

> Everyone has to become wise in this world: even rivers and streams; even mountains which man, their absolute despot, bends to his will ... These valleys were astonishing as Nature created them, but no one will deny that humans have not only taken care of them, but also improved them, carefully managing their water and plants, soil and rocks, plains and mountains.[13]

This viewpoint might be dismissed as the opinion of a forest ranger, praising the need to manage nature to justify his professional existence. However, this view was more widely shared. During those years, the journal of the Italian tourist association, considered the ancestor of national environmentalism,[14] expressed the same ideas. Reclamation was erasing some picturesque spots in the landscape, such as marshes with reeds and water buffaloes, but Italians needed to learn to appreciate the new human-made spectacle as if it were a natural expression of national beauty.[15] Hence, the forestry fair of 1934 celebrated such a vision of nature and those practices responsible for its 'improvement'. The main idea emerging from the fair was that nature needed to be redeemed rather than just protected or preserved; Fascism aimed to do that. In the Fascist narrative, the concept of redemption and its use as a metaphor to indicate reclamation or improvement, was an obvious reference to Catholicism; as with the soul, the land was stained by some kind of sin and needed to be redeemed – that is, to be saved from its impure condition. Employing the metaphor of redemption, Fascists stressed the connection between nature and soul, reinforcing their vision of reclamation as a process involving not only external nature – wastelands, ruined mountain slopes and malarial plains – but also the moral qualities of their inhabitants. The discourse about the moral and material decay of the country before the advent of Fascism was the premise of that approach; the liberal governments were blamed for having stayed inert in the face of Italy's decadence, producing a degenerated landscape and a weak people. Thereby, while they were reclaiming and improving the land, the Fascists claimed that theirs was a redemption effort, a peculiar mixture of a return to some mythical past, essentially the Roman Empire when Italians were strong and respected, and a modernisation which was supposed to involve both nature and people.

13. Ulderico Tegani, 'Nel bacino del Sele', *L'Alpe* **1** (1932): 24–25.
14. Luigi Piccioni, 'Nature Preservation and Protection in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Italy, 1880–1950', in *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, eds. Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 259–268.
15. G.P., 'Agricoltura e turismo', *Le vie d'Italia* **35**/2 (1929): 158. The creation of a nature reserve actually preserving 'redeemed nature' and human-made landscapes will be discussed more in depth in part 3, with the case of the Circeo National Park.

As the 1934 forestry fair shows clearly, this approach had big inconsistencies and contradictions; the intrinsic value attributed to nature and its preservation on one side and a modernisation ideology which aimed to develop every resource for the economic growth and self-sufficiency of the country on the other could not work harmoniously together. During the Fascist era the tension between preservation and improvement was extremely strong, leading to peculiar paths and compromises which, however, were not specific to that kind of authoritarian regime and ideology. The protection of fragments of nature here and there was complementary to the large-scale exploitation of nature that was the dominant feature of modern economic growth everywhere. In his classic on wilderness and the American mind, Roderick Nash has shown that there were mixed feelings about conquering versus preserving wilderness; according to Nash, James Fenimore Cooper's novels on the American West were the clearest examples of the inevitability of civilisation even though they celebrated wilderness.[16] After all, what was the Hetch Hetchy Valley controversy if not the demonstration of the contradictory blending of protecting wilderness and exploiting nature? Indeed the construction of a reservoir inside the Yosemite National Park embodied clearly this contradiction between preserving wilderness and putting it to work, for the benefit of the country; the voices of conservationists like John Muir could not stop modernity from entering even inside a sanctuary of the American wilderness like Yosemite.[17] Frank Uekoetter has shown the same kind of conflicting discourses and practices towards conservation and the exploitation of nature during the Nazi regime in Germany.[18] For example, in the case of the beech forests threatened by the construction of the Autobahn near Stettin in 1934 Uekoetter reported Hitler's opinion, in which the latter unequivocally stated that 'while beech forests obviously should be preserved as far as possible during the construction of the Autobahn, they would have to yield to the demands of such a great technological project in case of conflict'.[19] Therefore, in both cases, even under different political and ideological systems, we can see the same pattern: in the 1920s US as well as in Nazi Germany the conservation and exploitation of nature coexisted; actually, conservation was the other side of the coin of a rapid economic

16. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982 third edition [1967]), p. 77. James Fenimore Cooper can be considered one of the main founders of the Western genre and the Frontier myth; on Cooper, Karl May, Maine Reid and other Western novelists see Allen Ray Billinton, *Land of Savagery Land of Promise. The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1981).

17. On the Hetch Hetchy Valley, see Robert W. Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and The Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature, The Life of John Muir* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 403–439.

18. Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown*, especially chapter 4.

19. Ibid. p. 32.

and urban growth. In the Fascist case, however, even conservationism was deeply mixed with the desire to redesign, as in the case of the national parks, which stemmed from its improvement ideology.[20] This assumption implied that wilderness was not at the core of the Fascist environmentalist agenda. Rather than looking for pristine nature untouched by human beings, the Fascist regime was interested in preserving and restoring landscapes able to represent 'Italianness' – that is, the combination of national nature and identity.

Following a long-standing tradition in Italian culture, nature was worth protecting because it was perceived as the historical product of the nation. It was not by chance that in the decades between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries Ravenna's Pinewood became the catalyst for the first attempts to develop a conservationist policy in Italy; rather than as nature, the forest was viewed as a living repository of literary and historical memories of the nation. Celebrated by Dante and Boccaccio, the forest also embodied the history of Risorgimento[21] since it was there that the hero of Italian national unification, Giuseppe Garibaldi, had taken refuge from Austrian soldiers. The death of Garibaldi's beloved partner, Anita, among the trees of the forest further transformed Ravenna's Pinewood into a 'natural' monument to the nation.[22] The 1904 proposal for the protection of the forest stated that it was: 'A national monument ... living testimony of many centuries of history ... venerable home of noble memories of arts and literature regarding our entire intellectual life'.[23]

The Italian conservationist movement was based on such a vision of nature; the rate of embedded cultural and historical heritage had to be high to stir its interest.[24] In this regard, the Fascist regime did not represent a fracture in the history of Italian conservationism; its anthropocentric vision of nature, filled with memories of the national culture, rested within a much older tradition. The 1922 law on the protection of natural beauty, enacted a couple of months before the Fascist rise to power, synthesises such an approach.[25] The law, in fact, focused on the conservation of objects and landscapes that were deemed

20. James Sievert, *The Origins of Nature Conservation in Italy* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2000).

21. *Risorgimento* is the name given to the entire movement and struggles that led to the unification of the country.

22. Albero Malfitano, 'Alle origini della politica di tutela ambientale in Italia. Luigi Rava e la nuova Pineta 'storica' di Ravenna', *Storia e Futuro* **1** (2002): 1–18.

23. Quoted in Malfitano: 8.

24. For example, one of the first societies somehow dedicated to the conservation of nature, the Associazione Nazionale per i Paesaggi e i Monumenti Pittoreschi d'Italia [National Association for the Italian Picturesque Landscapes and Monuments], founded in 1913, combined precisely the concepts of landscape, monument and the picturesque. According to the historian Luigi Piccioni, the Italian conservationist movement was influenced in this regard by the French notion of 'patrimoine' which stressed the historical sedimentation of meanings and memories, and blended natural and cultural objects; see Piccioni, 'Nature Preservation', p. 253.

25. Law 778, 11 June 1922, 'Per la tutela delle bellezze naturali e degli immobili di particolare interesse storico.'

to have a particular 'natural beauty' and also an intrinsic 'relationship with history and literature'. It also showed that the law-makers were deeply entrenched in a traditional definition of nature conservation as an essentially aesthetic and historiographic endeavour in which landscapes became worthy of protection only because of their links with human history.[26]

Nevertheless, we believe that there was definitely something new under the dark Fascist skies. The regime's narrative on natural/cultural landscapes attempted to embed national memory, aesthetics and the celebration of human work – that is, of the day-to-day transformation of nature into fields and agricultural landscapes – into a unique, if not always coherent, discourse. It was on this basis that Fascist ideology moulded both conservation and reclamation in one discourse and a multitude of concrete practices embodied throughout Italian territory.

Aldo Pavari, one of the most influential forestry experts in the Fascist era, expressed this concept clearly:

> Italy [is known as] the garden of Europe. Yes, but this beauty does not represent the general conditions of our lands; moreover, few people know that the richness and beauty of Italian agriculture are the by-product of a secular and tenacious struggle of the rural people against the adversities of nature, gaining victory inch by inch, [and] paying a great price in terms of work and pain.[27]

Therefore, he concluded that the Fascist reclamation scheme was simply an extension of that long-standing effort which 'had transformed and embellished the face of the divine peninsula'.[28] As a matter of fact, reclamation rather than protection was the keyword of the Fascist relationship to nature; and according to this component of the narrative, Italian nature had to be redeemed from marshes, malaria and unproductiveness.[29] From this point of view, manipulating nature rather than conserving it was the main focus of the Fascist environmental vision.

---

26. Luigi Piccioni, *Il volto amato della Patria. Il primo movimento per la conservazione della natura in Italia, 1880–1934* (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 1999), p. 249; Andrea Saba, 'Cultura, natura, riciclaggio. Il fascismo e l'ambiente dal movimento ruralista alle necessità autarchiche', in *Storia ambientale. Una nuova frontiera storiografica*, eds. Andrea Saba and Edgar Meyer (Milan: Teti Editore, 2001), p. 76.
27. Aldo Pavari, 'Genesi e sviluppo della bonifica in Italia', *Le vie d'Italia* **36**/8 (1930): 561.
28. Ibid.
29. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat has written, 'The concept of bonifica, or reclamation, was central to many discourses of fascist modernity. Initially, the term referred to the conversion of swampland into arable soil and New Towns along the Latium coast and in Sicily and Sardegna. Yet land reclamation merely constituted the most concrete manifestation of the fascists' desire to purify the nation of all social and cultural pathology. The campaigns for agricultural reclamation (bonifica agricola), human reclamation (bonifica umana), and cultural reclamation (bonifica della cultura), together with the anti-Jewish laws, are seen here as different facets and phases of a comprehensive project to combat degeneration and radically renew Italian society…'; see Ruth Ben-Ghiat *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 4.

This vision might be considered the Fascist version of the 'wise use' approach to natural resources which aimed to employ nature rather than contemplate it. The Fascists not only aimed to extract natural resources in a 'sustainable way', but also radically to transform the environment into a productive machine. In Fascist Italy the improvement of nature equalled reclamation – that is, a massive revolution in both the shaping and utilisation of the landscape.

Clearly, reclamation was not a Fascist invention. Italy has been affected by malaria since Roman times and had therefore become a permanent laboratory to experiment with technological, medical and political solutions for its eradication, a story analysed in depth by several scholars, including Frank Snowden, Giuseppe Barone and Piero Bevilacqua.[30] Nevertheless, in Fascist discourses and politics, reclamation was not only about land and water; it also included humans, who needed to be redeemed as well. The blend of soil and people in a racist and nationalistic fusion gave the Fascist environmental narrative its distinctive character. To understand the rhetoric and practices of Fascist attitudes towards nature we need to link the discourses and policies of nature with those on humans. After all, the Fascists blended Italian bodies and landscapes, and national and natural spirit, into one narrative. This merging of race and the environment was particularly evident in the most important Fascist narrative of nature: the discourse of ruralism and the related project of ruralising the country. As Barrington Moore has written, ruralism was a composite set of ideas and rhetoric with which Fascism aimed to demonstrate and implement the superiority of the countryside and its inhabitants over urban life and people.[31]

Mussolini himself started the ruralist campaign with one of his inspired speeches on 26 May 1927. In that speech, he argued that ruralising Italy was the only way to rescue it from what he called a 'demographic decay', caused first and foremost by the rise of industrial cities, which, in his words, made 'people infertile'.[32] Italians would have to return to the countryside to find the 'power of numbers', thus becoming a large population ready to conquer an empire of its own. In another fundamental text on his demographic and anti-urban

30. Frank Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900–1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Giuseppe Barone, *Mezzogiorno e modernizzazione: elettricità, irrigazione e bonifica nell'Italia contemporanea.* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986); Piero Bevilacqua and Manlio Rossi-Doria (eds.), *Le bonifiche in Italia dal '700 a oggi* (Rome: Laterza, 1984).

31. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin University Books, 1974 [1966]), pp. 493–497.

32. The same kind of arguments were also present in Nazi propaganda; see, for instance, the examination of Friedrich Burgdörfer's ideas of urban infertility versus peasants' prolificacy in Andrea D'Onofrio, *Razza, sangue e suolo. Utopie della razza e progetti eugenetici nel ruralismo nazista* (Naples: ClioPress, 2007), pp.18–19.

crusade Mussolini announced his plans for the future, explicitly linking reclamation policies and population growth:

> In an all reclaimed, cultivated, irrigated, disciplined – that is, Fascist – Italy, there is room and bread for another ten million people. Sixty million Italians will be able to make visible the strength and power of their number in the history of the world.[33]

Mussolini wanted a populous, self-sufficient Italy, rooted within the land. His huge reclamation project – the so-called *bonifica integrale* – should also be understood as a part of that rural narrative; fighting malaria and ploughing the soil represented a unique opportunity to increase the health of both nature and nation. The gigantic reclamation projects implemented during the dictatorship aimed to mould the environmental and spiritual landscape, making both a new Italian and a new Italy. In transforming the malarial plains Fascism also aimed to transform Italian peasants, producing the strong and prolific Fascist farmer. Quoting Mussolini, Giuseppe Tassinari, agronomist and Minister of Agriculture, wrote in 1940: 'land and race are indissolubly bound; it is through the land that we make the history of our race; the race rules, develops, and fecundates the land'.[34] As the Italian historian Silvio Lanaro has observed, what the Fascist regime was pursuing was not just an agrarian policy but an identity policy too, which would soon become a racist policy.[35]

From that point of view, the Fascists did not differ much from other approaches to national landscape as the expression of the people's spirit. Due to the similarities and political alliance between the two regimes, a comparison with Nazi Germany is useful; in spite of several differences distinguishing discourses and practices on race between the two countries[36] we want to stress the thread connecting nature and race in both nations. As David Blackbourn puts it, according to the Nazis, it was the 'racial energy' of German people which created the 'harmonious picture of farm, town and garden, settlement, field and landscape' characteristic of their homeland; this narrative racialised landscapes, counterposing the beauty and health of the German environment against the Eastern European landscape, described as empty, wild and abandoned due to the racial inferiority of its inhabitants.[37] Recently, Thomas Lekan has recalled Ernest Rudorff's arguments about landscape as the by-product of a

33. Benito Mussolini, 'Prefazione', in Richard Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli* (Rome: Libreria del Littorio, 1928), p. 23.

34. Giuseppe Tassinari, *Autarchia e bonifica* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1940), p. 193.

35. Silvio Lanaro, 'Da contadini a italiani', in *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea vol. 3 Mercati e istituzioni*, ed. Piero Bevilacqua (Venice: Marsilio 1991), p. 964.

36. Alexander J. De Grand, an expert on racism in Fascist and Nazist regimes has written: 'Traditionally, a clear distinction had been made between Nazism and fascism on matters of race'; in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The 'Fascist' Style of Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.

37. David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature. Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), p. 253.

secular interaction between 'people defined as a spiritual community and their natural surroundings'.[38] While in the Nazi approach biological elements of racism were strongly supported, in the Fascist case environmental factors had a more significant influence.[39] The Italian Fascist discourse on nature and race was largely based on the same 'organic connections' between nation and natural landscape so ingeniously analysed for the Soviet context by Mark Bassin:[40]

> Ethnic identity and character were determined not so much by internal physiological features as by their *Naturbedingtheit* or dependency upon the external conditions of the natural environment.[41]

Hence, nature and people mirrored each other. Rural people in Italy, especially those living in mountainous areas,[42] were strong and reliable due to their direct contact with a still wild nature – or at least what was perceived as a still wild nature – that in spite of its harshness was beautiful and productive because of human work. While taming nature, it was argued that rural dwellers absorbed its wildness. In the Fascist narrative the external landscape became tidy and civilised, but the spiritual landscape, the 'people's soul', preserved the pristine power of an unbounded nature.

In the official publication of the Forest Committee,[43] *Il Bosco* [*The Forest*], which was distributed with the most important Fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia* [*People of Italy*], the relationship between race and nature was clearly expressed in several articles; in one of them, entitled 'Race and Mountain', we read:

> The Italic race, the most authentic Italic race [is] the race of the strong Alpine people. These are the people from the mountains, the closest to the heart of Italy from which they sustain themselves. As a matter of fact it is up in the mountains that this pure race of labourers, shepherds, farmers has been able to preserve itself pure and authentic, isolated from the rest of the world ... It is up there that hybridisation has hardly ever occurred, instead the defence of integrity has been tenacious.[44]

38. Thomas Lekan, 'It Shall Be the Whole Landscape. The Reich Nature Protection Law and Regional Planning in the Third Reich', in *How Green Were the Nazis? Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*, eds. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Marc Cioc and Thomas Zeller (Athens: Ohio UP, 2005), p. 82.
39. De Grand, p. 70.
40. Mark Bassin, 'Nurture Is Nature: Lev Gumilev and the Ecology of Ethnicity', *Slavic Review* **68**/4 (2009): 872–897.
41. Ibid. 873.
42. On the relationships between national identity and mountaineering, see Armiero, *A Rugged Nation*.
43. The Forest Committee was created by the Fascism regime in 1928. It substituted the autonomous societies devoted to the protection of forest. Forest Committee's first president was Arnaldo Mussolini, Benito's brother. On this Fascist institution see Armiero, *Rugged Nation*, pp. 120–127.
44. 'La razza e la montagna', *Il Bosco* **14** (1938): 1.

Stressing the connection between internal and external nature, spiritual and material landscapes, Fascism built its own narrative in which the racial quality of people was embedded in the national landscape considered as a by-product of both natural and historical forces.[45] In a basic textbook on the supremacy of the Italian race – whatever it was – one could read: 'the natural environment is, without discussion, an incredible producer of men affecting both individuals and the collective'.[46] Eduardo Zavattari, one of the most authoritative proponents of Italian racism, expressed the same argument in an article on 'Natural environment and racial characteristics', published in the Fascist journal *La Difesa della Razza* (*Defending the Race*). According to Zavattari, the variety of the Italian landscape impressed its vigour and strength on the Italian race, producing 'the pure Italian, steely and sturdy as the mountains, obstinate and brave as peaks rising to the sky'. As he put it, biological and spiritual characteristics were transferred from the natural environment to the Italian race, forcing land and people into one narrative.[47]

Obviously, that kind of discourse was deeply connected to Fascist rhetoric about the re-birth of the Roman Empire;[48] a prolific and martial race of healthy peasants was the logical premise for the territorial expansion of the country. According to Fascist narratives, from Roman times to the Great War the finest warriors were people coming from the mountains – that is, from areas where nature was still strong and had a powerful effect on human life. A textbook produced by the Italian Alpine Club in conjunction with the Ministries of Culture and War – such a revealing merger – incisively stated: 'when the resistance has been defeated up in the mountains, Imperial Rome has been carried away'.[49] The Fascist president of the Italian Alpine Club[50] introduced an exhibition on mountains in 1938, making the point that 'mountain means first and foremost defence of the homeland'; he continued:

45. Although we are focusing on the connections between race, nature and ruralism, nevertheless environmental determinism was just one among several schools in the racist discourse of Fascism; for a comprehensive history of it see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

46. Giovanni Marro, *Primato della razza italiana* (Milan-Messina: Casa Editrice Giuseppe Principato, 1940), p. 36. On the relevance of this book and its author in the making of the Italian racism see Gillette, *Racial Theories,* pp. 114–5.

47. Eduardo Zavattari, 'Ambiente naturale e caratteri biopsichici della razza italiana', *La Difesa della Razza* **1** (1938): 20–21; here the quote is reproduced from the anthology *Eia, eia, eia alalà. La stampa italiana sotto il fascismo 1919–1943,* ed. Oreste Del Buono (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), pp. 347–8. On Zavattari's environmental determinism in racial matters see Del Buono, pp. 84–5.

48. The cult of *romanità* is not at the centre of this essay; nevertheless, it was a basic ingredient of Fascist doctrine. On this issue see Romke Visser, 'Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità', *Journal of Contemporary History* **27**/1 (1992): 5–22.

49. *Manuale della montagna* (Rome: Ulpiano, 1939), p. xiv.

50. The whole society was 'fascisticised' by the regime; on this issue see Alessandro Pastore, 'L'alpinismo, il Club Alpino Italiano e il fascismo', *Storia e regione* **13**/1 (2004), Special Issue on *Sport e fascismi*, eds. Claudio Ambrosi and Wolfgang Weber: 77–81.

> A strong race of mountaineers lives and works in the shadow of deep valleys, surviving with incredible effort; people made for war and children, for work and battle, people always ready for the harshest tasks the Nation asks them to perform.[51]

These arguments were quite common in the Fascist narrative, connecting natural landscape and the nation's spirit. They were the very foundation of the monumental inquiry on depopulation of the mountains, commissioned by the regime for the Italian Institute for Agrarian Economy. In the volume on the Venetian Alps, one of the researchers proclaimed:

> If there is a corner in Italy where the mental habit, the fierceness, the sense of duty, obedience, and authority, the possibilities of conquest are embedded in the very nature of men, the Alps are this corner of Italy. We must give recognition to this noble progeny of shepherds, soldiers, workers, fighters, to this stock of true Italians clinging to the tops of mountains, surviving in the valleys and on the terraces.[52]

Those lines expressed typical rural rhetoric. Deeply connected to 'nature', rural people were physically and morally stronger than those from the city but, according to that narrative, nature did not make them free and rebellious; rather, it bent them to authority of whatever kind. Fascist ruralism domesticated Rousseau's theory of nature and its effects on the political attitude of people. In particular, mountains, as the symbolic place of wilderness, shifted in this narrative from the kingdom of freedom to that of obedience, transforming the insubordinate mountaineers into obedient rural folk, ready to become alpine soldiers.[53] Memory, landscape and race were the trinity of that new nationalistic religion, which, starting during the Great War, reached its acme during the Fascist era.

The celebrated reclamation of the Pontine Marshes near Rome offered a typical example of the discourse about memory, landscape and race. As the Italian historian Patrizia Dogliani put it, the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes provided a social and genetic laboratory to improve the 'Italian race'.[54] The colonisation of those newly made lands created a melting-pot, in which people from different Italian regions met and mixed. The regime aimed this way at revitalising the 'race' and reshaping the face of the nation.[55] Although new,

51. Angelo Manaresi, 'Mostra della montagna', *Rivista Mensile del CAI* **57** (1937/1938): 190.
52. Giacomo Pittoni, 'Montagna vicentina', in Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria (Inea), *Lo spopolamento montano in Italia – vol. iv Le Alpi venete* (Rome: Tip. Failli, 1938), p. 168.
53. On this rhetoric see Marco Armiero, 'Nationalizing the Mountains. Natural and Political Landscapes in World War I', in *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, eds. Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 231–250.
54. Patrizia Dogliani, *L'Italia fascista 1922–1940* (Milan: RCS, 1999), p. 206.
55. Federico Caprotti has pointed out that, according to the Italian physiologist, Nicola Pende, the internal colonies in the Pontine Marshes were the laboratory for the creation of 'a race of Italians selected and tested for productivity and fertility'; see Federico Caprotti, 'Internal

that landscape was also deeply saturated with signs of memory; those signs alluded to Imperial Roman times and also to the Great War. The map of this reclaimed area of Italy included Sabotino, Piave, Grappa and other toponyms referring to famous battles of the recent war. From this point of view, the battle for reclamation involved nature and people, not only because people were supposed to transform the land, but also because the process of transformation would change both land and people. Frank Snowden has expressed the concept perfectly: 'It was as if by a mysterious inversion of traditional miasmatic teachings, the virtues of a redeemed soil would emanate life-enhancing, healthy effluvia that could penetrate the genes of the fortunate population.'[56]

The rhetoric of ruralisation was deeply connected with an entire wing of the Fascist movement called '*Strapaese*', which can be translated as 'Super-Village'.[57] *Strapaese* supporters, the savages, as they called themselves, were convinced that the secret of the Italian race was its *paesanismo* – that is, its being profoundly rooted in rural villages.[58] According to that narrative, the soul of the Italian race needed to be found in the village, the living memory of place and people.[59]

Mino Maccari, the most influential exponent of the group, explained what *Strapaese* was with an incisive short parable on the 'wild village':

> The great chief: what in the hell is that white and smoky rubbish over there on the plains?
>
> One of the Ras [Fascist local leaders]: that is a city, O powerful chief. There are hundreds of factories, schools, universities, offices, clubs, public gardens, artificial lakes, monuments made of cement, toilets, hospitals ...
>
> The great chief: I see. Raze it immediately. Flood it with wildmen, pillage it, ravage it. I want the biggest remains of that city to be contained in one of my fists! And over there, among those dark live oaks and those soft pillows of olives, what is that little red and grey spot?
>
> That is a godforsaken place, an old village far away from the rest of the world, without roads, railroads, schools. There is just an old, half-destroyed church with a blind priest; there is also an inn smelling of salami and *prosciutto* with some ramshackle benches, but with a healthy, smiling young lady serving a burning wine. In those little houses miners, shepherds, and woodsmen live.

colonisation, hegemony and coercion: Investigating migration to Southern Lazio, Italy, in the 1930s', *Geoforum* **39**/2 (2008): 950.

56. Frank Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900–1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 175–6.
57. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, p. 26.
58. Fottivento, 'Italia paesana', *Il Selvaggio*, 11–15 June 1927: 44.
59. David Matless has analysed similar arguments for the English landscape. As he writes, 'Country is set against city, and the categories of 'true' experience set against "artificial" modern distinctions of work and leisure'; in David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 144.

> Their women have black eyes, large hips and large breasts due to maternity. Around the village, woods and wild boars proliferate …
>
> The great chief: Stop there. Honour to the wild village. Listen to me my fellows. Take our flags up there and build the capital city of our empire; no one should even try to civilise this sacral temple of power, health, and love![60]

This dialogue between the great chief and the local leader is emblematic; it states that only the village preserves the genuine soul of the nation. And that national spirit is embodied in nature as well as in social memory: live oaks, wild boars, an ancient church and, of course, the bodies of women used to express the prodigious fertility of the race. Following Mussolini's thesis on the infertility of the urban environment, *Strapaese* supporters proposed a sort of sensual link between rural nature and rural people; in the pages of their journal *Il Selvaggio* were frequent references to the lively sexual life of the *Strapaese* people, compared with that of urban dwellers.[61] While in the marshes nature merged into the bodies through malaria, in this 'wild' version of the rural world human sexual life was the contact point between internal and external nature. On one hand, women's full bodies symbolised the power of nature over those people. On the other, we should not confuse what was seen as a natural 'function' of women – that is, reproduction – with some kind of sexual freedom. *Strapaese* was a place for large families and fertile mothers; the sensuality emanating from rural nature was confined to those subjects.

The 'wild village' parable also reinforces the observation that the Fascists did not celebrate a wild nature, as at the centre of the story remained the village; it was a timeless village, in harmony with its surroundings, embodying naturalness with its smells, bodies and form. Nevertheless, it was a village with houses, a church, an inn and people. Not wilderness but rurality – that is, the mix between the culture of people and the shapes of the land; this was the Fascist vision of perfect nature.[62]

As confirmation of that vision we have the testimony of Arnaldo Mussolini, Benito's brother, who was considered the mastermind of the Fascist rural

60. Mino Maccari, 'Così sia', *Il Selvaggio*, 1–14 April 1926: 4.

61. On 'Il Selvaggio' see, in English, W.L. Adamson, 'The Culture of Italian Fascism and the Fascist Crisis of Modernity: The Case of Il Selvaggio', *Journal of Contemporary History* **30**/4 (1995): 555–575.

62. On the anti-urbanism theme in the Fascist culture see Per Binde, 'Nature Versus City: Landscapes of Italian Fascism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **17**(1999): 761–775 (767). Although so significant in Fascist and Nazi cultures, ruralism and anti-urbanism were also common in other environmental traditions. For the US see Nash's interpretation of ruralism in Thoreau as the point of equilibrium between the poles of wilderness and civilization (Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 95); Paul Sutter has pointed to the Anglo-Saxon fear about feminization caused by urban living as one of the driving forces of the American passion for the outdoors; see Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 22.

narrative, at least in its forestry version[63]. He was the founder and then president for life of the Italian Forestry Committee, and in 1934 he wrote that:

> With deep fondness I have always admired Italy for its monuments, museums and all the various manifestations of its genius ... But above all the works of the land have always attracted my appreciation; in my frequent trips through the peninsula I love to observe the beauty of the Po Valley, its ordered and levelled fields, the rows of vineyards, the wisely pruned trees ...[64]

Although in the Fascist mythology Arnaldo Mussolini was celebrated as the apostle of trees, these lines testify to his connection with the rhetoric of rurality that went beyond the discourses on forests. As he made clear in his statement, the Italian landscape was beautiful indeed, but its beauty relied on the work of humans rather than on that of nature. Even his beloved trees were mentioned in the context of wise human management. And, as will be shown below, 'civilisation' also influenced the 'wild' in the case of national parks and nature reserves.

3. RURALITY, WILDERNESS AND BORDERS: WHY WERE NATIONAL PARKS ESTABLISHED IN FASCIST ITALY?

In Italy national unity and identity were traditionally reflected in rhetorical discourses about the environment mainly concerning nature's aesthetic and memorial value.[65] This interpretative framework was inherited by the Fascists, who showed a marked distrust for 'wilderness' (or 'external nature') and a manifest preference, as we have seen, for anthropogenic rural landscapes. As Caprotti and Kaïka have written, wild nature was instead perceived 'as essentially sterile, undisciplined, uncivilized and unproductive. ... Nature as wilderness posed a frontier that had to be conquered and colonized.'[66] Considering the controversial relationship Fascism had with wild nature, it may seem strange, if not counter-intuitive, that it was precisely under Fascist rule that the long-standing debate about the realisation of national parks in Italy found its practical fulfilment.

The four national parks set up in Italy in the interwar period, and the planned national park at Sila, were each the offspring of a peculiar categorisation of the

63. On Arnaldo Mussolini as a guru of Fascist protectionism see Armiero, *A Rugged Nation*, pp. 116–124.

64. Arnaldo Mussolini, 'L'agricoltura nella vita italiana, discorso alla fiera di Milano 25 maggio 1928', in *Scritti e discorsi di Arnaldo Mussolini* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934), p. 59.

65. Gabriele Zanetto, Francesco Vallerani, et al. *Nature, Environment, Landscape: European Attitudes and Discourses in the Modern Period. The Italian Case, 1920–1970* (Padua: University of Padua, 1996), p. 9.

66. Federico Caprotti and Maria Kaïka, 'Producing the Ideal Fascist Landscapes: Nature, Materiality and the Cinematic Representation of Land Reclamation in the Pontine Marshes', *Social & Cultural Geography* **9**/6 (2008): 618.

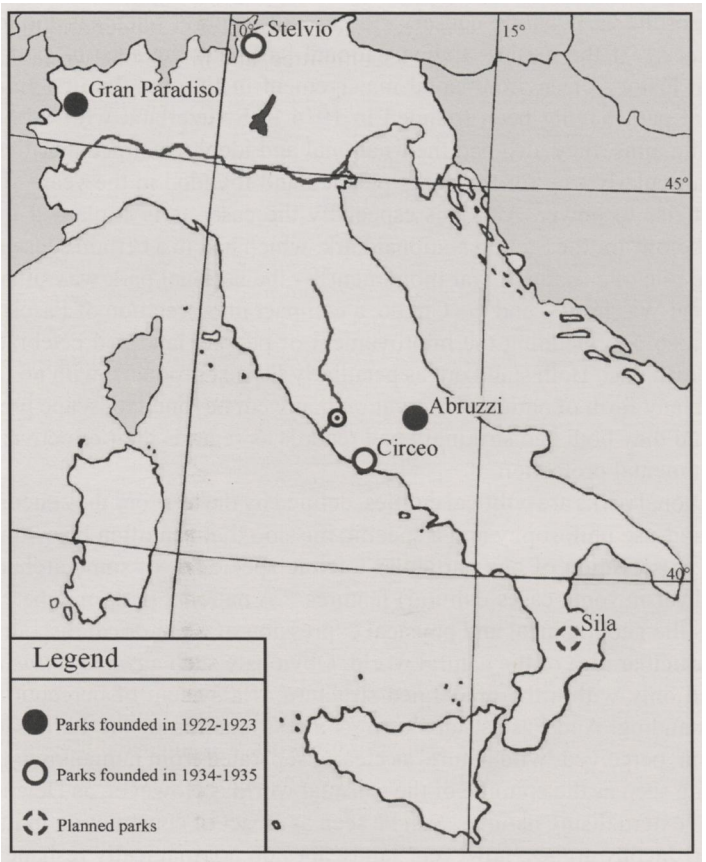

Figure 2. National parks created and planned by the Fascist regime. Graphics by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg.

natural world and of different needs (Figure 2). Nonetheless, they may all be seen as tools to construct physical representations of the different facets of the Italian rhetoric of nature. The variety of these representations was probably an effect of diverse ideological and political origins of the plans behind the national parks and of the different timing of their establishment. In fact, as will be shown, the first two Italian national parks (Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo) were the outcome of the pre-Fascist debate on the need for the institution of national parks in Italy and the areas in which they were set up had been chosen primarily because of the presence of rare, endangered and highly symbolic animal species (ibex, chamois and bear). In both cases, however, to different degrees, the park administrators attempted to create national parks that could merge the needs of animal species preservation and those of tourism development, reflecting the aims and desires expressed by the two groups that were most active

in supporting early nature conservation in Italy: natural scientists and tourism advocates.[67] If the earliest Italian national parks can be seen as part of the general history of environmental management in Europe, the first European national park having been founded in 1914 in Switzerland with exclusively scientific aims, they also had their national and ideological peculiarities. This was particularly true for the parks planned and founded in the years after the Fascist rise to power. And it is especially the case, as is explained in more detail below, for the Stelvio National Park, which had in a certain sense the exclusive role of a 'natural' war monument[68] – the national park was situated on the Great War front – and the Circeo, a compact interpretation of Fascist landscape ideology blending the improvement of people, land and celebration of the Roman past. Both stand out as peculiarly Fascist products, with no interest at all in any form of nature conservation that went beyond landscape preservation, and they both had strikingly bad records as regards their effectiveness in environmental protection.

National parks are political entities, defined by the territory they encompass, their land-use philosophy and a specific mission that can often be synthesised as the preservation of one particular totemic species or of some archetypical natural (or in some cases cultural) features.[69] A national park may be considered as the geographical and physical expression of a rhetorical discourse and of a particular idea of the natural world. Obviously such a *construction* can be realised only within the predefined structure of a system of perceptions and understanding. And Fascist ideology, as a continuation of the Italian idealist tradition, perceived 'wild nature' as clearly separated from humankind, the latter being seen as the epitome of the spiritual world.[70] However, as Delaney has stated, 'externalising nature ... can be seen as an act of construction in itself'.[71] As Karl Jacoby argues, however, 'landscapes do not magically reshape themselves in accordance with the desires expressed in legislation'.[72] And even if it is easy and quite straightforward for a government to map out a boundary and declare an area a national park, that action is never without consequences. The national parks created in Italy under Fascist rule, however, as with most European parks, were set in relatively densely populated landscapes (at least in comparison with the idealised American model of 'wilderness' parks for recreation), where it was even more difficult to trace clear boundaries between

67. Piccioni, *Il volto amato,* p. 86.

68. On the memory of the Great War in the Alps see Armiero, 'Nationalizing the Mountains'.

69. Lary M. Dilsaver and William Wyckoff, 'The Political Geography of National Parks', *The Pacific Historical Review* **74**/2 (2005): 237–266.

70. Giovanni Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*. VII ed. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1987), (original edition 1916), pp. 53–54, 236–40.

71. David Delaney, 'Making Nature/Marking Humans: Law as a Site of (Cultural) Production', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **91**/3 (2001): 487–503.

72. Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 29.

'natural' and 'anthropic' landscapes and thus to superimpose a national park without creating conflicts with the area's residents over the use of natural resources.

The establishment of two natural parks – Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo – was one of the earliest acts of the Mussolini government, occurring just a couple of months after the *Marcia su Roma*,[73] between the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923. It was, however, not the result of a peculiarly Fascist initiative; in fact, both parks stemmed from plans and projects prepared and discussed in the previous twenty years of the Liberal era. Before the Swiss National Park was set up in Lower Engadina, the governments and the scientific communities of the two countries had debated the opportunity to establish the first Italian national park in the bordering Livigno Valley. At least ten other locations were proposed as potential national parks before the First World War by different actors with often very different interests, ranging from animal species conservation to tourism promotion and landscape preservation, from the Alps to the Sila in Calabria. Italy had thus already begun a lively debate about the need to create national parks before the Fascists came to power, and about what sort of national park was more apt for Italy: purely scientific ones following the Swiss model, or mainly recreational ones based on the so-called American model?[74] In the cases of Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo, the new national parks were set up in what had been royal hunting reserves. The relevant areas had thus already been subjected to some form of nature conservation and their borders and legal regulations were superimposed on areas that had been relatively sparsely populated and that had remained rich and largely unspoiled parts of the natural world. Both were as close as one could get to wilderness in early twentieth century Italy.

The establishment in December 1922 of the Gran Paradiso National Park was due to the 1919 decision of King Vittorio Emanuele III to donate his hunting reserve and the tenancies held by the Royal House on the Gran Paradiso massif for the preservation of ibex, long a symbol of Italian nature. The Gran Paradiso massif was at the same time symbolically at the core of Italy, representing the historical roots of the Royal House and one of the country's prime examples of 'wilderness'. Not far from Turin, physically it was one of Italy's most typical border regions, characterised by an economically backward

73. On October 22, 1922 about 30,000 members of the Italian Fascist Party marched on Rome and forced the king to nominate Mussolini Prime Minister. A comprehensive history of the event is found in Giulia Albanese, *La marcia su Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2006).

74. Saba, 'Cultura, natura, riciclaggio': 81; Sievert, *The Origins,* p. 173; Piccioni, *Il volto amato*, p. 198. For further details on the the Abruzzo National Park see James Sievert, 'Abruzzo National Park: Land of Dreams', *Environment and History* **5**/3 (1999): 293–307. A good analysis of the transnational debate about national parks in the interwar years and of the role of ecology as a science in nature conservation may be found in Patrick Kupper, 'Science and the National Parks: A Transatlantic Perspective on the Interwar Years', *Environmental History* **14**/1 (2009): 58–81.

pastoral agro-ecosystem, the existence of a linguistic frontier between the francophone and Italian-speaking areas and a harsh and demanding environment. To minimise the risk of overlap between wilderness and productive areas, the physical markers of the national park's boundaries (such as signs and fences) often followed lines that diverged from those drawn on maps, which carelessly included whole villages within the national park, so as to avoid areas heavily affected by human activity.[75] Such a distinction between productive and unproductive areas is, however, never easy to make and in this case it also proved to be unsatisfactory. The early history of the Gran Paradiso National Park, whose main aim was the preservation of its ibex population, was in fact characterised by conflicts between local communities and the park administration over land-use issues, in particular with respect to the transformation of hunting from a customary right into a crime after the institution of the national park. What the local communities contested was the refusal of the state to pay them compensation for giving up hunting rights (although they had already been voluntarily ceded to the King).

In 1925, in an attempt to assuage the protests of the local communities, and in particular of the hunters, the park administration excluded from the national park, allegedly as an experiment, the Valsavaranche area, one of the richest in wildlife.[76] But the Fascist regime, in an attempt to create a park in which nature conservation and local development were balanced, also adopted its traditional rural policies in the area, promoting a land improvement programme 'in order that the great Park could ever more match the aims it had been created for and the economic needs of the population that live in it or on its borders'.[77] Even in the case of the most 'wild' Italian national park, the Fascists thus felt the need to work on the improvement of its nature. Later, in 1932, the journal of the Italian Alpine Club published an article proposing to transform the Gran Paradiso into a sort of huge open-air zoological garden, with all the features of an urban park: entrance fees, ice cream parlours, benches, almost domesticated animals and so on. The 'natural' features of the national park were to be reduced to a minimum, in favour of its thorough 'civilisation'. This proposal complied with the Fascist vision of wilderness, that to be fully appreciated it had to be 'civilised'.[78] The ideological border between wilderness and culture, typical of Italian Fascism, could not be drawn more explicitly.

In contrast, the establishment of the Abruzzo National Park was due to the determination of the preservationist movement, whose objective was to preserve the local bear colony. Its representatives had lobbied since the 1910s in

75. Roberto Gambino, 'Le ragioni culturali', in *Il Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso. 1992: 70 anni di storia, di cultura e di ricerca scientifica*, eds. V. Peracino, B. Bassano, E. Tompetrini and C. Carniel (Turin: Ente Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso, 1995), p. 88.

76. Antonio Cederna, *La distruzione della natura in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), pp. 102–103.

77. 'Il Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso', *L'Alpe*, November 1928: 436.

78. Ugo Rondelli, 'Il Gran Paradiso sotto campana', *Rivista Mensile del CAI* **51**(1932): 299–304.

Parliament and struggled in negotiations with the government to create a park that could promote preservation and tourism in the former royal hunting reserve of the Val di Sangro and, more generally, to promulgate a national parks law. In 1918 the *Pro Montibus* association, a spin-off of the Italian Alpine Club, started to collect funds to rent or buy land in the area and to set up a privately owned park, attentive to both the needs of scientific research and of the tourism industry.[79] The 1923 act of the Mussolini government was thus only the official governmental recognition of an existing reality; the Liberal preservationist movement had been able in just three years to create a park without the support of the state.

Boundaries had to be drawn there between private intervention and state inertia, between preservation and exploitation.[80] On one occasion the park administration, led by its president Erminio Sipari, strenuously opposed a particular form of exploitation.[81] The Terni hydropower company planned to build two dams within the park, with the aim of having a steady supply of water for one of its plants and increasing its production rate of electricity, and had initially obtained the support of the government to undertake the scheme. But, after a radical position change on the side of the government, caused in part by Sipari's cunning use of his strong network of acquaintances, this political battle led to the following intervention by Mussolini:

> To create a National Park means to rescue its territory from extraordinary forms of exploitation and maintain it at normal levels of exploitation, as they have been exercised for centuries: and this for various noble aims, such as cultivation, aesthetics, tourism promotion, preservation of the geological features that adorn it and of the flora and fauna that enrich it. [82]

The regime thus decided in the end that an eventual improvement in the production of hydroelectric power could not compensate for the possible aesthetic, sanitary and economic damages that were foreseen in the event that the dams were built. For once, the conservation movement had won a battle and the ideological border was drawn in favour of wilderness and not of modernisation. However, the defeat of the dam proposals was due, at least in part, to the ruralisation rhetoric adopted by Sipari: among the catchwords he used in the course of this confrontation with the government were the defence of aesthetic pleasure, the need for preventive hygienic control of malaria and the risk that great numbers of farmers would abandon the region, and possibly emigrate, because of the loss of their best land. To win the battle and stop the

79. Piccioni, *Il volto amato,* pp. 242–247; Sievert, 'Abruzzo National Park': 300.

80. Sievert, *The Origins,* pp. 177–179.

81. Ing. Erminio Sipari deputato, presidente Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, SME – Atto d'opposizione alla progettata formazione dei laghi artificiali di Opi e di Barrea, 3. April 1927 (Archivio Storico ENEL – Napoli / SME – Studi e progetti – Versante Adriatico – Sangro, 6/1/9/1/180)

82. Giovanni Bognetti, 'Per il Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo', *Le Vie d'Italia* **34**/3 (1928): 195–206.

construction of dams and reservoirs within the national park, the conservationists successfully employed ruralist rhetoric; evidently wilderness preservation could not be the only raison d'être, even for a national park.

By the end of 1923, the Senate, spurred by the interests of the hydro-power lobby in conserving the area's forests as a means to preserve its hydrological basins, also set up a commission charged with the task of determining the feasibility of a national park on the Sila massif in Calabria, in defence of a natural environment with almost no human settlements and of its wolf colony.[83] This was a long-standing project, one of the several national parks proposed, as noted above, by diverse actors since the turn of the century. Some accounts report that the commission drafted a possible border for the planned Sila massif national park, though the authors have found no supporting documents. Michele Bianchi, one of the members of the quadrumvirate leading the Fascist March on Rome, certainly acted as if he were its new president and he was publicly addressed as such.[84] But in this case, it seems that the national park existed only on paper, with fictitious borders and a mission focused on the defence of the economic interests of the industrial elites as opposed to those of the local population, which feared that the creation of a national park would harm, or even remove, their customary rights of use in the forests.[85] The Sila was not yet a national park since it lacked the administrative and financial tools needed to begin working effectively on the preservation of the natural world. Rather it was just an empty shell, the idea of a national park, but used as if it were an actual political entity.[86]

It was easy for the regime to present itself as the only political party able effectively to put an end to the previous liberal chit-chat about the creation in Italy of natural reserves and national parks by taking action (either real or

83. Saba, 'Cultura, natura, riciclaggio': 84. In the Sila forests, as all over the Appennines, local communities exercised their rights to access common resources in a perpetual struggle with the private and feudal owners and within very intricate networks of local rules and state laws. The arrival of the nation-state, even through conservationist policies, has always implied a simplification and reduction of local use and access rights. On this see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale Univeristy, 1998), pp. 9–53; specifically on the Italian Appennines and commons see Armiero, *A Rugged Nation,* pp. 76–86.

84. Ferdinando Cordova, *Il fascismo nel Mezzogiorno* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2003), p. 177; *Verbale dell'adunanza*, January 25, 1924 (Gran Paradiso National Park – Historical Archive – Verbali d'adunanza).

85. Saba, 'Cultura, natura, riciclaggio': 84.

86. The Italian historian Giuseppe Barone has used the Calabria case as an example of the tensions between technocratic understanding of environmental problems and social resistance to the kind of changes technocrats were supporting; in Giuseppe Barone, *Mezzogiorno e modernizzazione: elettricità, irrigazione e bonifica nell'Italia contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 243–76.

invented).[87] The rhetoric of deeds, combined with a so-called 'programmatic relativism', was in fact very important within Fascist ideology, whose only claimed dogma was the welfare of the nation.[88]

Decision-making and legislative initiative, however, are essential, but insufficient to establish functioning national parks; what was really needed was the will to enact the decisions effectively and to set up productive and continued relationships with the local communities affected by the new parks, which in some cases experienced, or as in the Sila case feared, a reduction in their rights to use resources. The need for national parks stemmed from an urban desire to preserve certain areas for their environmental and aesthetic values, but their actual implementation led to the creation of completely new categories of crimes, which diminished the ability of local communities to make a living out of the territories that became national parks.[89] The Fascist regime seemed to lack both the will and the ability to mediate between national and local needs and initially left the management of nature conservation to autonomous commissions representing both academia and local communities. These commissions, notwithstanding the lack of funding, were to be rather successful in managing conflicts and in promoting nature conservation within the borders of Italian national parks.

That state of things continued, more or less undisturbed, until 1933, when the Fascist regime showed a renewed interest in the direct management of nature conservation. A certain historicist rhetorical discourse about the Roman Empire played a relevant role in the creation in 1934 of an additional national park. The Circeo National Park, which actually occupied only a minimal part of the former Pontine Marshes reclaimed during the *bonifica integrale*, was in fact aimed at representing a 'document of throbbing *romanità*'.[90] Preservation was directed at both cultural and natural features, going from Roman archaeological remains, through forested landscapes, to water buffaloes, to create a living memory of an archaic agricultural landscape.[91] Actually, while the Fascist passion for the preservation and reinvention of Roman archaeological

87. As Frank Uekoetter has shown, also in the Nazi's narratives, the regime was able to impose conservationist policies thanks to its authoritarian nature which, allegedly, did not give any room to 'ifs or buts'; Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown*, pp. 1–2.

88. By 'programmatic relativism' scholars in Fascist studies mean the Fascist lack of an actual core programme and the regime's tendency to adapt to changing conditions with the only aim to stay in power. Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), pp. 3–4.

89. Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature* p. 2; Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 'Act locally, think nationally: a brief history of access rights and environmental conflicts in Fascist Italy', in *Nature and History in Modern Italy,* eds. Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 141–158.

90. The concept of *romanità* is rather difficult to translate directly into English: in synthesis it defines the archetypical and uchronian view of the Roman civilization to which the Italian Fascists aimed to relate. See footnote 48.

91. Gino Massano 'Il Parco Nazionale del Circeo', *Le Vie d'Italia* **40**/4 (1934): 241–256.

remains has been thoughtfully analysed by several historians,[92] the connections between those ruins and an idealised Roman landscape has never been fully explored.

The conservation of natural features and the defence of the race were subsumed in the Circeo National Park's mission, which was unofficially to demonstrate 'the strength of a race that comes back to life where it had already been great'.[93] The nature of the park was, however, an artefact, just as were the rest of the Pontine Marshes subject to the *bonifica integrale*. The Circeo National Park was thus a peculiar fabrication aimed at recreating, and 'documenting', how the area was supposed to appear in the 'mythical' times of the Roman Empire. The last forested areas, in fact, were reclaimed by the *Milizia Forestale*; the underwood cut, the ponds drained, the glades filled. The regime claimed to have eradicated malaria, but in the process it also destroyed several ecosystems.[94] About a fifth of the park's area was then reforested with alien species, such as the eucalyptus, with the aim of recreating the windbreak effect formerly produced by Mediterranean maquis, damaged during the reclamation works.[95] According to the Italian urbanist and environmentalist Antonio Cederna, the Circeo National Park 'was born dead', since it never was able effectively to act as an institution of conservation and the environmental conditions of the area were appalling.[96] Cederna quotes, as an example of how the park administration was more interested in reclamation than conservation, a celebratory volume published in 1960 by the state forestry agency (*Azienda di Stato per le Foreste Demaniali*), charged, since 1933, with the management of Italian national parks, in which the radical transformation of the wild appearance of the area through commercial wood-cutting, trimming of the undergrowth, and canalisations carried out in the 1930s were still highly praised.[97]

In line with Fascist rhetoric of rural rebirth, Mussolini himself took part, ritually, in the planting of trees.[98] The bronze commemorative plaque on the forest's outlook claimed that the 3,200 reclaimed and improved hectares

92. Among several scholars who have worked on this issue see Giovanni Gentile, 'Fascism as a Political Religion', *Journal of Contemporary History* **25** (1990): 245; David Atkinson and Denis Cosgrove, 'Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation, and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome, 1870–1945', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* **88**/1 (1998): 37–41; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 217; 379.

93. Massano, 'Il Parco': 241–256.

94. L. Senni, 'La bonifica di un bosco. (La Selva di Terracina)', *L'Alpe*, April 1934: 113–120.

95. 'Cultura, natura, riciclaggio': 85. and Senni, 'La bonifica'.

96. Cederna, *La distruzione*, pp. 196–203.

97. *L'Azienda di Stato per le foreste demaniali* (Roma; ASFD, 1960), 567 ff., quoted in Cederna, *La distruzione* p. 203.

98. Ariberto Merendi, 'Il Duce visita la 'Selva del Circeo', *L'Alpe*, January 1935: 3–8. On the role of rituality in the Fascist transformation of landscape see Per Binde, 'Nature Versus City'.

of forest would become a 'defence and support for agriculture and an element of health, decorum and beauty in the redeemed Pontine countryside'.[99] Agriculture occupies a central role in this statement and, in fact, the forest was seen and advertised as Rome's new wood reserve, a possible source of wood and work in the winter season for the settlers in the Pontine Marshes and a hygienic and healthy tourist destination.[100] Preservation was thus part of the ruralist rhetoric, and the natural landscape became beautiful, healthy and worthy of protection only due to human work. Fascists reshaped the borders between past and present, society and nature; while on one hand they drew a clear line dividing the space of modernity (the reclaimed swamps) and the mythical past (the Roman golden age symbolically embodied into the park), on the other, they constructed a narrative and a landscape dominated by the continuity or, better still, by the rebirth of the *romanità*. For sure, while past and present merged in the Fascist narrative, highlighting the alleged continuity of the regime with the Roman Empire, the Circeo Park was also a patent reaffirmation of the ideological separation between nature and society, of the denial of wilderness: 'good' nature was only that which had been civilised and integrated in society.[101]

Further issues of national identity, combined, however, with a drive towards the promotion of mountaineering and tourism, may be cited as motives for the creation of the fourth and last park set up under Fascist rule in Italy: Stelvio National Park, founded in 1935 in Trentino-Alto Adige, on the border between German and Italian speaking areas. The fact that the area hosted one of the last red deer colonies in the central Alps, or considerations regarding wildlife conservation in general, played only a minimal role in the decision to create the national park. Those who promoted the national park were mainly interested in the area's scenic beauty.[102] Moreover, if the entire Alps had always been seen in Italy as the guardians of the fatherland, this was even more the case in the recently annexed area of Trentino-Alto Adige, which, until less than twenty years before, had been subjected to Austrian rule, but had always been claimed as 'naturally' and 'culturally' Italian within the widespread nationalist rhetoric of irredentism.[103] In particular, the struggles to conquer, or, as the irredentist rhetoric would have said, to liberate, those territories had made them a patriotic symbol. The simple fact that they were contested spaces

99. Merendi, 'Il Duce'.

100. Ibid. As Per Binde put it 'Agriculture was construed as a way to impose a degree of order onto nature, and the building of new towns as a way to create enclaves of civilisation in the natural landscape'; in 'Nature versus city': 769.

101. On this see Federico Caprotti, 'Scipio Africanus: Film, Internal Colonization and Empire', *Cultural Geographies* **16** (2009): 381–401.

102. Guido Bertarelli, 'Il gruppo dell'Ortles-Cevedale', *Le Vie d'Italia* **35**/8 (1929): 621–630.

103. Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 'Beyond human limits: the culture of nature conservation in interwar Italy', *Aether – The Journal of Media Geography* **11** (2013), http://geogdata.csun.edu/~aether/pdf/volume_11/graf.pdf (accessed 22 May 2013): 44-50

amplified their symbolic value in relation to forging national identities. The blood shed by Italian soldiers became part of the landscape, transforming the entire area into a natural monument of the nation.[104] The Stelvio National Park, besides being a cherished destination for mountaineers and ramblers, could thus also be seen as a symbol of both Italian nation and nature in an area that represented the country's cultural, linguistic and political borders. In addition, mountaineering itself pushed the boundaries of human limits through the attainment of the highest Alpine peaks. The symbolic value of the Stelvio as a national border and as a tourism destination were placed in such a high regard that no real conservation policy, such as a hunting ban, was set in place within the national park.[105]

This state of affairs seems to have reduced the conflicts between the park officials and the local population, since, in the end, the Stelvio National Park under Fascist rule did not amount to much more than borders drawn on a map, which even included urbanised areas such as villages and hamlets, where the nature conservation tasks associated with a national park were clearly not feasible. The park seems to have lacked any mission and land-use philosophy that went beyond tourism promotion.[106] In an article published in the magazine of the Italian Touring Club in which the park was first proposed, Guido Bertarelli had already stressed that the main aims of such a national park should be the further development of tourism infrastructures and the protection of scenic landscapes (Figure 3).[107] Just after the end of World War Two the same Bertarelli claimed, in an argument with Renzo Videsott, by then the new director of the Gran Paradiso National Park, about the role of nature conservation in the Stelvio National Park since its foundation, that he would have been more than willing to sacrifice a herd of chamois if this had allowed the construction of the roads needed to develop car tourism.[108] In addition, the Stelvio National Park undeniably lacked the means to implement its statutory conservation tasks. Thus in a certain sense, even if formally and legally a reality, it was no more effective in preserving nature than was the planned national park on the Sila massif.

104. Armiero, 'Nationalizing the Mountains'.

105. Franco Pedrotti, *Notizie storiche sul Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio* (Trento: Temi, 2005), p. 54.

106. Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 'Percezione e rappresentazione della natura in "Le Vie d'Italia. Rivista mensile del Touring Club Italiano"', *Paratesto* **5** (2008): 237–254; Hardenberg, 'Beyond human limits'.

107. Bertarelli, 'Il gruppo dell'Ortles-Cevedale': 629–630

108. Guido Bertarelli, 'Il Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio. Lettera aperta al professor Renzo Videsott', *Lo Scarpone,* 16 November 1947

Figure 3. The Grand Hotel in Solda, within the area that later became the Stelvio National Park. Photograph: Gebrüder Wehrli, Kilchberg (Bertarelli, 'Il gruppo dell'Ortles-Cevedale', 630).

4. CONCLUSIONS

It may be stated that wilderness was perceived as a feminine waste that needed to be redeemed by the effort of the masculine Fascist State.[109] Nature and culture were inseparable and the former could be appreciated only in consideration of the latter. Moreover, the Fascist vision of nature was inseparable from its economic exploitation, be it in form of land improvement or tourism. In particular the national parks set up during the Fascist regime were deeply affected by the varying political context in which each of them was created.

The early autonomous administrations of the Gran Paradiso and the Abruzzo national parks were examples of continuity with the Liberal era that marked several outcomes of Fascist policy-making in the first years of the regime. These national parks could still be used as propaganda tools by the Fascists, as symbols of Italian nature, but, with their attention to species preservation and distrust for human settlements, they were placed outside of Fascist core interests and existed principally as a legacy of the previous political system. Shortly before the institution of the Circeo and Stelvio national parks, in December

109. Caprotti and Kaïka, 'Producing the Ideal Fascist Landscapes': 689.

1933, the regime abolished, however, the autonomous administrations of the Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo parks and centralised the national parks' management in the hands of the *Azienda di Stato per le Foreste Demaniali* and the paramilitary *Milizia Forestale*. This action had great symbolic value: the message of the Fascist regime was that even nature conservation had to express the values of the totalitarian state; there was no place within the state for non-Fascist institutions such as the two autonomous national park administrations.[110]

Circeo, the only original park project developed in the 1930s, best represented the realisation of Fascist rhetoric in nature conservation and it was not by chance that it was so strongly connected to both reclamation of malarial lands and celebration of the Roman past. A significant part of the 'external nature' conserved here had physically been recreated by human intervention, losing most of its 'wild' allure in favour of a role as counterpoint to the civilising *bonifica integrale,* in what may be termed a cultivated wilderness. In contrast, the ideological background of Stelvio seems to have been more nuanced; elements derived from the rhetoric of exploitation, nationalism and sport were mixed to give legitimacy to the park project. Actually, what it lacked was a vision for the place of nature in the project; the rhetoric of 'external nature' was used mainly to depict the limits that the 'new Fascist man' should strive to overcome.

Addressing the issue of Fascist forestry policy lies beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it was precisely in the forest realm that the contradictions between the rhetoric of rurality and the practices of Fascist policies became particularly striking. While the rural narrative praised the racial qualities of country folk, proposing a general return to the land, Fascist forestry policies aimed to control people's activities in the mountains, assuming that they were always harmful to the environment. At the same time, these policies reinforced the power of large hydroelectric corporations. The planting of forests to protect artificial reservoirs, the imposition of taxes to decrease the number of goats and of laws to restrict customary use of commons and the militarisation of the strongly repressive forestry corps were the actual face of Fascist rural policy.[111] Such an interpretation, based on a dichotomy between narratives of 'productive' nature and 'wild' nature, could apply to rural Fascism as a whole. There is no doubt that the policies of the regime neither helped peasants nor stopped urbanisation. In addition, Fascist ideology has never relied on ruralism as its only vision of nature, technology and society. As is well known, the strong relationship with modernity – the very opposite of rurality – was typical of both Fascist and Nazi ideologies.[112]

110. Hardenberg, 'Act locally, think nationally', pp. 149–150.

111. Oscar Gaspari has addressed several of these issues in *Il segretariato per la montagna (1919–1965)* (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria, 1994). See also Armiero, *A Rugged Nation,* pp. 114–134.

112. On this see Edward Ross Dickinson, 'Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse about "Modernity"', *Central European History* **37**/1 (2004): 1–48.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume a gap between rural narratives and modernist Fascist policies: indeed, our argument blends them. The Fascist discourse on race, nation and history was steeped in nature; therefore, even if one might say that Fascism did not develop an explicitly environmental discourse, nevertheless, the environment was always present in its narratives. The centrality of reclamation and improvement within the Fascist discourse exemplifies this point; nature, in the form of marshes, mosquitoes, drainage and reforestation, was at the core of that narrative. But it informed much more than nature and its transformation. Reclamation became a way of looking at the Fascist construction of the nation in a narrative built around nature and its representation.

The example of reclamation is useful because it allows us to see both sides, that is, how nature suffused Fascist narratives and the extent to which Fascist narratives affected the natural world. The discourse on reclamation and improvement was visible not only in the Italian soil in the thorough transformation of the Pontine Marshes, but also in Fascist attempts to improve land in the Alpine national parks. Ruralist rhetoric was realised in roads and buildings and in the network of new rural towns created by the regime, such as Littoria (1932), Pontinia (1933), and Sabaudia (1937).[113] The imposition of a new forestry regime manifested itself in the reforestation projects which accompanied the peculiar mix of planting trees and building dams. Nature conservation showed itself in a plurality of forms, seldom respectful of ecological relationships within the natural world, but always structured as an attempt to bring a 'civilised' nature nearer to the people. Nature and narratives of national improvement were more than a contradiction; they were a complex, distinctively Italian blend.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A first version of this article was presented at the World Congress of Environmental History, held in 2009 in Copenhagen; we wish to thank all the participants in our panel for their suggestions and especially John McNeill. Special thanks to Peter Coates for his attentive reading of this article and to Stephen Mosley for his suggestions. Last, but not least, we thank Mark Walters and Veronika Fukson for improving and editing our English. Of course, we take responsibility for any mistakes. Wilko Graf von Hardenberg's contribution to this essay has been made possible by a PAT2007 postdoctoral fellowship of the Provincia Autonoma di Trento and by his appointment as Associate Researcher at the Laboratorio di Storia delle Alpi of the Università della Svizzera Italiana.

113. On the new Fascist cities see Federico Caprotti, 'Destructive Creation: Fascist Urban Planning, Architecture and New Towns in the Pontine Marshes', *Journal of Historical Geography* **33**/3 (2007): 651–679.