

The Cultural and Spiritual Sites of the Parco Nazionale della Majella Abruzzo - Italy

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas

Since time immemorial there have been places that held a special meaning, be this as a special place for hunting, where water was available year round, endowed with special healing powers or of special spiritual or cultural significance. Many of these places were considered of such importance that they became protected places. A protected place does not necessarily mean that there is fenced but that the protection relates to a significance given to a single place or to a whole area. Specific to this then special rules and regulations were created.

Today there are over 100'000 protected areas and these include World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and conservation areas, with the smallest one being just 10 square kilometers and the biggest are being 970'000 square kilometers.

However, after the success of the protection of natural areas, a need arose to extend protection to historical sites that were in danger. In 1955 UNESCO⁽¹⁾ launched a campaign in order to safeguard treasures of ancient Egypt that were in danger of disappearing forever, due to the building of the Aswan High Dam. In 1965 the USA proposed the idea of combining cultural conservation with nature conservation and called for the creation of a World Heritage Trust in order to preserve "the world's superb natural and scenic areas and historic sites for the present and the future of the entire world citizenry." IUCN developed a similar proposal in 1986 and these proposals were presented to the UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972 where a single text was agreed on as the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage⁽²⁾ and adopted that same year. Today 186 state parties have ratified this.

Twenty years later the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH)⁽³⁾ emerged as a counterpart to the World Heritage⁽⁴⁾ that focuses mainly on tangible aspects of culture. The Intangible Heritage Convention⁽⁵⁾ was adopted in 2003 and became in a short time a fully operational legal instrument that 147 countries have now ratified.

While natural criteria are relatively easy to define, the definition of (non-physical) cultural criteria are much more 'intangible' due to the great variety of cultures upon this earth, but also due to historic consideration, as some cultural traditions have their source in civilizations that have long since disappeared, but whose traditions are still alive and with us today, as they have been passed on, either orally or in writing. They are also more difficult to define depending on who is *defining* these. It is therefore of the utmost importance for such work to be multi-tasked, to have different approaches and to include a variety of peoples, especially including those whose traditions are being considered.

UNESCO, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) have all played an important role in bringing together and disseminating methodologies for the identification and quantification of the economic values of protected areas and in providing guidelines for managing protected natural areas and world heritage sites. But much work still remains to be done, e.g. to identify, define, and provide guidelines for managing the Cultural and Spiritual dimensions of protected areas. This work is accomplished through a Specialist Group under the umbrella of WCPA.

⁽¹⁾ UNESCO – UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization <http://portal.unesco.org/en>

⁽²⁾ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Heritage_Convention)

⁽³⁾ intangible cultural heritage (ICH) - (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002>)

⁽⁴⁾ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Heritage

⁽⁵⁾ The Intangible Heritage Convention - <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00006>

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Since ancient time the Majella has been considered a sacred mountain and the deep forested gorges with an abundance of caves, water and springs have made this an ideal location for hermits. It is known that hermits already stayed here before the year 1000. It is on record that Dauforius already lived here as a hermit before becoming Abbot at Monte Cassino. He was later enthroned as Pope Victor III. Also St Francis of Assisi came here and visited Pietro da Morrone who was later to become Pope Celestine V.



Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas is a theme the Foundation for GAIA has been working with for years. The cultural and spiritual sites of the Parco Nazionale della Majella was a project we proposed to IUCN and their related agencies.



The purpose was to bring to the attention of the IUCN, WCPA, CSVPA and Delos Initiative⁽¹⁾ the abundance and variety of cultural and spiritual sites that were located at the Parco Nazionale della Majella (PNM) in Abruzzo, Italy and at the same time to support PMN with identifying and managing the cultural and spiritual attributes and values of their protected areas as a means of maximizing the Parco Nazionale della Majella's contribution to society.

The special characteristic of Parco Nazionale della Majella is that 55% of its territory is situated above 2000 m (6562 ft)



The Parco Nazionale della Majella has PAN Parks and Federparks designation.

The Parco Nazionale della Majella finds itself in a unique situation:



that of being on the one hand one of the most important protected areas of Italy...

... and by having on its territory such well preserved, unique and varied sites of cultural and spiritual value.

⁽¹⁾ Delos Initiative - <http://www.mediterranean.org/delos/sites.htm#Majella>



Many of the artistic items have been brought to the museums in the area, though there is still an abundance to be found on site.

This will certainly be a major draw for tourists



but it will also create an additional responsibility.



Following the visit by our Executive Trustee, Vita de Waal, she submitted the Parco Nazionale della Majella sites as case-studies and these have been accepted within the Delos Initiative ⁽¹⁾

There are many caves with reputed healing powers, be this through rubbing a diseased part of the body on the walls where the holy people lived



or by lying in the area they slept in a releasing psychological distresses

or by drinking water that comes out of the ground after it being touched by holy hands



The area has been peopled since Paleolithic times, and this has allowed for an amazing variety of different peoples and cultures to leave their traces.



Sancturaries dedicated to Archangel Michael are numerous not only in this area but indeed all over Italy.



There has been extensive transhumant activity has taken place since the Copper Ages just over fifty years ago, till the 1950s

Over 1000 tholoi-type stone-huts
Are to be found on the territory of the
Parco Nazionale della Majella



