

A Paradise Reclaimed

An Introduction

This book tells the early story of one of the first accomplishments in nature conservation in the Alps, the Gran Paradiso National Park, in Italy's northwestern-most corner (see map 1). Set up by one of the apparently least environmentally conscious regimes in Italian history, Mussolini's Fascist government (1922–1943/45), it was Italy's first state-recognized national park and the second in the whole Alpine range after the Swiss National Park. The fact that such an innovative experiment in conservation was established just over a month after the notorious March on Rome in late October 1922 that propelled the Fascists to power seems incongruous—especially if we consider that Mussolini's movement had not shown any particular interest in nature and its preservation in the years since its foundation in March 1919. As the satirist Ennio Flaiano stated in one of his famous quips, fascists do not love nature, “because [they] identif[y] nature with country life, that is, the life of serfs.”¹ How this oddity came to occur, how it exemplifies continuities and ruptures between different political regimes, and how it fits into the post–World War One narrative of crisis, conflict, and national rebirth are crucial questions this book aims to answer. Moreover, the book examines how the park developed over two decades within a regime whose focus, as part of the symbolic creation of a New Italy, was transforming landscapes and making nature productive.² By doing so, it shows how

conservation is a type of work that can have hugely transformative effects on the material and symbolic affordances of landscapes and ecosystems, as well as on the meshwork of rights and claims that human communities make upon environments.

The history of Gran Paradiso National Park provides an exceptional lens through which to understand the place of conservation within the rhetoric and propaganda of a regime that, as Marco Armiero skillfully noted, constructed its narrative of national reconstruction around the idea of *bonifica*, or land reclamation. This concept, and its derived set of policies, brought to the forefront of nature management a palingenetic idea of regeneration that fit extremely well into the rhetoric put forward by scientists, politicians, and conservationists when plans were being made to preserve the area around the Gran Paradiso massif.³ Thus while Italian Fascism did not in any way embody what Zeev Sternhell has suggested was the “first environmentalist ideology of [the twentieth] century,” lacking any particular “green agenda” or “wing,” it developed a set of legislative acts and decrees which had serious impacts upon the natural world.⁴ Focusing on conservation in a specific locale, on how it materially and symbolically reclaimed certain Alpine landscapes and animal species, allows me to construe a counternarrative which is intended to provide a fuller view of the different ways Mussolini’s regime remade nature(s), beyond the most famous cases such as, for example, the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes.⁵

Under Fascist rule, in continuity with traditional Italian interpretations, nature was perceived essentially as rurality, rather than wild, secluded, or pristine environments.⁶ It was seen as a socio-natural complex which had to be mastered, controlled, reclaimed, and managed by humanity before it could become the paradise that it ought to be. According to an essay on the doctrine of Fascism attributed to Mussolini, but whose long introduction was actually written by the Fascist ideologue Giovanni Gentile, work was the only means through which “man subjugates nature and creates the human world (economic, politic, moral, intellectual).”⁷ Nature, in this interpretation, only became worthy of attention through human intervention. The same need to reclaim landscapes, at least symbolically and rhetorically, if not materially, was also used to justify the preservation of nature in reserves and parks. In fact, the Fascist preference for what has been termed *productive nature* affected the preservation and exploitation of landscapes and ecosystems equally, while wildernesses were subjected to more and more efforts intended to make them more valuable, just like agricultural landscapes.⁸ The growth of landscapes’ and ecosystems’ productivity in rural and wild nature alike was central, whether in terms of tourism and propaganda or, quantitatively,

increased resources (e.g., greater forest areas or more animals). Throughout the whole interwar period nature reserves were increasingly attributed value on the basis of their monetary and symbolic output. Under Fascist rule the productivity of nature, whether material or immaterial, eventually became the core criterion by which all environmental policy making was validated.

Based upon a former royal hunting reserve, the park contributed to sustaining the protection granted by the House of Savoy since the early nineteenth century to the last herd of Alpine ibex, from which all of the over fifty thousand ibex currently living in the Alps originate. This story has been portrayed as an example of “the human ability to fix damaged natures.”⁹ Indeed, the continuity of preservation efforts in the region did play a crucial role in safeguarding the ibex from extinction. Focusing on the park’s early years, however, reveals a more nuanced, complex story—one of struggle, confrontation, and discontent. A story in which the daily practices of conservation, or the lack thereof, despite good intentions and existing infrastructures, repeatedly pushed the extant population of ibex back to the brink of extinction. A story where other animal species benefited or suffered from the symbolically laden human fixation with saving one particular kind of mountain goat. A story in which human ability is as active in damaging as in fixing nature. The way we read the overall story is, in the end, a matter of timescale. Looking across the *longue durée*, we gather the impression that ibex in the Alps went almost linearly from just a few animals enclosed in a couple of valleys, saved single-handedly by the king of a small European country, to tens of thousands once again spread over a whole mountain range. Zooming in on the critical years around the two world wars allows us to understand how competing interests, desires, and needs affected the story—and could have led to very different results.¹⁰

HISTORIES OF CONSERVATION

Nation states are necessarily concerned with managing nature, landscapes, and resources, as these set the material basis and the aesthetic scenario for their very existence. Therefore, managing material and symbolic environments has always been an essential component of state policies and nation making.¹¹ It has not always been exclusively an issue of the exploitation or wise use of resources either, as about a hundred and fifty years of institutionalized nature conservation can testify. Since the late nineteenth century, in fact, due to a coincidental and varied set of interests, nation states around the world have started to develop an awareness of the need to actively take care of nature. Conservation has increasingly become part of the core remit of state activities, in a process that has led to the increasing formalization of

what I and others have recently termed the *nature state*.¹² Over the course of the twentieth century this reconceptualization of conservation as a national task became reminiscent of the state's handling of other issues of general interest, such as welfare and planning. Understanding this provides the ideal context for discussing the history of Gran Paradiso beyond and around its framing as a national park.

Historiography on conservation institutions—particularly national parks, for their high symbolic value—dates back to the origins of environmental history as a discipline, is extremely rich, and still plays a central role in twenty-first-century scholarship.¹³ A crucial insight into the historiography is that the term *national park* covers a very diverse set of concepts and entities, varying not only in appearance but also in purpose. As Patrick Kupper neatly puts it, “The term ‘national park’ provides a common denominator for all this global diversity, yet the denominator itself is indistinct.”¹⁴ As noted by Emily Wakild, however, most histories focus on the democratic and/or colonial origins of the idea. Less space has been given to conservation institutions that took shape within other settings, such as, in the case she delves into, the Mexican Revolution or, as detailed here, Italian Fascism.¹⁵ The latter observation in particular provides the opportunity to explore how nature conservation institutions faced change against overarching political and ideological settings, which parallels and enriches the existing literature on conservation in socialist countries.¹⁶ It also foregrounds the issue of how one nation's nature was handled and preserved within a strongly nationalist authoritarian regime.¹⁷

Existing literature on conservation under fascist, para-fascist, and pseudo-fascist rule has focused on Nazi Germany, mainly due to that regime's alleged ideological connection with the natural world.¹⁸ The myth of the green Nazi has, however, already been dismantled by various scholars, who have shown in detail how the approach of Hitler's regime to environmental issues was mostly incoherent and, aside from some propaganda boasts, quite ineffective. In particular, Karl Ditt has remarked how the motives for the development of nature conservation in Nazi Germany were based in power politics and the results accounted essentially to paperwork. Continuities, for instance, played a crucial role in Nazi environmental law making. Even the much touted *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz*, the first nature conservation law covering the whole of Germany issued by Hitler's government in 1935, has been shown to be essentially a mere compilation of rulings, bills, and ideas that originated in the Weimar era.¹⁹ As we will see, similar continuities were central in the development of conservationism in Fascist Italy.

While apparently thriving, conservationism in Nazi Germany never suc-

ceeded in setting up a national park—something that the declining Italian conservation movement found virtually delivered to its doorstep as soon as the Fascists came to power. Almost a chance occurrence, the establishment between the end of 1922 and early 1923 of the Gran Paradiso and Abruzzo National Parks set in motion a public inclination toward the idea that national parks were an integral part of Fascist nature management practices. The debate about conservation thus continued, and after a number of failed attempts, the creation of two more, rather different, national parks, the Stelvio and the Circeo, ensued almost ten years later.²⁰ This central difference makes it feasible to do a kind of research on conservation in Fascist Italy that is not possible for Nazi Germany, one that focuses on the practical and material aspects of how a conservation institution explicitly dedicated to supporting a national idea of nature interacted with the broader political structures of a dictatorial regime. Recently new strands of work on nature conservation in other fascist and pseudo-fascist regimes, such as Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, have also emerged. The huge difference in timelines of Italian Fascism in respect to these other authoritarian regimes does not, however, seem to allow much space for comparison: the international contexts appear too different.²¹

Another necessary dimension of comparison, beside the political, is that of the Alpine range's geographical coherence. The Swiss National Park, which was aimed more toward total protection and the promotion of national parks as scientific research institutions, has been the object of an incredibly detailed park biography from a transnational perspective by Patrick Kupper.²² Yet that area was subject to different stresses and conflicts than the Gran Paradiso because of the contrasting political setting in which the Swiss park was set up, the goals that informed its development, the way it was organized, and the way it related to local communities. Nonetheless the similarities in its environmental context, the fact that it was repeatedly cited as an example in discussions about conservation in Italy, and the material connection through reintroduced ibex make this park a necessary comparator for any history of the Gran Paradiso, as will be shown repeatedly throughout this volume. Similar benchmarks are provided by the failed attempts to set up a park around the La Bérarde peak in France, the struggle to create a German Alpine park around the Großglockner, and the structuring of the nature reserve around the Triglav Mountains in Slovenia as a laboratory of science.²³ Finally, the history of conservation in Italy under Fascist rule has been the object of a continual, if sparse, flow of research and document collection over the last twenty years, but there is still no definitive account of how conservation interacted with Fascism on the ground.²⁴

The environmental relevance of conflict must be considered. Its analysis is an extremely powerful tool to make sense of the mechanisms by which various actors interacted with conservation, which lies at the core of this book's narrative. As Patrick Kupper has written, "Around the world, precarious relations with the local population are a defining characteristic of the national park as an institution."²⁵ Moreover, many historians have analyzed the role of conflict as a way to frame and understand property and access rights from an environmental point of view beyond the conservation issue.²⁶ Telling the story of the Gran Paradiso will both pave the way toward a more comprehensive understanding of how the Fascist regime became active in setting up the nature state in Italy and add to the existing scholarship on environmental conflicts and crimes.

FASCIST (DIS)CONTINUITIES

The issue of whether the rise to power of Fascism on October 28, 1922, marked a radical, almost parenthetical break in Italian history or whether it was the logical, inevitable consequence of the country's unification has been debated since the very beginning of Mussolini's regime.²⁷ Fascism's own self-representation oscillated between continuity and rupture, between a revolutionary origin myth, a modernizing stance on practical matters, and the appropriation of tradition, beauty, and historical values.²⁸ Forged in violence, the legend of the mutilated victory, and revanchism, building on the reaction to the perceived Bolshevik menace of the Red Biennium of 1919–1920 by small bourgeoisie, industrialists, and landowners, and tolerated, when not openly supported, by the liberal and conservative elites, the Fascist regime did not bring the clean break with the past that it had built its propaganda upon. As Paul Corner reminds us, Fascism was "neither total breach nor total continuity with the past."²⁹

After a rather chaotic start, the Mussolini government found a rhythm and a way to coexist with the existing powers in the country, recognizing in particular the necessity for a certain continuity of bureaucratic structures, a continuity which technocrats trained and hired during the war by the Liberal governments took advantage of to foster their own agenda under the mantle of fascism. Just as in Nazi Germany, legislation which had already been proposed in the pre-Fascist years was routinely rebranded and propagandized as fascist because of the speed with which it had been ratified into law, in contrast to what was framed as the idle Liberal parliamentary procrastination. And while the regime boasted propagandistically of its totalitarian credentials and effectiveness, in reality it was what Guido Melis calls an "imperfect machine," in which different power centers and actors coexisted in a

complex array of interactions that did not fit well into the monolithic ideal of a totalitarian state.³⁰ Indeed, the state, its local subdivisions, its agencies, the king, the judiciary, and the party acted as brokers of contradictory social interests in a polycratic system of “multi-level governance” or, to use the terminology adopted by Massimo Legnani, “a constellation of powers,” that allowed for more pluralism than is usually accounted for.³¹ Fascism, hampered in its action by the legalistic way the constitutional crisis triggered by the March on Rome was solved and by the vague and uncertain character of its political program, postponed any radical rearrangement of the Italian political system. It aimed instead to first present itself as the conveyor of rationalization, productivism, and technical efficiency in managing the state. This found wide acceptance in bourgeois public opinion, during a period of enduring social and economic crisis in which the state’s bureaucratic apparatus had shown symptoms of negligence and disruption.³²

The first two years of Fascist rule, prior to Mussolini’s address on January 3, 1925, which marked the real beginning of the dictatorship, were characterized by the greatest degree of continuity with the previous Liberal era and by the need for a political compromise with the conservatives. The reform of the state in a centralizing and totalitarian sense gained momentum only after that date, marking the end of the parliamentary system and the representativeness of local authorities.³³ However, years after the March on Rome the Italian state maintained a strong Liberal legacy. Individuals adapted themselves to living and working in a radically different political framework. The Crown kept most of its powers as, in many respects, did the judiciary. And many other institutions inherited from the Liberal age kept on going. Moreover, the Fascist attempts to reform the bureaucracy proved a failure: the best of the alleged original modernizing aims actually came from continuity with the Liberal tradition, the system suffered a stiffening of the hierarchy, and the regime did not even succeed in fascistizing staff.³⁴ The main effect of the Fascist attempts to modify the bureaucracy was that its management was fully entrusted to the existing administrative and technocratic hierarchies, liberated from any political intervention. The Fascist hierarchical way of thinking reinforced the authoritarian rule of the heads of service, instead of modernizing government by investing its employees with personal responsibilities or autonomy.³⁵

Dabbling in setting up a nature state, aligned with other similar efforts to enlarge the scope of the state’s activities, had already characterized the years before World War One and was then developed under Mussolini into an attempt to set up a fully integrated *fascist state*.³⁶ Born out of the parallel administration set up to address the need for a more flexible management

of resources, under Fascist rule the new structures of the state crystalized into a variety of semiautonomous agencies, a prime factor in the exponential growth of bureaucracies during those years. Thus behind the facade of a monolithic state, the Fascist regime hosted a great number of minor but powerful bodies, each lobbying for specific interests, which soon became the real bureaucracy of the new state.³⁷ Here the Fascists, who had not found their place in the formal state administration, attained complete control of the complex system of minor institutions. These became the reserves the Fascist elites were looking for to enact an effective and uninhibited policy of patronage.³⁸ Among the agencies that were part of this para-state, the forestry department was central in the development of a nature state in Italy. However, this nature state remained a low priority for Mussolini's regime—one could even say a “low modernist” attempt to achieve this result—which left space for open conflict and a certain amount of political agency, even within a budding totalitarian state. Struggles over rights to access natural resources provided a political dimension in which conflict remained possible, even under duress.³⁹ Paradoxically, Italian traditional structures, advantaging networks of relationships and the power of local notables in the rule of the state, were carried on in the polycratic structures and organization of the same regime that was supposed to revolutionize the country and reorganize its hierarchies.

POWER, STATE, AND SYMBOLS

Looking at the fringes of power rather than at the heart of Fascist politics enables me to shed new light on everyday political and bureaucratic practices and frequently overlooked historical continuities. In this respect this book inserts itself into a recent trend in research on life under fascist rule outside or at the fringes of the state, exploring new ways to understand the “complexities of lived experience.”⁴⁰ The idiosyncrasies of local representatives within the commission that ran Gran Paradiso National Park had, in fact, a much greater impact on local livelihoods than any slogans or decrees issued by the central government.

This becomes evident in the role the park managers played as middlemen and brokers between opposing pressures from local communities and the central government. They used other state agencies to influence the outcome of conflicts and policies and overcome the limits of their liminal and transient roles, reflecting the vested interests of the agencies they represented. These interests were not fixed, but were ever-changing expressions of particular individuals, lobbies, or classes that coalesced over time in different groupings of power: power that moved back and forth between a plurality

of actors at different levels. The actors themselves were also affected by the agencies' decisions and used various relationship networks to influence different sectors of the Fascist regime. How this was possible becomes clear if we look at it through the materialist theoretical interpretation of the state as a fluid "site of passage of and between different powers," rather than a discrete entity that is distinct from society.⁴¹ In such a context power can be interpreted as an ebbing and flowing condition, rather than a steady-state item owned by certain actors or networks of actors.

Such an interpretation enables me to incorporate fascism's self-proclaimed ideological flexibility into my analysis of the state, devised as a method to attain power rather than a true political doctrine. As Denis Mack Smith suggests, this "enabled local fascist groups to adapt their political color to suit the tactics dictated by the nature of the power struggle in their neighborhood."⁴² This ability becomes evident when narrowing the investigation down to the local level, considering how the state, the party, and different layers of bureaucracies interacted and mingled on an everyday basis: the socio-environmental setting affected how the fascist state and the nature state were implemented in the framework of local social relations and power systems. To explore this in my analysis, I look at how everyday practices, especially at the level of the bureaucratic implementation of policies, confirmed the perception that the actors involved had about the state. As the anthropologists Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta claim, "The boundary between state and non-state realms is thus drawn through the contested cultural practices of bureaucracies, and people's encounters with, and negotiations of, these practices."⁴³

Rather than an organically developed socio-nature, fascist policy makers aimed to create a predetermined, detailed, planned, and centralized *state-nature*. Within a government that was seen as the univocal expression of the nation, nature was acted upon as an assembly of resources that stood completely at the service of the nation. The state was the guiding principle behind nature's transformation. Moreover, under fascist rule legislation essentially became a means to an end, a way to realize the nation's goals. Consequently the authority of the nation state, as expressed by fascism, gained dominance in jurisprudence, as the state became accepted as an autonomous being with its own free will and goals that went beyond the interests of any individual. In this context any rights that people held, including property and use rights, were assigned a social and national character.⁴⁴

My aim is to observe from a material angle, anchored to the day-to-day activities of the state and its agencies, how the immanent idea fascism had of the state translated into environmental policies.⁴⁵ In other words, I discuss

how the way the fascist state represented itself affected the way it structured the nascent nature state. As the media scholar Niall Richardson claims, “Representations are *never* innocent—they do not just suddenly happen by accident—but are always a construct in accordance with a specific set of politics and ideas.”⁴⁶ It is crucial to understand the regime’s perceptions and representations of the state, and of (productive) nature, in order to fully fathom Mussolini’s Fascism, its policy making, and its impact on daily life, since they were reflections of those unequal power relationships that had contributed to implementing the regime itself.

Nature is not only political in and by itself, because the resources it makes available to human societies are the objects of conflict; it is also further politicized as a set of symbolic resources.⁴⁷ Representations of both the state and nature were repeatedly used to justify and propagandize a broad range of political and legislative choices throughout the regime’s life span. For instance, the way it structured its understanding of the state crucially impacted the conceptualization of property rights and control over access which, as will be shown, inevitably became a central issue in all struggles about nature conservation.

CROSSROADS OF PRESERVATION

The story I tell in this book discusses all aspects of the motives behind establishing the Gran Paradiso National Park in 1922; its positioning within fascist rhetoric, propaganda, and political practice; and the path that conservation followed in the Graian Alps under Fascist rule. To achieve this, the book follows a roughly chronological structure, moving from before Fascism rose to power to the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime. Exceptions are made to provide sweeping descriptions of how the way conservation practices interacted with other major themes framing the connections between the regime and the natural world, such as science and tourism, changed over time.

Chapter 1 addresses the long history of preservation in the area, from the near-extinction of the ibex at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the establishment of the Gran Paradiso National Park on December 3, 1922. In doing so it focuses in particular on the lengthy debate that ensued in 1919 after the king’s decision to donate his hunting reserve on the massif to the state. This helps to explain the interconnectedness of conservation discourses and policies between the Liberal age and the Fascist regime. In Chapter 2 the narrative continues with a detailed account of how the park was organized in its first decade of existence, as well as the socioeconomic and environmental context within which it was set up. This offers a clear idea

of how the continuities with the Liberal age, including personnel, acted in practice to give shape to conservation governance under Fascist rule. In contrast, Chapter 3 tackles the nuanced history of conflicts about access rights that was sparked by the transition of conservation from the authority of the royal house to that of the state. This transition was perceived by the locals as a betrayal of their rights, which led to numerous tripartite confrontations among the state, the park, and the local communities. The analysis of their complexities is central to supporting my claim that conflict about access to resources allowed, even in Fascist Italy, for spaces of social dialectics and the expression of interests that antagonized the policy decision of a wanna-be totalitarian state. Chapter 4 then examines the impact of the decision taken in 1933 by the government in Rome to centralize its administration on the park's effectiveness. The overall reform of the way the park was managed led to renewed conflicts with the local communities, as well as a collapse of the ibex population.

Chapters 5 and 6 break the mostly chronological structure of the narrative to broach two topics that, for their relevance, need to be looked at in relation to their intrinsic coherence over the whole arc of the park's history in the interwar years. The first is the role of scientific inquiry in the way the park, which had been thought by many as inspired by the Swiss plans for a total reservation aimed at fostering scientific research, was managed. The other is the at times conflictual relationship of the park and its administrators with the promotion of tourism, an important facet of conservationism in many countries. The Epilogue reaches into the early years of the reestablishment of the park as an autonomous agency immediately after the end of World War Two, contributing to a better understanding of the continuities and ruptures that characterized the history of conservation on the Gran Paradiso massif and in Italy generally through the first half of the twentieth century and beyond the Fascist experience.

The Gran Paradiso National Park was founded at a time of major social upheaval, brought about by the Fascist rise to power and radical changes in Italy's economic and power structures, and it acted at the heart of low-intensity, local conflicts around access to natural resources. Set at the crossroads of the local and the national, the material and the ideological, the case of the Gran Paradiso provides an exemplary illustration of the ways that local communities reacted to the social and political changes of the interwar years.⁴⁸ Moreover, although set up at around the same time as the Fascist power grab, the park was founded on decision-making processes that were rooted in the tradition of liberal Italy.⁴⁹ The park was established in accordance with long-term debates and discussions and originally was structured

along the lines of other, previous Liberal policies and ways of thinking. In this book I examine how local actors, scientific networks, and political institutions reacted to Fascism throughout its period at the helm of the country, and how this reaction determined the strategies and outcomes of localized conflicts over access to natural resources, their public representation, and the way in which science and tourism affected how conservation was practiced under Fascist rule.