

The Mountainous Wildlands of Italy

BY FRANCO ZUNINO

Italy is a Mediterranean peninsular country of southern Europe, and many people believe it has only a marine climate and chaparral habitat. But Italy is also a mountainous country with very high peaks and glaciers, where natural, open plains are scarce. Italy is a very populated country with 57 million people. Thanks to this geographic situation, and notwithstanding the population rate, Italy is preserving some of the few remaining wild areas of western, central, and southern Europe. England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland have lost almost all their wildlands because of scarce mountainous regions, or from an overdevelopment of mining or tourism.

Large expanses of wild areas in southern Europe today probably exist only in Spain, in the Balkans, in Greece, and on the French island of Corsica. This article refers to the largest wild areas remaining in Italy, including nearby Corsica. But we must be clear that, though all these wild areas are “roadless,” they are not unaltered natural landscapes. The forests have been exploited for many centuries, and some old human artifacts exist of historic or cultural value. All such areas may be correctly considered only as Class II Wilderness

Areas, as described by Vance Martin at the 6th World Wilderness Congress (WWC).

The island of Corsica is considered here not only because of its geographic consistency and nearness to Italy, but also because it likely has the highest proportion of wild areas in west, central, and southern Europe. The character of its indigenous people, of ancient Italian roots, has been traditionally one of respect for the wild aspects of the land and its resources—perhaps more so than any other large European community.

A pertinent question to ask is, “Have the mountainous regions of Italy have been preserved by conscious intention, or simply due to their remote and rugged character?” The reality is that most of the wildlands exist because natural resources are scarce or difficult to harvest. Essentially, I believe the people do not have a real “preservation mentality.” They enjoy their mountains for the well-loved sport of mountaineering and the possibilities for adventure, rather than for recognizing the role of mountains as habitat for wildlife and as part of an ecosystem that must be valued and preserved. For the most part, the concept of wild nature has not been philosophically developed by the people of my country.

For example, the Italian Alpine Club is a club of mountain lovers, that since its founding in the 18th century has worked to develop the mountains, to domesticate them, to



Article author Franco Zunino near a protected chestnut tree. Photo by Mario Norziglia.



Glaciers and ibex in Gran Paradiso National Park. Photo by Alexander Marconato.

Italy is also a mountainous country with very high peaks and glaciers, where natural, open plains are scarce.

make them accessible by roads, and to have huts everywhere. The object has been to open these areas for “personal conquest” in all the places of beautiful scenery: remote peaks,

woods, alpine prairies, lakes and waterfalls, and glaciers. In the last century, the city has come to the mountains, effecting an almost irreversible destruction of their wild



The Abruzzo brown bear, animal logo of the Italian Wilderness Society. Photo by Franco Zunino.

beauty. Fortunately, through citizen action, we can still save some wild and formidable mountain areas. This is already underway through our system of National and Regional Parks, though many areas remain unprotected because there are no serious environmental laws to enforce roadless preservation. We have wild flora and fauna preservation—which ideally would be linked



Black pine in the Appennini Mountains, Mejjella National Park. Photo by Franco Zunino.

to wilderness preservation—environmental laws are not likely given the prevailing economic interests and because roadless preservation is not a priority.

As a result of these problems, our mountainous wildlands are decreasing in area and are subject to erosion from construction of huts, dams, power lines and, recently, energy windmills. In addition, where there is adequate protection, massive tourist use decreases wilderness solitude.

While I lack an accurate wildlands inventory, I would like to speak briefly of the significant mountain chains of Italy. The biggest are the Alps, to the north. They extend beyond our national boundaries, but the southern watershed is in our country. The Appennini Mountains extend down the peninsula. Other mountain chains exist on the large island of Sicily (Mount Etna and the Nebrodi Mountains) and in Sardinia (Gennargentu Mountains). In these mountains are located the largest and wildest areas of Italy. Similarly large alpine wildlands exist in France (Vanoisse, Mount Blanc e Plateau du Vercors), and in Switserland (Grand Comben-Matterhorn, Silvretta, Jungfrau-Aleschhorn), but rarely are they as undeveloped, roadless, and wild as those in Italy.

In my country, the wildest of such mountainous areas is the Val Grande, in the Alps of the northern Piedmont Region. In Italy, Val Grande is symbolic of the word *wilderness* thanks to the battles of the Italian Wilderness Society for its preservation. This 30,000-hectare wilderness was proposed as the first Italian and European Wilderness Area in the 1970s, and proposed again after the WWC in Scotland in 1983. A resolution of this Congress addressed the Italian and Piedmont Regional governments' opposition to two dam projects in the valley; the

projects were stopped and the valley saved. The battle for an officially declared wilderness never stopped, because the politicians favored schemes that increased state revenue from tourism and other job creation associated with national park status. Today, the national park authorities like to use the word *wilderness* as an attractive tourist slogan, but they do not wish an officially designated wilderness because it would restrict their management for tourism.

Despite the opposition, we had the first officially designated wilderness established in 2000 in a national park by the park authority itself: the Caldera del Monte Somma, only 125 hectares on the top of the famous Vesuvio Volcano, near the city of Naples. In addition, we had two other small wildernesses designated in a national park, but by a municipality only and by the park authority: Tempa del Palo and Viscigli Luonghi, of 200 and 250 hectares, designated by the Campora Commune in the Cilento: Vallo di Diano National Park. These wildernesses establish a very important principle, following the 6th WWC resolution about Italy to “encourage all national parks, regional parks and state nature reserve authorities to officially recognize wilderness areas inside their boundaries ...”

In the Alps are other large expanses of wildlands, such as the Gran Paradiso Mountain and National Park. It is penetrated by valleys, some with roads and towns, though it retains wild areas on the mountainsides. This European area is famed for its rich population of Ibex and Chamois. The roadless part may be about 40,000 hectares. Another wild area, famous for its big glaciers and the highest point of Europe, is Monte Bianco. These wildlands are shared by France and Switzerland, with Italy's portion

being about 10,000 hectares of roadless areas, divided in two places by a large international connected cable railway.

To the east, a large wild area with big glaciers exists in the Gruppo Ortles-Cevedale (Stelvio National Park). The area is divided by beautiful valleys, rich in alpine forest fauna such as red and roe deer, chamois, and ibex. These pristine areas (30,000 hectares) are unfortunately penetrated by roads along the valleys and with many small alpine villages. To the south are the Adamello (30,000 hectares) and the Brenta Mountains wild areas (20,000 hectares), all in regional parks. Far north and east of them are two wild areas just south of the Austrian boundary: the Gioia di Tessa and Cima S. Cassiano, each about 10,000 hectares. Finally, we have what is probably the second largest and wild-



The Val Grande Mountains National Park. Photo by Franco Zunino.

est area of the whole Alps: the Alpi Carniche complex, a very rough and beautiful expanse of about 40,000 hectares, famous for its mountainous dolomite scenery. It is almost all protected in a regional park, with a small part in the largest and wildest wilderness area of Italy: the Valmontina (3,340 hectares), established as a result of an Italian Wilderness Society proposal.

In the Appennini Mountains, only a few wild areas remain in the central and south. The largest is the famous Majella Mountain, now a national park, where an expanse of about 20,000 hectares may be considered



Dolomite Mountains in Alpi Carniche Regional Park. Photo by Franco Zunino.



A monumental laricio pine in the Restonica Valley, Corsica Island, France. Photo by Franco Zunino.

roadless. This is a mountainous area noted for its canyons and high alpine plateaus, with rare and endemic flora. Here some rare brown bears roam—an emigration phenomenon—and the abruzzo chamois have been restocked.

Another wild area, preserved through the battles of the Associazione Italiana per la Wilderness (AIW), is the

10,000 hectare Serra Lunga-Lacerno plateau, where an alpine prairie exists with roughly wooded valleys of beech forest. Rare species of Appennini fauna live here, such as brown bears, abruzzo chamois, wolves, golden eagles, and peregrines.

South of these two large areas, there is only one other that can be considered



The vast Lacerno Plateau in the Serra Lunga. Photo by Franco Zunino.

wild: the Valle dell'Argentino-Montea mountains, in the Calabria Region. A very wild area of about 15,000 hectares is included in the Pollino National Park and partially protected in a state nature reserve. It is populated by some of the last ancient natural stock of roe deer and black woodpecker of south Italy.

In Sicily, the only large expanse of roadless area is the famous Etna Volcano, where a 10,000-hectares area is protected in a regional park. In Sardinia, we have two large wild areas, but only one considered mountainous: the Supramonte plateau (20,000 hectares), so wild that today it is a refuge for modern “desperados” and kidnappers. The area is rich in almost all the rare species and subspecies of the Sardinia fauna and flora.

Near the mountainous wild areas of Italy is an important wild place—the French island of Corsica. Here is the largest remaining roadless and wild area of the European Mediterranean region. Monte Cinto is the biggest, probably 50,000 hectares, and may be one of the largest in south Europe. It includes the northwest part of the island, with rough, rocky mountain slopes and long, intact valleys. The Cinto Mount, 2,706 meters is the highest point of the island. It contains the last natural European population of Bearded Vulture outside of Spain and Greece. Next in size (about 40,000 hectares) and just to the south is Monte Rotondo-La Restonica, where a large expanse of the Corsican laricio pine forests exist, with very big trees that may be considered “European sequoias.” The vegetation is mostly chaparral or pine forest, with large expanses of high pasture and rocks, and small, very beautiful alpine lakes and streams. In the forest areas lives the endemic Corsican nuthatch. A third Corsican area is

L'Incudine (30,000 hectares) on the central-south part of the island, where the landscape, vegetation, and fauna are similar. These three areas are all partially protected in the Corsica Natural Regional Park.

As an Italian, I work with the AIW to protect our wild, roadless, mountain areas as wilderness. As a European, I hope that the French and Corsican environmentalists and people may forever preserve their wild areas in a future French or European Wilderness System. The AIW will be proud to help activate this preservation on the basis of the Italian experience. We appeal to our colleagues to work with us. This would conserve the value of a typical European wilderness resource both for itself and as a rich resource for appropriate tourism.

In sum, wilderness is being designated in Italy, but slowly, and only small areas of genuine wildland. Of these 23 areas, almost all are mountainous. The largest are the cited Valmontina and the Val di Vesta (1,525 hectares) in the Alps. A third large wilderness is Ernici Orientali in the Appennini, the Monte Cesima, and a recently designated Valle dell'Innolacapo Cosa (830 hectares) in the same mountainous chain of the Lazio Region. These small wildernesses are being established with the hope that such examples may make it possible in the future to obtain official preser-

For the most part, the concept of wild nature has not been philosophically developed by the people of my country.



The Valmontina Wilderness, the largest, wildest place in Italy. Photo by Franco Zunino.

vation of all the large wildlands mentioned here as Italian and European environmental treasures.

In the mean time, the AIW has proposed a Regional Wilderness Act to establish Regional Wilderness Systems and is working with some Italian regional governments to adopt it. Among other issues, this draft law will address the consump-

tive use of natural resources, such as hunting, which are restricted in national parks but allowed in most Italian wilderness areas. ❧

FRANCO ZUNINO, a previous contributor to *IJW*, is the founder of Wilderness Associazione Italiana and an advocate of developing new and innovative ways to designate and protect wilderness in Italy. Fax: (+39) 019-53545.