

A Perspective on Wilderness in Europe

BY FRANCO ZUNINO

Promoting wilderness conservation in Italy, a country with a long history of civilization and settlement, is a significant challenge. Few very large areas remain, almost none of them in a pristine state. Moreover, there is no obvious Italian equivalent to the word *wilderness* and no deeply ingrained wilderness culture as there is in such countries as the United States or Canada. Nonetheless, finding a way forward for a wilderness conservation strategy is a high priority. Italy, in particular the Alps in the northern parts of the country and in the central Appennini Mountains, can provide critical habitat for large mammals, such as bears and wolves. Italy is an integral part of the Mediterranean Hotspot, and has many endemic species—and, unfortunately, many species on The World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Red List: 12 of 39 threatened European mammal species, 15 of the 29 threatened bird species, and 4 of the 14 threatened reptile species (Italian Ministry for the Environment and Territory 2005). As a whole, despite its relatively small size, Italy contains more than one-third of all European fauna (Ministry of the Environment 1998).

Despite the obvious challenges, Italy has many rural areas throughout the country that still contain wildlands (see figure 1), and many local human populations have a deep appreciation for these areas. As a result, there is a strong basis for wildlands conservation in Italy, and it has been possible to implement a gradual, highly effective strategy to start securing some of Italy's remaining wild areas, and just as importantly, to develop a wilderness conservation ethic.

Many of the wilderness areas that have been established in Italy are small by international conservation standards, and some of these units might not qualify as wilderness in other countries. However, despite their small size, many of these areas can be expanded over time, or are

already part of a larger protected complex. As such, they are in many respects building blocks: providing a foundation for larger wilderness areas to be assembled in the years to come, or just as importantly, serving as a tool for developing a wilderness conservation culture in Italy.

An incremental approach to wilderness protection is a necessity for a highly populated country that does not have a culture of wilderness conservation (see figure 2). The wilderness ethic must be nurtured and a wilderness network must be established gradually, as awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the concept grows. The good news is that this incremental approach is producing results: new wilderness areas are being established on a regular basis in Italy (see figure 3), providing a model that can followed not only in new areas throughout the country, but throughout the European Union as well.

Origins of the Wilderness Movement in Italy

Italy's wilderness movement began with a booklet written by the author (then in the staff of the Abruzzo National Park, as expert naturalist) entitled "Wilderness, a New Necessity for the Preservation of Natural Areas" (Zunino 1980), and published in 1980 by the former National Department of Agriculture and Forests (which today is divided between the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment). The booklet briefly



Franco Zunino in the Val di Vesta Wilderness Area. Photo by Riccardo Tucci.

illustrated the American history of the wilderness philosophy and concept, the importance of wilderness areas, and the history of the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964. The booklet also illustrated the first proposal for wilderness areas in Italy, as well as criteria for future European wilderness areas.

In 1981 the author began publishing and distributing a newsletter entitled “Documenti Wilderness” (Wilderness Papers), designed to raise awareness among Italian environmentalists about both the wilderness philosophy and the broad parameters of wilderness conservation and management. At the Third World Wilderness Congress (WWC) in Scotland in 1983, the author presented “A Wilderness Concept for Europe” during the Congress’s plenary sessions, which was later included in the Congress’s proceedings (Zunino 1984). Momentum from the 3rd WWC inspired the author and several friend and colleagues to found an Italian wilderness society: Associazione Italiana per la Wilderness (AIW), which then began working to establish wilderness areas in Italy.

Wilderness Areas in Italy

By December 2006 there were 42 wilderness areas covering more than 29,000 hectares (71,600 acres) in seven regions of Italy and 15 provinces—from the Alps to the coast, to the central-southern Appenine Mountains (see figure 4). The very first Italian wilderness area was the Fosso del Capanno Wilderness Area, established in 1988, now covering 760 hectares (1,877 acres). This area was first established via a management agreement with a private foundation and covering 118 hectares (283 acres). The area was expanded when the Regional Forest Authority classified an additional 259 hectares (622 acres),



Figure 1—The Pizzo Madama Marta peak in the Monte Maggiore Wilderness Area. Photo by Anna Filomena De Simone.

and then expanded again when the Municipality of Bagno di Romagna added another 383 hectares (919 acres) (Zunino 1995). The largest wilderness area is the Ausoni Wilderness Area, with 4,230 hectares (10,338 acres). The smallest is Brizzulera at 0.3 hectare (0.741 acre). Most of these areas are protected by municipalities, regional forestry authorities, or private landowners, including, in some cases, AIW. Only one designation is by a national park authority (Vesuvio). The largest de facto roadless, wild area in Italy is the Val Grande National Park at 14,700 hectares (36,300 acres). AIW played a key role in the protection of the first 11,700 hectares (29,000 acres) of this park (see figure 5), an effort that was strongly supported by several WWC resolutions.

Definition of Wilderness and Allowed Uses

AIW defines a wilderness area as an area with no roads or other industrial



Figure 2—A creek and ravines in the Burrone di Lodisio Wilderness Area. Photo by Riccardo Tucci.

infrastructure, no houses or permanent buildings, no ski resorts, no wind-power mills, no industrial artifacts, and no motorized use of the land. AIW adopts strict protection measures to preserve the territorial



Figure 3—A boundary cartell of the Val di Vesta Wilderness Area. Photo by ERSAF.

integrity of the areas. However, AIW is generally open to a sustainable use of renewable natural resources, such as hunting, fishing, gathering forest products, some logging, and grazing. With respect to logging, AIW generally does not allow any cutting in wilderness areas managed by the regional forest authorities, on lands for which AIW holds an easement, or

reserves. This approach of respecting traditional resource use is consistent with the approach taken by many countries around the world, from Finland to Mexico, to achieve a balance between wilderness values and local uses. However, AIW always requests of the authorities who designate wilderness areas that at least part of the area must be preserved as a core area (46%) without any logging or other loss of habitat, and that at least some portion of the wilderness area (37%) must be closed to hunting.

Designation Process

Italy's wilderness areas have not been created by legislation, but rather by internal administrative initiatives of the authorities that manage municipal, regional, or federal lands. As a result, most designations are made by decrees, drafted in partnership with AIW based on the criteria above, and issued by municipalities or regional

are indefinite in duration. Designations by municipal councils or regional authorities are ideally indefinite, although their status could in principle be revoked. In practice this almost never happens. Almost all the wilderness areas have been approved unanimously with support from both the majority and minority parties on the municipal councils. To date, only one municipality has ever attempted to revoke a wilderness designation (to build a wind energy farm); however, AIW successfully intervened to prevent this from happening.

In a very positive development, a regional Wilderness Act has been proposed in the Lazio Region, which has the highest number of wilderness areas. Because of a change in government, the Lazio Region has yet to act on this proposal, although AIW has hopes that this could be the first step toward a regional legislation, and ultimately perhaps a national law. Another possibility for legislation is emerging in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, where in December 2006 a decree (Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional Executive Board 2006) was

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on lands that AIW acquires directly. For other wilderness areas, only very small parcels of coppice woods are clear-cut, and mature forests are always logged very selectively. Grazing generally has low impacts and in some cases is useful from a biodiversity perspective.

These criteria take into account the fact that in Italy local people are often in favor of the idea of preserving their wildlands if protection does not mean a strict no-use policy of renewable natural resources, as it does in national or regional parks and nature

forestry authorities. In some instances, wilderness areas designated by municipal councils are then added into town planning guidelines and regulations. There are of course some exceptions to this rule: some wilderness areas are established entirely privately by easements held by AIW or by private philanthropies, or in a few cases through direct land acquisition of wooded areas by AIW. As mentioned above, one wilderness area was established in a national park.

Direct land acquisitions and wilderness areas created by easement

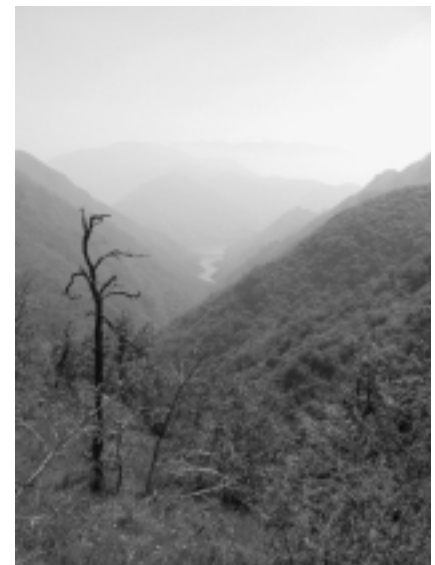


Figure 4—The Val di Vesta drainage, with a reservoir in the foreground, in the Val di Vesta Wilderness Area. Photo by Riccardo Tucci.

passed to authorize a program for the designation of regional wilderness areas, and which identified nine areas for a total of 4,103 hectares (10,134 acres). These areas may be the most similar to the U.S. wilderness areas, they would be the first designations made by a regional government (rather than a regional land manage-

ment authority), and, therefore, this initiative represents the highest legislative point reached in Italy to date.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago, there was almost no dialogue in Europe about wilderness areas. Certainly there was no discussion of any sort about wilderness in Italy, and very few people even knew the term existed. Today, every environmentalist in Italy is familiar with the term, literature on the wilderness concept is developing, and experiential wilderness trail programs are gaining in popularity. In 2005 the Italian government officially recognized the AIW as an official environmental preservation association through a decree from the Department of the Environment. And some organizations are even beginning to speak about the necessity of a wilderness areas concept by national law.

There is much work yet to do, both at the policy level and in terms of designating new wilderness areas in Italy. Nonetheless, it is important to take stock of the successes to date, and to recognize the fact that we have successfully adopted the philosophy of Aldo Leopold, who referred to a wilderness area as “a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man” (Leopold 1921). **IJW**

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Figure 5—A wild aspect of the Corni di Nibbio peaks in the Val Grande National Park, saved by an AIW and WWC battle. Photo by Riccardo Tucci.

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