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# *Protected Areas and Territorial Tensions: The Ticinese Case of Adula Park*

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Abstract

This study examines the role of socio-spatial structures and their perception in negotiations concerning Protected Areas (PAs). It focuses on tensions among institutions and various groups of local people with regards to the creation of one particular PA. By bridging the gap between studies on PAs and others on critical urban issues, this paper offers a new perspective for the constitution of PAs. A critical analysis of the content of newspaper articles, editorials and readers' letters regarding Adula Park (Switzerland) was conducted. A radical discursive difference between supporters and detractors of the Park emerged. As predicted, the findings show the importance of including broader socio-spatial elements in PA negotiations. Future research should further enhance the analysis of PAs in terms of urban territorial policies.

Profile

Protected area

proposed Adula Park

Mountain range

Alps

Country

Switzerland

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse the failure to establish one particular protected area (PA), in order to better frame bottom-up processes. The public debate that led to the rejection of the Swiss Adula Park in a vote in November 2016 was analysed. (For details regarding PA implementation in Switzerland, see Michel & Bruggman 2019). The analysis revealed an important discursive asynchrony between institutions and detractors, deepening the ideas proposed by Michel & Bruggman (2019) and Michel (2017, 2019).

The paper takes an interdisciplinary perspective, focusing on the interaction between PAs and society (Hammer et al. 2012). The research is based on three theoretical corpora: on the production of space, cultural hegemony, and bottom-up processes in PAs.

The notion of the production of space (Lefebvre 2001) is at the core of urban studies. Contemporary spatial forms can be understood as ranging from the urban (in which density and diversity are concentrated) to the infra-urban (e.g. mountainous and secluded areas) (Lévy 1994) – which means that centre–periphery dynamics are crucial in contemporary social analysis (Lefebvre 2015). The theory of planetary urbanization (Brenner & Schmid 2011) indicates that any activity that reinforces urban structures can be read as urbanization. PAs, then, represent a form of urbanization of wilderness (e.g. Gómez-Pompa & Kaus 1992) while playing a major role in environmental policies (Bruner et al. 2001). Harvey (2008, 2016) has shown how capitalist structure is linked to the cycle of destruction and reconstruction of urban spaces. Contradictions within the process of capital accumulation are crucial as urban determinants (Jaret 1983). Furthermore, in an urban society these factors increase competition between places (cities, regions etc.) (Harvey 2010: 295), nurturing a global competitive trend to attract particular industries, become international tourist centres etc. The transition from an insular (Elden 2013; Schmitt 2006) to a networked territorial paradigm (Dematteis & Governa 2001; Marull et al. 2015) is another key aspect: spatial planning increasingly transcends institutional boundaries in order to promote connections between different territories and foster competitiveness.

The study of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1975; Mouffe 2005, 2013a, b) reveals how society is divided into different groups struggling to establish hegemonic discourses. Institutional discourses are particularly important, since they also have performative effects (Weisser 2014). The description of institutional projects (e.g. the founding of a PA) is not politically neutral. The importance of discourses – particularly on the concept of justice (Chan & Satterfield 2013) – has also been recognized in studies of PAs.

In studies on PAs, there is broad agreement on the need for bottom-up and participatory policies (Oestreicher et al. 2009; Hiwasaki, 2005). These policies should help to acknowledge and preserve the particularities of the local management of nature (Hayes 2006). PAs are always a negotiation between top-down and bottom-up initiatives (Fraser et al. 2006; Gaymer et al. 2014; Jones 2012), and so they need multi-level governance to be effective (Mauerhofer 2011). Finally, the multiplicity of expectations related to PAs (Mose & Weixlbaumer 2006; Michel 2017) and the consequent tensions (Bay-Larsen et al. 2006) reinforce the consensus around the need to operate in bottom-up ways (Weixlbaumer et al. 2015).

The concept of a neoliberal paradigm of nature conservation (Büscher & Arsel 2012a, b) provides a link between these three theoretical perspectives: it shows how PAs are one of the territorial materializations of the neoliberal discourse. In this frame, PAs serve not only to protect nature, but also to promote regional development – e.g. to foster tourism (Good-

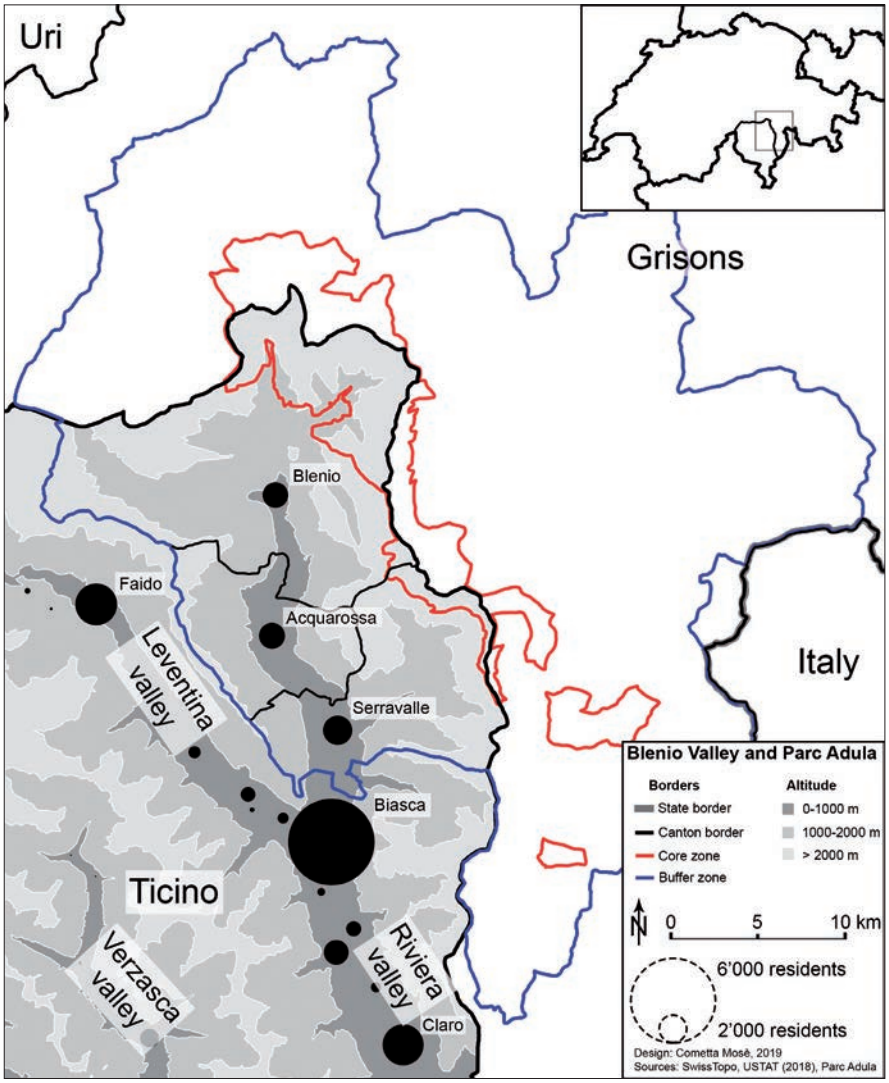



*Figure 1 – Proposed perimeter of Adula Park and Ticino population details..*

win 2002). This is possible thanks to the inclusion of anthropic goals in the management of PAs (Oldekop et al. 2015).

## Study Area

The proposed Adula Park (Mount Adula's central peak is located at 46° 29'N, 9° 2'E) would have been the second largest National Park in Switzerland. In contrast to the Engadin Park, it would also have guaranteed protection of anthropic interests (in a buffer zone comprising most of the territory involved in the project). The project followed a bottom-up, participatory process but was rejected in a vote at commune level. This study has focused on the Ticino part of the Park, that is the sparsely populated Blenio Valley (Figure 1), with its 5 714 residents in 2015 (USTAT 2018c).

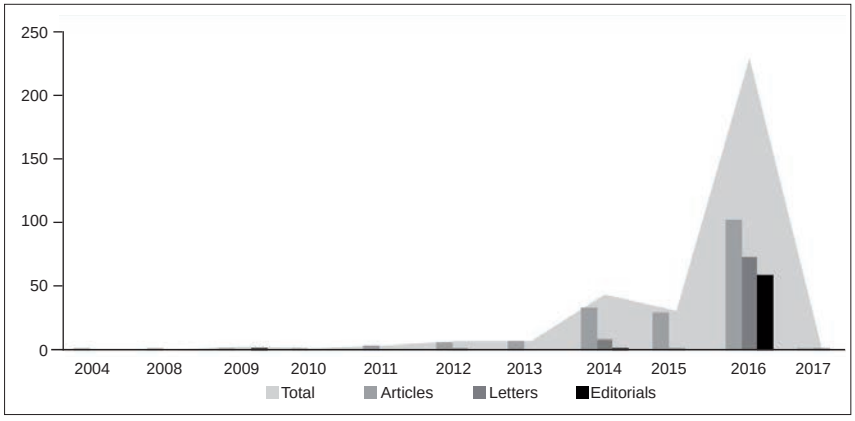
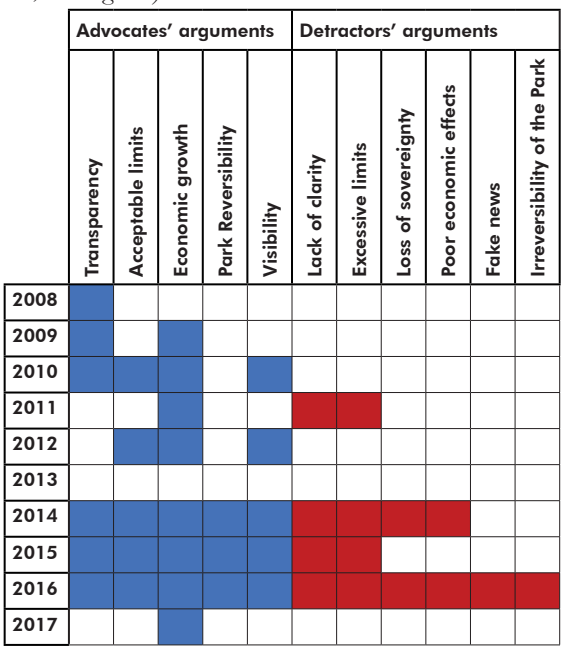



*Figure 2 – Number of newspaper texts analysed, based on year of publication.*

*Table 1 – Expressions of opinion about the Park (blue: positive; red: negative) in the media debate.*




## Methodology

334 newspaper articles and readers' letters from *Corriere del Ticino* (CdT) and *laRegione* (lR) – the major newspapers in Ticino – were studied using Atlas.Ti software. These items were published between 01.01.2004 and 31.12.2017 (Figure 2). Quotations from the letters were translated into English. Data was collected and analysed in 2018.

Critical analysis (Foucault 2015; Hajer 2003) and content analysis (Mucchielli 1996) perspectives were mobilized to gain an understanding of the motivations that led to the results of the vote. As previously shown by Kohlbacher (2006) and Wodak & Reisigl (2016), the combination of qualitative and critical discursive analyses brought together both problem-oriented and theory-guided approaches.

## Results

Analysis of the media debate – especially regarding readers' letters – shows a clear difference between supporters and opponents of the Park where the focus of their arguments is concerned. The former described the Park positively, highlighting the visibility that the Park would offer to the region, as well as the economic growth it would drive. Supporters also focused on the transparency and reversibility of the project, and the idea that the delimitation of the core zone was fair and acceptable. The opponents' arguments, which only started to emerge during 2014 (Table 1), focused on negative criticism of the process involved in the Park's creation, perceived as obscure, irreversible and excessively limiting to human freedom, including in the buffer zone. The Park was also seen as economically pointless and politically dangerous for the sovereignty of local communities. Critics of the project also denounced what they perceived to be acts of state-financed propaganda by the organizers.

Economic growth, centred on the development of tourism guaranteed by the visibility of the National Park label, was one of the strong arguments of the Park's supporters. Adula Park was perceived by its advocates to be the last hope for the economic development of the valley. *"If we want to keep this Valley alive and ensure that it does not become only a dormitory zone with a weak tourism sector, few services and scarcely any attractions, we must embrace this challenge and try"* (Rigozzi & Vitali, CdT, 03.10.2016: 29), claimed two Blenio legislative assembly members. Economic growth was closely linked to visibility. Accordingly, the Mayor of Blenio stated that "*it is not enough to design and build tourism infrastructures if we do not create the attractor element that will make our region known and attractive on a Swiss, European and international level, [as a place] which can be visited as part of the largest Swiss national park: the Adula Park*" (Truaisch, CdT, 30.09.2016: 42).

Economic growth is seen as an agent of development that upholds freedom. According to the supporters, the Park would impose a small loss of freedom to hike, which would be generously compensated for by the socio-economic outcomes. *"What is freedom? Freedom 'is many things'. Freedom is, for example, 'being able to' go hiking in the mountains [...]. Freedom, however, is also being able to carry out a work activity at home to decently maintain a family. Today, many young people 'are no longer free' to work in the valley. The park would give them and all of us more possibilities"* (Bricalli, CdT, 24.11.2016: 37).

In addition to the idea that the restrictions that the project would impose were reasonable, many supporters stated that even the core zone was still basically accessible. *"There will be few new constraints, and they will only touch the core zone, which includes 142 km² over a total area of 1250 km², and is, for the most part, situated above 3000 metres. Huts, cottages and mountain pastures will be able to continue their activities even in the core areas of the park. If it is true that you will not be allowed to leave the paths, it is equally true that in the core zone alone we will have 60 km of paths, 157 summer itineraries and 113 winter trails that will allow us to frequent the mountains, both in summer and during the winter"* (Lechleitner, lR, 16.11.2016: 27).

Concerns about restrictions were depicted as irrational. The project was seen as bottom-up and transparent: *"The intentions of the park [were] highlighted in a transparent way over the years and explained to the population during the numerous public meetings, as well as [being] available during the three months of public consultation of the 'Charta'"* (Galli, CdT, 06.06.2016: 45). No hidden goal was associated with the Park. Furthermore, supporters claimed that opponents of the project were moved by personal interest and misinformation. *"Public debates* [organized by the promoters to present the project to the population before the vote] *highlighted the juxtaposition of opinions […] from among those who feel satisfied with the existing*

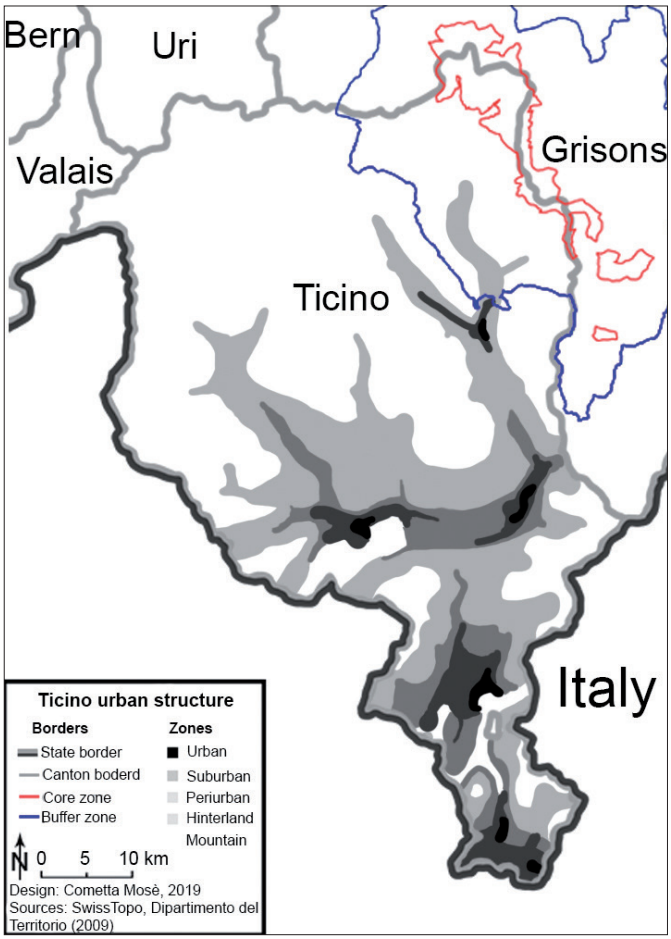



*Figure 3 – Urban structure of Ticino.*

*situation (lucky them) – they fight for the defence of personal or categorical interests – and […] those who have instead taken the trouble to investigate the contents of an idea which has allowed the Park to financially support about twenty bottom-up projects since its preliminary phase"* (Baggi, lR, 29.10.2016: 30).

As previously stated, detractors had been challenging Adula Park on another discursive level. Their arguments were more broadly linked to scepticism and lack of confidence. *"We have been told that nothing will change in the buffer zone. One wonders then why they want this area. […] One wonders why in Zernez, in the Engadine, they did not want to add a new buffer zone to their National Park. […] It is certain that the Engadinese understood that the introduction of a buffer zone would have involved only restrictions"* (Devittori, CdT, 05.10.2016: 37). Despite the claims of both the Park's promoters and the authorities, opponents feared top-down impositions on their way of life. They were particularly sensitive to the topic of the presence of large predators – a concern which manifests the difficult balance between conservation and anthropocentric interests. *"The Blenio Valley will become an experimental laboratory. While in Switzerland and in Europe we are moving towards reducing the presence of the wolf, for the Blenio Valley they hope for a massive presence of the predator to increase tourism"* (Bini, lR, 08.10.2016: 30). Although the wolf and bear populations are managed by the federal government and not by the Park organization, opponents feared the decisional power of the Park. From this perspective, accepting the Park would mean a clear loss of sovereignty. *"If the project is accepted, what will happen when the interests of the park come into conflict with our individual and collective interests? How much freedom will we still have to develop our projects?"* (Boggini, CdT, 14.10.2016: 45). Regarding development of the region, opponents wanted to initiate certain projects, *"but chosen by us and not driven by Bernese bureaucrats or even from Brussels"* (Devittori, CdT, 03.11.2016: 36).

The Park was seen as an imposed, top-down, project, as something imagined from far away, that disregarded local practices and traditional lifestyles. Despite all the efforts of inclusion by the promoters, Adula Park was perceived as a project that threatened the local way of life. Doubts were cast on the reversibility of the project (which would have been guaranteed by confirmatory votes every 10 years). *"If you vote yes, you won't be able to leave. This is certain and is not a far-fetched opinion. Nobody has informed us in detail and fully about what it means to be in a park forever"* (Devittori, CdT, 25.10.2016: 34). Thus, supporters, institutions and the Adula Park organization were criticized for pushing an obscure project without telling people the truth. *"Reasons for rejecting Adula Park are certainly more solid than the undemonstrated promises, the myriad press releases released by the promoters, and an abstract concept without any certainty"* (Fraschina, CdT, 13.10.2016: 37), claimed a right-wing Blenio legislative assembly member. Moreover, depict-

ing supporters in a negative manner was a strategy of the opposition. *"I say no to this name and its symbols, to which many have adhered with an attitude close to fanaticism"* (Dalberti-Bassi, CdT, 19.11.2016: 37). The whole epistemic value of the project was undermined by affirming head-on opposition to science itself. *"Every time we come up with research, we create new constraints and restrictions that are unlikely to have a positive impact on the region"* (Zanini, CdT, 03.10.2016: 28), said a right-wing cantonal MP.

## Discussion

The differences between the arguments put forward by supporters and opponents of the Park, focusing on radically different concerns, are quite clear, and a constructive debate was therefore impossible. As shown by Michel (2019), underlying concepts of justice are at stake. This paper confirms Michel's findings, and further extends them to the Italian-speaking part of the Park. I propose, however, to add another layer of analysis: that of the territorial fabric (i. e. including both urban and infra-urban areas).

To understand Ticino's rejection of the Adula Park project, one needs first to be aware of the evolution of territorial policies in this Canton. Swiss territorial policies were founded on the principle of *decentralized centralization* (Salomon Cavin 2004, 2005). In this political frame, every region should receive public aid in order to develop (Schmid et al. 2006). The Blenio valley, like all other peripheral regions of Switzerland, benefited from financial help that provided important communal and regional autonomy. Because of the increase in global urban competition during the 90s (Harvey 2010) and a neoliberal turn in institutional governance (Ceschi 1998), this kind of policy was gradually abandoned. To avoid the risk that the entire Canton would become nothing more than an outlying residential area of Milan, the new cantonal masterplan (RCT 2009) stated that a more efficient allocation of economic resources was needed. This goal was pursued based on the principle of *functional specialization*, which divided the Canton into *urban* (urban to peri-urban) and *infra-urban* (hinterland and mountains) zones (Figure 3). Subsequently, every region was forced to plan its development in accordance with broader cantonal goals. The Canton's competitiveness was at stake.

While according to the plan, urban parts of the Canton were to aim to increase their links to the nearby Italian towns of Como and Varese, infra-urban areas were to seek to collaborate with other alpine Cantons and to focus on agriculture, tourism and nature conservation. Adula Park was the key project for ensuring these results in the Blenio valley. The institutional perspective on the creation of the Park was thus clearly linked to large-scale neoliberal urban analysis (Harvey 2008): on the one hand, the arguments in favour of the Park were focused in particular on economic development (the so-called neoliberal paradigm for PAs (Büscher & Arsel 2012a, b)). On the other hand, spatial planning criteria for promoting Adula Park from an institutional point of view were concentrated mainly on regional development and competitiveness – a structuring idea of the neoliberal paradigm (Foucault 2008). Since the integration of the Blenio valley in the broader urban network was mediated by the Park as a means of increasing tourism, we can understand the Park as a project of urbanization.

A better understanding of the urban setting of Ticino also leads to a deeper understanding of the disputes between supporters and detractors of the Park. Supporters never discussed Ticino's broader urban situation. Even among the most critical of the Park's supporters, the new urban setting was perceived as a fact and not a situation to be debated. Thus, they indirectly accepted the new institutional perspective. Conversely, detractors disputed indirectly the political shift between the two cantonal masterplans, depicting the valley's autonomy (founded on *decentralized centralization* policies) as legitimate, and the need to coordinate local development at cantonal level (following *functional specialization* policies) as an undemocratic submission of peripheral communities to bureaucrats' interests. From their point of view, the Park was a political instrument of both central powers and ecological organizations to override local sovereignty. Promises of financial development linked to the PA's creation (Job et al. 2006) were not sufficient to overcome the fear of losing sovereignty (Backhaus et al. 2018: 54).

Where the supporters wanted to discuss the concrete regulations of the Park, the opponents made more general criticisms, showing discontent because of the perceived abandonment and submission of the valleys. Furthermore, the arguments mobilized show radically different understandings of freedom. For the Park's supporters, freedom was the possibility of living in an economically prosperous environment; for its opponents, it was seen merely as the absence of imposed rules. For the former group, the region's central social problems were the poverty and peripherality which forced people to look for work outside the valley or emigrate. For the latter, conversely, the main problem was the increasingly invasive role of state goals in the valley's way of life. These differences seem to indicate a lack of acceptance by the detractors of the transition of the Blenio from a rural (autonomous) area to an infra-urban (interconnected) one (Lévy 1994): a dispute concerning hegemonic discourse (Gramsci 1975).

## Conclusion

By helping to better connect the populations of peripheral regions to the urban network, PAs can tackle exclusion. However, for this to happen, all territorial policies must be inclusive. Suspicions of being subjected to a central control are linked to the sense of unease brought on by urban transformations. The opponents of Adula Park prevailed because of the gen-

eral anxiety felt by those in the peripheral area about submitting to external interests. I suggest that these difficulties cannot be solved within the process of creating a PA. More inclusive and participative spatial planning is needed at cantonal and federal levels. If the Park project remains an isolated example of a bottom-up approach within the broader top-down territorial policy, it will be rejected not so much for its content as for what it represents.

However, the aim of more inclusive policies is not to eliminate contrasting positions and establish a monolithic, universal consensus. Conflicts between different visions are at the heart of democracy and cannot be eliminated (Mouffe 2013a). Inclusive policies should, however, help to manage them in a more constructive way. Better governance would limit tensions, allowing problems to be addressed in a more rational way. With less concern about the loss of local sovereignty, opponents might have entered into the debate on the Park with more pertinent arguments, helping to improve the project.

I suggest that a fundamental problem that prevents the constructive management of tensions is the complete asynchrony between the discourses employed. If supporters and detractors argue on two radically different discursive levels, no debate can take place. To reduce this discursive asynchrony, educational measures are probably needed. For spatial planning to be participatory, people need to be properly informed and to understand the problems and challenges facing the community. In times of fake news and widespread epistemic dispute around the values of science, it is important to regain a minimum cultural common ground to render possible a constructive public debate on the creation of PAs. As stated by Michel, *"conservation and regional development projects have both to follow and to communicate a clear set of values (or worths) and adjust these to local citizens' plural senses of justice"* (2019: 30).

This paper follows the consensus found in the literature on the need for bottom-up policies in PA creation and management, but it also suggests that for those processes to be effective we need to integrate broader bottom-up spatial planning and a stronger shared culture. PA promoters cannot be left alone to address the demands for greater participation in wider territorial policies. Public authorities, if they are really interested in establishing Parks as a way of including peripheral areas in urban networks, must help the Parks' promoters. Without achieving this first, PAs in rural and traditionally autonomous regions will run the risk of being seen by locals as urban, top-down impositions, despite the Park's aims not simply to protect the area's cultural and natural richness but also to promote economic development and social stability.

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