The cultural and spiritual sites of the Parco Nazionale della Majella, Italy

Vita de Waal

Intangible heritage

The Majella National Park is a protected area with an abundance of diverse and intriguing sites spanning at least 800 000 years. These cultural sites are not just physical sites but have deep historic, cultural and spiritual significance that cannot easily be conveyed to people who are not of that culture or spiritual view. Furthermore, some cultural traditions have their source in civilisations that have long since disappeared, but whose traditions are still alive today, as they have been passed on, either orally or in writing.

A further difficulty is that intangible cultural criteria mean different things to different people, thereby making it difficult to establish a clear-cut definition. 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.

This case study will raise a number of questions, but might also present an example in which many cultural, spiritual and historic contexts converge within the contemporary context.

The Abruzzo Region

The sites of Majella National Park need to be set against the historical, cultural

< San Giovanni all'Orfento: Very remote site to which Pietro Angeleri retreated at the age of 69 and where he stayed for nine years.

Eremo San Bartolomeo in Legio (ninth century – still in use): Located next to a prehistoric lithic site.

and geographical background of the Abruzzo Region. Situated in the centre of the Italian peninsula and with over one-third of its territory protected, this region is considered one of Italy's greenest. Within its territory there are Majella National Park, Gran Sasso-Laga National Park, Abruzzo National Park and the Regional Park of Sirente-Velino.

While the Italian peninsula has seen diverse peoples and cultures passing through its territory, many finds confirm that *Homo erectus* inhabited the Abruzzo area since the Lower Paleolithic. During the last glacial period the permanent snow line in this area went down to 1200m. The hunter-gatherers had to move down to the coastal plains while the animals were forced to migrate southwards to find new habitats. The glacial period ended about 10 000 years ago with the milder weather opening new grassland corridors allowing new migration patterns and people from different regions.

Many of the new foreigners that settled in the area brought with them new cultural inputs, metal smelting techniques, domesticated sheep, goats, agricultural knowledge and a tradition of transhumance that would mark the Abruzzo region for millennia to come. Milder weather conditions allowed the transition from a more mobile society to the development of nascent and more permanent agricultural settlements coupled with seasonal movements of transhumant activity.

The transition from a society of hunter-gatherers to an agricultural society did not occur in a consistent manner and for a period Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures appear side-by-side. By contrast, one element that can be found to persist uniformly is the importance given to Mother Earth, to Maja, the giver of life. However, many clay figurines of her in burial sites show that she does not only accompany individuals in this life but also into the afterlife. It is to her that the Majella Mountain

has been dedicated and since time immemorial the Majella is considered a sacred mountain, the Mother Mountain.

Transhumance

Majella National Park is intrinsically related to Abruzzo's culture of transhumance. Two of the millennia-old drovers' roads *(tratturi)* used by shepherds and their herds for their seasonal migration traverse Majella National Park and Abruzzo's remote, majestic and dramatic landscapes into Apulia, and over 1000 tholoi-type shepherd huts still dot the Majella landscape to this day.

Transhumance was practiced in the Abruzzo Region since the Copper Ages till the 1950s, marking society, traditions, as well as its tangible and intangible culture. In 1605, and with only a working population of 50 000 people, five million bovines were counted in the Abruzzo region alone to which need to be added millions of sheep and goats. A single shepherd could be moving as many as 10 000 animals along drovers' roads that would be either 55 m or 111.6 m wide, depending on whether he was moving cattle or ovine. The distances travelled per day would be 40 km for cattle and 10-15 km for ovine. Shepherds had to pay a toll for the use of the tracks and for each animal; the income of these taxes to the Aragon crown was considerable. Farmers welcomed the herds as they benefitted from the passage of the animals. Archival records show that wheat yields from fields fertilised by herds were well above average.

The 250 km journey to the south took two to three weeks and every three or five km along the drovers' road the shepherds would find resting places that were strategically located, containing wide open spaces that offered shadow, ample watering opportunities for the herds, cooking areas and stone huts. The routes were also extensively used by all needing to reach the South of Italy or by those travelling northwards. Today, these highways of the past are once again being used as trekking and pilgrimage routes.

Shepherds would build shrines to protector deities or even churches along these tracks which made these the preferred way for pilgrims to travel to/from the Holy Land. The commercial opportunities these migrations presented allowed people to organise markets, build taverns and houses and, over time, lively market villages would come into being, as the most important requirements for making a living existed through the availability of water, roads, and a barter and trade network with neighbouring regions. This was kept alive through the seasonal migration of shepherds that allowed goods to be transported, exchanged and sold. On 8 May the shepherds would return home along a different route to the summer pastures of their mountains, often joined by their families.

The Majella, mountain of sacred sites

It might seem a contradiction that the abundance and diversity of sites is also the challenge Majella National Park fac-

es. Another point is that the same sites have been used and reused by many subsequent cultures. However, beneath it all there is a powerful force that has expressed itself continually, reinforcing the living matrix of this mountain that has expressed itself as a Mother Mountain by giving birth to diverse cultures and spiritual expressions.

To use an ecological word, sites have been 'recycled' and adapted to meet new requirements and interpretations and therefore contain many historical, cultural and spiritual layers. Which one is to be brought to the fore? Or is it the resulting sacred landscape that needs focussing on with this cultural and natural diversity just an outcome of much deeper forces?

Context of monasticism and the Abruzzo

Monasticism in the Abruzzo region is characterised by a number of key dates.

- 4th–6th century AD: Christianity arrives in Abruzzo. The Valnerina Hagiographic texts mention Christians who fled Syria and Anatolia arriving in Valnerina. Here they lived as hermits, founded Anchoritic settlements, introduced the hermitic tradition and reclaimed the marshy valley.
- 501 AD: St Benedict retreats to a cave at Subiaco, while monasteries already exist nearby.
- St Benedict creates his Rule based on the writings of St Basil and the early church fathers.
- 6th century: The hermitage abbey of S. Salvatore a Majella was built on top of Roman settlement. Documents from this hermitage state that hermits were already living then on the Majella.
- 639 AD: Monks escape the Persian invasions of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Armenia and Sicily.
- 726/739: Byzantine Emperor Leo III issues edicts against the worship of images. Pope Gregory III condemns the Emperor's decision and the iconoclasts escape to Southern Italy.
- 732: Leo III transfers Illyricum and Southern Italy from Papal governance to the Patriarch of Constantinople. Monks escape northwards and to Rome.
- 820: Saracens invade Abruzzo. Monks retire to remote areas to lead an eremitic way of life
- 1042: The creation of maritime links between South Italy, Syria and Palestine and the advent of the Crusades in 1093 bring more monastics to Italy

The Majella National Park

The Majella National Park territory covers 74 094 ha within the three provinces of Pescara, L'Aquila and Chieti and comprises 39 townships.

What sets the Majella National Park apart from the other national parks is the fact that 55% of its territory is situated above 2000 m (6562 ft). This also means that certain areas of the park are not easily accessible from late autumn to spring, thereby giving nature some respite from visitors.

Planning and Management

The Resolution for the creation of Majella National Park was adopted on 6

December 1991. It was founded in 1993 and the institutional organ came into being by presidential decree on 5 June 1995. The IUCN Category is II.

The administration comprises a Board of Directors, an Executive Board, Auditors, and the Park Community that is constituted by the presidents of the regions and of the provinces, the town mayors, and the presidents of the mountain communities in whose territory the areas of the park are situated.

With over six million visitors the Majella National Park was the most visited National Park of the Abruzzo in 2008. The Park has four visitor centres; five information centres; two museums, of which one is dedicated exclusively to the Marsican brown bear; two botanical gardens and four hostels.

There are over 500 km of hiking trails, and the Park attracts visitors that enjoy climbing, trekking, mountain biking and skiing.

The trails are well maintained and signposted with length of hike, estimation of time and degree of difficulty. Benches and/or picnic areas can be found along some of the trails.

Sites are often located in remote areas. Directions to the sites are sign-posted. Information panels are displayed at the site. No facilities or shops are to be found at any site.

Natural heritage

The Park is host to a wealth of rare and endemic species related to both fauna and flora from southern Europe as well as those from the alpine regions thereby providing the essential elements for the survival of highly mobile populations of carnivores, specifically the Marsican brown bear. Some indicators testifying to the natural wealth of the region are the following:

- Fauna: 78% of the mammal species of Abruzzo and 45% of those of Italy are found on its territory.
- Birds: 130 species
- Flora: 65% of the Abruzzo's, 37% of Italy's and 22% of Europe's species of flora is located here.

Cultural and spiritual heritage

The Park contains a wealth of sites that testify to the migration of peoples and tribes of cultural diversity. They contain archaeological sites dating back to the Lower Palaeolithic (old/early Stone Age), caves used extensively from Early Neolithic times, pagan, Italic, Roman and Christian sanctuaries and temples, Roman habitats, at least 1000 tholoi-type huts used for transhumant activities, sacred wells, lakes, and rocks, rock burial chambers, hermitages, coenobites, monasteries, sanctuaries, abbeys, churches and numerous fortified medieval towns.

Although much can still be viewed, most of the archaeological and artistic treasures that were found at these sites have been moved to museums outside the Park's boundaries as the finds were of great importance and of relevance to the cultural heritage of the Italian nation.

The spiritual sites at Majella were so numerous that Petrarch, the famous Italian humanist and poet, called the

Majella Mountain the '*domus Christi*' (the house of Christ).

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 stayed here well before 1000 AD. However, it is mostly through the hermit Pietro Angeleri (1210–1296) that the Majella hermitages are known, as he lived here for over 60 years restoring and amplifying many of the existing spiritual sites.

Continuity of cultural and spiritual heritages

The arrival of Christianity was seen as an additional belief available to the people and tribes living in the area that had a long history rich in culture that was permeated with a variety of spiritual traditions. The people simply incorporated aspects of this new faith and, for a period, all these cultural and spiritual practices were interwoven and found expression without any conflict. Christianity added an element of hope, salvation, and rebirth within the human realm.

The people of Abruzzo have kept many of their traditional beliefs alive, because the region was 'off the beaten track', the high mountain range making this region inaccessible and remote, while it was also considered to be one of the economically poorest regions in Italy.

Still today age-old rituals are being acted out and each town has its own traditions and contributes to the rich tapestry of cultural expressions that make this land unique. Many of the rituals are linked to elemental forces, such as earth, rocks, fire, water or animals, like snakes, that will link people to the deeper forces that influence and shape human life and mark the changes of seasons on earth. Festivals to celebrate these forces and to invoke their protection are still attended by all, young and old alike, and all participate with equal delight and intensity. Such an example can be seen at Cocullo, eight km west of the Park when in May the statue of St Dominic is brought out after Mass and paraded through the streets completely covered in snakes (which were considered potent guardians of temples and other sacred spaces) followed by the *Serpari* (local snake expert) who is also draped with serpents. The *Serpari* are a hereditary brotherhood of snake-charmers who play a major role in the festival and to this day they are held in high regard. However, this festival has much older roots and is related to a much older rite, that of the snake deity/witch Angitia. The snake-charmers were in pagan times the priests at the sanctuary of Angitia.

Selected sites

Valle Giumentina is an Old Stone Age site dating back 350 000 years that is situated on the edge of what was once a lake in the Valle Giumentina. Paleolithic humans took care of infirm and weak companions, they buried their dead, had spiritual beliefs and engaged in ritual. They were hunter-gatherers. The wildlife that surrounded them included

bison, elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, hippopotami, water birds, tortoises and amphibians inhabiting the marsh areas while the forests sheltered deer, wild horses, bears and boars.

Caporciano includes 67 shaft tombs from seventh-sixth century BC.

Grotta dei Porci is a cave used since Middle Paleolithic times for habitat, burial, cult, and for making tools. A 12 600 year old skeleton was found here, the skull of which can be seen in one of the museums.

Grotta dei Piccioni, 6500 BC, is considered one of the most important Neolithic sanctuaries in this area.

Grotta della Continenza is a cave that includes 37 burials with features common to most burials of this period: the burials contained pierced deer canines, shells and ochre. However, there were also characteristics that were less common: the skeletons were placed in stone circles; the skeleton's head in a few instances was replaced by a stone (as in the nearby Grotta Maritza); there were quartz crystals in the burial sites and some burials were found with deer antlers fragments near their head.

Grotta del Colle is a huge cave rectangular 40 x 60 m wide and 4-12 m high that was used in Paleolithic times as a shelter, and only since the italic era did it come into use as a Sanctuary. In the sixth century BC it was an Italic temple dedicated to the Goddess Cerfia, the Mother and Nutrix who gives fertility to the land. A small statuette of Goddess Cerfia has been found and it is interesting to note that during the Procession in honour of the Madonna di Carpineto, all young girls are dressed like Cerfia, with three quarter long tunics over long tiered dresses and flowers in their hair.

Votive deposits and coins dating back to the third century BC confirm this as an important sacred space for the Maruccini tribe. Also found in the same cave was the famous bronze tablet, called the Tabula Rapinensis from the same period, which is exhibited today in Moscow's Puskin Museum.

In Longobard times (568 to 774 AD) the cave was a shrine to Archangel Michael while in later Christian times it was dedicated to Santa Maria in Cryptis.

Temple of Ercole Currino, adjacent to the National Park headquarters, is a sanctuary dating back to the fourth century BC dedicated to Ercole Curino. An exquisite bronze statue representing a Resting Ercole from 300 BC and many ex-voti have been found and are now at the Archaeological Museum of Chieti. The sacred well, located inside the cave, is still in use today. An avalanche covered this site in 200 BC. Stones used to build the Abbazia di S. Spirito al Morrone, (Badia Morronese) at Sulmona and St.Onofrio uncovered the Sanctuary in 1259.

Badia San Liberatore a Majella is one of the oldest medieval Benedictine monastery churches, already documented in 884 in an inventory of Benedictine properties. It was destroyed during the earthquake of 990, but rebuild in 1007. The magnificent and impressive mosaic floor from 1275 has been restored.

San Giuannelle near the shore of River Alento is made up of rock burial chambers, a niche, a small chapel and a sacred pool. It is thought that a group of hermits came here in the eighth century AD.

Grotta Sant'Angelo, a large cave with a church built inside, was already documented in 1221. However, oral traditions mention this as being the site of an older pagan temple dedicated to Bona, the Goddess of Fertility. Women would make the trek through the forests to bathe their breasts in the special waters praying for an abundant milk flow for their new-born child and the many water basins in the rocks would confirm this ancient tradition.

The Church of Sant' Agata that is currently being excavated was built on a pagan temple where women who did not have enough milk for their newborn would come . Women still pray at the altar stone.

Abbazia di Santo Spirito al Morrone, at Sulmona was founded in 1259 by Pietro Angeleri, a holy man who later became Pope Celestine V. The administrative offices and headquarters of Majella National Park are currently located here.

The Hermitage of San Bartolomeo, located next to a prehistoric site, is known to have existed in the ninth century. Pietro Angeleri stayed here and was engaged in its restoration and extension. His piety and fame drew many visitors and he decided to move further up the mountain, to the Orfento. Many miracles are attributed to Pietro Angeleri while he lived here.

Miraculous powers are attributed to the statue of San Bartolomeo which is housed above the altar. In times of need, especially when people were very ill, individuals were allowed to come and take the statue home until the patient recovered. However, the rules have changed and instead of the statue, people today are allowed to take home the knife that San Bartolomeo holds in his hands. This site is still in use today, and several ceremonies and rituals are performed.

Santo Spirito a Majella is a monastic complex with rich legacy of history and traditions. It is one of the most famous and biggest monasteries of the Park. Dauferius stayed here with a fellow group of hermits in 1053. Pietro da Morrone resided here for about three years around the 1250s and his disciple, the Blessed Roberto da Salle, was Prior from 1310 to 1317. It still retains its charm and majesty due to its superb position and to the atmosphere of mystery that shrouds it.

Eremo San Giovanni all'Orfento. Pietro Angeleri stayed at this remote and austere site from 1284 to 1293. The water harvesting techniques used here were applied extensively to all sites and provide examples that could be utilised in the twenty-first century.

The Eremo Sant'Onofrio sul Morrone was built in 1265, though Pietro Angeleri retreated to this hermitage only in 1293. It is probably the most historic site. Elected by the cardinals to succeed Pope Nicholas IV, he refused to accept the Papacy. In 1293 a delegation of cardinals

Santo Spirito a Majella

and bishops accompanied by the King of Naples and the King of Hungary made their way to the hermitage to convince him. Finally he accepted and was crowned Pope Celestine V at S. Maria di Collemaggio in Aquila.

He issued a number of papal bulls, one of these declaring the right of any Pope to abdicate, a right that he exercised within six months to return to Sant'Onofrio. However, his successor, Pope Boniface VIII, decided to imprison him in the castle of Fumane where he died on 19 May 1296. It is believed that Boniface had him killed. He was canonised in 1313.

Sites related to transhumance

Along the drovers' routes one can find caves with shrines dedicated to Archangel Michael, many with healing wells. These places often became places of pilgrimages that were visited on 29 September and 8 May, both days dedicated to the Great Protector Michael, the Patron Saint of Shepherds.

The Santuario di San Michele is a cave sanctuary near a resting place which water makes this an important rest stop and gathering point for shepherds and their herds. Ceramic finds from various epochs testify to its extensive use over time. It is situated on a strategic position on the drovers' road near Pescocostanzo, a well-known fortified medieval hill-top town.

Challenges and recommendations

There are a number of challenges, some of which paradoxically, stem from the successful manner the Park developed various programmes, e.g. breeding, protecting its wildlife, its visitor and educational facilities. The National Park attracts over six million visitors yearly and people of the neighbouring townships realise the importance to the local economy of keeping these visitors in the area. This has led to an encroaching urbanisation in areas inside the park.

Larger visitor numbers create more waste. A rubbish dump and a toxic waste discharge now exist in an adjacent border area, threatening both people and wildlife.

The people of the Abruzzo have a great affection for *their* brown bear, the Marsican Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos marsicanus*), also known as the Appennine

Duration of Use of Majella National Park Sites

Sites - Used since	800 000 to 20 000 BC	12 000 to 9 500 BC	6000 BC	4000 BC Bronze Age
Eremo Sant'Onofrio sul Morrone				
Eremo di San Bartolomeo				
Abbazia S.to Spirito al Morrone				
Eremo Sant'Onofrio				
Badia San Liberatore a Majella				
Tombe Rupestri San Giuannelle				
Grotta Sant'Angelo				
Chiesa Madonna Buon Cammino				
Drovers Road and Sites			√	√
Grotta del Colle	√	√	√	√
Sanctuary San Michele				
Santo Spirito a Majella				
Chiesa Sant'Agata				
Eremo San Giovanni all'Orfento				
Grotta della Continenza	√	√	√	√
Sanctuary Ercole Currino				
Grotta dei Piccioni		√	√	√
Grotta dei Porci	√	√	√	√
Roccamorice Lithic Site	√	√	√	
Valle Giumentina Site	√	√	√	

1200 BC to AD Iron Age Italic culture	AD to 476 Roman Empire	568 to 1017 Lombard Empire	Middle Ages 500 - 1400	Renaissance 1500 - 1700	Still in use in 20th Century
			√	√	√
			√	√	√
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brown bear, an endangered subspecies of the brown bear. Their habitat is mainly restricted to Abruzzo National Park, though a number have also been seen at Majella National Park. The total population of this subspecies is estimated to be only around 40 bears. Big roads and motorways divide Abruzzo National Park from Majella National Park and Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park. There is an urgent need for wildlife corridors between these parks.

The numerous sacred sites also pose challenges, though these are more related to restoration, maintenance and safety measures. While many of these sites (caves, hermitages, churches, abbeys and monasteries) are still in use, not all are used on a daily basis. There might therefore be a question of who is to look after these sites, many still consecrated. Another point is that while these sites are remote, the Abruzzo winter also delivers much snow and with over 55% of its territory above 2000 m many sites are inaccessible from November till March. Nor is the weather gentle with the frescoes and statues and it is amazing that after hundreds of years we are still able to admire some of the paintings. Unfortunately many people think that it is acceptable to scribble their name over paintings, on statues and even on altars. An educational initiative that values the uniqueness of Abruzzo's special natural, cultural and spiritual heritage might help in safeguarding its importance to future generations.

Only recently has some money been made available by the government, and excavations have resumed at some of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites. Recently a 14 000 year old hearth was discovered, making this one of the best-preserved hearths in Europe. While a number of caves today have the necessary legal safeguards (because they are related to paleosurfaces) there are still a number of caves that people can just walk into.

It is of note to mention that only recently (2004) Palaeolithic surfaces in Italy received protection through Legislative decree no. 42/2004, containing the 'Code on Cultural Heritage and Landscape' - Title I, Section 10. However, no such regulation exists related to caves, and of consequence hermitages will suffer further deterioration. Although many of these sites have beautiful frescoes funding might be hard to be obtained for any restoration work.

At present the panels at sites do mention their history and use, but more information is still at hand; it might be worth speaking with those who still hold the memory of how people used these sites, about the sites used for the water cult, of those used for litho-therapy (the rubbing against stone walls or lying on rocks and slabs), the rituals involved with these and the dates which were considered the most beneficial. These are the cultural traditions and related knowledge that are being lost.

Some sites need safer access, e.g. San Giovanni all'Orfento. If this is not possible then there needs to be at least a sign informing visitors that they should not access the site or do it at their own risk and peril.

As was mentioned above, there is a need for wildlife corridors and for feeding programmes for the Marsican Brown Bear.

In 2001, the Board of Majella National Park sent a request to Dr G. Proietti, Director of the Permanent Working Group for the UNESCO World Heritage List at the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, asking for the Park to be included in the list of Italian sites to be presented to the World Heritage Committee. It is a pity that this was refused, as the Parco Nazionale della Majella would be an outstanding world heritage site, offering a variety of sites rarely found elsewhere and spanning from Paleolithic times to the Middle Ages and to the present.

The above-mentioned list of sites contains only few examples of the many sacred and natural sites that can be found there. This National Park is remarkable as the natural aspect is almost overshadowed by the great and diverse variety of sacred natural sites, many or which are not restricted to the historic period.

The Parco Nazionale della Majella, with its protected natural landscape dotted by sacred and historic sites comprises hermitages, monasteries, churches and abbeys. The millennia old traditions of transhumance have influenced the culture of the Abruzzo and the caves, tholoi-huts, drovers' roads, sacred wells and lakes are testimony to a spirituality that is still very alive today. Festivals and celebrations continue to reflect the sacred and are related to the earth, the abundance of harvests and peoples' gratitude for the gifts and the healing power of nature. Around this colourful tapestry of cultural traditions those related to the culinary arts, to food preparation and to food preservation are bountiful. The sacred mother is still very much present and it is hoped that the Majella National Park Board will once again consider bringing the Park to the attention of the Ministry of Culture for inclusion in the Italian UNESCO World Heritage List.

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