Portofino Regional Park in Italy

Mediterranean landscape with strong conservation interests

Introduction

Portofino is a famous village and at the same time a small peninsula between Genoa and Sestri Levante (Liguria). Most of the peninsula is since 1935 part of the Parco del Monte di Portofino, which since 1977 has the status of a Regional Nature Park. The core area of the Park is located within three municipalities of the Province of Genoa: Portofino, the smallest with two square kilometres and a population of only about 580 inhabitants, and Camogli and Santa Margherita Ligure, with respectively 5,800 and 11,000 inhabitants on some 18 square kilometres. Most people live in Camogli and Santa Margherita, outside the park area, in contrast to Portofino, which is fully located within the park. The total protected area is 1056 ha.

The highest point of the peninsula, the Monte di Portofino (610 m a.s.l.) is named after the small harbour of Portofino.

A main feature of the peninsula – and thus of the Portofino Park – is the steep ridge that rises from sea level up to Monte di Portofino over a distance of only one kilometre, with an average slope of 59°. The geology, climatic variations together with the various expositions and slopes
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of the place, have decisively determined its vegetation differentiation.

Land management situation

Over the recent decades there has been a strong pressure on the coastal area of Italy, a spread of villages and towns due to economic activities as well as tourism occurred with detrimental effects on the coastal zone.

Portofino encompasses a complex of environmental relationships, a case study full of interesting stakes that helps understand the evolution of landscape dynamics, of an extensive coastal front in the north-western part of the Mediterranean basin.

The long history of human habitation (from prehistoric times onwards) has shaped the landscape. From the 16th century onwards multifunctional land use was common. Over the past decades it changed, and tourism, habitation and nature conservation have become important. Less suitable areas have been abandoned.

Apart from a strategic transit harbour, the village of Portofino was since at least Roman times a fisherman's place. Portofino became internationally famous among tourists already more than 100 years ago. Today, it is a well-known resort and an attractive site for the ‘rich and famous’, and well-to-do Milanese and Genovese urban people to have second houses, and for investors to develop facilities for tourism.

Apart from the statistics there is the story of the people. The farmers from the surroundings of Portofino village were interviewed by Mosconi (2000) during May 1999. All farmers that have been interviewed were between 60 and 80 years old, as all young people moved to town or recreation resorts for jobs. Most of the old farmers were still (part-time) working. The number of farmers that still work as sharecroppers is very small. Presumably they still keep this position for the cultivation of land for their own purposes.

In the opinion of the old farmers, there are no incentives stimulating farming with their sons. The
numerous laws and regulations that restrict the use of the park area, as well as the increased numbers of wild boar are found to be obstacles.

**Land use**

Most common are natural vegetation types: more than 50% is forested, some 42% is broadleaved forest, remaining is pine forest and mixed forest. Some 20% is covered with macchia vegetation, and some 20% of the area has an agricultural function.

Farming in Portofino area is mainly for subsistence, or a part-time activity– a characteristic of low intensity farming. Agriculture has been widespread in the east of the Park, in total some 150 ha and in addition some 40 ha of abandoned agricultural areas. In the park east of Olmi and Molini some 50% of the land was cultivated, which is shown by the terracettes and (partly abandoned) orchards. In the past there were also terraces in the west, on the slopes near Semaforo Nuovo, but these have been abandoned and are totally eroded now. Most important for the local economy were olives. Most commonly grown are olives, largely for export. Main problem is the small size of holdings, i.e. 85% of the holdings is less than 5 ha. in size. Usually no irrigation is applied for olive growing and there are usually possibilities for mechanisation. Fertilisation is always performed, pesticides are applied 2 to 7 times per year. Pesticides use can also be high in crops like grape growing (Narciso 1992). Also grapes and many other fruit trees were planted. Vine growing is less important nowadays, since prices are currently low and it is labour intensive.

Old abandoned farmland is sometimes restored, terraces are repaired, and houses are being renovated, often by people not originating from this area. Vegetable gardens are concentrated around the houses and small settlements. It is a type of ‘coltura mista’, mixed farming with orchards, fruits, some vegetables and often wheat or Lucerne. No grazing takes place, since grazing is not allowed anymore within the park boundaries. According to the historical land use survey grazing was always limited in this area (Mosconi 2000).

In the past the gathering of firewood was definitely one of the main factors determining vegetation patterns in the Mediterranean areas. Wood was the only source of energy for many economic activities until the 19th century, such as carpentry, naval workshops, metallurgy, limekilns, or glassworks for example. In Italy the trade of charcoal was very active, for energy supply to all main cities. Until the beginning of the century this was one of the major forms of
income for the rural population. The sweet chestnut tree was intensively managed until the end of the 19th century. Due to the rural exodus as well as changing agricultural policies by the EC plantations were abandoned. 

Chestnut grows in oak forests, at more favourable, deep moisture retaining soils on north facing slopes.
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Planning

The governments and their institutions (regional government, provincial authorities, and municipalities) have a general interest in regional socio-economic developments for the benefit of the whole unit under their responsibility. To some extent, they also aim at a balanced multidimensional development, which includes the quality of environment, nature, and landscape, social and cultural affairs, etc. Their objectives are better defined at the lower policy levels of municipalities.

In order to protect valued natural areas, the Italian national policy (Elenco ufficiale delle aree protette, 4° Aggiornamento Elenco Ufficiale delle Aree Naturali Protette, Delibera della Conferenza Stato Regioni n. 1500 del 25.7.2002) distinguishes several types of natural parks, of which the "Regional Nature Park" applies to the Portofino area since 1977 (Regional Nature Park of the Monte di Portofino) and more recently also the more specific "natural reserve" (National Marine Reserve).

The Regione Liguria has developed various policies to structure the spatial development of the province, including the Portofino Park region (http://www.regione.liguria.it/territor/16_ptr/pqd/index.htm). Further, for the Park itself and the adjacent Site of Community Interest (SCI), proper management is being defined, the most recent plan dating from 2002 (Regione Liguria 2002).

In general, it appears that EU agro-environmental measures have frequently been applied. In some mountain regions, such as the Abruzzi, EU measures were however not applied because of ignorance and incapacity of farmers and Regional Government, unclear ownership of the land, and laborious procedures. And if the measures are applied, they have several restrictions: they are either confined to just components or specific productions, and they are used as an income support without weighting environmental arguments. Moreover, other instruments, such as the EC Afforestation Regulation 2080/92, may work in an opposite direction by promoting transformation from low-intensity farming and pastoralism towards any kind of not pre-existing forestry.

The 'Ente del Parco di Monte di Portofino' or park authorities are responsible for the management of the park. A management plan was developed for the regional park which is being implemented with the aim is to maintain biodiversity of the national park, to prevent erosion, and to improve the plant communities. Most interventions relate to forestry management: selective removal of species, rehabilitation of sweet chestnut stands, etcetera. To a limited extent, efforts are made to restore old oliveyards and terracettes, and restore in this way the traditional landscape.

The municipalities of Camogli, Portofino, Rapallo, and Santa Margherita Ligure are responsible for the spatial planning in the area considered. Other villages in the park are San Rocco, Paraggi, Olmi, and Molini. Inside the Park and buffer zone, construction and building of houses is very much restricted. It might merely be repair and maintenance, and in some cases (illegal?) expansion. The built-up areas are just outside the buffer zone of the park where urban development is proliferating.

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Main findings of the questionnaire survey

The Portofino case study is a showcase for the declining agriculture in an upland Mediterranean landscape. The majority of the population consists of old farmers, with a shrinking agricultural area which depends for a limited extent on farm income. Since 1934 there has been a continuing trend of land abandonment and extensification of land use. Olive groves have reduced in number and area, and coltura mista and vineyards have almost vanished from the area. The aims seem of the Regional park and farmers are conflicting: the park strives for more 'natural areas', farmers want to maintain their lands. The role of small farmers is not acknowledged by the managers of the Regional Park, and although the has been a cultural landscape for many centuries (see the extensive terraces of former olive groves and Chestnut trees), the tendency is that cultivated land reverts to natural groves. The farmers' position is further weakened by the wild boars, which destroy crops and properties, and in particular threaten the stability of terraces. The heavy labour involved in maintaining terraces and fences coupled with the age of farmers, results in further marginalisation of the farming sector. The vicinity of urban centres and development of the tourism sector with alternative employment opportunities leads to an exodus from farming, and further decline of the agricultural sector. If the process of land abandonment continues there seems no future for agriculture. Only if new payment mechanisms are developed for landscape management, coupled with tourism, farming could have a future in such marginalised areas in the Mediterranean.
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References


