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A national park in a metropolitan context

Roberto Gambino

Vesuvius National Park is a paradox - an extraordinary natural monument in a context of millennial anthropisation - challenging the international park and protected area culture. This challenge, clearly taken up since the first phase of the Park planning, has recently assumed a great topical relevance in relation to the rethinking of nature conservation and protected area conceptions.

On one side, the exceptional well-known geomorphology justifies the classification of Vesuvius complex as a National Park, on the other side many reasons oblige to consider it as a borderline case in the international panorama. A case where the crucial intertwining of conservation and development issues - currently observed in many European countries, as well as in many under-developed countries - is displayed in extremely aggravated terms (see for instance the evacuation problem).

Of course, this mix of problems obliges to consider the Vesuvian complex largely beyond the institutional Park's boundaries, taking into account a number of interferences, such as the historical involvement of the surrounding territories in the eruptive and the hydrogeological risk, the ecological linkages, the historical connection with Naples and the surrounding cultural sediments, the problems of the public transport for the access to the volcano and for the enjoyment of its natural and cultural resources. So, there is no future for the Vesuvius National Park except in a metropolitan perspective. But, in this perspective, is the National Park classification really appropriate?

To try to answer this question, we must refer to the international debate and reflections, to the 'new paradigms' for protected area policies (IUCN 2003), to the new directions for nature conservation (IUCN 2004), to the new environmental governance models. Referring to the National Parks, these changes draw our attention from visitors to inhabitants, from wilderness values to social and cultural ones, from compelling regulation to strategic processes to be shared by a plurality of institutions, actors and stakeholders. Further, a growing importance is given - following the European landscape convention, CE 2000 - to the landscape, both into and outside protected areas.

All these issues are well represented in the Vesuvius area. But here the observed conflicts and contradictions do not raise only from the recent changing processes (such as urban sprawl, illegal building, extractive activities and so on).

They are rooted in the natural and cultural history of the Vesuvian territory. They have much to do with the endemic ambiguity of the Vesuvian landscape, with the diversity and complementarity of the two main images: the peaceful image of the Somma, with its human settlements, forests and cultivated areas; and the threatening image of the Vesuvius, still in eruptive activity. The tragic history of this activity has always crossed and will again cross the human history, in a never-ending process of change.