

## 26 OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS AND ECOMUSEUMS AS TOOLS FOR LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT: SOME ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

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### INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades the meaning and the usage of the term “heritage” has expanded exponentially: from the legal definition of “inheritance that an individual received in the will of a deceased ancestor” to include “almost any sort of inter-generational exchange or relationship, welcome or not, between societies as well as individuals” (Graham, Asworth and Tunbridge, 2000: 1). Within the latter, all-encompassing, definition it is possible to identify a subdivision, directly linked to the term used in Italy – *beni culturali* (cultural properties) – which comprises all manifestations of the past and of the culture identified by today’s society as worthy of recognition, conservation and public utilization, being at the same time a resource for the thriving tourism and recreation industry. Even considering the term “heritage” in this relatively narrow sense, it is possible to note a progressive extension of the type of object and experience to which society has gradually accorded such status. The early preservation laws issued in some European countries towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century concern only restricted categories, such as historical documents, works of art, monumental buildings and archaeological sites. Only subsequently was the concept extended to material and abstract manifestations of folk culture. At last, landscapes are also being rightfully included – not merely as a background and support for individual objects and buildings – in the category of heritage. While it is difficult to give a uniform chronology on an international scale, it must be said that the full recognition of landscape as a form of heritage is a relatively recent acquisition in terms of policies and among the general public.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade Geography has essentially faced the questions posed by the consideration of “landscape as heritage” from two standpoints, which reflect the evolution of Historical Geography and its increasing acceptance of approaches derived from Cultural Geography. On the one hand, Applied Historical Geography has emerged, coherently with the notion of landscape as a set of material structures that visibly

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<sup>1</sup> Reference can be made to recent achievements on different scales: the introduction of “Cultural landscape” among the categories considered for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List, in 1992 (Fowler, 2003); the evaluation of landscape as a “basic component of the European natural and cultural heritage, contributing to human well-being and consolidation of the European identity” in the European Landscape Convention (2000); the issue of a new general “Code for Cultural Properties and Landscape” by the Italian government in 2004.

express the interaction of past and ongoing ecological and social processes. This applied approach provides heritage planning with knowledge accumulated during empirical research into the morphogenesis of specific landscapes, for the interpretation of their historical characteristics. It constructs specific methodologies for inventorying, mapping and assessing these components (Newcomb, 1967, 1979; Denecke, 1982, 1985; Hooke, 1994, 1998, 1999; Renes, 1994; Vervloet, 1994, 1998). On the other hand, from the standpoint of Cultural Geography, during the 1980s a vision of landscape as a cultural product matured, both the result and the means of affirming symbolic and ideological values (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Baker, 1992); hence the investigation of the role of landscape as “visible history” (or “visible culture”) used in museums or heritage sites as a means to the constitution of local and national identities (Crang, 1999; Graham, 1998; Graham and Proudfoot, 1994; Johnson, 1997, 1999; Sörlin, 1999; Yeoh and Teo 1996, 1997).

We used this twofold perspective as a starting point for exploring one specific aspect of “heritaging” of the landscape: its assimilation amongst the objects and the themes dealt with in museums.

## **LANDSCAPE AND ECOMUSEUMS**

Given the atypical nature of landscape as a material object – or rather, as a set of spatially widespread physical structures – it has rarely been dealt with in traditional museums, which are based on the collection and presentation of objects in an enclosed space.<sup>2</sup> The various kinds of outdoor museums seem to offer greater potential for dealing with landscape: open-air museums, ecomuseums and museum networks or systems. We have excluded the latter from this analysis, since they are generally management solutions designed to link indoor museums and pre-existing sites, rather than museum models explicitly finalised in the conservation and interpretation of landscapes within the area of the network or system. In the first two cases, however, the museum is founded with the aim of preserving, studying, and displaying to the public the natural and manmade environments in which past generations conducted their daily life; the cultural landscapes they fashioned therefore become a key element of the museum.

The open-air museums, now largely widespread in northern Europe and overseas, are inspired by the Skansen prototype, founded in Stockholm in 1891. These museums are based on a collection of original buildings – usually rural, but sometimes urban or industrial – dismantled and rebuilt in the open-air, precisely recreating the internal settings and, as far as possible, the immediate surroundings. The setting may also be animated by the presence of live animals and costumed workers who carry out traditional activities, at times directly involving the public. As well as for the innovative opportunities offered to research and conservation of vernacular architectures, this kind

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<sup>2</sup> But see, for early cases of geographical museums, Semenov Tian Shansky (1929) and Reinhard (1934), and, for an example of a recent museum display critically devoted to landscape, Vecchio (1997) and Vecchio and Capineri (1999).

of museum has been celebrated for its educational advantages: the direct experience of past life that is realized in these settings, combining learning and entertainment, makes it possible to reach a much wider public than that of traditional museums. These characteristics are more similar to historic theme parks, re-creations of bygone environments, which, not usually being based on original exhibits, are not museums, but operate on a more or less solid scientific basis a prevalent function of entertainment (Sorensen, 1989).

While there has been a tendency to contrast the scientific meticulousness and the search for authenticity of the open-air museum reconstructions with the purely commercial set-up of the theme parks, the more recent debates have highlighted considerable limits in the way the past is presented that are common to both experiences. In particular, it has been noted that these museums, including Skansen, tend to offer a vision without diachronic depth, in which time appears frozen in a generic past, represented as a “a holistic, static and bounded cultural entity” (Crang 1999: 452). The social conflicts, the processes of change, the various spatial relationships and scales that historically moulded and transformed the local cultures are hidden by an appeasing and holistic representation, often inspired by the desire to offer historical grounding to national identity discourses (Crang, 1999; Johnson, 1996, 1999; Graham, 1998).

These limits seem to be confirmed if we analyse the specific possibilities offered by open-air museums in the interpretation and communication of the landscape. In the first place, it must be noted that the authenticity of the reconstructions is particularly ineffectual from this point of view: in fact, although the individual elements presented in the museum – utensils and tools, clothing, furnishings, buildings – are original, or replaced by rigorously researched replicas, the overall setting that they create is totally artificial. The need to document types of building representing different areas and historical periods creates an artificial juxtaposition of places and times within the museum area, disguised by the apparently organised and unitary scheme of a village or a town street.<sup>3</sup> The spatial organisation of the buildings and the other material structures and of the vegetation is not overall a representation of the relation patterns that linked these elements in the landscape to which they belonged. Moreover, like the representation of culture offered by these museums, the interpretation of landscape – or rather of the fragments of landscape presented there – is of limited diachronic insightfulness. In the open-air museums communication stresses the visitors’ visual and material experience, which, in the absence of specific interpretative aids, risks making the processes underlying the outward appearance not intelligible (Johnson, 1999: 196, 204).

Seemingly, the potential of the ecomuseums, though originally inspired by the open-air museum is radically different. The idea of ecomuseum was conceived in France by the ethnologist G.H. Rivière as a re-interpretation of the Skansen model and was repeatedly

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<sup>3</sup> With the exception of heritage centres, which are hypothetical reconstructions of entire settlements dating back to a certain age, like the prehistoric village at Lejre or the Ribe Vikingecenter of Lustrupholm, in Denmark.

re-elaborated by its author between the 1930's and 1980's. The well-known "evolutionary definition" (Rivière, 1980) concentrates the attention of the ecomuseum on the relationship between a given population and its environment, interpreted in the contemporary situation, but also in the historical evolution and with a critical awareness of future developments. More specifically, according to Rivière, the ecomuseum "shows man and his natural and cultural environment according to two systems. A temporal system: the evolution of a given region, from the geological era, through the prehistoric and historical periods, blossoming into modernity and concluding with a conjecture of what is to come. A spatial system: representing this portion of the world, the original landscapes in their wild natural form and forged by man, the settlements and agricultural systems in their own environment and transferred to equivalent environments" (Rivière, 1971: 94-95). The repeated theoretical re-formulation of the ecomuseum concept reflects the changes that it has undergone in its practical applications, which can be traced back in France alone to at least three different generations (Hubert, 1985, 1997).

The first ecomuseums were created at the end of the 1960's in regional natural parks. In these cases, the museum structure becomes a "museum of time", a building in which the permanent exhibition illustrates the historical evolution of the region, and a "museum of space", through the paths that link representative sites within the area of the park. The prevailing method is – in contrast with the building removal of open-air museum – the conservation *in situ* of rural buildings and generally extensive portions of the landscape, at times recouping the traditional agricultural and pastoral activities. The next step is represented by the experience – now paradigmatic on an international scale – of the ecomuseum of Le Creusot-Montceau-les Mines, established in Burgundy in the early 1970's (De Varine Bohan, 1973; Bellaigue-Scalbert, 1985). In an area marked by a lengthy industrial history and by the first signs of the waning of these activities, the question of unemployment and the need to identify new development strategies – while at the same time safeguarding and managing the material and non-material heritage of the industrial tradition – were strongly felt. In such a context, the ecomuseum assumes new connotations, above all with regard to content, being focused more on the social aspects than on the question of the relationship between man and his environment.

However, the break with previous experiences lies less in the themes dealt with than in the relationship between the museum, the public and the territory. In effect, the separation between the users and the professional museum staff is abolished: on the model of the American community museums, the local population is actively involved in the management of their heritage and in the evaluation of existing problems and prospects for development.

The ecomuseum is therefore a way of making the local community more aware of its history and of its future. On the organisational plane, the formula of the *musée éclaté* soon emerged, structured as a group of sites (*antennes*) spread around the entire territory of the community served. All the moveable assets and real estate present in the area

form the collections of the ecomuseum, while remaining mainly entrusted to their owners, and potentially all the inhabitants are involved in the activities of the museum – administration, cataloguing, conservation, communication – with the assistance of a small team of external restorers and scientific consultants. In the 1980's this innovative model proliferated on an international scale (Davis, 1999) and, in parallel, evolved through the “third generation” in France. This was characterised by a considerable increase in the number of museums, and by a certain regression with respect to the principles that inspired them, since they are often small ecomuseums with limited resources. The themes taken into consideration are increasingly limited, so that the ecomuseum is dedicated to a specific traditional activity and relates to a single site, betraying the original idea of illustrating the historically evolving relations between a population and its environment. In this phase the anti-institutional and participatory component is emphasised to the detriment of the scientific dimension, with the risk of turning in on itself and nostalgically mythicizing the past (Hubert, 1985).

While it is difficult to trace this sundry plurality of experiences – or the other adaptations that have emerged in diverse national contexts – to a single and stable model, it is possible to identify certain distinctive elements of the ecomuseum philosophy, which are particularly interesting in relation to the landscape. Although the discipline from which the ecomuseum is born is ethnology, it is impossible to ignore the strong consonance between the central theme of an ecomuseum and the very core of geographical research. The notion of landscape also finds a place, although not central and predominant, in the planning of many French ecomuseums. However, it is a casual consonance that contrasts noticeably with the persistent lack of attention paid by Geography to the ecomuseum movement.<sup>4</sup> The principles that drive the ecomuseum movement, above all those of the first and second generations, can therefore easily be re-read from a geographical perspective and appear rich with implications for action on the heritage/landscape. Here we feel that three aspects, which are at the same time strengths of the ecomuseum concept and potential practical difficulties, are worthy of note.

In the first place, the ecomuseum differs from a traditional museum and from an open-air museum inasmuch as it has definitively overcome the procedures for the collection/concentration/exhibition of objects or buildings, which would be extremely limiting if applied to the landscape: it is dealt with as a coherent set – the expression of the relationships historically matured between a population and its environment – and not as isolated fragments. This new approach to landscape already potentially arises in the first ecomuseums, realized within French regional natural parks: the network of paths is

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<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the main periodicals representing French Geography has shown, even in the motherland of ecomuseums, a diffused unawareness of this experience until the 1990's (Sturani, 2000: 426) and similar results are given by the examination of international English-speaking literature in this field, with few exceptions (Tunbridge and Asworth, 1996: 37-38). Anyway, in this latter cultural context the appreciation of ecomuseums has come very late also in the museological debate (Walsh, 1992; Davis, 1999).

proposed here as a spatially spread means of interpreting the landscape, rather than a simple way to link isolated sites.

But it is with the second generation of French ecomuseums that an approach to the landscape as a coherent whole becomes inevitable. In particular, in the experience of *Le Creusot* the identity between the collection and the territory of the community it serves emphasizes the problems already faced within the narrower boundaries of protected areas, and necessarily place the museum's activities in relation to the landscape at the junction between conservation and planning. Thanks to this interweaving, the ecomuseum, though not playing a decision-making role, can be important on the informative and critical plane (Rivière, 1985: 182). It is undoubtedly a role that requires considerable creative effort if it is to be translated into practice, so that the visitors to the ecomuseum are effectively offered adequate means for interpreting and understanding the landscape as a coherent and integrated system, rather than as a casual grouping of elements. Otherwise there is a risk of simply replicating "the traditional eclectic display of many local museums" (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996: 38).

Moreover, the ecomuseum project seems to be explicitly based on a dynamic vision of the landscape, founded as much on the reconstruction of the processes that have historically shaped it as on the awareness of present-day problems and the dilemmas regarding future development. All the same, experience has shown that the difficulties posed by the representation of the past, with the risk of nourishing mystifying reconstructions and the emergence of conflicts between memory and historical reconstruction, also exist in the case of the ecomuseums (Hubert, 1997; Wasserman, 1997).

Finally, the close involvement of the local population in the ecomuseum, which characterises the turn-around of the *Nouvelle Muséologie*, is crucial when an object as complex, extended and inhabited, as a landscape is to become a museum exhibit. Once again, we must stress the need to reconcile conservation, management and local development. Yet this is where an element of fragility emerges at an operational level and, at the same time, an element of fundamental ambiguity of the idea of a homogeneous and stable relationship between a community and its territory inherent in the concept of an ecomuseum. G. H. Rivière's evolutionary definition uses the metaphor of a mirror, in which the local community recognises itself, and which at the same time it proffers to visitors to make itself known. In effect, the images reflected in the mirror are plural and often express dissonances in the interpretation of the past and of the present role of the ecomuseum: between the various agents and groups within the community, between the latter and professional operators of the museum, between the insider's perception of the inhabitants and the outsider's gaze of external visitors.

We are convinced that on all these three points a merging of the experience of the ecomuseum and the theories matured by Historical and Cultural Geography regarding the landscape could produce interesting results and it is by beginning with this three-

fold challenge that we have attempted to re-construct and interpret the recent spread of the ecomuseum movement in Italy.

### **ECOMUSEUMS IN ITALY**

Like other countries in Southern Europe, Italy has not been affected by the spread of the open-air museums and even the acceptance of the ecomuseums seems rather belated, at least with respect to the French experience. Unlike the latter, a shared definition of the Italian ecomuseums and some regulations valid on a national scale are still missing, because this subject has been controlled so far only by regulations issued by some sub-national administrative authorities: the Piedmont Region (law issued in 1995) and the autonomous Province of Trento (law issued in 2000).

For this reason it is complex to take a census of the exact number of the ecomuseal entities existing in Italy. There is, in fact, a problem that concerns the relationship between denomination and substance: it is not easy, in the absence of a clear legislative framework, to distinguish between those which are truly ecomuseums and those which are merely nominally such, or which – being in existence for a number of years – have decided to adopt a fashionable new name, without amending the content, which is often very different from the model of ecomuseum that should be their reference point. However, although we are dealing with a continuously fast-evolving picture, today we can count on the Italian territory about fifty museal experiences that approximate to varying degrees the concept of ecomuseum, whose exact definition is still under discussion from the museological point of view.

Even if there are some sporadic but significant previous experiences, most ecomuseums were created after 1995, when the Piedmontese law was passed. That was a starting point from which the idea of ecomuseum itself was popularized and the number of ecomuseums brought into operation – or whose projects were presented – increased with relative rapidity, also outside the promoting region. In fact, Piedmont, in addition to generously subsidizing their institution on its territory, has widely contributed to the spreading of the ecomuseal model in the Italian context, through the creation of a specific documentation centre, the starting of census and research, and the organization of two important national meetings.

Regarding the geographical distribution of the phenomenon, there is a high concentration of ecomuseums in Piedmont, and a generally higher distribution of ecomuseums in the North and Centre of Italy, while there are only few and isolated cases in the South. A characteristic which all of them share is their location in smaller towns and in predominantly rural areas, with generally negative demographic trends, and usually excluded from the processes of agricultural modernisation of the last fifty years. In these contexts the ecomuseum seems to be proposed as a means of reflection on the problems of local development and sometimes also as a pivot of strategies of tourist exploitations of the heritage.

Apart from these general traits, the picture of Italian ecomuseums looks rather unstable and in certain aspects elusive, because most initiatives are still at present at an embryonic phase, *i.e.*, they are not yet at a planning stage. For this reason, on the one hand, it is objectively premature to give a full appraisal of the role they have played in the field of preserving and managing landscape. On the other hand, it seems useful to try at least a first critical examination of the operational potential and the scientific basis of the projects. The latter profile highlights the general absence of research work in the realization of ecomuseums, despite rare exceptions, as another characteristic of the Italian case, unlike other European contexts, where cooperation has been much wider. This deficiency is evident both in the initial planning stages and in the subsequent management, with the risk of impairing the choice of content and the interpretations that are passed on. Such deficiency is frequently evident on a geo-historical level, where stereotyped visions of the past and of the historical elements of the landscape are generated and perpetuated.

If we want to single out from the varied picture of Italian ecomuseums those that seem more specifically oriented to the interpretation of landscape, it is possible to recognise some recurrent models:

- ecomuseums based on the description of a traditional productive activity, and in which the reference to the landscape is implicit and not necessarily illustrated by itineraries or trails;
- ecomuseums based on recouping and safeguarding only one type of elements of the landscape – a building or other material structure – which has become a museum and a centre for collecting records and documents;
- ecomuseums deriving from existing ethnographic museums, devoted to material culture and peasant culture, founded since the 1970's, and today transformed into ecomuseums, although they basically continue to be what they have always been, that is, traditional collections aimed at preserving working tools or ceremonial objects, but with no theoretical or practical reference to the landscape;
- ecomuseums whose theme – more or less explicitly declared – is the territory of a community and its landscape, though the theoretical clarity of the latter is not always evident.

The initiatives dealing with landscape are different in all classes, and it seems useful to verify whether the ecomuseum can be – potentially, or in action – a means for conserving and managing landscape, and particularly in those initiatives which seemed more specifically centred on the interpretation of that object, excluding all cases where the reference to landscape does not exist or is fictitious, or is only nominal, and is accomplished by means of settings which are really of the traditional type. Specifically, among the initiatives of the last category of the previous classification, we decided to focus our attention on a specific case study taken from the Piedmontese context that,

thanks to its thematic orientation and to the advanced stage of its activities, offered matter for reflection.

It is the Terraces and Vine Ecomuseum (*Ecomuseo dei Terrazzamenti e della Vite*), near the Cortemilia borough, situated at the border between Piedmont and Liguria, in the upper valley of the Bormida river.<sup>5</sup> It is, among the various Italian initiatives, one of the cases in which greater and more explicit attention has been given to the theme of landscape, both in the aim of the project and in the implementation of the first concrete phases of work. If the contents of the project already seemed to be promising with regard to protection, convincing with regard to local development and founded on explicit reference to scientific research, the first interventions implemented by the foundation up to the present seem to confirm the initial premises. Formally founded in 1996, but active and financed only since the end of 1999, promoted and run by the local authority itself, the ecomuseum is aimed to protect, study and popularize, as well as to productively revitalize the characteristic landscape of terraced vineyards of Cortemilia and Bormida Valley.

Since the last century this area has been marked by processes of demographic decline and ageing population which characterize Piedmont's mountains and high hills as a consequence of the transition from an agro-pastoral economy founded on small peasant holdings to a growing integration between part-time farming and income generation from other activities, linked to the development of industrialization. The latter began in that area when a chemical industry was established in the upper valley: It has been active since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was this industry, certainly beneficial in terms of employment, that gave rise to serious problems of water and soil pollution, which eventually led to the declaration by the Ministry of Environment in 1987 of the Bormida Valley as "area at high environmental risk" and subsequently to the reclamation programme under the pressure of large mobilization of the local population and of groups of environmentalists.

In this context, marked during the last twenty years by serious environmental problems and by social struggles, the ecomuseum comes into being out of the will to protect and recover the landscape of terraces as a historical product and a foundation of the local cultural identity. As a matter of fact, terraces are acknowledged – in the project elaborated by the ecomuseum – as "one of the most noteworthy aspects of the cultural landscape, of those landscapes that recount the history of man and Nature and which bear witness, through their evolution, to the realisation and the formation of the uniqueness and the identity of this area".<sup>6</sup> The project also envisages the revival of agricultural activities, and the possible recovery of traditional land uses.

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<sup>5</sup> The study of this case has been based on the review of the projects presented to the regional administration for the institution of the ecomuseum, on the information provided by the two official reports on ecomuseums in Piedmont (*Laboratorio ecomusei*, 2001, 2002) and by an interview to the ecomuseum director.

<sup>6</sup> Quotation from the project presented to the regional administration for the institution of the ecomuseum.

As in many other cases, one of the first concrete initiatives which followed the project phase, consisted in the restoration of the building destined for the seat of the interpretation centre – historical building situated in the borough of Cortemilia – and in the setting up of a permanent exhibition inside it. The exhibition consists of four rooms in which short descriptive texts and plastic models offer some information for understanding the terraced landscape the visitor can observe outside. In particular, attention is drawn to some natural features of the landscape (geomorphology and geology) and to the main man-made material features (paths, dry-stone walls, chapels, buildings for the sheltering of tools), in addition to the illustration of the main areas of geographical distribution of terraced landscapes in the world and of productive activities connected to the presence of such landscape.

Next to this indoor exhibition, interventions are developed in the open air. Of particular interest are initiatives of landscape restoration, in two directions. The first one has led the ecomuseum to buy, from private owners, a hill called Monte Oliveto, with terraces and a paved path, which climbs up to a farmhouse on the summit. It has been acknowledged as a particularly significant example of the territory the ecomuseum illustrates, and ideal to represent the shape of terraced landscapes thanks to its position and the good state of preservation of dry-stone walls.

The whole complex of dry-stone walls has been restored and the soil has been made productive again by planting vineyards on the sunny side: a modest quantity of grapes is gathered to make wine which will soon be sold with the trademark of the ecomuseum itself, thanks to a cooperative society of local producers. On the opposite side, a “catalogue cultivation” has been started in order to document and maintain the varieties of fruit trees and vegetables that have been recognised through a census as typical of the area; its aim is to create a small tree nursery to preserve local varieties. The whole hill is the open-air route of the ecomuseum through an interpretation path that winds from the Cortemilia built-up area, and along which the main basic aspects of a rural terraced landscape will be illustrated: geomorphologic conditions and man-made changes, landscape evolution and the risks arising from neglect. From the interpretation centre visitors will get enough information to enable them to read the landscape, supported along the open-air route only by unobtrusive signposts. The use of larger explanatory panels is avoided as it is considered aesthetically unpleasant.

The second intervention, at present barely past the planning stage, seems more difficult, as it generally happens whenever the attempt to combine conservation and development involves private interests. After making agreements with the different owners, the ecomuseum would like to promote restoration operations of the terraced slopes of an area called “Regione Morera”, at present in a semi-abandoned condition, with the purpose of making their cultivation possible again; their owners should let them to a local cooperative association, which would manage the cultivation of vineyards and fruit trees.

The experience of the Cortemilia ecomuseum seems positive because the local community is involved and takes part in the ecomuseum activities: they are mostly school children, who participate in laboratories and are involved in organization work, and the older population, which includes the owners of the grounds involved in the preservation action. In this direction, where the first results already look consolidated, it is possible to notice numerous consonances with the theme of the value of landscape for the construction of local identity, as analysed by Cultural Geography, and with investigation on local development, for which the ecomuseum could from now on be an interesting case study. Equally successful, considering their initial goals, seem to be those actions whose purpose is the conservation of morphological elements of the landscape. However, until now they have been implemented without the support of precise historical investigations. In this respect, it seems desirable that the initiatives of research promoted by the ecomuseum, so far focused on the agronomic sector, be extended in future to the analysis of the morphogenetic processes of landscape on which Historical Geography could proficiently offer its competence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Following an international tendency, the process leading to the full recognition of landscape as a form of heritage has greatly advanced in Italy too, both as regards its exploitation as a resource for heritage tourism and the enactment of laws and policies specifically devoted to its conservation and management. There is, however, a high risk that – as it happened with previous legislation, as in the case of the “Galasso Law” (1985) – the measures recommended by the recent “New Code for Cultural Properties and Landscape” (issued in May 2004) may have limited and controversial practical effects. This ineffectiveness is due to the frequent enforcement of provisional acts, like the remissions of violations to planning and building regulations repeatedly approved in the recent past, in sharp contrast to the aims of heritage policies devoted to landscape. But in more general terms it can be traced back to the fragmentation of the competence exercised on the landscape by different levels and branches of the public administration, and to the manifold theoretical and operational approaches matured by different academic traditions, which have sometimes become an obstacle to effective decision making and management, as already recognized for nearby countries (Bouillon, 1991). Moreover, it must be noted that the contributions of Geography and, specifically, of Historical Geography to the conservation and management of Italian landscapes has been sporadic so far, and that applied research has developed to a lesser degree here than in northern Europe.

The recent spread of ecomuseums in Italy is to be set against this background characterized by light and shade. Although based on various degrees of theoretical awareness and, in general, only superficially linked with geographical debate and research, they will ultimately deal with landscape in a variety of ways. Sometimes, as we have seen in the case study examined above, landscape is explicitly assumed as one

of the main objects of the museum's activities for the pursuit of research and for conservational or educational aims. But in many other cases the main focus is on different themes, according to an approach that gives more importance to ethnology or social and cultural history than to geographical studies of landscape. Landscape is simply considered an ordinary setting upon which the ecomuseum operates. In such cases what is done to the landscape – which is not to be critically appraised – can concern first of all its physical aspect: for example, formal or functional features of the landscape can be changed when some of its components – generally buildings – are restored for new usages, or when new infrastructures (paths and roads, parking areas, poster panels etc.) are built in order to implement the development of educational or recreational programmes. On a less material but not less important level, the use of landscape as an image is often found in the communication strategies adopted by ecomuseums in order to attract external visitors: in this perspective, landscape is frequently referred to in a stereotyped manner, which exhorts aesthetic or natural values rather than historical insight.

In this context, it seems desirable that the traditional divide and lack of communication between the world of ecomuseums and that of geographical research is overcome. Attempts should be made to establish cooperation and exchange relationships that should be put into practice in planning and managing ecomuseum and that could potentially bear positive outcomes for both sides involved. As for Historical Geography – in Italy, but also in a wider context – cooperation with ecomuseums could offer a sort of research laboratory that could be used to test the empirical and theoretical results of the longstanding tradition of landscape studies; furthermore, it would be a good opportunity to stimulate the growth, as yet stunted, of an applied approach. But ecomuseums will also offer interesting opportunities of interaction with other fields of geographical enquiry: with Cultural Geography – for the deconstruction of landscape representations produced by ecomuseums – and with local development research – for the analysis of possible uses of heritage as a resource in local development strategies. However, ecomuseums themselves could draw useful suggestions from an approach to geographical tradition, not only for the important amount of knowledge on specific landscapes that could be derived from it but also from a critical standpoint. A deeper awareness of the questions dealt with by the geographical debate on the idea and concept of landscape could probably foster the definition and communication of less static and stereotyped images by ecomuseums.

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