Detecting peoples’ and landscape identity in a changing mountain landscape. An example from the Northern Italian Apennines.

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Remote mountain areas in the Northern Italian Apennines were historically characterized by rural landscapes, covered by grasslands with herds of sheep and cows, chestnuts, small vineyards, mountain villages and criss-crossed with mercantile trails connecting the Ligurian Sea with the Po plain. Since 1950s, inhabitants of these mountain villages, mainly farmers and shepherds but also merchandisers or travelers, emigrated and abandoned the agricultural land which caused a spontaneous growth of secondary vegetation and transformed the valleys in marginal areas with shrub, woodland and desolated villages. More recently, young ‘newcomers’ arrive in those villages, consisting of a community of a few elderly people, and set up ‘new’ rural activities like environmental education, agricultural tourism, cheese production, etc. The current diversity of today’s users of the landscape creates an interesting identity ‘clash’. Original inhabitants identify themselves with the historical agricultural landscape of before the large abandonment; newcomers with the current landscape and even dear to look towards the future.

This paper aims to construct a theoretical framework on both the individual and collective landscape identity in a landscape that changed drastically trough time. Therefore, we first want to detect how people identify themselves within a changing mountain landscape and discover to which landscape, the historical or the recent one, the main community refers to when it comes to identification. We want to understand why people still identify themselves with a historical and disappeared landscape.

Second, we want to describe when and how both the newer and historical landscape identity does evolve into a collective landscape identity, in analogy with the landscape changes. Furthermore, we want to detect smaller collective identities, referring to the current or even future landscape, formed by parallel communities.

To found this framework, a large series of in-depth interviews are performed with different types of stakeholders. This information is combined with the analysis of landscape change patterns and processes (economic, political, social …) causing a switch in the dominant identity from the historical to the actual landscape.