

Beyond Nature and Culture: Rethinking Eco-Cultural Heritage through Historical Landscapes

Mauro Agnoletti

University of Florence, Florence, Italy

e-mail: mauro.agnoletti@unifi.it

The conventional separation between natural and cultural heritage does not adequately reflect the historical development of many European landscapes. For centuries, agriculture, pastoralism and forestry have shaped ecosystems, biodiversity and landscape patterns, creating values that cannot be fully understood independently from human activities. Historical landscapes therefore provide a valuable perspective for reconsidering the relationship between nature and culture within the concept of eco-cultural heritage. This perspective is consistent with the 2014 Florence Declaration on the Links between Biological and Cultural Diversity, which emphasized their interconnected character and described the European landscape as predominantly a “biocultural multifunctional landscape”. Historical landscapes are among the clearest expressions of this long-term interaction between communities, environmental conditions, land-use practices and traditional knowledge.

Today, these landscapes are increasingly affected by two contrasting processes: agricultural intensification, often associated with landscape simplification, and the abandonment of marginal rural areas, frequently followed by forest expansion. Both may lead to the loss of historical landscape structures, practices and knowledge. Conserving eco-cultural heritage therefore requires moving beyond the assumption that increasing naturalness necessarily increases the overall value of a landscape. At the same time, historically rich territories should not be regarded only as objects of conservation. Their biodiversity, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, food products and landscape quality can provide important resources for diversified rural economies. Recognizing eco-cultural heritage as the outcome of the historical interaction between nature and culture can support policies in which biodiversity conservation, cultural heritage, food production and rural development become mutually reinforcing.

