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# Nature as a constellation of activities: movement, rhythm and perception in an Italian national park

Drawing on the concept of taskscape, the paper explores activities of environmental interpretation in an Italian national park. Taskscape is the array of rhythmic movements, tasks and activities that humans and nonhumans perform in the process of dwelling. Accordingly, the paper presents environmental interpretation as particular mode of action and perception that shapes conservation areas as environments understood as realms of nature. By extending the concept of taskscape, and adopting a performative perspective, the paper also sheds light on ethical and cognitive considerations. Ethics emerges along with the activities interpreters carry out within the landscape; it is performed, hence it is constitutive of a taskscape of conservation as a process in which particular ways of moving, hence perceiving, generate particular ways of knowing, hence understanding, and vice versa. The conclusion suggests that nature in conservation areas emerges as a constellation of activities resulting from a particular way of dwelling and performing a certain environment according to a specific rhythm, and framed within a particular ethics.

**Key words** environmental anthropology, environmental interpretation, conservation areas, performativity, Agro Pontino

## Introduction

'Forest!', the guide shouted and stopped. We, who were following in line walking a narrow path among butcher's broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) and tree heaths (*Erica arborea*), answered the command by taking different positions: those at the end of the line extended their arms upward; those in the middle remained steady in their natural posture, and the ones at the beginning of the line crouched down. By taking those positions we were imitating the forest structure, which as the guide explained at the beginning of the trail is composed of dominant trees, mainly oaks; smaller trees, such as forest apple, wild pear and tree heath; and shrubs, such as butcher's broom. When, after a few seconds, we returned to our natural posture, the guide restarted walking and stopped a few steps beyond, on a small round clearing. He waited for all the people to come around in a circle and started explaining that we were walking an old trail, historically used to transport charcoal from the forest to the sea, and that the clearing was a mark left on the ground by a charcoal pit. During his explanation, the guide also dug with his hands on the ground and found a small piece of charcoal that he passed to us, asking us to put it back once everybody had seen it. Then, he started walking again on the path, and we followed him.

In his explanation, the guide linked the current structure of the forest, made of trees, shrubs and clearings, with its history, and hence with the previous uses of the wood, especially charcoal production, carried out until the 1930s, when the area was declared a national park. In doing so, he also referred to the current park's conservation policy, which is fostering a process of naturalisation, revealed by the current forest structure. He adopted peculiar strategies, marked by a specific temporality, to help us, the visitors, to understand his explanation. He used our bodily movements, framed within a certain rhythm, to make visible, hence perceivable, the structure of the forest and the conservation policy of the park. He used the command 'forest' also to stop us in a particular place, where the narrow path widened, thus allowing us to create a circle around him. That circle corresponded with the perimeter of the clearing, created as a result of the old activity of charcoal production. We actually made visible that particular place by means of our movements. These movements were emphasised by the guide's explanation of the ecological importance of clearings in a forest, and by his link to the history of that particular area, represented by the remains of the charcoal pit and by his finding of a small piece of charcoal that he passed around the circle, inviting us to handle it and to put it back on the ground.

The strategies used by the guide were inspired by a particular approach called 'environmental interpretation'. This method was developed in the 1950s by the US National Park Service, and since then it has been increasingly used in conservation areas all over the world to lead visitors in nature and to make them aware of conservation goals. The episode that I briefly described took place in Circeo National Park, a conservation area in Agro Pontino, Italy, where I conducted fieldwork with a local institute of environmental interpretation, participating in guided visits and attending a course for 'Environmental Interpreters of Circeo National Park'.<sup>1</sup> Expanding on this example,<sup>2</sup> and including other materials gained during fieldwork, this paper explores environmental interpretation as a particular facet of nature conservation.

I draw on the concept of taskscape, developed in a paper entitled 'The temporality of the landscape', where Tim Ingold addressed the basic constituents of social life, time and space, exploring two main ideas: 'First, human life is a process that involves the passage of time. Second, this life-process is also the process of formation of the landscape in which people have lived' (1993: 152). These ideas are brought together using what Ingold named 'dwelling perspective', a relational approach that takes as point of departure the *animal in its environment* rather than the *self-contained individual*. Within this perspective, humans – as much as non-human animals – constitute a coherent totality with the environment; they cannot be understood separately. Taking such an approach means to emphasise the idea that any environment is neither natural nor cultural; it rather emerges along with the lives of its inhabitants, it is a concretion of their life activities.

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted in Agro Pontino between spring 2011 and autumn 2012, with many subsequent visits to the field. The material discussed here is part of a larger ethnographic study of conflicts between farming and conservation in two protected wetlands of Agro Pontino, Italy. The author is native to Agro Pontino.

<sup>2</sup> The episode described was a rehearsal of a guided visit designed as part of the course for environmental interpreters I attended. On that occasion, each apprentice interpreter performed one particular stage of the visit and colleagues acted as visitors.

In the case of conservation areas, usually understood as places of nature, this is a powerful approach because it highlights the point that nature is not an inner quality immanent to a particular environment, it rather emerges as a *constellation of activities* – a taskscape – performed according to certain values, strategies and ideas that result in a particular temporality. Indeed, this perspective makes clear that temporality is not intrinsic to the landscape, it rather emerges along the activities performed by its human and non-human inhabitants. This is particularly important to understand the temporality of guided visits, their rhythm, which requires a constant negotiation with other-than-human temporalities, and the ability to correspond with them. As I am going to suggest, this temporality results from, and conveys, the environmental ethics performed by interpreters during guided visits.

In the paper, I adopt the ‘dwelling perspective’ to describe how nature emerges in conservation areas along with particular activities that involve the body, as much as the surrounding environment, as a site of experience. These activities are embedded within, and convey, a peculiar ethics; they constitute a particular ‘mode of dwelling’ (Macnaghten and Urry 2001: 6) that Tilley and Cameron-Daum calls ‘temporary dwelling’ (2017: 265). This relates to the activities performed during guided visits, and generates a particular kind of nature that emerges with a specific temporality through peculiar ways of moving and sensing across the landscape (see Macnaghten and Urry 2001; Ingold 1993).

My use and understanding of the ‘dwelling perspective’ is framed within a wide and inclusive reading of Ingold’s work (e.g. 2000, 2011, 2013, 2017a) that allows to overcome criticisms of romanticism and localism raised against this concept, thus pushing it beyond its Heideggerian legacy (e.g. Cloke and Jones 2001; Massey 2006; Ingold 2011). In a recent reframing of the concept of dwelling, Ingold argues: ‘the spaces of dwelling are not already given, in the layout of the building, but are created in movement. That is to say, they are *performed*’ (2013: 85, emphasis in original). From this perspective, the concept of dwelling associated to the taskscape becomes critical to my argument because it affords the possibility to shift focus from representations to practices (see Bender 1998; Cloke and Jones 2001; Jones 2009), thus demonstrating that conservation areas are not only ways ‘of *thinking* about the world, of *viewing* the world, and of *acting on* the world’ (West and Brockington 2006: 609, emphasis in the original): they *are* activities and performances that give shape and meaning to nature (see Watson 2003).

Such a shift, centred on *performance*, is important because it allows me to broaden the concept of taskscape, framing it within a wider argument on movement, perception and cognition (see Gibson 1986; Ingold 2000, 2011; Ingold and Vergunst 2008). From this perspective we can understand nature and conservation areas not as fixed and bounded localities resulting from the implementation of particular knowledges, but as *events* (Massey 2006: 46, emphasis in the original) that unfold along embodied, material activities and staged performances (see Szerszynski et al. 2003). Accordingly, this approach also sheds light on ethical considerations concerning what nature affords in conservation areas and the cognitive outcomes of them (see Milton 2002; Cheney and Weston 1999). Ethics emerges in active, embodied and contingent experiences along with the activities interpreters carry out within the landscape. Ethics is performed according to a certain rhythm, hence it is constitutive of what I call *taskscape of conservation* as a process in which particular ways of moving, hence perceiving, generate particular ways of knowing, hence understanding, and vice versa (see Ingold and Vergunst 2008).

This is important because it brings out an aspect of the taskscape that is usually overlooked, namely its epistemological model, that is to say its proposition to understand how people come to know the world they inhabit. The notion of taskscape, in fact, needs to be framed within a larger discussion that challenges traditional cognitive models, according to which the world is perceived through acquired cognitive schemata that organise and transform sensory experience into mental representations (Ingold 2000: 157–71). The taskscape suggests a radical relational approach that can be summarised as follows: ‘Far from being inscribed upon the bedrock of physical reality, meaning is immanent in the relational contexts of people’s practical engagement with their lived-in environments’ (Ingold 2000: 168). This is to say that perception is a situated process that involves experience and an ongoing attunement to the surrounding environment. Paraphrasing the Berlin-based philosopher Armen Avanessian, we can say that perception ‘is centered not around “epistemes” (concepts of knowledge), but around “existemes” (categories of experience)’ (Weber 2019: 144).

Within this approach, emphasis on movement is paramount: ‘perception entails movement’, Ingold (2000: 166) argues, recalling Gibson’s ecological psychology. In this sense, ‘perception is a mode of action’ (2000: 166) and it is entangled within a ‘mode of dwelling’ that entails the accomplishment of particular practices, activities and tasks. Accordingly, I use the notion of taskscape not only to emphasise the processual and relational aspects of the landscape, but also to provide a heuristic and epistemological model to understand relations between the emergence of landscape as a ‘sphere of life activity’ (Anderson and Berglund 2003: 8), and contextual modes of perception, dwelling and action framed within a particular temporality.

In what follows I discuss one mode of perception, dwelling and action that emerges along a particular kind of taskscape. I explore how environmental interpreters perform nature through an array of activities that, marked by a certain rhythm, shape conservation areas both physically and symbolically. I describe the experiences I gained both as a visitor during guided walks in Circeo National Park, and as an apprentice interpreter, attending a course organised by a local institute of environmental interpretation (from now on called ‘the Institute’). I first briefly describe the area where I conducted fieldwork; then I introduce the approach known as ‘environmental interpretation’ as presented during the course and performed by the interpreters of the Institute. Subsequently, I discuss two ethnographic examples that illuminate the practices implemented by interpreters during guided visits. I conclude returning on the theme of temporality and clarifying my approach to the taskscape as a contribution to understand nature in conservation areas.

## Circeo National Park in Agro Pontino

Agro Pontino, 70 km south of Rome, Italy, was affected between the 1920s and 1930s by one of the most important technological interventions of that time. This intervention, named Bonifica Integrale (complete reclamation), was carried out by the fascist regime, which drained the largest marshland in Italy, i.e. the Pontine Marshes, perceived as a wild and almost uninhabited wasteland (Gruppuso 2018). The Bonifica Integrale also involved the construction of three ‘new towns’, Littoria (now called Latina), Sabaudia and Pontinia<sup>3</sup> (e.g. Mariani 1976; Martone 2012), and the establish-

<sup>3</sup> Established respectively in 1932, 1934 and 1935.

ment of Circeo National Park in 1934 (e.g. Sievert 2000; Armiero and Hardenberg 2013).

Like the rest of Agro Pontino, the area included within Circeo National Park was affected by a severe process of transformation. A network of paved ditches was created to avoid water stagnation and to drain the pools, and a major programme of reforestation was implemented, which changed the original vegetation of the forest, composed of a large variety of oaks. Fast-growing species like pine (*Pinus pinea*) were planted to cover the higher and cleared areas of forest, called *lestre*, which were previously occupied by villages consisting of huts inhabited by local people (Gruppuso 2016). This kind of management, which led to the ecological degradation of the National Park, continued until the 1960s, when an important process of requalification took place. This process consisted of the creation of four strict nature reserves in the forest, which underwent a process of naturalisation that is still going on, and that aims to reconstruct its original structure, as explained by the guide in the example at the outset. Moreover, three coastal wetlands and the small and uninhabited island of Zannone, just off the coast, were included in the National Park. Following this process of requalification, in 1977 the forest was also included within the UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme.

The history and ecology of Circeo National Park, composed of a patchwork of different ecosystems concentrated in less than 9,000 hectares, make it a unique protected area in Italy. These aspects are highlighted in the framework law, known as ‘Law 394’ (*Legge quadro sulle aree protette* – Framework law on protected areas),<sup>4</sup> which in 1991 redesigned the ‘fundamental principles for the institution and management of protected areas, regarding their mission, classification and governance’.<sup>5</sup> This law, still considered as a revolutionary instrument for environmental conservation in Italy (Palmieri 2005; Perna 2002), is particularly important for understanding the role of environmental interpretation in the National Park. As it applies to this area, Law 394 highlights the importance of educational and didactic activities in managing the park, ‘given its historical, cultural and environmental values’.<sup>6</sup> This point was stressed several times during my fieldwork with the Institute, which is one of the historical Italian organisations for environmental education and interpretation, and is based within Circeo National Park. In what follows I describe the origins of environmental interpretation, highlighting the political, ethical and instrumental value that this approach plays in nature conservation and particularly in Circeo National Park.

## Environmental interpretation

Environmental interpretation originated in the USA, the cradle of nature conservation, where it developed according to the needs of the National Park Service, which in the first half of the 20th century was facing an increasing number of visitors interested in exploring national parks (Pierssené 2003: 16; Adams 2004: 80, 81). Within that context,

<sup>4</sup> Law December 6 1991, no. 394 – *Legge quadro sulle aree protette* (<http://www.parks.it/federparchi/leggi/394.html>) accessed 23 February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> From the official website of Federparchi, the Italian Federation of Parks and Nature Reserves (<http://www.parks.it/indice/Efaq aree protette.html>) accessed 23 February 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Law December 6 1991, no. 394 – *Legge quadro sulle aree protette* (art. 35) – translation by the author.

environmental interpretation was key in constructing a particular idea of conservation areas as special places for the discovery and appreciation of nature (e.g. Adams 2004; Cronon 1995). This approach was not only meant to provide guidance for leading visitors in nature in conditions of safety (Mills 1920); it was rather intended to make nature readable, accessible and understandable to a large public, mostly made of city dwellers, who needed help 'to understand and appreciate what they had come to see' (Pierssené 2003: 16). This aspect needs to be framed in relation to the educational role of environmental interpretation, which was supposed to instil in visitors, perceived as potential 'threats to nature purity' (Ogden 2011: 2), the right behaviour to adopt in national parks, understood as places that could be 'damaged by accidental misuse' (Pierssené 2003: 16; see also Adams 2004). In doing so, environmental interpretation contributed to shape a particular idea of nature as 'the province of experts' (Anderson and Berglund 2003: 5), in need of being interpreted by well-trained professionals, and revealed to ordinary people.

In the 1950s this approach was systematised by Freeman Tilden, known as the 'soul of interpretation' (Robinson 1990), who gave the first and most important definition of interpretation as 'an educational activity that aims *to reveal* meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Tilden 1957: 8, my emphasis). In his book, defined by the interpreters I worked with as the 'bible' of interpretation, Tilden gave form and substance to this approach as a profession, defining the principles that are the basis of interpretation as an 'art that combines many arts' (1957: 9).

During the course, the first classes were dedicated to the history and first developments of interpretation in the USA, and Tilden's principles and definition were explained thoroughly. Interestingly, the slide reporting Tilden's definition focused on the verb 'to reveal', highlighted in bold, and presented on a photographic background representing the surface of a pond. The slide highlighted two points: the first and more obvious is the emphasis on the idea of 'revelation'; the second, less explicit, hints at the idea that wetlands are good places for interpretation, as they are usually understood as wastelands, whereas they are instead tremendously important ecosystems that need to be discovered, revealed, appreciated and thence protected.

The idea of revelation and the convincement that interpretation challenges common thought, leading visitors to understand and to appreciate something previously despised, are deeply interrelated aspects that play paramount roles in how interpreters perform nature in guided visits. This idea is emphasised by the Institute's motto, which reads: *Conoscere per apprezzare – Apprezzare per difendere* (Through knowledge, appreciation – Through appreciation, protection). This motto is drawn from a longer declaration, 'Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection', composed by an anonymous US National Park Service ranger in an administrative manual, and widely publicised by Tilden in his book (1957: 54). Sam Ham,<sup>7</sup> described during the course as the current 'guru' of this approach, reads this sentence through a particular lens based on cognitive and behavioural psychology, arguing that through a special process of communication, interpretation creates a kind of understanding that leads visitors to appreciate, and hence to protect, the places they visit (Ham 2009). This aspect is paramount to

<sup>7</sup> Professor of communication psychology and international conservation at the University of Idaho's Department of Conservation Social Sciences.



understand that environmental interpretation is not just rooted in conservation, it is rather key to its practical achievement.

The importance of this approach for conservation in Circeo National Park emerges in the following text, where the Park's president presents the activities organised by the Institute:

Open and enter Circeo's chest to discover the treasures that the National Park safeguards and preserves. This is possible thanks to the Institute which, in partnership with Circeo National Park, offers the opportunity for true and proper discoveries rather than just occasions for visiting. This is not only because of the beauty of the area and the rarity of particular environments which you will be able to see, but because of the modalities of the visit in which visitors play the main role.<sup>8</sup>

This text appeared in the leaflet produced by the Institute to advertise a set of guided visits for the year 2011. These visits, which I attended during fieldwork, were sponsored by the Park Authority, and significantly advertised under the title *Ospiti del Parco* (Guests of the Park). In his text, the president used the terms 'chest' and 'treasures', emphasising the idea of the National Park as an enclosed place that safeguards something precious to discover: nature. The title Guests of the Park resonates with another expression, namely *andare in natura* (going into nature), which was regularly used by the guides during the public excursions as well as during the training of interpreters. Both these expressions suggest that natural protected areas are places designed to afford extraordinary experiences for a particular category of persons, namely visitors (see Adams 2004; Brockington et al. 2008; Jacoby 2001), and convey the idea that one has to cross a space, a material boundary, in order to enter into nature.

By stressing the modalities of the visits, the president was referring to environmental interpretation as an approach that, through particular strategies, is able to communicate the importance of nature conservation. These strategies involve 'modes of action', a certain rhythm, that entail particular bodily movements and activities. This aspect is paramount because, as I argued in the introduction, what we perceive is the result of how we act and move across the landscape (Ingold 2000; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017). In the example I described at the outset, the perception of the forest structure, as much as its history represented by the charcoal pit, and the conservation policy of the National Park, emerged along the movements of the visitors, who were performing the spatial organisation of the forest. In doing so, the activity of interpretation highlighted the different temporalities negotiated (see Massey 2006) within the forest. During the visit in fact different temporalities emerged along the movements of the visitors: the long history of the forest, performed through our walking a historical path related to charcoal production; the temporalities of plant life, performed through the imitation of the forest structure; the temporality of conservation, which is fostering a process of naturalisation; and certainly also the temporality of leisure framed within a particular idea of nature as a commodity to be exploited by a particular kind of consumer, namely visitors and nature lovers (e.g. Milton 2002).

These different temporalities are woven within the temporality of the visit, which is important because this reflects and makes visible the peculiar spatial organisation and architecture of natural protected areas. This is not merely functional; it rather implies

<sup>8</sup> Translation by the author.

a precise awareness, a precise idea about the meaning of a place, of the relationships between people and place, humans and non-humans, and the role that nature should play in society. As I am going to explain, these aspects emerge in guided visits, marked by a particular sequence of movements and activities – a rhythm – that make the structure and anatomy of the National Park evident and tangible.

## Performing the architecture and the ethics of conservation

Circeo National Park, like many protected areas, is delimited by boundaries that are marked and defined by material structures, such as fences and gates, representing particular ideas and values. These boundaries are also constantly reconfigured and recreated through embodied activities (see Szerszynski et al. 2003); they are actually performed through a series of practices which make them evident. Ethics emerge along such activities, thus conveying precise ideas of what kinds of people, behaviour and practices belong within the boundaries of the National Park. In this sense, the edges of conservation areas are not just fixed boundaries resulting from decisions concerning planning, environmental policy and regulation; they are also activities that emerge in time and that perform a powerful moral geography (see Cresswell 2005: 128; cf. Matless 1994).

As an example, I describe the initial steps of an excursion named ‘Nature in all senses’ (*Natura in tutti i sensi*), intended as a multi-sensorial exploration of ‘nature’. It usually occurs in a fragment of forest situated just behind the main Park’s visitor centre. The first time, I attended this excursion as an ‘observer’ in April 2011; the visitors were a local group of cub scouts, composed of about 20 children and led by three scoutmasters around 18 years old, who arrived at the National Park by bus. Once the bus stopped in the car park, the excited children noisily got off; the interpreter was waiting for them and with the help of the scoutmasters she gathered them together and they started walking, quite chaotically, towards the entrance of the forest, a few hundred metres from the car park.

On a nice lawn, in front of the forest’s fences, the guide, raising her voice, and with the help of the scoutmasters, settled the children in a circle and introduced the activities that they were going to experience. After this short introduction, the guide asked the children to close their eyes and passed a pine cone around the circle, asking them to describe the sensations they felt while handling and smelling it. When the children finished their task of describing the pine cone, they were calm and ready to start the walk. At that point, the scoutmasters asked them to line up in pairs, be silent and follow the interpreter to the entrance of the forest, signalled by a board with the map of the National Park and indicating rules and prohibitions for visitors.

Once there, the children settled themselves in a semicircle in front of the map, and the interpreter started giving information about designations, boundaries and the history of the Park. On that occasion, the guide also posed a very interesting question: ‘What is a national park?’ The children replied, almost unanimously: ‘it belongs to the nation’, and the interpreter added: ‘it is a protected and guarded place which belongs to the nation, then, to all of us’. Immediately, the interpreter stressed that it is forbidden to pick and remove anything from the Park, because such an action is considered as real



theft. Then she told the children that they were now 'going into the midst of nature', so asked them to be silent and to walk two abreast, keeping to the trail so as not to tread on flowers, plants and animal tracks. They started walking, following the interpreter, through the gate and into the forest.

There are a few aspects in this example worth highlighting. The first concerns the activity performed with the pine cone, which had the important result of gathering them in circle, calming the children and catching their attention. By handling, smelling and even licking the pine cone, children were supposed to experiment with 'nature', as a non-human thing to contemplate and relate with. In this context, the pine cone symbolised 'nature', and the interpreter, leading this activity, introduced children to a multisensorial approach towards it. By presenting the pine cone, the interpreter was also able to draw children's attention to an important aspect of conservation policy, namely the idea that in a particular environment there are native species and species introduced by humans. Within or near the car park, considered as the threshold of the National Park, there are usually plant species, mainly pine (*Pinus pinea*), that were introduced during the fascist reclamation (Gruppuso 2016). Hence, in the vegetative context of the National Park forest, characterised by a huge variety of native oaks, the pine represents an introduced tree that is considered extraneous to that particular environment. By marking the activities according to a certain rhythm, the interpreter spatialised the distinction between native and introduced species, inside and outside the forest. She made evident the current conservation policy of the Park Authority, which in the core areas of the Park – that is, within the forest – is trying to replace pine trees with native species. In doing so, the interpreter conveyed an important idea about the spatial understanding of the Park, namely that there is a boundary, and that this boundary blurs little by little as you 'go into nature', towards a core that is perceived as genuinely natural.

The second aspect that I want to highlight concerns what the guide *did* at the entrance of the forest. Here, in front of the map and referring to it, the interpreter presented basic information concerning the National Park's legal, historical and ecological features. In presenting this information, she started from the general characters of the region and then moved to the specific features of the National Park and the particular part of it to be visited. This activity is what interpreters call *fare la cartina* (doing the map): they give information while gesturing on the map, pointing out particular areas, trails and paths. In doing this, interpreters perform the wider territory and make it visible, understandable and familiar to visitors who could not experience it otherwise during the short time of a guided visit (see Bailey et al. 2007: 49). By *doing the map*, the interpreters also perform a particular understanding of the National Park territory that reflects its material architecture. They start visits from the areas' boundaries, and then they move in; likewise they begin their explanation from global and national designations, then they close up to particular areas. As with the activity involving the pine cone, the interpreter in front of the map performed and made visible the boundary of the National Park.

There is another aspect concerning this particular example. While *doing the map*, the interpreter emphasised that it is forbidden to pick anything from the Park. On that particular occasion, she was indirectly referring to a man, completely unaware, who was collecting asparagus along the fences that divide the forest from the area used as a car park. In doing this, she conveyed an important aspect of conservation ethics, namely the idea that nature in protected areas has to be appreciated for its own sake and that the use of it as a resource is problematic if not deplorable (see Jacoby 2001; Adams 2004;

Brockington et al. 2008). This particular ethics was also highlighted in another rather different but interesting episode. Checking my Facebook page at the beginning of 2013, I noticed a picture that some of the interpreters of the Institute shared on their Facebook wall. This picture, originally posted on the official Facebook page of Yosemite National Park,<sup>9</sup> portrays a letter handwritten by a 'Yosemite Junior Ranger' and addressed to the Park Rangers. The letter, with two sticks attached with adhesive tape, reads:

Dear Park Rangers

I am a Yosemite Junior Ranger. I went to Yosemite recently and accidentally brought home two sticks.

I know I'm not supposed to take things from the park, so I am sending them back. Please put them in nature.

Thank you,

Evie

The comment below the image reads: 'The rangers that answer the phone and mail in our public information office receive a lot of letters, but this might be one of the best in recent years'. The image and its comment underline precisely the ethics of nature which the interpreter was communicating to the cub scouts, and reveals the cultural legacy of the Institute, which is deeply rooted in American conservation.

The small sticks that Evie taped to her letter are considered natural and worthy of protection because they were found inside a protected area. This example is interesting because it demonstrates a particular environmental ethics that emphasises a spatial distinction between inside and outside the boundaries of conservation areas. In the ethnographic vignettes that I described, this ethics emerges in the activities performed at the edges of the National Park. Environmental interpreters perform nature and its boundaries, giving particular information to visitors and proposing specific activities that, following a certain rhythm, shape conservation areas as 'natural places' worthy of protection. The same approach also emerges in the following section, where I discuss how interpreters perform the nature of wetland environments (cf. Keul 2013; Wiley 2002) within the boundaries of the Park's forest.

## **Performing the swamp: dwelling global awareness of conservation**

There is an area in the National Park forest that is characterised by the presence of vernal pools. It is a fascinating environment that is understood as one of the remaining fragments of the Pontine Marshes. The Institute offers a specific excursion to the pools, bringing visitors to the area especially in spring, when it is waterlogged. Rather than describing in depth a specific example, here I sketch out the typical rhythm of the visit I experienced during fieldwork.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/shares/view?id=485523781495909> (accessed 23 February 2019).

The visit usually starts outside the forest, near the car park, where interpreters ‘do the map’, giving general information about the Park, and introducing the theme and the specific location of the excursion. From there, visitors walk through the gate and enter the forest, walking along a path and stopping at certain points where interpreters perform different activities. Once at the pool, the path narrows, so visitors usually walk single file. Apart from giving some ecological and historical information concerning the area, the main goal of the visit is to convey the importance of wetland environments as the core of ecological processes. This idea relates to the global understanding of wetlands in environmentalist discourse, interpreted as one of the most important ecosystems on Earth. Despite their ecological value, in fact, vernal pools, and wetlands in general, are in Agro Pontino usually understood as disordered, unhealthy and dirty environments (Gruppuso 2018).

In order to challenge this idea, one of the main pieces of information that guides give to visitors is that the pools’ disorder and their apparent dirtiness is actually a sign of their vitality, of their richness in terms of biodiversity. This information is conveyed through a particular activity, namely pond dipping, performed by interpreters to demonstrate this richness. In order to perform the activity, interpreters usually stop where the path along the pool becomes wide enough to allow the visitors to gather in a tight semicircle. Here, in front of the public, the interpreters assemble a very simple tool – an insect net made with very thin pantyhose. At the end of the net, which is cut off, a transparent jar is tied with elastic to the hose. Once the tool is assembled, the interpreters start fishing in the pool and then show visitors what they caught. The catch consists of water that is usually teeming with larvae, insects and small crustaceans like triops.<sup>10</sup> The scope of this activity is to demonstrate that water in the pools, usually understood as dirty waste, is not polluted and is instead rich in life, particularly living organisms that constitute the base of the food chain.

This particular activity is interesting because it exemplifies the role of environmental interpretation in relation to nature conservation. By pond dipping, interpreters read the ‘message from the mud’ (Helmreich 2009: 31, 32) and disclose it to the public. They transform the muddy water of vernal pools into a distillate of nature that visitors access through the transparent glass of the jar, and through the skilful interpretation of the guides, who reveal the importance of wetland conservation, making visible and understandable an ecosystem otherwise despised. In doing so, interpreters perform the nature of wetlands and the importance of their conservation on a global scale; they frame the experience of local environments within the global language of nature conservation. This aspect is relevant because it demonstrates that the ‘mode of dwelling’ embedded in the taskscape of conservation performed by interpreters and visitors is framed within a global environmental awareness, and challenges the critiques of localness raised against the concepts of taskscape and dwelling (see Cloke and Jones 2001; Massey 2006; cf. Watson 2003).

## **Conclusion: performing temporality, revitalising the taskscape**

Philosopher Edward Casey argues that ‘Places not only *are*, they happen’ (1996: 27, emphasis in the original). This sentence conveys the meaning of places not as fixed localities but as occurrences. Within the context of nature conservation this is a powerful

<sup>10</sup> Triops often inhabit temporary pools and are considered indicators of clean water.

idea because it helps to understand that national parks, like Circeo, emerge along the unfolding movements of several beings, humans and nonhumans, who perform particular activities and tasks, according to specific rhythms. In the paper, I focused particularly on the activities that environmental interpreters and visitors perform when entering and walking in Circeo National Park. I stressed how nature, conservation policy and environmental ethics are not only cultural constructs, but are given substance through performances. Here, my focus on performance broadens the concept of taskscape by emphasising how nature, nature knowledge and the National Park come into being and are encountered through particular experiences and practices marked by a certain rhythm.

This is to say that ‘nature is something we do’ (Abram and Lien 2011: 8); it is a taskscape that entails particular modes of action, perception and dwelling, and that emerges along with a very specific temporality. Guided visits start in the car park, which is often used by visitors and guides to get ready for the excursion, according to the season, the weather and the terrain; when they are ready, they gather in one place where the interpreters ‘do the map’; then, they pass through a gate to enter a specific area, walking along a path together, and ‘with the rhythm of the slowest’.<sup>11</sup> Once in the area, they stop at predetermined points to perform certain activities, and eventually they leave the protected area. This is the temporality of guided visits, their rhythm, which is marked by several steps that correspond with the Park’s opening time and with seasons, as much as with the ecological features of the visited area.

By working on seasonal taskscapes associated with the Kemi River in Finland, Franz Krause (2013) has demonstrated that the rhythms of social life are ways of performing, and resonating with, the non-human components of the environment such as seasons and the fluctuations of water levels. In doing so, Krause reflects on the implicit performativity of temporality: seasons and the environment emerge along the particular tasks and activities that people perform in the process of dwelling a particular landscape. Likewise, I argue that the spatial organisation of Circeo National Park, and of protected areas in general, is performed through particular activities that I called the taskscape of conservation. The spatial organisation of the National Park emerges in time as people move across places according to a specific rhythm marked by particular activities. This rhythm, the temporality of guided visits, shapes the boundaries of the National Park, thus making visible a particular ethics according to which conservation areas are considered special places that enclose and safeguard nature.

This aspect is paramount to my discourse on perception and cognition because ‘the temporality of movement and the sequences in which persons encounter places is fundamental to how people experience landscapes and thus feel about them’ (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017: 3). As I demonstrated, the architecture of conservation areas emerges along a peculiar temporary ‘mode of dwelling’, according to which humans are allowed to get in only as visitors and should avoid leaving any trace of their passage. This experience of nature and landscape, this particular ‘mode of dwelling’, reflects and conveys the global ethics of conservation, which can be summarised with the idea that ‘Nature should be conserved in a pristine state, unaffected, as far as possible, by human activity’ (Milton 1999: 438). This approach emerges in the examples that I described, when the interpreter told the children that they were ‘going into the midst of nature’

<sup>11</sup> 18 January 2012 (Course for Circeo National Park Interpreters). Translation by the author.

and asked them to keep to the trail to avoid treading on plants and animal tracks; or when the interpreter showed the piece of charcoal and asked that it was put it back when everybody had seen it.

This particular attitude must not be confused as a form of detachment from nature; it is rather a manifestation of engagement grounded in a peculiar environmental ethics. The practices and tasks performed by environmental interpreters during guided visits, such as walking and sensing, are particular forms of enviroing that actually shape that particular environment (see Sörlin and Wormbs 2018; cf. Watson 2003). They make nature by implementing the particular *techne* of interpretation through discourses and activities (Sörlin and Wormbs 2018). This is to say that environmental interpretation is a 'mode of dwelling', and that interpreters adopt particular strategies to build the environment in which they are engaged. Although concerning a rather different case,<sup>12</sup> John Gray clarifies this point in the following excerpt:

Acts of dwelling have implications for the organization of space and definition of place in at least four ways. First, in doing things with objects people abolish the distance between themselves and the things they use, thereby bringing them into a spatial relationship. 'Dwelling involves a lack of distance between people and things, ... an engagement which is neither conceptualized nor articulated, and which arises through *using* the world rather than through scrutiny' (Thomas 1993: 28, emphasis added). Second, dwelling in everyday life has a referential function. The use of any one thing implicates the use of other things so that together these uses constitute a coherent totality, a world in which each thing has a proper – and thus meaningful and nameable – place in spatial and practical terms. Third, dwelling is therefore a way of seeing. Fourth, by using objects, people gather them together spatially to form a place whose meaning derives from both actions and objects. (1999: 449)

As I have described in the paper, environmental interpreters do things with objects, trying to bring visitors 'closer' to what they conceive as nature, and trying to arouse a deep and sensitive understanding of it. Environmental interpretation certainly has a referential function: interpreters present the National Park and nature as a coherent totality emphasising connections between things and phenomena, and this is the result of a particular way of seeing. Moreover, interpreters also give meaning to places, by performing actions with particular objects through which they do and know 'nature' (cf. Abram and Lien 2011). Another, rather paramount, 'act of dwelling', that Gray does not mention concerns movement: dwelling is first and foremost moving according to a specific rhythm and, as I demonstrated, this rhythm shapes the environment we inhabit, as much as the perception of it. All these aspects are paramount to understand what I call the taskscape of conservation.


Finally, I want to briefly return to my use of the taskscape in order to pinpoint the contribution of this approach to understanding nature conservation and conservation practices. I have framed the taskscape within a performative perspective and this proved to be particularly productive for the following reasons. First, by challenging the distinction between form and process, between the 'concrete' shape of the land and the 'intangible' tasks that shape it, my approach makes evident that conservation

<sup>12</sup> Gray explores sheep farming in the British region of the Scottish Borders.

areas, as much as any other environment, are contextual and relational constellations of activities rather than final outcomes of them. Second, a focus on performances, as contingent actions through which agency and creativity emerge, brings out the dimension of ethics: environmental interpreters are committed to nature conservation and performing their tasks during guided visits is a way of taking care of protected areas and conveying conservation goals. This is important because it emphasises that environmental ethics is not a detached judgement applied to nature, rather it emerges in experiential and embodied practices. Third, a performative take on the taskscape emphasises the multifaceted nature of temporality, which is always multiple because it emerges along with the movements, tasks and activities that human and non-human actors perform through their different modes of dwelling (cf. Massey 2006). This is particularly important in conservation areas, where interpreters and visitors have to correspond (Ingold 2017b, 2018) with non-human temporalities such as seasons, the weather and the lives of other beings (Whitehouse 2017). For environmental interpreters, this temporality, understood as a process of negotiation and correspondence, involves response-ability, that is the ability to respond adequately to the world and its other-than-human inhabitants (Ingold 2018: 27). Beyond the narrow boundaries of conservation areas, this temporality becomes a task to nurture, a collective and social task, which is the weaving of life and its basic constituent.

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## La nature en tant que constellation d'activités : le mouvement, le rythme et la perception dans un parc national italien

Faisant appel au concept de *taskscape* (« paysage de tâches »), l'auteur de cet article étudie les activités de médiation environnementale dans un parc national italien. *Taskscape* désigne l'ensemble des mouvements, des tâches et des activités que les humains et les non humains effectuent de manière rythmée au cours de leur existence. L'article présente ainsi la médiation environnementale comme un mode d'action et de perception spécifique, qui façonne les espaces protégés comme étant des domaines naturels. En élargissant le concept de *taskscape*, et en adoptant une approche

performative, l'article éclaire aussi des questions éthiques et cognitives. L'éthique émerge des activités réalisées par les médiateurs dans le paysage ; elle est performative et, de ce fait, constitutive d'un « paysage de tâches » de conservation, compris comme un processus au cours duquel des manières particulières de se déplacer, donc d'appréhender, suscitent des manières particulières de connaître, donc de comprendre, et inversement. Dans la conclusion il est suggéré que dans les espaces protégés la nature se révèle en tant que constellation d'activités provenant d'une certaine manière d'habiter et de performer un environnement donné, selon un rythme spécifique au sein d'un cadre éthique particulier.

**Mots-clés** anthropologie environnementale, médiation environnementale, espaces protégés, performativité, marais pontins