

**Salviamo L'Orso**  
**Associazione Per la Conservazione dell'Orso Bruno Marsicano – ONLUS**  
**Save the Bear**  
**Association for the Conservation of the Marsican Brown Bear – Non-Profit**

## **Sirente-Velino Regional Park**

### **A brief history**

*Translated by Sarah Bercusson*

The **Sirente-Velino Regional Park** was finally inaugurated in 1989 by the region of Abruzzo with **LL.RR. 54, 13.07.89/43** and welcomed its first board of directors in 1992. It came into being after a long and tortuous journey which began in 1967 thanks to the endeavours of a small number of environmental groups in collaboration with the then Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The park headquarters is located at Rocca di Mezzo in the building formerly known as Villa Cidonio. The protected area extends over 54.361,22 hectares within the province of L'Aquila and contains the municipalities of Acciano, Aielli, Castel di Ieri, Castelvechio Subequo, Celano, Cerchio, Collarmele, Fagnano Alto, Fontecchio, Gagliano Aterno, Goriano Sicoli, Magliano de'Marsi, Massa d'Albe, Molina Aterno, Ocre, Ovindoli, Pescina, Rocca di Cambio, Rocca di Mezzo, Secinaro and Tione degli Abruzzi. Within the park there are certain habitats classified as **Special Protection Zones (ZPS)** and **Sites of Community Importance (SIC)** as defined in the **European Directives 2009/147/CE** and **92/43/CEE** thanks to the presence of certain **habitats and species listed in the directives and highlighted as "priorities"**. The park is also designated as an **Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA 114)**, as it hosts a significant number of rare or threatened species and acts as a benchmark for the designation of Special Protection Zones. **The presence of rare species and species at risk of extinction** in this area, together with **glacial relicts, endemic species** and species listed not only in the European Directives cited above but also in the **Washington and Bern Conventions**, all highlight the park's importance. The areas concerned include some of the most important examples of floral variety in central Italy, in particular in relation to species that thrive at high altitude and in marshland environments. In fact, the park contains both unique and extremely rare species of flora, classified as priorities at EU level and included in both the national and the regional Red Lists.

Substantial funds have been allocated, by the EU amongst others, for the conservation and/or re-introduction of those species classified as 'priorities' and at risk of extinction. The **Marsican bear** is one such example. The Region of Abruzzo has been a signatory of **PATOM** – the Plan of Action for the Preservation of the Marsican Bear – since 2009 and was also a partner between 2010 and 2014 of LIFE ARCTOS. The park also received EU **LIFE** funds for the Ponte LIFE I and II "Save the Bear" projects between 2003 and 2007. Other examples of endangered species include the **Apennine wolf**, the **Abruzzo chamois** (recently reintroduced thanks to the LIFE

COORNATA project which is still ongoing), the **golden eagle** and the **griffon vulture** (LIFE “Rocky Gorges”). Their conservation is seriously imperilled by infrastructures that divide and fragment their habitats and by contact with human activities. The fate of three Marsican bears stands as testimony to these threats: one died from poisoning in 1996, another in 2012 from a disease linked to encounters with domestic livestock, and a third bear was killed when struck by a car on the A24 motorway near the Tornimparte toll booth in 2013. Another bear was run over, again on the A24, in 1991, near the Cocullo tunnel, which demonstrates the importance of the regional park as a zone linking the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise, the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, and the Regional Natural Reserve Montagne della Duchessa.

Notwithstanding the huge value of this area, both in terms of the environment and the landscape, for the last 27 years the regional administration has failed to equip the park with a Plan, an essential tool for defining zoning and regulating the activities allowed within the different areas of the park. Three laws had previously set out procedures but they were never implemented: the first (in 1989, Regional Law 13.7.1989 n.54) planned for the establishment of zoning within six months, the second within 18 months (in 2000, Regional Law 7.3.2000 n.23) and the third also within 18 months (in 2011, Regional Law n.42). Their failure to act, together with the Regional Council’s ability to exercise substitute powers, has led to two re-measurements (reductions) taking place:

1. 1998 – **Regional law n.426**, whereby the park territory was reduced by over **9.000 hectares**, removing the Prezza Mountains, the forest of Goriano Sicoli and the Forca Caruso Pass, fundamental connection points with the Giovenco Valley in the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise and the Gorges of Sagittarius.
2. 2011 – **Regional law n.42**, the regional Park lost an area of **90 hectares** of great importance both ecologically and in terms of conservation work in the Municipality of Aielli, specifically the area of Difesa and the Cerro meadows. This has caused an absolute ‘slaughter’ by hunters of birds of various species, including the rare rock partridge. This in turn has led, thanks in part to the reactions of citizens and local hunters, to the same ATC of Avezzano placing a precautionary ban on hunting until the end of the season.

As well as two re-measurements being proposed:

1. 2013 – the **Ricciuti law** proposed that **4.000 hectares** of terrain by the Municipalities of Rocca di Mezzo and Rocca di Cambio (as the attached map shows) should be excised from the park’s territory. It was suggested that a “**Hunting Area**” should be created in its stead and that the management and conservation of the natural habitat should be in the hands of local hunting associations. This proposal was withdrawn following protests by environmental groups and an online petition on Avaaz that garnered 320.000 signatures.
2. 2016 – **the environmental assessor Donato di Matteo** proposed cutting an area of unspecified size from the park in the Subequana Valley. The official aim was to reduce the damage to local farming from wild boars as well as to avoid constraints which would

otherwise be placed on certain historic town centres currently located within the protected zone. Di Matteo argued that approval of his **proposal of law 39/2014** and the subsequent re-zoning would clear the way for the approval of the Plan for the Park and would protect it from future modifications with the approval of 4/5 of the local council. Furthermore, the influence of the Region in the management of the park would also increase, with a board of three members appointed by the region, amongst whom the President whose vote would be worth twice as much as the others, and three advisers representing the three areas of the park (Marsica, the Subequana Valley, the Rocche Plateau).

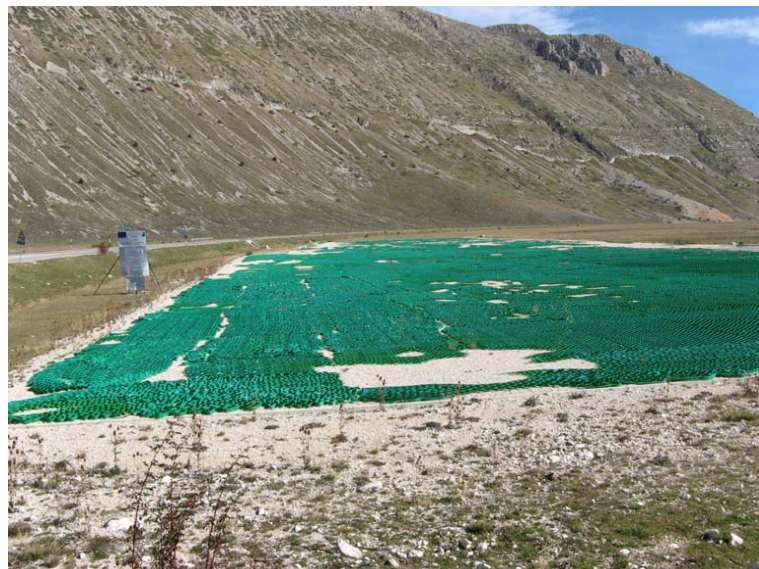
### Infrastructure plans:

1. The **Memorandum of agreement “To restore, develop and enhance the area around L’Aquila affected by the earthquake of 6 April 2009, to benefit both the environment and tourism”** was undersigned on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 by the Region of Abruzzo, the Province of L’Aquila, the Municipalities of L’Aquila, Lucoli, Ovindoli, Rocca di Cambio, Rocca di Mezzo, as well as by the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga Park Authority and the Sirente-Velino Regional Park Authority. Under this agreement a series of infrastructure projects are planned, aimed at expanding and improving the supply of **facilities for Alpine and Nordic skiing**, as well as the cross-functional integration of the current sites of Montecristo and Campo Imperatore on the Gran Sasso and **Monte Magnola and Campo Felice in the Velino-Sirente area**. It is also expected that further areas, subject to recommendation, will be developed as skiing centres. Following a joint note from the environmental associations, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2011, the **Ministry for the Environment and the Protection of Land and Sea sent a note to the Region of Abruzzo**, reminding it of the importance to the community of the areas affected by the memorandum of agreement. Effectively the Ministry warned the Region against disregarding the commitments it had made to Europe as a beneficiary of LIFE funds for the conservation of habitats and species that would be threatened by the proposed infrastructure projects. The so-called “Letta” protocol, proposed by Gianni Letta, led to the construction of the **Forcamiccia or Serralunga tunnel in 2011-2012**, 2,5 km long, so that highway 696 could connect the Campo Felice Plain to the Rocche Plateau in the Sirente-Velino Park. These works, which cost 25 million euros, and were interrupted because of suspected mafia infiltration in the company that was awarded the contract, have already led to the felling of hundreds of beech trees, have **damaged a large part of the marshlands and peat bogs** present in areas of high ecological value close to the ski facilities, as well as **critically endangered the only location of a new species of plant** recently described as *Sedum aquilanum* (previously classified as *Sedum nevadense*). In the **Campo Felice area**, several million euros from European and regional funds were funnelled into construction linked to alpine and Nordic skiing facilities. The results, of which photos and brief descriptions follow, have been left abandoned and unused. Simultaneously, the process has started for allocating **new zones for construction such as Piano della Madonna** at Rocca di Mezzo. This is a marshy area which periodically floods and it contains a number of rare

species of flora, amongst which stands out *Klasea lycopifolia* a priority species included in appendix II of the “Habitat” Directive CEE 92/43 as well as in the Red List of the IUCN (DD – Data Deficient). It can be found in Italy only on the Rocche Plateau and the Campo Felice Plain. Unbelievably, after receiving a negative expert opinion of the project from the Sirente-Velino Regional Park, the Region’s EIA Commission issued a positive assessment.



**Bridge for cross-country skiing, Rifugio Alantino area, storage for snow-plows and drainage and disposal of plastic carpeting for car parks (Municipality of Lucoli): regional funds: 304,000 euros. This work has never been tested.**





Construction of the **parking lots at Campo Felice and in the area of the Alantino Refuge** (Municipalities of Rocca di Cambio and Lucoli): **6.000.000 euros** in European funding (from the European Regional Development Fund). The parking lots were only partially completed and “deviated” from the original plan. They have never fulfilled their intended function.





**Skydome** (Municipality of Lucoli): European funding and a “loan of honour” of around **800.000 euros**. The work deviates from the original plan. It has never been tested.

2. In 1998 the **Collarmele wind farm** was created, at a key ecological nexus between the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise and the Sagittarius Gorges Regional Nature Reserve. In 2006-2009 renovation works took place, with the installation of 18 wind turbines whose size substantially increased the physical threat to large birds of prey (golden eagles and griffon vultures). These renovations also further impacted the habitat of land animals such as the Marsican bear. The necroscopies undertaken on the remains of several **griffons** found on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2014 in the area of the wind farm confirm the wind turbines as the cause of death. In spite of this, the Regional Park has “embraced” the wind farm to such an extent that it now includes it in its environmental education programs for schools. It would be useful to know the attendance data for these school trips in order to evaluate their appeal compared to prestigious archaeological (Alba Fucens) and natural sites in the area. Such information would be helpful in considering their value, from the perspective of tourism, culture and the economy. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2006 the Region with provision n.5715 gave qualified support to the request of VCC Energy s.r.l. **to a project to expand the Collarmele wind farm** at the foot of Mount Rimagi and Petto della Corte, in the Municipality of Collarmele. It issued the authorization, according to article 159, d.lgs. n.42/2004, for the installation of only 4 of the 22 wind turbines planned. The company’s appeal was denied by the ruling of the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2013, issued by the fifth section of the State Council, which recognized the legitimacy of the measure taken by the Region as the activation of all the planned wind turbines would have compromised the **Marsican bear’s** habitat.

3. **The proposal to build a nine-hole golf course**, driving range and club house at Campo di Rovere (Rocca di Mezzo) on the other hand dates back to 2005. This is an area of extraordinary biodiversity set on a **carsican plain full of sinkholes and subject to periodic flooding** where exceedingly rare botanical species such as *Gentiana pneumonanthe*, subspecies *pneumonante*, *Pinguicula vulgaris*, subspecies *vestina* and the already cited *Klasea lycopifolia* can be found. The execution of this project would have clear repercussions on the hydrogeological make-up of the area. There is a confirmed connection between Campo di Rovere and the Pozzo Caldaio sinkhole via the shallow waters of the Rio Gamberale river (and perhaps also through underground waterways) that disappear precisely there. There is also a serious risk of pollution for the Stiffe Caves. The project was rejected twice by Abruzzo's Regional EIA Office but the Regional Administrative Court annulled this rejection. The work has not yet been completed.
4. The **modification to the Town Plan for the Municipality of Rocca di Cambio** of 2011 is still pending. Its aim is to "*unblock the subdivision plans for the town, so that structures and infrastructures may be created for the accommodation of tourists and in so doing unemployment issues may also be addressed*". The subdivisions would entail overbuilding in the rural areas surrounding the town with the creation of parking lots and hotels, in particular along the Rocca di Cambio – Brecciarra axis, i.e. the entry point for the ski resorts.
5. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2015 the Wind Turbines engineering company s.r.l. set out before the Environmental Impact Assessment Office for the Abruzzo Region a proposal for the construction of an industrial wind farm in the area of Colle Carrito, Monte Pasarano and Colli Aschi in the Municipality of Ortona dei Marsi. The land impacted by the project forms an important link between the Sirente-Velino Regional Park and the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise, and its environment and that of its park neighbours is fundamentally homogeneous. The company received an unfavourable response from Abruzzo's Regional EIA Office, in part thanks to the detailed response from a consortium of associations, including Salviamo l'Orso. However, they then appealed to the Regional Administrative Court of Abruzzo. This body, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, confirmed the refusal to implement the project as the presence of wind turbines would constitute a threat to the conservation of the **griffon vulture**, as highlighted by a study carried out by the State Forestry Corps.
6. In January 2016 the Toto Group first aired the **plan to reduce the Parks Motorway**, of which it is the Concessionaire, **by 30 km**, with an expected investment of 5,7 billion euros. The Sirente-Velino Park would be traversed by a branch of the current A25 in the stretch that goes from Cerchio to Bussi Popoli. The infrastructure in question would require three double-barrel tunnels, inflicting clear and certain damage on the aquifers of the Aterno-Pescara basin, and leading to a reduction of a mere 6 km compared to the current route. The Minister of Infrastructure and Transport has pointed out that this proposal is not part of the planning activities assigned to the Parks Way according to the current agreement.

7. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, the regional council announced that it had approved plans for **the construction of facilities for seven new ski slopes in the area of Ovindoli-Campo Felice** (Costa della tavola 1 and 2, the Lenzuola Valley, the Genziana Trail 1, 2 and 3, and the Genziana-Canalone sky-weg). These would bring the total skiable area to ten kilometres, plus a few kilometres of infrastructure made up of chair- and ski-lifts. Funding for the whole project, with a total value of around 12 million euros, was divided into three blocks. The regional council then approved the financing of the first amount of 5 million euros. Thus, the Region of Abruzzo seems determined to carry out, and in fact even to exacerbate the **Special Territorial Project for district 5 Ovindoli-Monte Magnola**, a project already passed by resolution n.121/3, 7.11.2008 of the Regional Council, and published in the Official Bulletin of Abruzzo, n.13, 27.02.2009.
8. Another project that returned to the fore in April 2016 was the **“Piani di Pezza year-round resort”**. This consists of 10 hotels, 168 apartments, 150 kilometres of ski runs, and 70 cafes and restaurants. Originally dated 2014 and submitted by *White Oak Invest*, the project would involve Piani di Pezza, one of the most renowned areas for nature and landscape, not only in the Sirente-Velino Park, but in the whole of Italy, and situated just a few kilometres from the centre of Rocca di Mezzo. The project was available to view on behance.net until December 2015. There had already been talk in the autumn of 2012 of possible Russian buyers linked to Gazprom who planned to acquire both ski resorts (Ovindoli and Campo Felice) and build a connection between them.
9. In April 2016, the proposal for a **“Cross-Country Stadium”, i.e. the building of infrastructure required to host world events in cross-country skiing**, was also taken up again. According to the mayor of Rocca di Mezzo, Mauro di Cicco, who submitted the bid for funding from the Region, the structures built would be “non-invasive”, removable, and environmentally compatible. The project would rely on the reorganization of the resources of the 2012 CIPE resolution 135 and an allocation of new funds under the 2015 decree 78: the so-called Local Authorities decree. Such an action would round off the development of the area, which the Region planned for with a resolution that provides for the use of the Par Fas 2007-2013 budget for the “funding of the expansion project of the 1<sup>st</sup> lot of the Ovindoli-Campo Felice connection, for an amount equal to 5.012.274 euros”. The other two funding blocks are for 4,2 and 3.5 million euros respectively. The cross-country stadium project has also been divided into three different sections for a total of 1 million and 74 thousand euros. The project would provide for the construction of a service building for the Nordic skiing dock, equipped with a first aid area, space for the jury, for the press, alongside areas for waxing skis, an office for the race officials, bathrooms and changing rooms, as well as for the set-up of safety nets for the ski runs and the acquisition of equipment for preparing the ski runs and all the necessary signage for the routes. It would also entail the construction of a parking lot adjacent to the existing one, in order to double the number of available parking spaces, with consequent asphaltting of the area and the setting out of all necessary signage. Also included in the plan is the building of an artificial snow production plant, situated on a trail loop of 2,5 kilometres, as well as a reservoir to serve it and a water supply line to keep it filled. An



earlier structure, that was built a few years ago to serve as both refuge and restaurant, has already been abandoned, to the extent that the roof itself has been left damaged and in a state of disrepair.

10. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2018, with resolution n.83, just a few days prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> of March balloting, the regional council gave its assent to what its spokespersons, Lolli, Petrucci and Pezzopane, declared to be “an excellent project”. Its aim was to finance, with a sum of 6 million euros, preparatory works for the creation of a link between the ski resorts of Ovindoli and Campo Felice through the Piani di Pezza. This would be on top of the ten million already allocated for further facilities in Ovindoli as part of the regional Masterplan.

This list demonstrates how the very same political class that laments the problem of governing a territory subject to constraints that block its “development”, has nonetheless managed to build facilities within the territory of the Regional Park that are not remotely in line with such a protected area, where the conservation of nature should be a priority. Indeed, it plans to build more, trying in every way to circumvent EU rules, pursuing short-sighted and retrograde policies that disfigure the land in favour of the narrow interests of certain local and external groups, and ignoring the wealth of history, culture and landscape in the territory as well as current trends in tourism. For example, the expansion project for the ski facilities in Ovindoli is only the first step in connecting Monte Magnola with Campo Felice, as has been repeatedly attempted in the past and is now being attempted again. The infrastructure would be of great significance because it would not simply connect, as elsewhere, facilities that are located on two sides of the same mountain but, as there is a large plateau between them, it would involve a huge detour, involving an amphitheatre of mountains which constitute the most beautiful and important part of the whole Park. It would be a vast and extremely expensive undertaking (and one paid for by the local community) when far more essential works and services are sorely needed in all the municipalities such as purifiers, the reclamation of former landfills, the maintenance of existing roads, which are in a terrible state, urban amenities and improvements and repairs to historic town centres, up til now lacking not to say non-existent, as well as community sports centres and tourism structures within the municipalities etc. As a project it would devastate an area that was itself a catalyst for the creation of environmental protections for the land.

On 1 April 2016, the **XIII Nature Report on Tourism**, authored by the project’s scientific coordinator, Professor T. Paolini from the University of L’Aquila together with Dr L. Leoni from the National Institute of Statistics, was formally presented at Salinello Village (TE) on the occasion of the 26<sup>th</sup> edition of Ecotur, the International Grant for Ecotourism. Contrary to the choice of direction taken by regional politicians, as shown above, this report confirmed that in 2015 ecotourism actually grew, despite the challenging economic situation. The National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise was ranked first amongst Italy’s top ten favourite Parks. It also revealed that tourists are now increasingly turning to nature to take part in outdoor activities, to relax, and to enjoy food and wine. The most sought-after activities in the Parks are first, biking, followed by trekking and hiking, horse riding and wildlife watching tours. The data also reveals that over

the course of 2015 the internationalization index increased, demonstrating that a growing number of foreign tourists also appreciate Italy's natural heritage.

It is essential to consider the current situation in light not only of the aforementioned statistical and economic information but also seasonal trends over the last few years. Low levels of snow, most of it falling between February and March, together with ongoing climate change has led authorities in the alpine areas, both Italian and foreign (for example in Switzerland) to deny permits for new ski facilities below 1700/1800 metres of altitude, and yet here in Abruzzo they would be situated little above 1500 metres and much further to the south. All of these points lead us to the question: **does it still make sense to wrestle with the conflict between preserving the park's natural heritage and "tourism development" in order to undertake infrastructure programs which have immense costs and questionable, if not non-existent, benefits, all for the sake of barely more than two months of snow a year?** While we are not categorically opposed to the modernization of existing ski facilities, we believe that it would be wiser to invest in less expensive, more profitable activities that respect EU directives and environmental protection activities. We would like to see projects which are not set up to fail before they even start, and that do not jeopardize the outcomes of conservation programs, both those that have already concluded and those which are ongoing. Current political aims seem intent on promoting programs awarded public, including EU, funds in total disregard of existing regulations, in line with choices, luckily for us still incomplete, that rightly belong in the past.

28<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Report by:

Mario Cipollone

Daniel Valfrè

Siro Baliva

Stefano Orlandini

Photography by Daniele Valfrè