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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

STRICT NATURE RESERVE OF SASSO FRANTINO

(Italy)

ON-THE-SPOT-APPRAISAL

by
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(Switzerland)

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1. INTRODUCTION AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee of Experts for Protected Areas, as its last meeting in May 1983, examined the application for award of the European Diploma to the Strict Nature Reserve of Sasso Fratino (Italy), recognised its European interest and decided to have an on-the-spot appraisal carried out in accordance with the Diploma regulations (Resolution (73) 4 of the Committee of Ministers, 19 April 1973).

The Committee also broadened the experts' terms of reference by recommending an additional appraisal of the four "biogenetic nature reserves" surrounding Sasso Frattino, in order to consider the possibility of including them in the Diploma application.

The on-the-spot appraisal was carried out from 13 to 15 June 1983 by Mr P Baum and Mr T Hunziker. They were accompanied by MM M Pavan, M Padula, L Bortolotti and C d'Amico, the head warden Mr G Betti and the forest rangers MM G Venturini, F Checcacci, G Bini and M Cerbara.

The expert is most grateful to them for the kind and efficient help which he received, and wishes to thank MM M Pavan and L Bortolotti for the valuable cultural information which they supplied concerning the immediate and more distant surroundings of Sasso Fratino.

The admittedly brief on-the-spot appraisal, the discussions connected with it and the examination of the relevant documents confirm the validity of the arguments put forward in the application, presenting the Strict Nature Reserve of Sasso Fratino as a protected area of European importance. Some other useful particulars are to be found in the very sound appraisal by the Council of Europe Secretariat (SN-ZP (83) 47, dated 6 December 1983) and in an excursion report appearing in the scientific periodical "Waldgygiene", 3 (7) 1960.

In order to avoid undue repetition, frequent reference will be made to the material mentioned above (see the appended list of documents quoted), thus allowing scope for additional comments which should assist in answering the question of whether to award the Diploma.

II. GENERAL REMARKS

1. Geographical position

The five nature reserves - Sasso Fratino itself and the four biogenetic reserves, are located in the northern Apennines, some 50 km east of Florence. They form part of the "Foreste domaniali casentinesi". "These forests cover a total area of 10,600 hectares and straddle the watershed between the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas. They lie partly in Tuscany and partly in Emilia. Their name comes from the Casentino Valley which is in the upper reaches of the Arno and belongs to Tuscany.

Although today half of these forests are in the Emilia region, they have always had more administrative and historical links with Tuscany than with Emilia."(1)

2. History has had a decisive influence on the present state of the Casentinesi public forests and consequently on the five nature reserves, particularly that of Sasso Fratino. This historical influence is described in full on pages 2 and 3 of the application for the award of the diploma (1) and under point 2.2 of the Secretariat's appraisal (2), pages 2 and 3.

The following quotation from reference document (3) will serve as supporting evidence:

"An almost virgin forest like this is a surprising discovery after day-long prospects of bare mountainsides, olive-groves, chestnut plantations, vineyards, citrus-orchards or new afforestations, relieved only by the beech-thicket in the middle distance. It is as if suddenly you were transported to the Black Forest. This forest owes its preservation to the monastery nearby and to the City of Florence. The monastery of "Il Sacro Eremo", situated near Camaldoli at an altitude of 1,111 m in Arezzo province, was founded in the year 1012 by Saint Romuald of Florence and five of his followers. Among the stipulations of the monastic rule were the conservation and maintenance of the forest, and this is authenticated by the following freely translated excerpts from a monastery publication: "How could one forget the great fir and beech forest and the chestnut woods lower down? The hermit and the forest are as one, for the forest is the pride of the hermitage and hermit is the keeper of this, the treasure of his soul. For centuries the hermit has lovingly maintained this vegetation. Woe to him who should dare cut down a single tree without permission. Not even the Prior was allowed to have trees cut at will, but was obliged to secure the assent of a special meeting of the chapter. To enfold the monastery still more closely in the forest, 8,000 saplings were planted in 1857, 10,000 in 1859, 20,000 in 1862 and 30,000 in 1865. In 1866, the forest was declared public property."

At the present time, now that European woodland is increasingly deteriorating,(x), this reverent attitude to its management is winning respect and approval outside Italy.

3. The extent of the Casentinesi state forests, and in particular that of the nature reserves, is most impressive.

Total area of the Casentinesi state forests: 10,600 ha

Nature reserves:

Sasso Fratino	764.4
the four biogenetic reserves	4,124.4
	<hr/>
	4,888.8 ha.
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such that approximately half the forest area is either used according to nature conservation criteria in the strict sense (the four biogenetic reserves included) or totally protected.

(x) Example: According to information supplied by Mr Riesenhuber, Minister for Scientific Research in Bonn, 34% of the total forest area in the Federal Republic of Germany was already in decline in 1983 as against 7% in 1982. It should nevertheless be observed that in 1982 the figures were not yet very accurate (see "Nouvelle Gazette de Zurich", no. 19/24 January 1984).

State forests of these dimensions with such a large proportion of nature reserves or indeed with forestry areas as close to nature are unlikely to be found elsewhere in Europe.

All those who know of the abusive forestry - with the exception of large-scale afforestations - which has long been practised in the Mediterranean area and caused widespread erosion, will surely be deeply impressed by this unexpected fact and warned against any biased assumptions.

III. THE STRICT NATURE RESERVE OF SASSO FRATINO

A particularly noteworthy section of the state forests on the slope of the Apennines facing Romagna below Poggio Scali, covering approximately 113 ha, was selected as a strict reserve under an internal administrative measure. This was confirmed by a ministerial decree in 1971 and the reserve was progressively extended under further orders of the same kind, the most recent of which dates from 15 April 1983, until it reached its present dimensions of some 764 ha. The latest measure provides conclusive proof of the Italian authorities' full awareness of the reserve's unique importance and their consequent readiness to give the protected area whatever backing may be required.

At this point one should highlight the particular merits of Prof. M Pavan and Mr F Clauser, the former administrator of the Casentinesi forests, in establishing the reserve. In 1959, they were responsible for saving the forest at the last moment from an intensive forestry scheme which had already been decided. This also sets an encouraging example for all resolute but judicious personal initiatives to secure protection for natural and cultural assets, even where the cause already seems lost.

2. Setting, orography, climate and geology

The whole of the Sasso Fratino area lies on the north-eastern slope of the Apennines, extending from the ridge (highest point: Poggio Scali, alt. 1,520 m) to the nearest valley (lowest point: Ponte de Campo alla Sega, alt. 650 m).

The fact that the Sasso Fratino reserve is integrated with the surrounding biogenetic reserves, worked in a nature-conscious manner and forming an ideal buffer zone (see paragraph IV), represents a considerable advantage as far as its protection is concerned.

Orography, climate and geology are thoroughly dealt with in the Diploma application (1) under point 2.3.1, pages 3 and 4, and in the Secretariat's appraisal (2) under point 2.3.1, page 3, and require no further comment.

3. Vegetation and fauna

These two topics, fundamental to the award of the Diploma, are also discussed in detail in the two documents mentioned above: see (1), point 2.3.1 page 3 and (2), point 2.3.2 pages 3 to 5.

On-the-spot observations and the related discussions with the experts named in the introduction did not contradict or add anything to the opinions put forward in the above reports:

A few remarks substantiating the observations referred to in the two documents are all that is required.

- The conservation of virgin forests, now very much a rarity in Europe, particularly forests of such dimensions, is clearly an absolute necessity, not for Italy alone but for the whole of Europe. The following is a quotation from document (3), page 202:

"Even in regions with no lack of completely wooded areas, which applies to a large extent in the Apennines, such a unique natural landscape would be of paramount concern to groups involved with landscape protection, which constantly gains in importance as the adverse effects of civilisation increase. The conservation of such a breathtakingly beautiful virgin forest deep in the Apennines is all the more imperative for this. This forest is admirably placed for research into the natural history of the Apennines. On that basis, it would moreover be possible to draw valid conclusions for later reforestation in the Apennines."

and:

"The unspoiled forest embodies all elements necessary for reforestation in a wide perimeter."

These two observations dated from 1960 and are now even more telling.

- Not to mention its great importance for the natural sciences and forestry, the reserve impresses the visitor by its high scenic quality:

"Within the majestic Campigna forest, the nature park (expert's note: Sasso Fratino is not a nature park but a strict nature reserve) is striking in the profuseness of its natural beauties: tall firs of great age, well-grown beeches, huge fallen trees in romantic gorges, inspiring waterfalls and the ever-changing aspect of picturesque landscapes, resplendent at this time of year in their autumn leaves.

Little wonder then that Dr Clauser, to whom the forest already owes a great deal, untiring in his efforts for the preservation and even extension of the enchanting nature reserve in its original unspoiled condition." (3) pages 201 and 202.

4. Implications for the natural environment, research and administration

Here again, the expert fully endorses the exhaustive particulars in the application (1) point 6, pages 6 and 7, and the Secretariat's appraisal (2), points 2.3.3 to 2.3.5, pages 5 and 6.

The observations made on the spot and the examination of the documents do not raise any queries or prompt any further proposals.

IV. THE FOUR BIOGENETIC RESERVES

The importance, condition and administration of these reserves are dealt with in detail under point 2.4.1 pages 6 and 7 of the Secretariat's appraisal (2).

The expert would like to make four particular points:

- The sensitive, consistent treatment of the forest in a manner close to nature and the corresponding transformation of monocultures under the exemplary management of Prof. M Padula. His competence and commitment as our knowledgeable guide throughout the survey were altogether outstanding and augur well for the proper administration of the reserves.

- The control of the large-game stock, vital to the success of the current approach to the forest.

The experts had the opportunity to appreciate the adverse effects on plant cover caused by boar on open ground along the ridge, treeless and particularly exposed.

They were also able to observe the damage done by game to nursery stock in the absence of adequate fencing or other protective measures.

- The vital influence of the biogenetic reserves as buffer areas surrounding the Sasso Fratino strict reserve.

- A few tourist facilities (car-parks, cable-car, mountain restaurant) built before the creation of the biogenetic reserves bear out the countryside's attractiveness to the public, and at the same time the unacceptable risk which this entails from the protection angle.

In this extraordinary landscape of major significance to nature conservation, no future expansion of this type can be tolerated.

V. INFORMATION

The administration is well aware that information facilities are vital to the survival of the reserves. Three museums are open during the summer for public guidance concerning the reserves, also helping to disseminate the idea of protecting nature in general and to promote a favourable attitude to the forest in particular through exhibitions or lectures. This public relations work is aimed at young people in particular and therefore deserves systematic support from the authorities, as it also has staffing implications.

VI. LEGAL AND FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE RESERVE

No legal or financial problems were detected during the on-the-spot appraisal and related discussions of such a nature as to imperil the upkeep of the reserves.

Other experience with protected areas nevertheless calls for emphasis of the fact that these reserves will in future continue to require unconditional legal and financial support, and that to relax this effort would be irresponsible.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conclusions

1.1 Strict reserve of Sasso Fratino

This reserve indubitably deserves the immediate award of a Category A Diploma by the Council of Europe, owing to the existence of a virgin forest in excellent condition and irreproachably managed. It represents a conclusive model for this category and Italy's application on its behalf is most apt.

1.2 The four biogenetic nature reserves

These are managed in accordance with nature conservation criteria, either through the conservation of more or less natural populations or through the transformation of any monocultures still present, on the basis of the potential natural forest associations. The continuation of this kind of husbandry, still carried on to a large extent, clearly distinguishes the biogenetic reserves from the Sasso Fratino reserve, while forming (as previously mentioned) a vital buffer area for the latter.

In view of these aspects, the expert is unable to recommend the immediate award of the Diploma in Category A but can see a case for it in the not too far distant future, after the existing stands of trees have been systematically and gradually restored to a near-natural state.

2. Recommendations

The expert recommends the immediate award of the Category A Diploma to the strict reserve of Sasso Fratino on the following conditions:

- All measures endangering the present balance of the potential natural forest associations to be prohibited.
- Control of the large-game stock to be conducted in a manner compatible with the maintenance of the Sasso Fratino virgin forest and with the transformation of the four biogenetic reserves into near-natural stands (while forming buffer-zones for Sasso Fratino).
- For this purpose, short-term preliminary surveys should be made of the large-game species population, its make-up and repercussions on the present and planned condition of the reserves, continuing this work until the time comes for renewal of the Diploma, assuming that it is awarded.
- Judicious enlargement at a later stage of Sasso Fratino and the four biogenetic reserves (in order to support their function as buffer zones for Sasso Fratino) to be continued as in the past.
- The forestry approach which has applied hitherto in the four biogenetic reserves to be maintained on a rational basis, in order to help its tree populations attain a near-natural condition, and thus enhance their role as buffer areas for Sasso Fratino. The principles of this type of forestry should be transmitted to the Council of Europe.

- Research programme to be drawn up, suitable for obtaining concise short-term and long-term results in the basic and applied research sectors (forestry, nature conservation, game management etc). Potential vegetation map and plant inventory to be produced in the same connection.
- No more pathways to be built in the Sasso Fratino reserve, and present visiting arrangements to be maintained (guided visits only, on application).
- All tourist development in the entire Casentinesi state forest area to be prohibited.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The expert would stress the eminent suitability of the Sasso Fratino strict reserve as a subject for the award of the Diploma in Category A, and would express his appreciation for the outstanding efforts made by Italy for the establishment of biogenetic nature reserves. This sets an example for other European countries.

Having concluded his assignment, the expert hopes that the Council of Europe will award its Diploma to Sasso Fratino, thereby also acknowledging the outstanding commitment of the persons having played a leading part in the creation and conservation of the reserve.

A P P E N D I X

Documents quoted:

- (1) Application for the award of the European Diploma to the Strict Nature Reserve of Sasso Fratino, Italy, 7 March 1983, SN-ZP (83) 25.
- (2) On-the-spot appraisal. Secretariat memorandum, 6 December 1983, SN-ZP (83) 47.
- (3) Scientific periodical "Waldhygiene", 3 (7), 1960.