

Article

# Historic Rural Landscapes: Sustainable Planning Strategies and Action Criteria. The Italian Experience in the Global and European Context

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the historic and cultural dimension of landscape, in relation to the holistic and dynamic approach today required in landscape research. In this direction, the Authors investigate the present role played by historical rural landscapes in relation to their multifaceted character and function. In recent years there has been an ever-growing appreciation of their cultural value, depending on the differential speed of environmental change (relatively high) and people's adaptation to it (relatively slow), as a matter of compensation. Although reference is often made to the global and the European contexts, Italy is given special attention, since the long history of civilization known by its rural landscapes makes them particularly worthy of consideration and offers a wide variety of examples assuming a more general interest. The main changes occurred in the Italian rural landscapes over the last two centuries are described by referring to their main causes and to the parallel change observed in the urban-rural dialectic. The notion of "cultural landscape", as it emerges from the international debate and documents, is applied to historic rural landscapes, according to a varied range of conditions and characteristics. Knowledge, identification, interpretation and characterization are fundamental actions to define sustainable landscape management strategies. These last should be diversified according to landscape character, functionality, integrity and obsolescence, not being limited to outstanding landscapes only but considering all rural landscapes as heritage. To this end, heritage strategies and policies must go together with agricultural sectorial policies, since agriculture and farmers are the major actors of rural landscape protection and transformation. EU Common Agricultural Policy is considered by focusing on its effect on rural landscape and proposals coming from the heritage experts for its future implementation are examined. Emerging strategic measures and action criteria are singled out and presented. In any case, to protect historic rural landscapes, balanced change-dynamics and development vitality should be strengthened if present, introduced if not, so as to assure resilience. Neo-rurality today expresses the search for sustainable lifestyles, green development models and a better quality of life, implicitly offering new opportunities for the revitalisation of historic rural landscapes. Finally, a holistic approach and multidisciplinary cooperation are needed to allow for an effective synthesis of the many cultural visions, which today concern the theme of landscape.

**Keywords:** cultural landscapes; historic rural landscapes; multi-functional agriculture; neo-rurality; landscape planning; planning strategies

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## 1. Introduction. Aims and Structure of the Article

The present paper focuses on the historic and cultural dimension of landscape and expresses the Authors' position about the topic, in relation to the holistic and dynamic approach today required

in landscape research. From this point of view, the complex interaction over time between the many and different landscape components is discussed also by referring to the perceptual aspects entailed. The perception of landscape is here considered in its individual and social dimensions, not just as it concerns the sensorial sphere but as a continuous cultural process shared by people and influencing the well-being either of resident communities and visitors. From this point of view landscape, since it has always been made object of representation, narration and communication [1], also appears as a stratified deposit of cultural signs which, if correctly understood and interpreted, in some ways helps reveal the character and identity of places.

Each and every landscape are therefore characterized not only by the functional aspects related to land use but also by a historic and cultural dimension depending on: the living nature of landscape itself [2]; the role played by human communities in shaping it and exploiting its resources; and the importance of the social/cultural perception. The relationship between the landscapes' functional and cultural aspects and their relative importance, is investigated with particular reference to rural landscapes. From this relationship, it also depends the recognition of rural landscape as part of the cultural heritage and the management strategies which should follow.

Rural landscapes are a widely representative category of landscapes and, until a very recent past, were mainly considered by emphasizing their functional use for agriculture and forestry. In rural landscapes over the last century, it has occurred a progressive emersion of the cultural value and the increase of its relative importance in comparison with their functional value. The heritage value of the rural landscapes is relatively recent and is closely related both to a new emphasis on their historical dimension and to the different speeds of change characterizing either the rural space and people's cultural adaptation. Correspondingly it can be observed a shift in management and planning strategies, where the management of rural landscapes has passed from an approach merely sectorial (agricultural/productive) to approaches first intersectorial (agriculture/heritage), then comprehensive and integrated [3]. This last kind of approach corresponds to a relatively new and multifunctional role of agriculture and to a multidimensional function of the rural landscape. Rural landscapes in fact, while continuing to support the production activities, today also requested to provide environmental and socio-cultural ecosystem services. The "heritage status" of the rural landscape, on its turn, needs to be seen in a new way and some categories used to characterise it, such as "historic" or "traditional," should be redefined [4]. While in a sectorial approach, the recognition of this heritage status aimed to select a limited number of outstanding landscapes to be included in conservation lists, most recent approaches tend to consider the whole rural landscape as heritage "*per se*" and its historic character as an aspect simply related to its living nature. Therefore the management strategies of all rural landscapes should always be based on thorough consideration of their historic/cultural dimension and aim to a sustainable planning by integrating it with the other economic and environmental dimensions [5]. The rural landscape as heritage, in fact, can play as a driving force of development [3] if its cultural content is fully understood, interpreted and communicated, thus being able to generate a widespread awareness of local identity and distinctiveness. In Western Europe landscape research had a great development over the 20th century, that is a period of time when dramatic spatial changes occurred, with the loss of many historic and characteristic rural landscapes [6]. In describing this landscape loss, an authoritative ecologist and landscape historian as Oliver Rackham (*The History of the Countryside*, pp. 25–26) remarked four different aspects: "There is the loss of beauty ( . . . ) the loss of freedom ( . . . ). There is the loss of historic vegetation and wildlife, most of which once lost is gone forever. (...) I am especially concerned with the loss of meaning. The landscape is a record of our roots and the growth of civilization. Each individual historic wood, heath etc. is uniquely different from every other and each has something to tell us" ([7], pp. 25–26). Three out of the four kinds of loss above mentioned concern cultural and spiritual features.

In the present article, Section 2 focuses on conceptual aspects, particularly on the historic and cultural dimension of landscape and its components, while Sections 3–5 try to set in relation the rapid landscape transformation of the 20th century brought by urban growth, industrial development and

technological innovation, with the cultural changes occurred on parallel and the “loss of meaning” lamented by Rackham [7].

Throughout the article, although assuming a wider perspective, specific reference is made to the Italian rural landscape. It still shows the signs of a millennia-old civilization and during the first half of the last century, up to 1950s, underwent intense public interventions for land reclamation and agrarian reform. The Italian rural landscape is an emblematic example since in it we can observe: the signs and the long-term effects of the historic and traditional forms of agriculture; the intense transformation determined by planning actions intending to rationalize, modernize and improve the functional use of the rural space; the urban-rural dialectics and the effects of urban growth and rural depopulation on the quality of places. Moreover, since its very beginning, Italy has taken part in the process of the European unification and keeps on having a major role in the EU. Therefore Italy is also a good point of view for observing the consequences and impacts of the European politics on landscape, heritage and agriculture at the national and local level, also in the innovative framework determined by the European Landscape Convention (ELC), significantly signed in Florence (Tuscany, Italy) in 2000 [8].

The cultural value which today can be attributed to the historic rural landscapes is outlined in Section 6, by making reference to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the guidelines for its implementation. The categories and criteria there given, although intended for application worldwide in the process of proposal and selection of those cultural landscapes to be included in the World Heritage List, have found large consensus and are often used as an official reference by the various bodies involved in heritage and landscape management at the European and national level. Once recognized the multifaceted value of the historic rural landscapes, these need to be detected.

In Section 7, it is therefore analysed the systematic work needed for their identification, interpretation and characterization; this, not only to produce specific atlases and registers but also to address properly the main management strategies. To this end, the dynamic nature of landscape is considered and the central role played in it by population is highlighted, landscape being the product of a social construction over time and, in conjunction with the quality of place, having a strong influence on the quality of life as perceived by people.

In Sections 8 and 9, the new scientific and cultural perspective traced by the ELC is discussed, as far as it has consequences either on the heritage and the agriculture sector, thus compelling to make compatible, if not convergent, the cultural and the functional management-objectives concerning the historic rural landscape. Examples taken from the Italian experience show, on the one hand, how the appropriate extension in kind and time of the functional use of the historic rural landscapes is fundamental for the preservation of their cultural values; and, on the other, how some economic activities based on the valorisation of the rural landscapes as cultural heritage can add value to agricultural products and produce new incomes for farmers. Complementary activities based on heritage valorisation can help agriculture to persist even in disadvantaged areas affected by depopulation. Particular attention is given to proper management of rural landscapes based on specific consideration of the multifunctionality of either the rural space and agriculture itself. This last today is called not only to produce food and goods but also to provide a wide range of ecosystem services (environmental and socio-cultural), many of which are closely related with the quality and historic/cultural character of the rural landscape. To this end, the vernacular architectural heritage assumes a specific importance as key component of the rural landscape, greatly helping its interpretation and communication. It also appears as an available resource able to house and support new activities in the field of tourism, recreation, environmental education, professional training and so forth.

In Section 10, therefore, it is stressed the great scientific value recently assumed by the study of the vernacular built heritage and is shown how this can inspire new and sustainable site-specific forms of architecture. All through the text a paradox emerges deriving from the changes occurred over time in the relationship between the functional and the cultural values. In the past the rural landscape, seen as a landscape functionally characterized by agriculture and farming activities, was not given explicitly a

cultural value, although the agricultural work in itself was experienced by people as an important cultural expression not separated from the rest of their lives. Then, because of the affirmation of the industrial paradigm, the traditional and historic landscapes suffered obsolescence and erosion and the rural culture was despised.

Paragraph 11, finally, sets the theme of the valorisation of the historical rural landscapes against the background of the many and varied contemporary forms of rurality, the multifunctional use of rural landscape and the many social and cultural landscape services today provided by agriculture and forestry. It is shown how new and creative functional uses can be introduced in the historical rural landscapes, thus contributing to the revitalization of local cultures and economies and assuring a future to the past. It is stressed how in many cases, as an effect of the change in the cultural vision of the rural landscape, the recognition and appropriate communication of its historic character can attract new activities in rural areas, add value to the rural products and contribute to the sustainable management of the cultural heritage. As a concluding remark, it is highlighted the need for new and integrated approaches in rural landscape research.

## 2. Historic and Cultural Dimension of Landscape and its Components

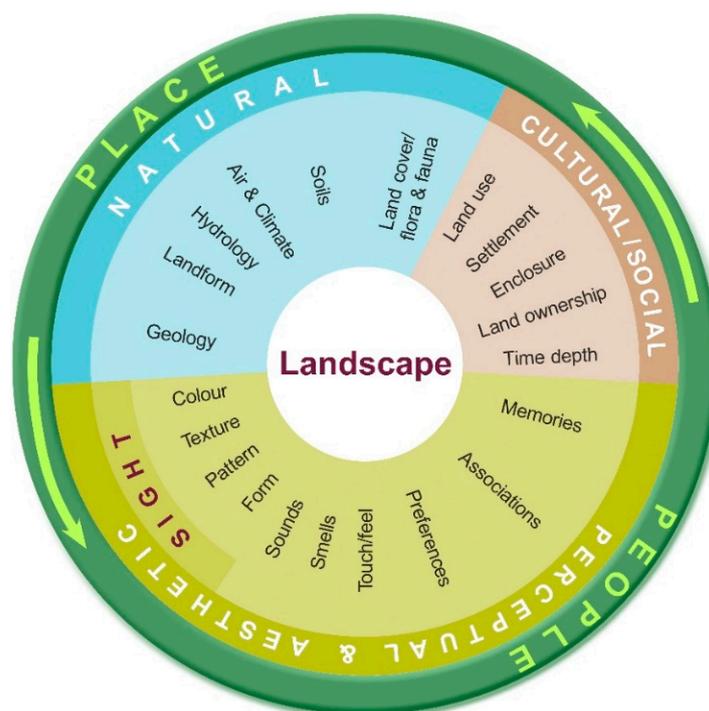
All landscapes, *per se*, are always characterised by a historical dimension in that they always involve space, communities and time. Landscape, in fact, can be seen as the perceivable configuration that a given territory assumes over time, resulting from the action/interaction of its environmental components, either natural or cultural [8–10].

These last can today be found listed in a number of inventories, more or less detailed and exhaustive, which have been produced to support landscape classification and evaluation processes at various levels and stages. The environmental content of a landscape can be read and interpreted according to appropriate combinations of its various thematic component layers, which can be attributed different weight and importance accordingly with the purposes and aspects under consideration [2,11]. Nevertheless, landscape requires a systemic approach, as a holistic unitary concept, a system being more than the sum of its parts [12].

Methods of landscape analysis and assessment developed from 1960s on have offered a new theoretical vision of the complex interactions between the many and varied landscape components. These methods can be direct or indirect and allow for the aesthetic and economic evaluation of a landscape [13]. More recently, new tools and techniques descending from geomatics and ICT advances, have made that vision widely and easily applicable. This has enabled the study and spatial representation, either synchronic and diachronic, of the complex interactions between all the relevant variables, in order to understand the landscape changes, the active change dynamics and their main driving forces [14–18].

Similar to ecosystems' components, landscape components evolve each and every one according to their own specific dynamics of change, at a different pace and interdependently. The components which are more stable, such as geology and climate, play a structural and predominant role in characterizing the landscape and drive the change of those components which are more mutable [19].

Human communities represent a very important and specific landscape component. Man plays an important and double-faced role: on the one side, as it is for all the other species, is part of the landscape and acts as a strong force of change; on the other, he has to be considered also as the perceiving subject. As landscape perception is concerned, the visual aspects and aesthetic appreciation are often emphasized. Should perceptual aspects be limited to sensory perception, all the senses should be considered, either singularly and by taking into account their mutual influence. But, indeed landscape perception is not to be considered as a merely sensorial but rather as a cultural perception, since what man perceives through the senses immediately becomes the matter of a cultural elaboration being set in relation with experiences, events, analogies, memories, people and so forth. (Figure 1) [20].



**Figure 1.** The so-called *landscape wheel* proposed by Carys Swanwick in the framework of landscape character assessment (LCA) methodology and illustrating the key components of landscape (modified after [20,21]). The wheel of landscape components is driven by time, according to the relationship that is established between people and places; when set in motion the wheel takes on a unitary and distinctive appearance, just as white is manifested by quickly rotating the wheel of colours.

That is a relationship with a more complex experience of the physical space as a cultural space, that is, a place rich in interrelated signs, dense of meanings and values and set by the human perceiving subject in the context of an even more complex network of belongings, communications and exchanges which is part of.

Through his activities man transforms the physical matter and the surrounding space [22], leaving on them a spiritual imprint, even when these activities are utilitarian in kind. This way the humanized nature and the re-organized space participate of a vision of the world that in man is generated by the meanings experienced in his relationship with places. This is particularly true in the case of architecture, since buildings represent and make perceivable, in a specific way, the *genius loci*. Although many expressions of the human activity rapidly change, some community's cultural traits which belong to an important spiritual sphere related to the fundamental aspects of life show an impressive stability and continuity over time, also being mirrored by the way how the physical space is modelled and signified [23,24].

Today it can be affirmed that in the world neither there are corners that have not known yet the changes caused by human presence and activity; nor they exist places that can be thought as not accessible to human perception. For this reason, although it is usual to make a distinction between “cultural landscapes” and “natural landscape”, according to the different relevance in each of them assumed by natural and/or anthropic classes of components, every landscape, not only can be said as “historical” but also, in a certain sense, as “cultural”. The wide diffusion of new mass and social media, coupled with the recent, massive and rapid development of information and communication technologies has contributed to add many new layers to the perceptual stratification, which is inevitably associated to places. An impressive number of images, descriptions and narrations of places, even the most remote, are produced and exchanged everyday by a great number of subjects, individuals and communities and instantly broadcasted, received and re-bounced all around the world.

### 3. Speed of Transformation, Cultural Adaptation and Relationship with Places

Worldwide, the last two centuries have been characterised by progressive technology innovation and application, followed by an easier and easier, as well as widespread, availability of tools empowering man's transformation capacity. The consequent and ever increasing impact and extent (spatial and temporal) of the landscape changes produced can be related to the corresponding and dramatically increasing trend of per-capita energy consumption and energy-use efficiency [25,26]. In Western Europe, in particular, in the period between 1800 and 2010 it has been estimated a remarkable increase in yearly per-capita energy consumption, which passed from 25 GJ to 113 GJ, with an average annual percentage growth rate of 6.5%.

In Italy, during the 20th century and particularly after the Second World War, it can be observed a radical change in the relationship between human communities and places, a relationship now appearing as very different from its previous expressions, which had characterized all the centuries before. Until a recent past, in fact, communities chose to settle in a given place knowing they would have been dependent from it indefinitely in the future. For this reason, the experience of inhabiting places was necessarily paralleled by the development of a sharp and shared knowledge of the constraints and the opportunities there present, particularly those ones strongly conditioning aspects of fundamental importance, such as: the availability of water resources for human consumption and crop irrigation, building materials, natural/renewable energy sources; the potential for food production and raw materials' wining; site accessibility and defensibility; suitability of site for urban settlements (aspect, morphology, hydrogeological condition, soil), healthy environmental conditions; possibility of cultural and commercial exchange with other communities.

The awareness of being dependent from place on the part of the community implied the need for taking care of it, in a creative, shared and continuous way. This, anyway, did not inhibit neither landscape transformation nor the carrying out of intervention aimed at overtaking the constraints imposed by the given local conditions and finding the way to access new opportunities.

Until peoples and communities had a relative settlement stability in the places inhabited and the evolution of knowledge and technology was characterized by a slow pace, a parallel social and cultural adaptation to the innovation thus introduced was possible. Moreover, the transmission of knowledge kept going on in a "traditional" way: that is an informal transmission, mainly practiced through an intra- and trans-generational sharing which over time tended to consolidate, confirm, standardise and make accessible to most of the people those technical solutions which revealed as the most effective and the most responsive to local conditions.

From the second half of 18th century up to now, at an increasing speed, the development of new energy sources, technology innovation, transport means and infrastructures, communication/information technologies and media, have progressively allowed communities to achieve a greater independence from place constraints. This evolution has been accompanied by a new social and cultural climate, characterised by widespread unconditional faith in technological development and the loss of a common ethical horizon. Consumerism, fundamentally irresponsible towards the environmental problems, has found justification in the wrong presumption of being able to: transfer to elsewhere, no matter how spatially and temporally remote, the unsolved present local problems (polluting production systems, waste, social inequalities and discomfort, etc.); take from other places no matter how remote, as easily as possible, the resources needed for the human settlement and activities; exploit unlimitedly and indifferently resources, either local or not.

Such a presumption, not only marked a radical difference from the cultural attitude of all previous generations but soon revealed itself as a failure, in that the sum of a large number of local problems, locally unsolved, resulted in a series of big global problems, today needing global answers that are more difficult to formulate and agree about [27]. The most relevant problems concern some of the structural components of landscape, such as climate and today urgently need answers, which involve a radical change of the present development paradigm at a planetary scale and a cooperative approach. The "sustainability" principles define the way how to find solutions,

emphasizing new ethical dimensions, either “horizontal” (equity, social justice, equal opportunity to access resources, independence from external political/economic contexts, etc.) and “vertical” (responsibility towards future generations).

#### 4. Urban-Rural Dialectics and Agricultural Landscape Changes in Italy in the Last Two Centuries: Continuity, Gaps, Differences

Although the last two centuries in Europe have seen a progressive urban growth, most of the physical space is still rural and is characterised by the widespread presence of such activities as agriculture, forestry and animal farming, which still play a major role in defining landscape identity and driving its changes. In Italy a large part of the rural landscape still is an agricultural landscape, that is a landscape consciously and systematically shaped by man as a result and in view of agricultural production [16,28,29].

Due to the long history of civilization, in Italy the agricultural landscape, although characterized by a large prevalence of biotic components—animals and plants, has to be considered, in a certain sense, as a built landscape, since it results from intense work of transformation carried out over time by various generations of farmers. It is a cultural landscape par excellence. Already in 1845 significantly the economist Carlo Cattaneo referred to agriculture by citing the corresponding German term “ackerbau” (field building) and remarking that the farmer is a “bauer” (builder). Agriculture and the agricultural landscape therefore express and are a product of, a social construction, at a point that Cattaneo could affirm that 90% of every civilized region is an artificial homeland (“patria artificiale”), the configuration of which is not made by nature but by man’s work, being an immense deposit of human fatigue [30]. The same consideration, in a different time and place, has been more recently expressed by Dominic Stevens referring to the present condition of one of the most rural European regions, Ireland: “We do not see virgin landscape, the wild wood, *urwald*. What we see looks the way it is because of layers of historical use, because of occupation by man and because of constant ongoing work in response to farm technology, economics, legislation and the desires of society. Our rural landscape is as man-made as the skyline of Manhattan” [31].

Among the Italian rural landscapes the agricultural terraced ones—which characterize many regions such as Cinque Terre (Liguria) [32,33], Costa Viola (Calabria) [34–37], Costiera Amalfitana (Campania) [38], Valtellina (Lombardy) [39], Chianti (Tuscany) [32,40], Langhe (Piedmont) and so forth—can be seen as the most evident expression of the agricultural landscape as the result of a proper social construction. A construction that there appears as audacious and persevering, sometimes defined as “heroic,” in all those cases when communities have intended to colonise for productive reasons harsh and steep lands, otherwise inhospitable, by clearing forests, reshaping land morphology, building retaining walls, stairs, irrigation channels and other functional artefacts [34–37,39] (Figure 2).

In some rural landscapes, the territorial stratification of human interventions has been slow and has occurred in continuity with the settlement systems and assets of previous generations. In many areas of Italy, this is particularly true, if it is considered the millenary history of the countryside, rich with multiple layers of cultural signs left by the many civilizations which succeeded one another. Many of these signs, the signs of the ancient settlement systems, are still well perceivable either as material artefacts or as immaterial testimonies [41]: the archaeological sites and remains spread in the countryside; the heritage of agricultural biodiversity; toponyms; the impressive permanence of the land subdivision signs of the ancient Roman centuriations, still visible and detectable in Po Valley and in many other European regions; the traces of ancient road networks and of transhumance drove roads, to which some traits of the present road network are superimposed; and so forth (Figures 3 and 4) [42–46].

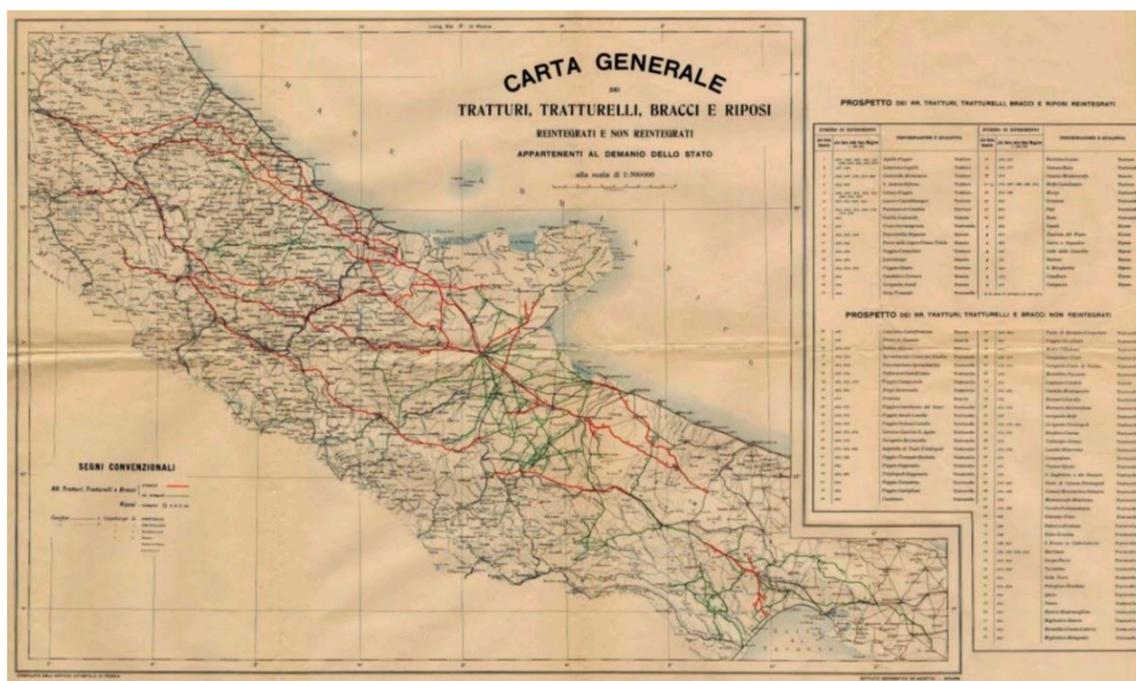
For all these reasons, it can be said that in Italy the historical dimension of the rural landscape assumes a strong cultural content and is at the roots of the present and well appreciated landscape distinctiveness and diversity at a national scale. Having to cope with various and sometimes challenging physiographic conditions, for a long time the various generations have normally respected the landscapes they had inherited.



**Figure 2.** Traditional vineyard terraces characterised by drystone retaining walls in the ‘Costa Viola’ landscape (Calabria, Italy).



**Figure 3.** The signs of Roman centuriation are still clearly visible today in the land grid of the Italian countryside, particularly in the Po Valley. In this figure, the centuriation in the Borgoricco municipality (Padua) is shown on orthophoto provided as WMS (web map service) layer by Italian Ministry of the Environment (A) and superimposed with the cadastral layer provided as WMS by Italian Revenue Agency (B).



**Figure 4.** “Carta generale dei tratturi, tratturelli, bracci e riposi ristrutturati e non ristrutturati appartenenti al Demanio dello Stato” (General map of restructured and non-restructured sheep tracks, sheep tracks, farm arms and resting places belonging to the State property—Commissariat of the Tratturi re-integration, Foggia, Apulia, 1959). The transhumance routes, being used to transfer flocks and herds, for centuries have been important long-distance communication routes that have also favoured the exchange of goods and culture among the populations of the connected regions. In various regions of southern Italy, recently, projects and initiatives have been developed for the touristic and cultural valorisation of sheep tracks, also within the framework of the creation of infrastructural networks to support green mobility.

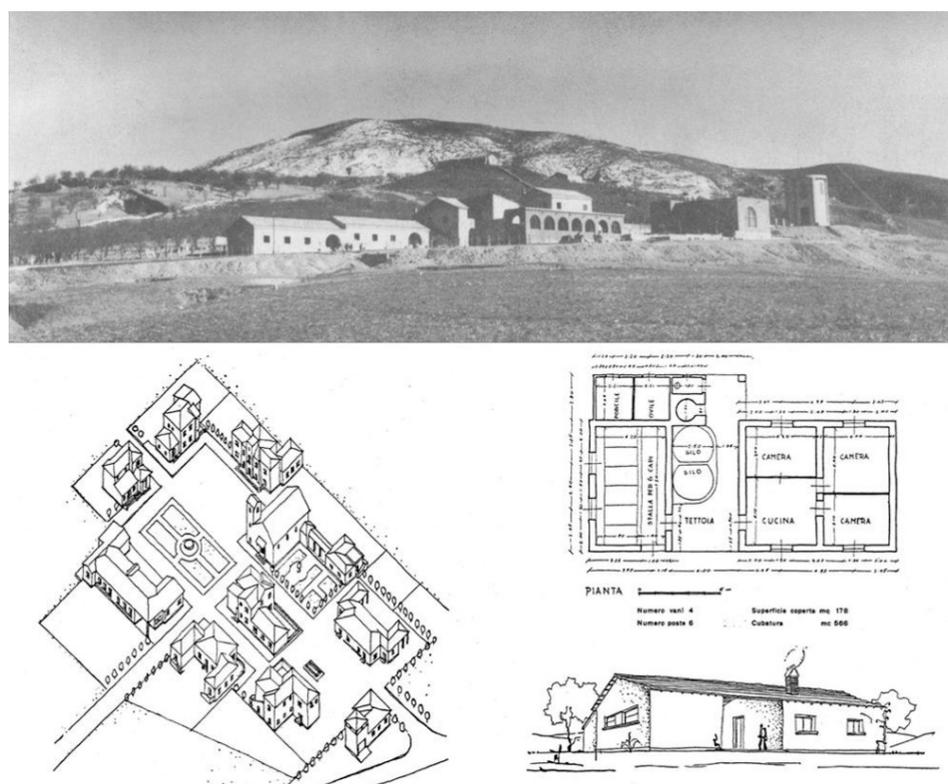
Normally, landscape transformations were carried out by carefully assessing the values present in the landscapes assets received. The features considered as still valid and well performing were usually confirmed, while new features and new assets were introduced to improve/extend a consolidated land use or to make a new one possible [42,47].

In some cases, landscape changes have been slow but in others they have been very fast, if not sudden. Dramatic changes in the inherited landscape assets, for example have occurred because of catastrophic events, either natural (i.e., earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides, floods) or man-induced (wars, invasions, etc.). In all these cases, the human communities have been struck by annihilating experiences and large parts of the landscape have been cancelled. As a consequence, people had to re-decide where and how to re-build their houses, villages, towns, infrastructures and where to allocate their activities. These decisions had to be taken rapidly and with a new awareness. They compelled communities to reconsider the past experience so as to evaluate what to confirm and what to deny, either re-settling in the same site or in another, more or less remote [48–50].

Fast and large-scale changes have also occurred in the rural landscape on the basis of human planned farsighted actions, carried out to improve some structural landscape features and land resource management. This is the case, for example, of the territorial and landscape planning policies adopted in Italy between the two World Wars (1920s–1940s). In this period, although in an extremely difficult political and socio-economic context, the rural landscape became the object of public interventions that radically transformed it and were based on the redefinition of the settlement system and agricultural land-property redistribution, paralleled by the introduction of new rural infrastructure networks and agricultural modernization [51].

In Sicily, in particular, this process was governed by a series of laws, some referring to a wider national context and other specific for the region, mainly concerning Land Reclamation and Colonisation of the Sicilian *Latifundia* and immediately after the Second World War (WW2) continued through the Agrarian Land Reform.

These laws, in that given historic period constituted a new and organic strategic framework for landscape planning, with its specific regulations and technical tools: new land was made suitable for agriculture through marshland reclamation; the most neglected parts of the countryside were infrastructured and urbanized. New rural towns and villages were created; new homes were built for the peasants; the land ownership of large estates was redistributed so as to achieve social justice, improve agricultural efficiency and counteract rural migration towards the cities and demographic pressure on urban areas [52,53] (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Borgo Gattuso (Caltanissetta, Sicily) and Borgo Lupo (Catania, Sicily), two of the villages built within the framework of the Law for the Colonisation of the Sicilian *Latifundia* (1940), for the provision of accommodation with scattered farmhouses (source [53]).

After WW2, the rural landscape evolved in a new and different way, also because of an increasing economic gap between industrial and agricultural sectors. This had grown during the fascist era and the trend persisted, showing a greater emphasis in the 1950s, soon showing other major consequences in terms of territorial unbalance between urban and rural areas and between the North (rich and industrial) and the South (poor and rural) of the Country [54].

Dating from the 1950s, many factors contributed to transform, directly or indirectly, the rural landscape, among which are: the redefinition of the land tenure system; the rationalization and intensification of the agricultural systems; agriculture industrialization; a general redefinition of settlement and production systems, ever more polarized in urban areas and influenced by an industrial model of development.

Progressive rural depopulation, with intense internal migration towards urban centres, coupled by drastic reduction of agricultural workforce was a national problem but it became particularly

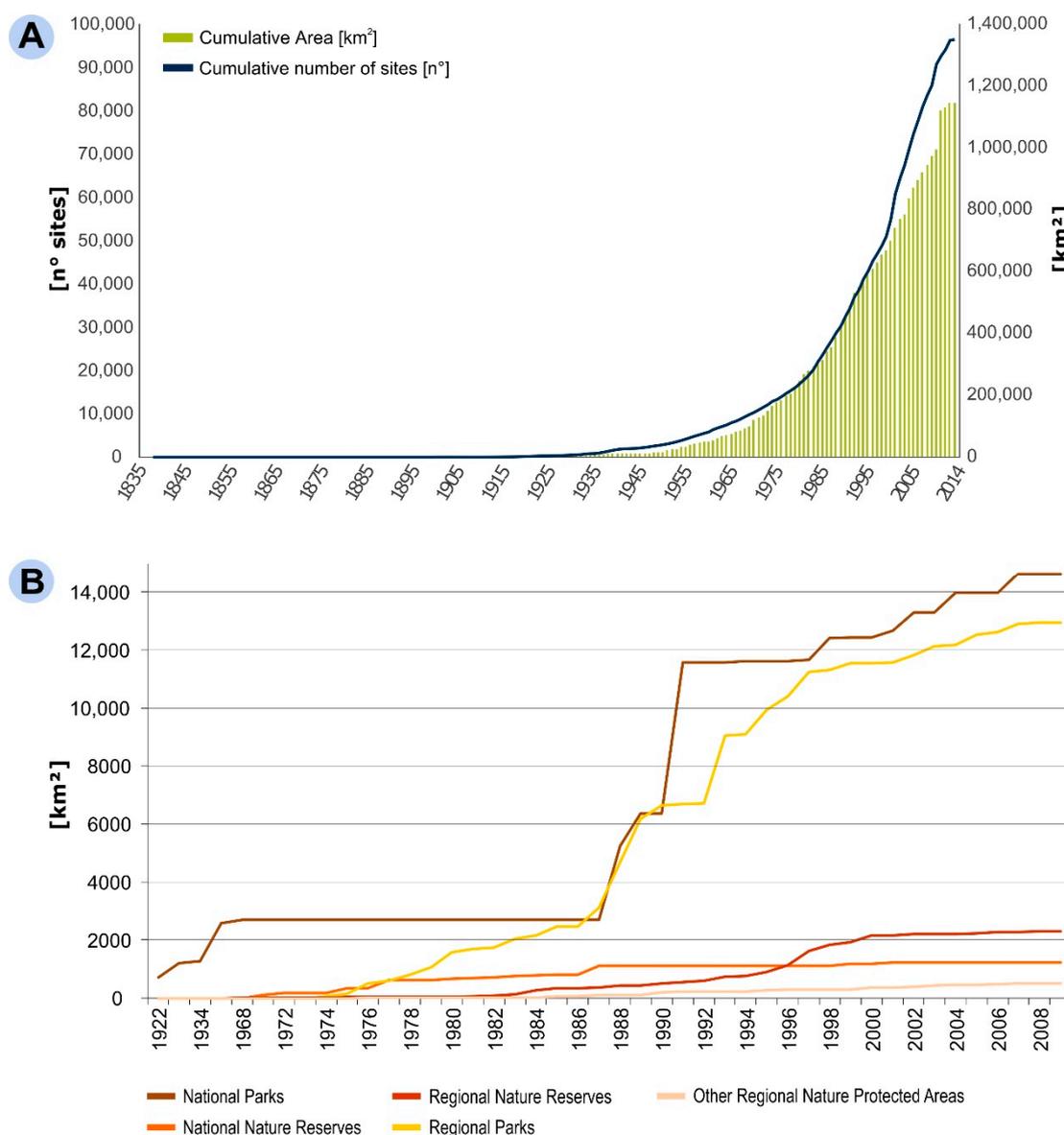
dramatic in the disadvantaged areas, the highlands and the marginal areas, that is in all those areas where agricultural mechanization was hard to introduce and agriculture could not achieve sufficient competitiveness. The lack of territorial infrastructures, alternative working and social opportunities, services, as well as the change of lifestyles, also encouraged the migration of young population towards the city [55].

### **5. Settlement Dynamics and Social Perception of the Rural Landscape: Nostalgia, Compensation, New Visions**

In recent decades, the urban/rural dualism has assumed new aspects, from which the present situation descends. In Italy, as well as in other developed countries, the environmental damage produced by urban concentration (of population and activities) and uncontrolled urban growth, spatially aggressive, have been accompanied by widespread consumerism and cultural homogenisation. Frantic living conditions in crowded environments; high and irresponsible resource consumption; increasing quantities of waste generated; loss of places' liveability and amenity: all these aspects characterising everyday life in the city have brought to the rising of a new social demand to which the rural world and agriculture today appear as able to respond.

From 1970s up to now, a new demand for environments and lifestyles favouring people's psychophysical health and wellbeing has made its way in the Italian society, following the change of a more general cultural climate. In deep, it is also a demand for identity and cultural rooting, spiritual values, authenticity of social relationships. For these reasons, to an ever-growing number of urban inhabitants the countryside has progressively appeared as a privileged place where to answer those needs. The countryside has therefore become the destination of a new flux of visitors going a direction opposite to the one that had characterized previous migrations. A corresponding inversion of tendency can be observed also from a cultural point of view: while in the past the vernacular culture and the rural world were considered as expressions of underdevelopment and social submission, now there is a general recognition of their intrinsic significance and dignity. What from the end of the 19th century ethnologists, anthropologists, geographers and other researchers—in Italy and in the rest of Europe—had started documenting, collecting and valorising, today can be seen as a common heritage of largely recognised and consolidated value. What was materially and culturally overwhelmed and mostly cancelled by the fast and intense cultural and landscape changes of the 20th century, now is recognised as worthy of protection, as a consequence of what Gombrich called the "Law of Compensation", according to which conservation policies appear as a late repair to the loss occurred [56,57].

In Italy, as in the rest of Europe, over the 20th century the progressive anthropization of the territory has been paired by a parallel growing trend in the number, variety and surface of areas of natural interest considered as worthy of public protection [58] (Figure 6). In Italy, today, National natural Parks occupy a surface of about 15,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 6) (approximately 5% of the national surface), 51% of which has an agricultural land-use. It can also be affirmed that some intense, aggressive and unbalanced forms of land anthropization characterizing all the last century, have been recently counterbalanced, as a form of compensation, by the attribution of cultural value to the traditional and historical rural landscapes. Recently, two Italian rural agricultural landscapes (Terraced landscapes of Cinque Terre and Langhe Roero) have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.



**Figure 6.** The upper graph (A) shows the growth of the nationally designated protected areas [km<sup>2</sup>] and site number in Europe from 1835 to 2015 (modified from [58]), while the graph below (B) shows the same trend in Italy between 1922 to 2009, according to the different types of nature protected areas (modified from [59]).

Farmers have also been explicitly attributed new roles, not only as landscape builders but also as landscape and environment keepers; roles that were implicitly present, in some ways, implied by the past forms of agriculture and human settlements, fully aware of their site dependence.

The present emphasis of the rural landscapes' cultural dimension in many cases originates from an "external" view, urban in nature, rather than from dynamics inherent in the same rural world; in other words, it originates from a culture that is radically unfamiliar with the values and the lifestyles of the rural culture. In the traditional rural world, a cultural dimension was implicitly affirmed in each and every action, in that even the most simple gestures, such as those made for the utilitarian exploitation of land resources, were naturally set in relation with an universe of profound values, shared by the whole community and which expressed an experienced sense of the world and of history, linking the present instant to the eternal, the particular to the universal, the single individual person to all generations, past and future.

Two writers of the 20th century help understand the change in cultural attitude occurred in the passage from a rural to an urban-industrial model of civilization, as expressed in everyday life. The Swiss novelist Jean Giono in 1938 [60], immediately before the beginning of WW2 wrote:

*“On ne peut pas savoir quel est le vrai travail du paysan: si c’est labourer, semer, faucher, ou bien si c’est en même temps manger et boire des aliments frais, faire des enfants et respirer librement, car tout est intimement mêlé, et quand il fait une chose il complète l’autre. C’est tout du travail, et rien n’est du travail dans le sens social de travail. C’est sa vie.”*

Some decades after, the Russian writer Andrej Sinyavsky (1972) [61] seems to echo Giono with analogous considerations:

*“The amount of our information, of our knowledge is enormous, we are overwhelmed by it but it never changes our nature. We can go round the world in a few days—take a plane and fly round it – but without getting anything out of it for our soul except a still greater intake of information. Now compare these seemingly vast horizons with the peasant’s way of life in the old days, when he never travelled further from home than to the harvest ( . . . ). In times past, man in his daily round had a much wider and stronger connection with the life and history of the universe as a whole than he has now. ( . . . ) We think of his outlook as narrow but how much it embraced in fact, crowded though it all was into a single village. Even the ritual of dinner ( . . . ) implied notion of universal significance. ( . . . ) The peasant before keeping up his spoon, crossed himself and, by this single reflex gesture became at one with earth and heaven, the past and the future.”*

The present urban societies—still being dominated by activities’ extreme and fragmented specialization, time compartmentation, meanings’ partialization which are typical of the industrial civilization—today looks at the peasants’ culture in a nostalgic way. This inclination to nostalgia is a desire to go back to an idyllic image of the countryside and its lifestyles depicted in such a way not fully corresponding to the real picture, from which sufferance and poverty, the straits which for such a long time have characterized the peasants’ living conditions, have been removed. The rural landscape therefore appears as a place where a relationship with nature is possible and where the composing elements are in harmony, thus transmitting us a fundamentally positive and unitarian vision of life, not a limited and fragmented one. The rural communities themselves are explicitly charged of a new role, that is nothing but the role they implicitly have been playing for centuries, as keepers of traditions, biodiversity, local identity and distinctiveness.

On the other hand, many farmers who live in the countryside, particularly in disadvantaged areas, still consider their condition as something to be emancipated from, because of present marginality, lack of services and opportunities and the civic gap they everyday experience. The cities keep on having a strong attractive power, confirmed by present demographic trends that, if confirmed, in Italy will bring the urban population to reach 70.4% of the total one by 2050 [62]. The rural areas today account for over 90% the whole territory. The rural landscape ever more will be looked at with foreign eyes, eyes unable to decipher immediately the signs of its multiple historical layers; the eyes of people visiting the countryside only occasionally: urban population and tourists, searching in it opportunities for leisure and traces of the good old days but not tolerating in it the signs of modernity and globalization; the eyes of new rural inhabitants coming from far foreign countries, the many migrants today working in agriculture and bearing cultural visions, customs and a way to live the relationship with place which is totally different from the traditional rural one [63].

The change of the rural landscape, therefore, should be set in relation not only with the spatio-temporal dynamics characterizing its biophysical transformation, involving configuration and functional use but also with the changes occurring in the social perception of it [64,65]. This last too requires to be observed, since the recognition of cultural value in rural landscapes, particularly those presenting strong historic and traditional character, paradoxically works as a statement of the definitive perceptual detachment—total or partial—from their primary function.

## 6. Cultural Value of Historic Rural Landscapes

The cultural value of historic rural landscape today finds its main reference document in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (WHC), particularly in the operational guidelines for its implementation [66]. There it is stated that cultural landscapes are cultural properties and represent the “combined works of nature and of man”, as such “they are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal.” It has to be remarked that in the same document the term “cultural landscape” is meant as to embrace “a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between the humankind and its natural environment” and that often “the cultural landscapes reflect specific techniques of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in and a specific spiritual relation to nature.” For these reasons, when cultural landscapes are considered as worthy of protection, they should not be crystallized in a given form corresponding to a certain evolutionary stage, anyway defined but should respect the dynamics which generated them and have kept them lively, particularly when these dynamics still match the present interests of the community. In fact, “protection of cultural landscapes can contribute to modern techniques of sustainable land-use and can maintain or enhance natural values in the landscape. The continued existence of traditional forms of land-use supports biological diversity in many regions of the world. The protection of traditional cultural landscapes is therefore helpful in maintaining biological diversity” [66]. This last statement well suites rural landscapes and the role today attributed to the agricultural and forestry systems, which are called not only to produce goods but also to provide ecosystem services, either environmental or socio-cultural in kind. In recent decades, the relative importance of rural landscapes’ service-provision function has greatly increased in comparison with the primary one, related to food and no-food production; in future projection this trend is expected to be confirmed [67–71].

Historic and traditional rural landscapes, as all the other cultural landscapes, can be attributed to three different categories [66]:

- (a) Landscapes designed and created intentionally by man;
- (b) Organically evolved landscapes;
- (c) Associative cultural landscapes.

In the (a) category, they usually belong garden and parkland landscapes created mainly for aesthetic reasons and often associated with monumental buildings and ensembles. In category (c), they are inscribed landscapes presenting powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent. Category (b) seems to be the most interesting according to the themes here investigated. It concerns those landscapes that descend from an organization of the land components initially guided by social, economic, religious/administrative reasons, the form of which was determined over time by answering the needs of the community in such a way that is coherent with the given environmental context and that has left perceivable traces of this evolutionary process. Nevertheless, in these landscapes the initial evolutionary dynamics can today present different grades of vitality, forming a wide range of characteristic conditions. At one extreme of this range the WHC poses the so-called “relict (or fossil) landscapes” that is, those landscapes in which the original evolutionary processes came to an end, although the distinguishing traces of it still present material evidence. At the other extreme, we find the so called “continuing landscapes”, that is, landscapes in which the original evolutionary processes are still in progress and play an important active role for contemporary society. Moreover, they have strong relation with the traditional values and lifestyles and present a well readable evidence of the historical stratification of the material signs of change.

## 7. Identification, Interpretation and Characterization of Historic Rural Landscapes as a Basis for Land Management Strategies

The above outlined considerations and classification categories, although referred to documents offering criteria for the selection of cultural landscapes to be included in the World Heritage List (WHL), are useful also to guide the work for the identification, interpretation and characterization of landscapes in a more general sense, either at the regional and national level. Such a work, in fact, is essential in order to undertake more general initiatives for landscape protection, management and planning. As it concerns historic and traditional landscapes, in Italy recently they have carried out studies on a large scale which represent a first step towards a national inventory [72]. They are in large part based on the above-mentioned UNESCO directions and guidelines. Some national and regional historic rural landscapes' atlases and registers have been produced as a first result of the application of methods which still need to be refined. It should be noticed that each of the landscapes singled out is investigated and evaluated not only on the basis of its structuring elements but also according to criteria defining quality, such as "significance", "integrity" and "vulnerability" [73–75].

The ELC, in defining the notion of landscape as an entity which is dynamic and unitarian, although complex and in some ways similar to a living organism [8], has emphasised the need for studies aimed not just to the singling out of outstanding landscapes, that is, those presenting natural or cultural features of relevant value. The ELC, instead, explicitly claims to consider and characterize all landscapes.

Landscape diversity should be considered, ranging from the ordinary landscapes—i.e., landscapes where the everyday life takes place, no matter how beautiful or ugly they are—to those landscapes of outstanding beauty, presenting relevant historical, aesthetic and cultural values. Landscape character should be defined not only on the basis of the present configuration [76], with its composing factors but also by investigating the forces which today are driving their change and which might be either beneficial or detrimental to people's wellbeing, recognizing that this depends on the quality of places and how it is perceived. Since in most cases landscapes are not just the product of design and planning actions but are the result of complex and long-lasting processes in which the local population plays an active and fundamental role, people should be involved in all the various phases of landscape identification, interpretation, characterization, assessment, conservation, management and planning.

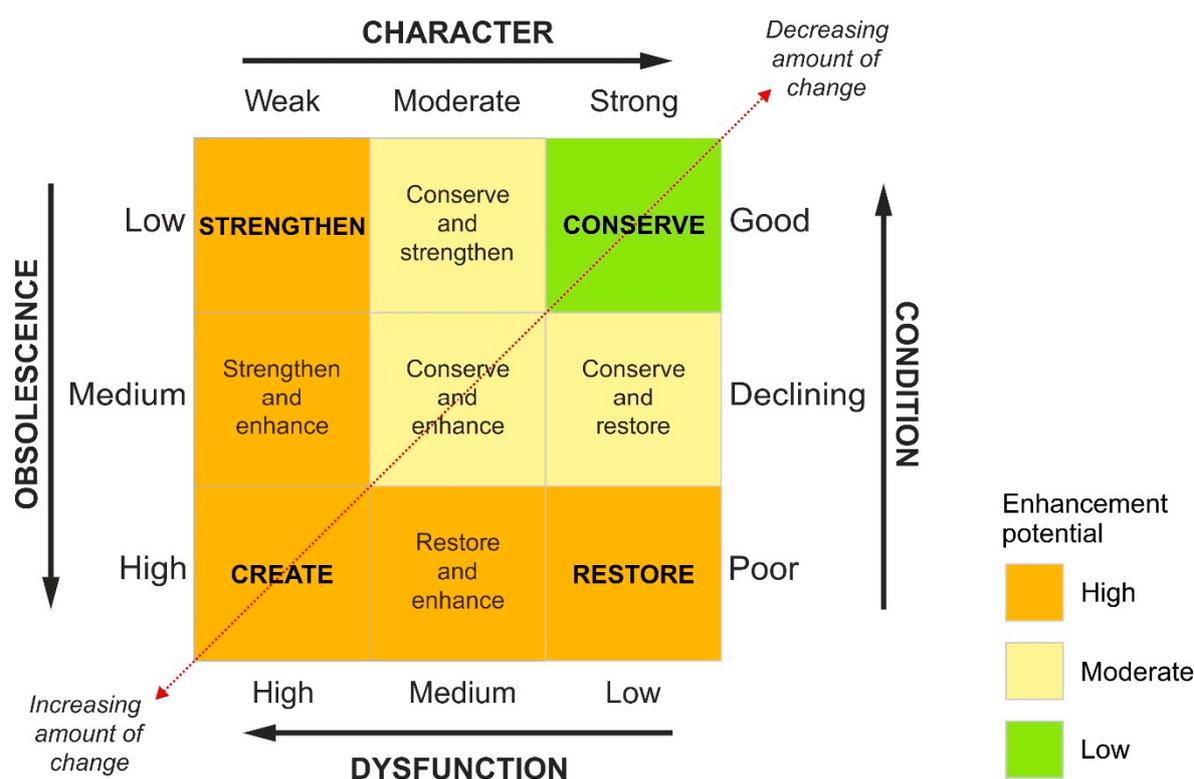
A quality landscape can be defined as such if it is sustainable, liveable and viable [77], then vital and auto-regenerative. Landscape liveability, on its turn, should be analysed in all its dimensions, taking into consideration landscape character, the quality of places and the quality of life (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** The three dimensions of landscape liveability.

It has to be noticed that in most cases the historic rural landscapes of relevant cultural value are the result of productive exploitation of land resources; therefore, the conservation objectives should never be set in contrast with the local population's needs and economic activities, agriculture and forestry in particular, these last having to suit the constraints and opportunities given by the surrounding environment.

In order to define appropriate management strategies for those historic landscapes mainly characterized by the presence of agriculture and forestry systems, it can be made reference to the general scheme proposed by Wood & Handley [78] after the seminal work of Warnock & Brown [79] and re-adapted by Macfarlane [77]. In it, the modes of intervention to be preferred are singled out by a careful cross-consideration of four main factors: character, condition, dysfunction, obsolescence, each of them evaluated accordingly to three-class verbal ranking (Figure 8). This way the most conservative strategies will concern those landscapes that present a strong distinctive character and are in a good condition, while the planning interventions aimed to introduce relevant changes are addressed to landscapes with a high grade of dysfunction and obsolescence. For those landscapes presenting a strong character but significantly affected by high obsolescence and being in a poor condition, restoration appears as the best strategy. Restoration in this case has not to be intended as the return to a pristine landscape configuration but as the reconstitution of a harmonic and vital relationship between all landscape components and of a satisfactory grade of resilience [77].



**Figure 8.** A framework for strategy options in landscape planning and management. Main focus is on the enhancement potential and the related amount of change, accordingly with different grades of obsolescence and dysfunction and to different ratings of landscape condition and character (modified after [77–79]).

## 8. A Global Vision of the Rural Landscape as Heritage and the EU Common Agricultural Policy: New Strategies and Action Criteria

In a recent doctrinal text following the Milano Declaration on Rural Landscapes, ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and IFLA (International Federation of Landscape Architects) jointly recognised rural landscapes as a vital component of the heritage of humanity.

Moreover, they published new guiding principles on the ethics, culture, environmental and sustainable transformation of rural landscape systems at various scales [80]. The document considers rural landscapes as dynamic and living systems, as well as multifunctional resources, where agriculture, forestry and pastoralism certainly play an important role and which are attributed by people and communities' important cultural meanings.

The nature of rural landscapes as heritage concerns all rural landscapes, either well-managed and degraded or abandoned. In some ways, the approach proposed follows the idea of landscape envisaged in the ELC, extending worldwide its basic principles and applying the UNESCO notion of cultural landscape to every rural landscape. This kind of approach is an innovative and good example of far-sighted heritage policies in view of sustainable management of land resources, going far beyond the so-called emergency approach [81]. According to the ICOMOS document the importance of rural landscapes is strongly rooted in their historic features, since "rural landscapes have been shaped over millennia and represent significant parts of the earth's human and environmental history, ways of living and heritage." The important role of productive activities in them is also recognised in that "landscapes used for the production and/or harvesting of plant and animal species, including edible resources, demonstrate the entangled connections between humans and other species across broad areas. The diversity of agricultural, forest, animal husbandry, fishery and aquaculture, wild-resource and other resource practices is essential for the future adaptation and resilience of global human life." The conservation of the integrity and authenticity of the rural landscape and of its heritage components, where recognizable, "should focus on assuring the standard and quality of living of local populations working and living in rural landscapes," heritage having to be considered as an economic resource to be used in view of long-term sustainability. To this end the rural landscapes which have proven to be sustainable and resilient over time assume a paradigmatic role, in that can inform future management of rural activities. Rural landscapes, moreover, bring benefits related not only to primary production and biodiversity conservation but also to the spiritual and cultural values, since they provide "a sense of identity" and represent "economic, spatial, environmental, social, cultural, spiritual, health, scientific, technical and, in some areas, recreational factors." According to ICOMOS/IFLA action criteria should be defined according to four specific measures concerning rural landscapes and their heritage values [80]: (A) understand; (B) protect; (C) sustainably manage; (D) communicate and transmit (Table 1).

**Table 1.** ICOMOS/IFLA action criteria to manage rural landscapes: understand, protect, sustainably manage the transformation, communicate and transmit landscapes and their heritage values.

Measures	Action Criteria
<b>A. UNDERSTAND</b> rural landscapes and their heritage	A1 Recognise that all rural landscapes have heritage values
	A2 Document the heritage values of rural landscapes as a basis of planning decision-making and management
	A3 Develop base-line knowledge of the physical and cultural characteristics of rural landscapes (current state and change detection)
	A4 Inventory and catalogue rural landscapes at all scales (global to local)
	A5 Develop knowledge to enable comparison of rural landscapes at all levels
	A6 Recognize local populations as knowledge holders
	A7 Promote extensive and ongoing cooperation among public institutions, NG organizations and universities
<b>B. PROTECT</b> rural landscapes and their heritage values	B1 Review and implement legal and policy frameworks
	B2 Implement policies
	B3 Define strategies and actions of dynamic conservation, repair, innovation, adaptive transformation, maintenance and long-term management
	B4 Consider the rural landscape heritage values as multiple and varied (economic, social, environmental, cultural, spiritual, spatial, etc.)
	B5 Prepare effective policies based on informed knowledge of the landscapes
	B6 Define monitoring strategies to review the effectivity of implemented policies
	B7 Consider that effective policy implementation depends on public information and engagement
<b>C. SUSTAINABLY MANAGE</b> rural landscapes and their heritage values	C1 Consider bio-cultural rights within food and natural resource production
	C2 Recognize key stakeholders of rural landscapes, including rural inhabitants
	C3 Consider the connections between cultural, natural, economic and social aspects in the development of sustainable management strategies
	C4 Consider the interconnections between rural and urban landscapes
	C5 Find a balance between long-term sustainable resource use and heritage conservation and the short term needs of rural workers' quality of living
	C6 Support the equitable governance of rural landscapes
<b>D. COMMUNICATE and TRANSMIT</b> the heritage and values of rural landscapes	D1 Communicate awareness of the heritage values of rural landscapes through collaborative participatory actions
	D2 Increase awareness of the means and methods for transmission of traditional and technical knowledge and practices; disseminate best practices
	D3 Support shared learning, training and research using diverse tools, approaches and cultural practices involving all stakeholders (communities, schools, etc.)

As well as landscape quality is beneficial for the development of various economic activities, these last should in some way be carried out so as to protect and improve landscape quality. The ELC while on the one hand stresses the importance of specific landscape policies at various territorial and institutional levels, on the other urges on the need for considering landscape as a topic to be included in all the relevant and specific sectorial policies [8,10]. As far as rural landscape is concerned, agriculture and rural development policies can play a major role in determining its protection, management and planning.

For all these reasons EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has become a specific focus of attention of a permanent EU Reflection Group on “EU and Cultural Heritage” (EU&CH). The Group has been recently established as a follow to the Declaration of Bruges on “Cultural Heritage: a resource for Europe. The benefits of interaction” (promoted by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2010). Members of the Group are experts in cultural heritage policies and representatives from national heritage authorities from the Member States of EU and EEA. Presently, 21 different countries are represented in the Group.

CAP has important consequences on the agricultural policies at the national level and has been, directly or indirectly, most influential on the change of the European rural landscape over the last five decades. Since 1960's the European Union has formulated a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in a strategic document that is revised on a regular basis. The current CAP (2014–2020) accounts for 38% of the total EU budget, stimulates sustainable farming and is based on two pillars that are in many ways interdependent and indirectly affect rural landscapes: (1) Green Direct Payment (GDP) and Market Measures; (2) Rural Development Programme (RDP). In pillar 1 is allocated the largest part (€ 308.72 billion) of the whole CAP budget so as to stimulate farmers to take greening measures, that is, measures to achieve environmental and climate objectives and to ensure agriculture long-term sustainability. In particular, farmers receive direct payments rewarding maintenance of permanent grassland; ecological focus areas; crop diversification. As far as pillar 2 is concerned, it should be

noted that in each Rural Development Programme at least 30% of the budget is allocated to voluntary measures benefitting the environment or climate. Other non-productive investments are also rewarded, including interventions for the repair, conservation and renewal of some landscape elements—such as field boundaries, dry-stone walls and so forth—which in many cases represent important features of the historic rural heritage. Moreover, in the ambit of LEADER (*Liaison Entre Action de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*) Programme, various projects involving heritage and landscape valorisation have been funded, many of which proposing integration of agriculture and tourism [82]. The combined effects of the two pillars have been extremely beneficial for the European countryside. In 2016, for example, holdings subject to one or more green measures of pillar 1 covered 78% of all utilized agricultural area of EU. Italy shows one of the lower performances in this ambit, with an area covered which is less than 50%. Most the initiatives undertaken have shown the interdependency of natural and cultural heritage management [83–85].

The report produced by EU&CH Reflection Group documents in a detailed way, through good practice, a positive although indirect influence of current CAP on the European rural landscapes [82]. Case-studies from different countries show that the application of CAP measures has produced the restoration of pastures and meadows, the recovery of vernacular architectural heritage (either buildings or minor landscape elements such as dry stone boundary walls or agricultural terraces), the creation of field margins to buffer vulnerable natural elements or archaeological sites, the set aside of lands as Ecological Focus Area and so forth. Nevertheless, a step forward is needed and in view of the approval of the new CAP commencing in 2021 a series of recommendations have been remarked to improve and extend its positive effects. From this point of view, it should be made a more explicit reference to landscape, landscape elements and heritage; this, both in relation to pillar 1 greening measures and to pillar 2 RDPs, since “heritage and/or landscape are implied but not mentioned as such and making them explicit can be helpful.” Six recommendations are to be taken into account: (1) Incorporating ELC definition of landscape into the CAP; (2) Remunerating farmers for preserving and managing the landscape; (3) Acknowledging the role of farmers as the main managers of rural landscape; (4) Stimulating Europe-wide exchange of best practices in the field of integrated approach to agricultural and cultural heritage and in the optimal utilization of relevant programmes such as CAP; (5) Cooperation and dialogue between governments and agencies, from the European to the local levels, to formulate and achieve common goals and ways to facilitate the delivery of environmental public goods; (6) Stimulating further dialogue, at all levels, between public governments and agencies and the main stakeholders, as well as between the agricultural and the heritage sector [82].

### **9. In View of Sustainability: Multifunctionality and the Ecosystem Services Provided by Historic and Traditional Rural Landscapes**

As shown in the previous section the new vision of the rural landscapes as affirmed on the field of cultural heritage and conservation needs to find convergent paths with analogous strategies concerning the environmental and the economic sectors. The progressive widening of the type and number of landscapes recognized as worthy of protection does not correspond to an increase of financial resources to maintain them; so, in some ways, historic rural landscapes in some ways have to pay for their own conservation. If the only productive function is not sufficient, a multifunctional approach can be more suitable to this purpose. From this point of view, multifunctionality, which in Europe today explicitly characterises either agriculture and the rural space, allows for an inversion of tendency. It can help to stop the progressive obsolescence of many rural historical landscapes and find for them new uses and functional reasons, coherently with the aims of sustainability. As it is required for any human activity, agriculture should be carried out in a sustainable way; to this purpose it should abandon some forms of landscape-indifferent and massively industrialized production systems and with the help of technological innovation find new systems which can suite better the distinctive characteristics of places, thus becoming more site-specific also [86].

The agriculture of the past in many ways was compelled to depend on the land where it took place and therefore to take care of it, otherwise it would have been compromised the possibility to last there; for this reason, it can today be seen as an inspirational example for the intelligent and responsible use of land resources. The relevance of the global environmental problems today urges for new forms of agriculture which have a lot to learn from the past agricultural practices and their landscapes: the good use of renewable energy sources (think of old agricultural mills driven by water or wind energy), the limited production of waste and the systematic use of agricultural by products (for animal feeding, soil fertilization, heat production, etc.); the use of local and natural building materials coupled with passive systems for microclimatic control in farm buildings (think of the many building solutions used in wineries to grant microclimatic conditions suitable for wine conservation); positive contribution given to water cycle and carbon sequestration; production diversification and biodiversity conservation.

Following the wide spreading of social awareness on environmental problems, in Italy as well as in other European countries, recently many agricultural concerns have shifted their attention towards the rediscovery of local food typicalities and the adoption of organic farming practices. To this end, they have often re-used or converted lands that in the past had revealed as specifically suitable. This also in order to match a changed consumers' demand, now oriented towards healthy and safe products and paying an ever-great attention to the production processes, with their environmental implications and the information regarding them. It has grown, moreover, the weight attributed by the consumer to ethical aspects.

More and more consumers tend to favour local and national products and will to know about the producing concerns either by visiting their headquarters and buying on farm their products, or by buying products at the local farmers' markets, often managed by farmers' associations. Visiting the farm can also assume a recreational value as an experience of rural tourism; this way it is inevitable to think of the quality of a given product as mirrored by the corresponding quality of the agricultural landscape it comes from. Such a specularity is more apparent for those typical products which get their identity from the relationship with regional landscapes, product history, local traditions and community knowledge. For such products as wine, olive oil, bread and cheese the historic rural landscapes related to them assume an extreme importance as: a specific content of the product's marketing image; a medium communicating products identity; a tourism attractor which can support recreational and cultural activities, some based on thematic eno-gastronomic cultural routes and so forth [87,88].

In other historic rural landscapes, such as the terraced ones, past forms of agriculture, heroic in some ways and otherwise condemned to obsolescence, today have found new reasons for continuing thanks to the ecosystem environmental services they are able to provide and that the community is prone to recognise, given their importance in granting landscape maintenance and reducing hydro-geologic risk, particular in very steep slopes located above human settlements.

## **10. The Vernacular Architectural Heritage as a Component and Interpretation-Key of the Historic Rural Landscapes**

A multifunctional and multisectorial integrated approach to agriculture and the rural space might grant a future not only to the historic rural landscapes but also to the many and varied heritage resources they contain and which contribute to characterize them. Some of these resources, as it is in the case of the vernacular architectural heritage, can greatly benefit from the landscape strategies and approaches outlined in the previous sections and, on their turn, help favour their application.

From this point of view, the important role played by the historic and traditional vernacular buildings deserves a specific attention. In fact, they represent the most synthetic and characteristic sign of the people-environment relationship, thus becoming a very significant and effective tool for interpreting historic rural landscapes.

In various European countries, as well as in some Italian regions, the work for characterizing the historic rural landscapes has been paired by the characterisation of the rural vernacular built heritage.

Today it is probably this kind of heritage which marks, more than any other element, the identity of rural landscapes, since it is a major interpretation-key helping to read them, thanks to its own nature as interface between the cultural and the natural components of the environment.

According to ICOMOS the vernacular built heritage “occupies a central place in the affection and pride of all peoples. It has been accepted as a characteristic and attractive product of society. It appears informal but nevertheless orderly. It is utilitarian and at the same time possesses interest and beauty. It is a focus of contemporary life and at the same time a record of the history of society. Although it is the work of man it is also the creation of time.” This heritage is important in that “it is the fundamental expression of the culture of a community, of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world’s cultural diversity” [89].

Traditional farm buildings, in particular, represent an effective answer to production demands and are coherent with the shared technological knowledge of the time and the concern’s financial availability, as well as responsive to the functional theme (i.e., determining indoor environment suitable for food processing and storage) and the local environmental and socio-cultural conditions. Although they are called to answer functional needs, nevertheless they represent an important document of the vernacular culture and of its continuity through generations and incorporate a precious cultural content.

Over the centuries, the traditional way of knowledge and ability transmission (informal, shared, learning by doing together) has consolidated some standard building solutions, per se functional and at the same time coherent with the landscape. Recently the cultural value of the rural vernacular built heritage, in the same way as for the rural landscapes, has been fully recognised and the need for its protection has been paralleled by the need for its sensitive revitalization and reuse. To this end, it has to be considered that this kind of heritage, as well as the landscapes of which is part, in the near past has known wide obsolescence, disuse and abandonment [90], inevitably followed by deterioration and decay. It is a heritage mostly redundant for the original purposes but nevertheless available for new suitable potential activities [91,92]. Multifunctionality of agriculture and rural space, if adequately interpreted, can offer the agricultural concerns the possibility to give a new life to old buildings by housing farm shops, tourism facilities, farm museums, events (music concerts, exhibitions), training and educational activities (environmental education, wine tasting and gastronomy courses, seminars, etc.) and many other uses which show compatibility with agriculture. Historic rural buildings have an important role in communicating the rooting of an agricultural concern in a given region, its historical dimension and become part of the marketing image of its products (Figure 9).

The need to adopt a sustainable approach to the built heritage throws a new light on the refurbishment and reuse of the present stock of redundant buildings, since this has now to be seen as the preferable way to answer the demand for residential or production spaces. For the same reasons, any attempt should be made to prolong the functional life of the built heritage still in use (by use intensification, adequation or conversion), even if partially used. In any case, should there not be any functional convenience in maintaining the buildings of the past, the cultural content they incorporate deserves to be released, interpreted and re-understood, so as to inspire and guide the conception of new buildings.

In a recent past, the Italian architects of the Modern Movement, frequently looked at the vernacular architectural heritage to learn from it a rational method for building design and construction [63,93]. Rural vernacular buildings can still be looked at by contemporary architects, so as to learn from them a sustainable approach, documented by such features as: the creative use of local resources; the wise altimetric articulation of the building to favour the transfer of the processed products by gravity; the systems adopted to catch, store and distribute drink and irrigation water; the various traditional passive systems used to control indoor microclimate; the use of building materials incorporating low energy content, natural, easily assemblable, disassemblable, reusable and recyclable; the effective visual integration with the landscape and the surrounding built heritage.



**Figure 9.** In many typical products that derive their quality from the relationship with a precise productive territory and from a long business tradition, the local landscape and the historical rural buildings are an instrument often used in the business communication and in the construction of the products' identity. Pictures show some labels of Sicilian wines representing, among the other elements of the wine region landscapes, examples of traditional architecture and historical farm buildings.

## 11. A New Future for the Past: Contemporary Rurality and the Valorisation of Historical Rural Landscapes

As it has been observed in the previous sections, progressive rural depopulation over the last century, in Italy as well as in other developed European countries, has been one of the main causes of the redundancy and dereliction of traditional and rural settlements, with negative effects on the historic rural landscapes. According to data trend estimated by United Nations [62], by 2050 urban population in Europe will amount 70.4%. The future of rural landscapes is closely depending on those who in the future will decide to inhabit and take care of it and therefore on the capacity to favour the inversion of the present migration trend. Landscapes, as stated in the ELC and remarked in previous sections, have to be seen first of all as living places. Will the search for well-being bring new groups of people to leave the cities and choose the rural landscape as a desirable place where to live, work and spend leisure time? Positive signs can be observed in some new forms of rurality that today are spreading, particularly among young generations. They can give an important contribution to the protection and revitalization of historical rural landscapes and, in their ambit, to the vernacular built heritage. Many activities that were traditionally urban-centred, today tend to move towards the countryside: recreation, sports, trade, tourism, restaurants and catering. The countryside is the favourite space also for some social services in which the farm itself can play an important and active role: educational and training services (educational farms, centres for environmental education, etc.) and social and health centres (green care farms, farms for the elderly, social farms). The great development known by infrastructure networks, telematics, information and communication technology, today make it easier to exchange information, documents and goods even when living in a remote locality. A number of production, commercial, craft and professional activities today prefer a rural localization, in territorial ambits either tranquil and accessible. It is also the choice of many practitioners who use new technologies but nevertheless prefer lifestyles keeping them in touch with nature and carry out part-time agriculture,

either for self-subsistence or by introducing in its innovative managing systems. Moreover, many young couples have chosen to live in the countryside there introducing new and alternative ways of living, aiming at energy and food self-sufficiency (grow—cook—eat); in some cases, these choices have been encouraged by far-sighted public programmes favouring and supporting either the acquisition or the long-term rental of disused or underused historic vernacular buildings and farmlands.

The trend above described lets us imagine that the historic rural landscape can be assured a new life, thus finding new meanings for the future [94,95]. A merely conservative approach, still present, should be therefore replaced by a creative and sustainable one, accepting that to the many layers of human settlements, which in the past shaped the historic landscapes, today new layers can succeed and superimpose in such a way that can be fully compatible. A way that can create new connections between the signs of the past and the new signs, thus reinterpreting and re-imagining the heritage received, welcoming the values they contain and revitalizing them in a new network of functions, activities, relationships [31]. In fact, the need to protect and valorise the rural landscapes and the signs of the past does not exempt us from the duty to trace new signs and build new landscapes, to organize the physical space in a new way coherent with the contemporary rural life. In order to allow this last to fully express its culture, social relations and economic activities, it should be implemented a new system of sustainable connections and infrastructures: new green infrastructure networks supporting slow non-motorized mobility; ecologic networks; initiatives and local networks for clean and renewable energy production/distribution at the local level; easier access to telecommunication and telematic networks in rural areas; and so forth.

New infrastructure networks are important also to redefine the rural/urban spatial dialectics, the two spaces not to be seen as antagonistic but as in search of positive integration, particularly in those transitional and fringe landscapes that are spatially fragmented, show poor quality and where people's discomfort originates from a bad relationship with their places. Moreover, in the Italian as in the other European cities, they are making their way new lifestyles which have many similarities with the rural ones: city farms; forms of urban horticulture in private or communal spaces; co-operative community management of urban green spaces; community forestry; green roofs, roof and vertical gardens; farmers' markets; green mobility; and so forth.

If the "loss of meaning" lamented by Rackham, as observed in the introductory section, can be considered either as a cause and an effect of the loss of the historic rural landscapes, the recovery and revitalization of these last needs a change in cultural attitude, also in the field of education and scientific research. The ELC invites to find new specific and holistic approaches to landscape and promote education, training and research on the matter. It should also become an important theme in sectorial studies, researches, strategies and policies. Finally, we remark the importance of a wide and open-minded scientific debate on the idea itself of landscape, to which the present work intends to offer a contribution. It has been observed by Marc Antrop that today the complexity and rapidity of the process of continuous adaptation of the land to human settlement's needs, coupled by the search for sustainability and set against the background of the varied and many interpretations of multifunctionality, make the idea itself of landscape a changing transitional concept. A concept, about which a number of different visions, values, cultural positions discuss and face each other; a concept for which a new holistic synthesis will be possible only through a wide transdisciplinary cooperation [94].

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