

*Research article***Sociopolitical conflicts on the establishment of protected natural areas:  
The case of Portofino National Park (Genoa, North-West Italy)****Lorenzo Brocada\***

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**Abstract:** This work traces the main stages of environmental and landscape protection of the Portofino Promontory, located in *Riviera Ligure di Levante* (N-W Italy), with particular regard on the recent establishment of Portofino National Park. From 2017, when the institution law was enacted, to date, the park has not yet been established due to the socio-political conflicts that have arisen between some stakeholders and institutions of the territory. These conflicts include not only environmentalists against hunters and constructors but also disagreement between municipalities and region (*Regione Liguria*) and between region and the Ministry of Environment. Today the situation is still stalled, and funds for a park larger than the current one (Portofino Regional Park) have not been allocated. In spite of this, the tug-of-war continues through legal actions. The aim of the article is to analyze the perception of the enlargement of the park by the community and local governance and how this is communicated by the press. The research was conducted through the analysis of the results of a questionnaire aimed at understanding the level of knowledge of the main functions of a national park and the position of the people with respect to it. Second, an analysis of the press was carried out to understand the narratives on this environmental measure. The results of the questionnaire showed a positive consensus toward the park, while press analysis showed little involvement of experts on the subject to foster a political debate without concrete arguments, which damaged the park's image.

**Keywords:** natural parks; sociopolitical conflicts; landscape; environmental protection; tourism; Italian Riviera; Liguria, Portofino

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## 1. Introduction: research objectives and methodological outline

Natural parks are generally perceived by many people with varying levels of knowledge on the subject. Some may view parks only as systems of conservation of the environment and landscape, while other may view them as a kind of theme park where people can satisfy the desire to immerse themselves in the “wilderness”.

From the strictly academic point of view, research is often mono-sectoral, concentrated only on a single dimension of these extraordinary spatial management tools, thus lacking a comprehensive and interdisciplinary view of the subject. Therefore, the geographical approach is a possible solution to holistically address the study of natural protected areas, thanks to its ability to synthesize the different features of the territory from a spatial point of view [1,2]. As Giuntarelli [3] notes, the choice to analyze only the touristic values of natural parks is the most common. Nevertheless, in order to have a more complete assessment, both private and social benefits should be evaluated, but above all they should be assessed according to the possible alternatives for that type of territory, considering that a good part of the public and social benefits of a park are difficult to quantify monetarily since they concern abstract aspects such as psycho-physical well-being, environmental education, biodiversity richness and prestige of the territory [4].

In spite of such a traditional approach to protected areas, a new paradigm is necessary which systematizes the various dimensions of natural parks and increase awareness on the real role of these institutions.

In this sense, such topics need to be discussed not only at academic level but also in a citizen science perspective to understand how and why natural protected areas are perceived by communities living within them or in their surroundings. It is fundamental to understand the daily critical issues that may emerge with respect to certain economic activities more harmful or less harmful to ecosystems and landscape such as tourism, construction and industry or more traditional or less traditional cultural practices such as farming, agriculture, hunting and fishing.

The difficulty of this research challenge is to use quantitative methods for calculating the tangible benefits and drawbacks related to the presence or absence of natural protected areas. The traditional tools of geographical analysis are often insufficient to demonstrate the overall impacts on the territories under protection [5]. For this reason, the analysis of the socio-political conflicts should be the starting point for a feasibility study of a new protected area. By listening to the local community positions, the future park could be better anchored in its territory, increasing its consensus [6]. Indeed, if insiders are involved in the process of park establishment and definition, these can become an extraordinary laboratory of sustainability where governance can experiment with innovative forms of territorial management [7].

An example of theoretical-conceptual reference in this sense is certainly the model for the analysis of socio-political landscape of environmental and natural resources management (ENRM) conflicts proposed by Colvin et al. [8], “This model incorporates the conduct of stakeholders and the citizenry in the governance process, within the culture of conflict. The conceptual model can be read as a clock face, with a radius from the centre extending to the outer edge, passing across the concurrent phases of the four elements. The centre circle represents the object of the deliberations-commonly a landscape or policy. Adjacent to the object is ENRM governance, which is surrounded by the stakeholders, then the citizenry, and on the outermost circle, the culture of conflict” [Ivi, p. 240].

To conduct the analysis on the social perception of the park, articles regarding the Portofino National Park (NP) establishment process in the local and national daily press, were collected from

2017 to the present, according to methodologies proposed by Staniscia et al. [9] and researchers from the *Équipe Proximités* of the UMR SAD-APT (*UMR 1048 Science Action Développement—Activités Produits Territoires*) [10] who studied the conflictual cases of the *Parco Nazionale della Costa Teatina*—still unrealized—and the *Parc National des Calanques*, realized only in 2012 after years of battles [11]. In particular, the research on the French case study analyses several complementary sources: more than 400 articles in the daily press from before the establishment of the park (1988–2012) and after (2012–2016), interviews with experts, representatives of associations, political and local government representatives, researchers, park employees, professionals and ordinary citizens and legal reports of the disputes like Administrative Courts of Appeal and Council of State rulings regarding conflicting objects found in the Calanques territory (a total of 9). The Italian case is based on a review of articles appeared on daily press, an analysis of video report with interview about the park, the direct observation of stakeholders' positions through participation in public events and the implementation of a survey concerning park's boundaries.

This method of social observation, considering the power of the media in our society, while not aiming for complete exhaustiveness can help delineate citizens' perceptions of a phenomenon. In this case, just by analyzing the headlines of the articles, we can highlight the recurrence of certain conflicting themes related to the creation of a natural park.

## 2. Study area: geography and short history of a beloved and contested park

### 2.1. The Portofino Promontory: an icon of the Ligurian Riviera

The Portofino Promontory is located in the metropolitan area of Genoa (Liguria, North-West Italy), less than 20 km away from the centre of the city and it is part of the *Riviera Ligure di Levante*, the subregion extending roughly from Genoa to La Spezia.

The profile of this promontory has always been an iconic element of the Ligurian Riviera and of the landscape of the two gulfs it forms: Tigullio and Paradiso, located respectively between Genoa and Camogli and between Portofino and Sestri Levante [12,13] (Figure 1). Using a concept proposed by Turri [14], it could be defined as a *iconema*, i.e., an element that, for its considerable symbolic power and the frequency with it recurs in the landscape, denotes an entire territory. It is precisely because of its pleasing preponderance in the landscape and for its environmental and artistic elements that, since the Modern Age [15–17], it attracted travelers—pilgrims and nobles—first and artists—painters and writers—later and continues to attract them today, at times in elitist form and at times in mass tourism form [18,19]. From an ecological point of view, the area is of great interest because it encloses, in a limited territory for extension and altitude development, more than 900 higher plant species with very different distribution and origin. Many of these species are endemism or at the limit of their zone of presence distribution area. In addition, the particular climatic conditions allow an unusual coexistence of species of warm climates and species of northern climates, present at unusually low altitudes. Also remarkable are the traditional terraced cultivations that have formed a rural landscape of great value, such as the olives and the vineyards in the southern slopes and the chestnut in the northern slopes.



**Figure 1.** Study area map (Elaborated with QGis 3.30).

Starting from the 20th Century, Portofino promontory has repeatedly been exposed to speculative building, which has partly compromised its traditional landscape structure, particularly in the small floodplains of Rapallo and Santa Margherita and along the Ruta Pass [20]. In the four municipalities of the Promontory—Camogli, Portofino, Santa Margherita Ligure and Rapallo—this process has caused a proliferation of second homes (Table 1), already observed by Scarin [21], Leardi [22], Mangano [18] and Brandolini et al. [23], which is still growing today. Also, due to the contemporary decrease in population, these factors have led to more than 52% of the total number of houses not permanently occupied (Table 1) according to ISTAT data concerning 2021. More than half of houses are uninhabited for most of the year; a percentage much higher than the provincial one (*Città Metropolitana di Genova*, hence CM) and regional one (*Regione Liguria*), about 28% and 38% respectively. Such data is traditionally high for a series of historical and geographical reasons, including the fact that this is a very popular coastal resort for the catchment area of Piedmont and Lombardy [24].

**Table 1.** Data on housing occupancy in 2021 in the municipalities of the Portofino Promontory [25].

Municipality	Occupied apartments	Unoccupied apartments	Total apartments	Percentage of unoccupied apartments
Camogli	2610	3049	5659	53.88%
Portofino	207	435	642	67.76%
Rapallo	14299	14068	28367	49.59%
S. Margherita Ligure	4432	6162	10594	58.16%
Total Promontorio	21548	23714	45262	52.39%
Total CM di Genova	406963	158009	564972	27.97%
Total Regione Liguria	742596	454387	1196983	37.96%

The modes of tourism development that have characterized this area have had a remarkable impact from a landscape-environmental point of view [26] but also from the social one. A high number of second homes and underestimation of visitor numbers makes it difficult to measure visitor flows, making it impossible to fully assess the real tourism pressure on the territory and the social and environmental impacts of it.

A small part of houses that are not permanently inhabited are now used for short rentals through online platforms—the most known of these is Airbnb—according to a pattern of “touristification” [27], or “airbnbization” [28], which is spreading in Italian art cities and ancient villages. This phenomenon is contributing to making these destinations increasingly commoditized and less authentic; traditional activities and the local community are slowly disappearing, replaced by economic activities aimed entirely at tourism like boutiques, souvenir shops, restaurants and, above all, bars, which often concentrate the economic benefits in a few people and leave the most negative aspects of tourism to the local community [29]. An emblematic example of this process is the closure of the Fishermen’s Cooperative of Camogli, often promoted as a tourist “fishing village” [30].

## 2.2. Main historical milestones in the protection of the Portofino Promontory.

In order to cope with the increasing urbanization in the promontory municipalities and for propaganda reasons related to the protection of Italians “natural beauty” [31], during the fascist period (1922–1943), the authorities were pushed to develop protective regulations aimed at preserving the remaining part of the promontory and its environmental elements, establishing what can be called the ancestor of today’s Portofino Park. The protection started, more precisely, on a utopian proposal to build a coastal road connecting Camogli with Santa Margherita Ligure, through Portofino [21,32,33]. The road was never built due to technical difficulties encountered, but a few years later, with Law No. 1251/35—followed by *Regio Decreto 1777/37*, which approved the regulations of the authority—the *Ente Autonomo del Monte di Portofino* was founded, based in Genoa at the *Consiglio Provinciale dell’Economia Corporativa*, which was initially governed by a *Commissione Amministrativa* and managed by a *Comitato Direttivo* (*Ibid.*, art. 6). This authority was also authorized to acquire, and in case of a disagreement to expropriate or to take under temporary management, the land included in the perimeter of the promontory (*Ibid.*, Art. 9), a power that over time ended.

In the 1970s, Italian regions with ordinary statutes acquired competencies in environmental matters from the state, and towards the end of the decade, as environmental awareness progressed, legislative initiatives to protect territories multiplied, sometimes laboriously [1]. With regional Law 40/77 “*Norme per la salvaguardia dei valori naturali per la promozione di parchi e riserve naturali in Liguria*” the Portofino Promontory was included in the protected areas system of *Regione Liguria* that was being established in those years.

In the following decades, Regional Law 32/86 “*Individuazione e disciplina del sistema di aree di interesse naturalistico-ambientale del Monte di Portofino*” established the *Ente Regionale Monte di Portofino* and redefined the boundaries of the “Park Area” and “Area Cornice” which collectively included the municipalities of Recco, Camogli, Portofino, S. Margherita Ligure, Rapallo, Zoagli and Chiavari. This norm was repealed in 1995 and replaced by the fundamental law for the natural parks of Liguria (L.r. n. 12/95 “*Riordino delle aree protette*”), which redefined the whole system of regional parks and established the current *Ente Parco di Portofino*, with its own administrative and functional autonomy. A few years later, the *Area Marina Protetta di Portofino* (MPA) was created by an

Environment Ministry Decree dated 26/04/1999, alongside the terrestrial park.

Finally, in 2001, L.r. no. 29/01 “*Individuazione del perimetro del Parco naturale regionale di Portofino e disposizioni speciali per il relativo piano*” reorganized the boundaries of the Park Area and the new “*Area contigua*” and also attributed powers to the entity over some sites of community importance (SCIs) and special areas of conservation (SACs)—or SIC (*Sito di importanza comunitaria*)/ZSC (*Zona Speciale di Conservazione*)—in the municipalities of Rapallo, Zoagli and Chiavari, excluding Recco for the first time.

### 2.3. Current situation

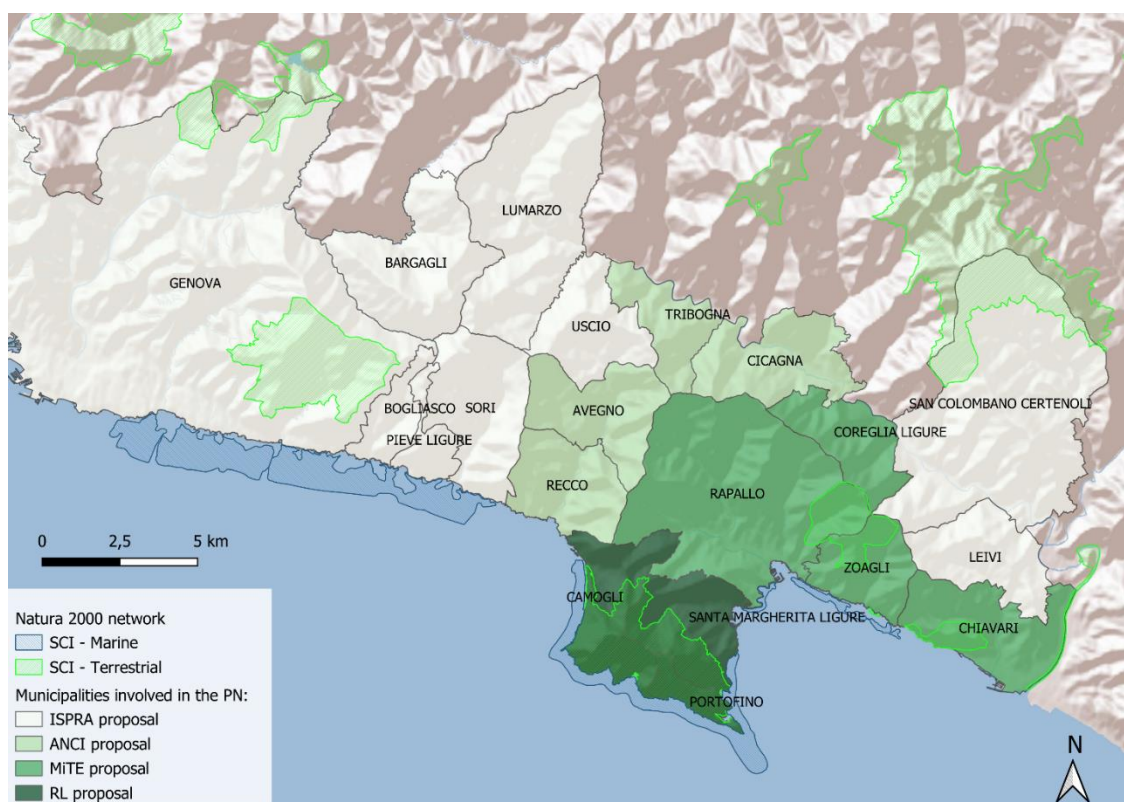
In recent times, with the “*Legge di Bilancio*” of Italian Republic (L. Dec. 27, 205/17), the “*Parco Nazionale di Portofino*” was established, starting a process that has produced a study by ISPRA (*Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale*) where a team coordinated by Pierangela Angelini has outlined for the area of the new park, extended to part of Tigullio, Val Fontanabuona and Golfo Paradiso, for a total of 20 municipalities in the CM of Genoa.

The measure has not been positively received by the regional council and many mayors of the municipalities involved, who have obstructed the establishment of the park from the outset, stalling on the legislative tasks to be carried out and issuing statements against it, or at best favoring only the transformation from regional to national park by maintaining the boundaries of the current *Parco Regionale di Portofino* (RP) in addition to the MPA. Such a solution is almost impossible to implement because it would entail the establishment of a much smaller NP than all the others existing in Italy (1056 hectares), thus not justifying the increased funding it would receive. In fact, the least extensive park at present is the nearby *Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre*, which has an area of 3868 hectares, followed by the two Sardinian national parks which are situated in the small islands *Parco nazionale dell’Arcipelago di La Maddalena* and *Parco nazionale dell’Asinara* (respectively 5134 and 5170 hectares).

## 3. The process of transformation in national park and its conflictual aspects

### 3.1. The proposed new delimitations

Due to the need to territorially define the new NP, four delimitations have been proposed by various authorities since 2018 (Figure 2). These proposals agree on the merger with the Portofino MPA but not on the number of municipalities to be involved: (1) 20 municipalities (ISPRA); (2) 11 municipalities (Ministero della Transizione Ecologica); (3) seven municipalities (Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani) and (4) three municipalities (Regione Liguria).



**Figure 2.** Municipalities involved in the various proposed delimitation of the NP of Portofino (background image: ESRI shaded relief, elaborated with QGIS 3.30).

In ISPRA’s preliminary proposal, the basic objective is to gather a series of SCIs/SACs (IT1331718 Monte Fasce, IT1332614 Pineta—Lecceta di Chiavari, IT1332622 Rio Tuia—Montallegro) isolated from each other between Genoa and Chiavari (Figure 2), including them in an NP that, through its human and economic resources and its brand, could have a positive impact on these areas thanks to an “active protection” view, following of the principles of *Legge Quadro sulle aree protette* which helped to change the conception of natural park in the country (L. 394 6/12/91).

The area of interest initially defined by the ISPRA team included part of the municipalities of Genoa, Bargagli, Bogliasco, Pieve Ligure, Lumarzo, Sori, Recco, Avegno, Uscio, Tribogna, Camogli, Portofino, Santa Margherita Ligure, Rapallo, Cicagna, Zoagli, Coreglia Ligure, San Colombano Certenoli, Leivi and Chiavari, all in CM of Genoa. This delimitation of 20 municipalities—although provisional—was shelved for three years until the summer 2021, when the new Ministry of Ecological Transition (MiTE), following legal action by some environmental associations (*Associazione Internazionale Amici del Monte di Portofino* and *Associazione Verdi Ambiente e Società—V.A.S.*) that led to the Lazio Regional Administrative Court’s ruling of 06/28/2021, proceeded by Decree No. 332 of August 6, 2021 “*Perimetrazione provvisoria e misure provvisorie di salvaguardia del Parco nazionale di Portofino*” to identify a provisional park delimitation and establish a provisional management committee. In addition, the MiTE urged *Regione Liguria* to cooperate in the resolving delimitation of the protected area to definitively form the new NP within 30 days, suggesting mediation between the state and the region. The ministerial proposal that emerged from this dispute included a decrease in the municipalities involved from 20 to 11 (Avegno, Camogli, Cicagna, Coreglia Ligure, Chiavari, Portofino, Rapallo, Recco, Santa Margherita Ligure, Tribogna and

Zoagli), going so far as to exclude a good part of the municipalities in the Paradiso Gulf and some in the Fontanabuona Valley.

The response of *Regione Liguria* and most of the municipalities involved (excluding Camogli and Zoagli) was an appeal to the ruling—initially won (*Sentenza n. 222 del 22 marzo 2022*) but then cancelled by *Consiglio di Stato* (*Sentenza n. 625 del 18 gennaio 2023*)—followed by a counterproposal from only 7 municipalities—supported by ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities) and *Federparchi*—that involved only the municipalities of Portofino, Camogli, Santa Margherita Ligure, Rapallo, Zoagli, Chiavari and Coreglia Ligure. This solution was not accepted by the Ministry of Ecological Transition. Also, the region's proposal, surprisingly supported by WWF Italia, to transform the current PR into a national one by simply merging it with the MPA was not accepted.

The situation seemed stalled, but the change of national government in autumn 2022 presented an opportunity to balance the conflict. The new Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security (politically aligned with Liguria Region), which replaced the Ministry of Ecological Transition of the previous government, has positively received the proposal of keeping the borders already in force for the new NP, signing a new decree of establishment. Despite this, new appeals have already been lodged since no final ISPRA opinion has been sought and the judgment is scheduled for April 2024. Therefore, the conflict has not yet ended.

Moreover, for the first time, the Environment Committee of the Chamber of Deputies has organized a hearing on the National Park of Portofino to understand the wishes of the municipalities of Avegno, Camogli, Chiavari, Cicagna, Coreglia Ligure, Portofino, Rapallo, Recco, Santa Margherita Ligure, Tribogna and Zoagli. This meeting took place online on Monday 13 November 2023 and the individual mayors briefly expressed the position of their municipality. Based on this it turned out that: four of these are in favor of entering the new park: Coreglia Ligure, Leivi, Rapallo and Zoagli; one is neutral: Chiavari; three are against entering: Avegno, Recco and Tribogna; while the three that are already part (Camogli, Portofino and Santa Margherita Ligure) are against accepting new municipalities, probably because they can share the new funds only among themselves.

### 3.2. *The potential of a national park: from environmental protection to sustainable tourism*

Despite the potential of an NP, the measure has been seen by many people as a constraint imposed by the state, like a top-down measure, rather than as an opportunity for the area, partly due to a lack of accurate information from authorities. As Graziani and Piccioni [34,35] observe, in Italy, until the promulgation of the *Legge Quadro*, natural parks were established and managed with a purely conservational approach towards attacks on natural and landscape resources; this fact produced the stereotype of parks like simple constraints for the territory.

Even today, the establishment and expansion of natural parks involves conflict due to the tensions between public and private interests, particularly in highly anthropized coastal areas, such as objectives of biodiversity conservation, economic development and common welfare. Such negative perception of natural park establishment is not a novelty in the Mediterranean panorama. Some examples of recent critical situations are the aforementioned troubled establishment of the *Parc National des Calanques* in France, the never realized park of *Costa Teatina* and the *Parco Nazionale del Gennargentu e Golfo di Orosei* in Sardinia [36]. However, there are contrary examples where people have expressed a desire to have a natural park to protect their land from outside speculation. For example, the *Parc Natural de Cap de Creus* in Catalonia, established in 1998, was born starting from a collection of more than 18000



signatures promoted by IAEDEN (*Institució Alt Empordanesa per a la Defensa i Estudi de la Natura*), along with other entities and organizations [37].

Beyond the ideological and party positions that have monopolized the public debate (Figure 3), the transformation of Portofino Park from a regional to a national one, with the consequent enlargement of the protected area, could be an important tool for the future of this area.



**Figure 3.** Political posters of some parties about the topic (Source Facebook).

Through the increased state funding provided for an NP, it would be possible to extend policies of landscape enhancement, hydrogeological risk mitigation, monitoring, education and environmental outreach to the surrounding areas, exporting good practices that have long been tried and tested in the territory of the RP or other NPs. For example, restoration of mills converted into hospitality and dining facilities [38], maintenance and enhancement of trails [39], mitigation of environmental issues through Nature-Based Solutions [40] and educational programs consolidated for years [18].

In addition, a bigger park could become a connecting vector between coast and inner areas—as well as between MPA and RP [41]—not only as an ecological corridor for animal and plant species creating a network with the other two parks in the Ligurian Apennines (*Parco Regionale dell’Antola* and *Parco Regionale dell’Aveto*) but also as a hub of territorial cohesion projects to decrease the socio-economic gap between coast and mountain, typical of this region [42]. In fact, the *Istruttoria per l’istituzione del Parco Nazionale di Portofino* [43] mentions minimization of the “margin” and “island” effects in a perspective of creation of an ecological network.

Finally, it could be a useful tool to encourage the redistribution of tourism, relieving tourism pressure on best-known resorts, which are at certain times of the year threatened by over-tourism, as well as to create green jobs through the reactivation of typical agri-food productions, the organization

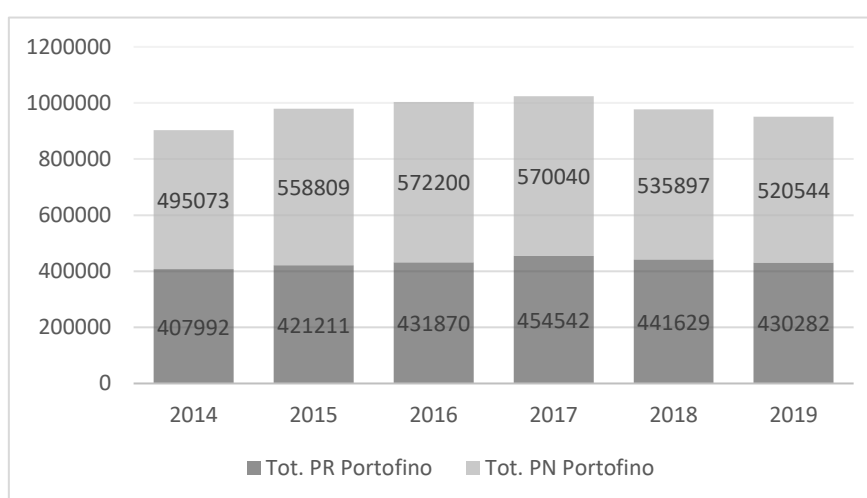
of slow tourism itineraries that retrace ancient panoramic paths and the restoration of disused production facilities or mining sites that can be reconverted into ecomuseums. For example, the slate quarries and the Tower Clock Museum in Uscio, the Bell Museum in Avegno and so on.

However, from an economic point of view, it is not easy to demonstrate the benefits of a park, especially potential ones. There are no detailed studies in literature on the actual spillover effects on the territory of Ligurian parks, excluding the report on the real economy of the parks edited by the Ministry of the Environment and Unioncamere in 2014 that only concerns Liguria marginally as the sole NP in Cinque Terre. Initially, the RP did not seem to have positively impacted employment in the three municipalities [32], perhaps also due to other socio-economic dynamics.

In any case, data from the last years before Covid-19 (2014–2019) shows a trend of rather stable annual tourist presences between 900000 and 1000000 (Figure 4). On average, 44% of these are concentrated in the three municipalities of the current RP—Camogli, Portofino and Santa Margherita—which cover only 15% of the total area of the municipalities involved in the enlargement project. This data shows an excessive tourist pressure on the three municipalities of the current RP, even more so, considering that these numbers should be added to vacationers in second homes and that the flows are mainly concentrated in a small part of the municipal territories, i.e., the three respective historic centers and the San Fruttuoso Abbey.

For these reasons, the Municipality of Portofino has introduced a restriction on flows in the well-known “*piazzetta*” [44] and a closed-number restriction was recently hypothesized also for San Fruttuoso [45].

Clearly, the greater success of tourist movement of the three RP municipalities compared to the surrounding ones is not directly attributable to the presence of the park according to a cause-and-effect logic, but this data helps to disprove the hypothesis that a protected area hinders the tourist development of a region. However, in order to confirm the beneficial role of a park in territorial development, more in-depth studies would be needed that considers not only additional indicators (economic, social and environmental) but, more importantly, compares different areas with similar geographic characteristics to observe any differences in development trajectories between municipalities with protected areas and vice versa.



**Figure 4.** Trend of tourist presences in the period 2014–2019 in the three municipalities of the current Portofino RP (Camogli, Portofino and S. Margherita L.) and in the other municipalities involved by ISPRA for the future Portofino NP [25].

### 3.3. Local community fears due to false myths about the national park

According to daily press articles, the local community is principally concerned with issues common to many Italian natural parks, such as building permits, ungulate management and hunting activity.

In particular, the first issue has a considerable specific weight because this territory is a typical example of a Mediterranean coastal area, traditionally very attractive for the building industry [46,47]. In this regard, it should be highlighted that the areas that would be included in the NP are purely hilly and sparsely inhabited, but above all, they are already subject to constraints on new construction due to the urbanistic plans of the individual municipalities, as well as to the regional *Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento Paesistico*. Therefore, the thesis that the enlargement of the park will block new constructions is false. The presence of a park can instead slow down building practices because they will require the authorization of the authority for each construction work.

The second issue is perceived as a real emergency because of the excessive number of wild boars in the region but especially because of the African Swine Fever epidemic that spread in 2022 to much of the CM of Genoa. This factor led the region in 2022 to attempt to abolish the “*Area contigua*” of the RP for the entire period of the emergency through a resolution of December 28, with the aim of opening hunting in these areas [48]. Due to the very limited territory of the Area contigua (less than 1000 hectares), this measurement would have an extremely limited impact in reducing the number of ungulates and goes against ISPRA’s directives regarding the management of epidemic [49]. Instead, it appears as another attempt from *Regione Liguria* to reduce the size of protected areas. Other attempts in this direction in recent years are Regional Law No. 3 of April 19, 2019—known as “*taglia-parchi*” [park-cutters]—challenged by the national government on the grounds that regions with ordinary statutes could not decrease degrees of environmental protection but only implement them with respect to national legislation and for which the higher court (*Corte Costituzionale*) issued Law 134/2020 declaring as many as five articles illegitimate and Law No. 7 of 07/15/2022, in which the article 18 provided for a further reorganization of protected areas by decreasing their extent and autonomy, which was also challenged by the *Consiglio dei Ministri* and later declared legitimate by *Corte Costituzionale* ruling No. 115 of 06/8/2023.

The issue of hunting is strongly related to the potential inclusion of hunting areas along several ridges of the Paradiso and Tigullio Gulfs, which would be subject to protection, where currently fixed ambushes used for hunting birds, regularly authorized and generally marked by permission signs along the trails are located. Although this is a niche activity compared to hiking and general outdoor recreation that are already practiced in the area but could grow further, the hunters’ lobby holds significant political clout in Liguria and is clearly hostile to the expansion of protected areas in the territory where hunting is practiced.

A further critical point raised by opponents to NP is the use of the Portofino brand. According to some stakeholders of this town, with the enlargement of the park, the brand name “Portofino” would be improperly used. In this regard, however, an alternative or composite name could be proposed, as it has happened to other natural parks that include more than one geographic region. This is the case of the *Parco Nazionale del Cilento, Monti Alburni, e Vallo di Diana* which covers more than 181000 hectares and includes both coastal and inland areas and also of *Parco regionale di Montemarcello-Vara-Magra* which is composed of a promontory and two watercourses that descend from the Apennines and give the name to the park. To solve the problem, the name could be changed, e.g., *Parco nazionale di Portofino e del Tigullio* or *Parco nazionale di Portofino, Golfo Paradiso e Tigullio*, depending on the municipalities involved.

Finally, from a strictly political-management point of view, the regional and municipal administrations opposing to the enlargement of the park fear for losing political control over the territory. With the establishment of an NP, the management of the area would no longer depend on the region but would pass directly to the Ministry, reducing the decision power on it. Additionally, as Camerada [50] notes, the more a protected area—for reasons related to its administrative boundaries—involves a high number of actors, the more articulated the administrative practice becomes, to the detriment of timeliness and efficiency. A greater number of stakeholders also equals greater difficulty in making shared choices because of the reasons and expectations of a multiplicity of people. A greater number of municipalities within the park authority is perceived by administrations—and by many citizens—as an increase in bureaucracy.

As already noted by Spotorno [32], one of the mistakes made by authorities and associations in favor of greater protections is often to emphasize purely environmental aspects, which are not always perceived by the whole community, without carrying out dissemination initiatives to inform the community, and without caring about some of the actors in the area. At the same time, there is a general reluctance by many citizens to listen to—and even less to understand—environmental and sustainable development issues. Indeed, as Tillet and French [51] note, environmental conflicts occur when there are two groups of people expressing different values, beliefs and interests, regardless of whether they actually take action to defend their position or have arguments for doing so. In spite of this, it is important to note the efforts of some associations and parties in organizing meetings, conferences, public debates and street leafleting at various municipalities involved in the new park to raise awareness of the park's opportunities. Some initiatives have been promoted by the coordination for the NP (numerous conferences and press releases), the “Tutti per il Parco” Committee (a conference in 2023 and a public meeting in Recco in 2022 and several leafleting sessions), Slow Food (a public meeting in Fontanabuona Valley), the Ligurian section of Legambiente (an online conference in 2020 and a conference in Zoagli in 2022)—which even awarded Liguria the “*Bandiera nera*” for the environment in 2021—and by the Linea Condivisa local party (a public meeting in Genoa in 2020 and an online conference in 1).

#### **4. Survey on social perception of the NP: from the local community to the daily press**

##### *4.1. Analysis of the perception by local community and frequent visitors through a questionnaire*

Using Goofle Forms, a survey was circulated in 2021 via social networks, word of mouth and in paper format at some local facilities. The survey was aimed at better understanding the perception of this protected area by the local community and its frequent visitors, especially regarding its enlargement. The questions were divided into personal data, opinions on the economic and social impact of the park, level of knowledge about some functions of the park and a final more personal question (Table 2).

The responses obtained by June 2023 amount to 1027. Although representing a limited sample of the local community and park users, the response show an overwhelming majority of people are in favor of enlarging the protected area. It should be noted that only 75% of respondents live in one of the municipalities involved by the measure, 8% live in the Region and 10% do not live in Liguria at all. In addition, it should be noted that a large proportion of people potentially opposed to the NP may have no interest in participating in such initiatives, as well as in public debate events. Thus, it is

possible that those who filled out the questionnaire were mainly citizens who are interested in the topic and therefore more sensitive to environmental protection issues.

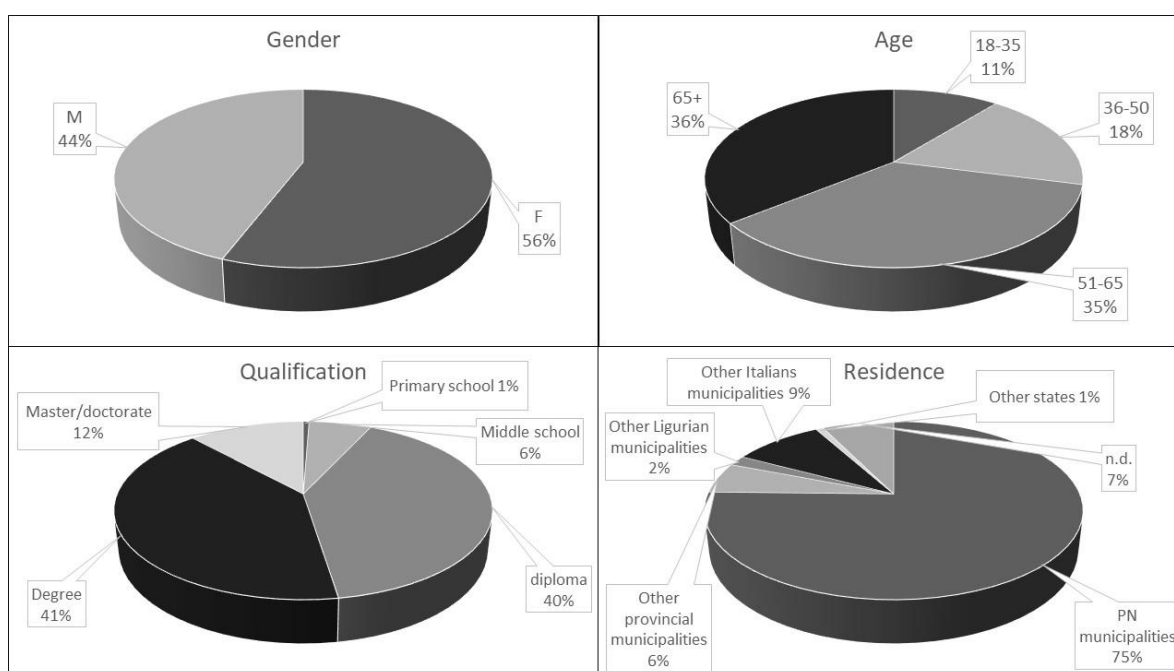
**Table 2.** List of questions in the questionnaire.

Category	Questions	Possible answers	
Personal data	Gender	M/F	
	Age	16–35/36–50/51–65/Over 65	
	Qualification	Primary school/Middle school/Diploma/Degree/PhD-Master	
	Job	Student/Education and research/Employed/Freelance and businessman/Merchant/Healthcare/Industry and crafts/Agriculture and breeding/food and tourism/ housewife/Retired/Unemployed/Other	
	Residence	Free	
	Reason for interest	Tourist-Hikers/Tourism operator/Farmer/Hunter/Resident or property owner/Stakeholder/Environmentalist	
		Do you think that the presence of a PN, due to its notoriety, would offer greater benefits to the economy of the area, for example, to hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, stores, supermarkets?	Yes/No/Maybe/Don't know
Impacts on economy and society		Do you think that there would be more job opportunities for tour operators and transport (including maritime)?	Yes/No/Maybe/Don't know
		In your opinion, how important is the development of tourism at local level?	Fundamental/Very important/Fairly important/Not very or not at all important
		Do you think that the presence of the National Park will be useful for young people to stay and work in Liguria?	Yes/No/Maybe/Don't know
		Do you think that the presence of a National Park, thanks to funding, is useful for the care of the territory, to recover the woods, olive groves, dry stone walls, ancient hilly paths, etc.?	Yes/No/Maybe/Don't know
		The National Park is going to get a lot of money. How would you use National Park funding if you were the one to decide how to spend it? Would you like to choose some of the following proposals and add them? (Multiple choice)	Hire an adequate number of park guards and tour guides prepared/Recover olive groves and agricultural areas for the production of quality oil, honey etc./Encourage agriculture, horticulture and the establishment of agricultural cooperatives in the territory/Recovery of paths, fountains and historical artifacts/Recovery of abandoned farmhouses for reuse in agriculture and revitalization of the territory

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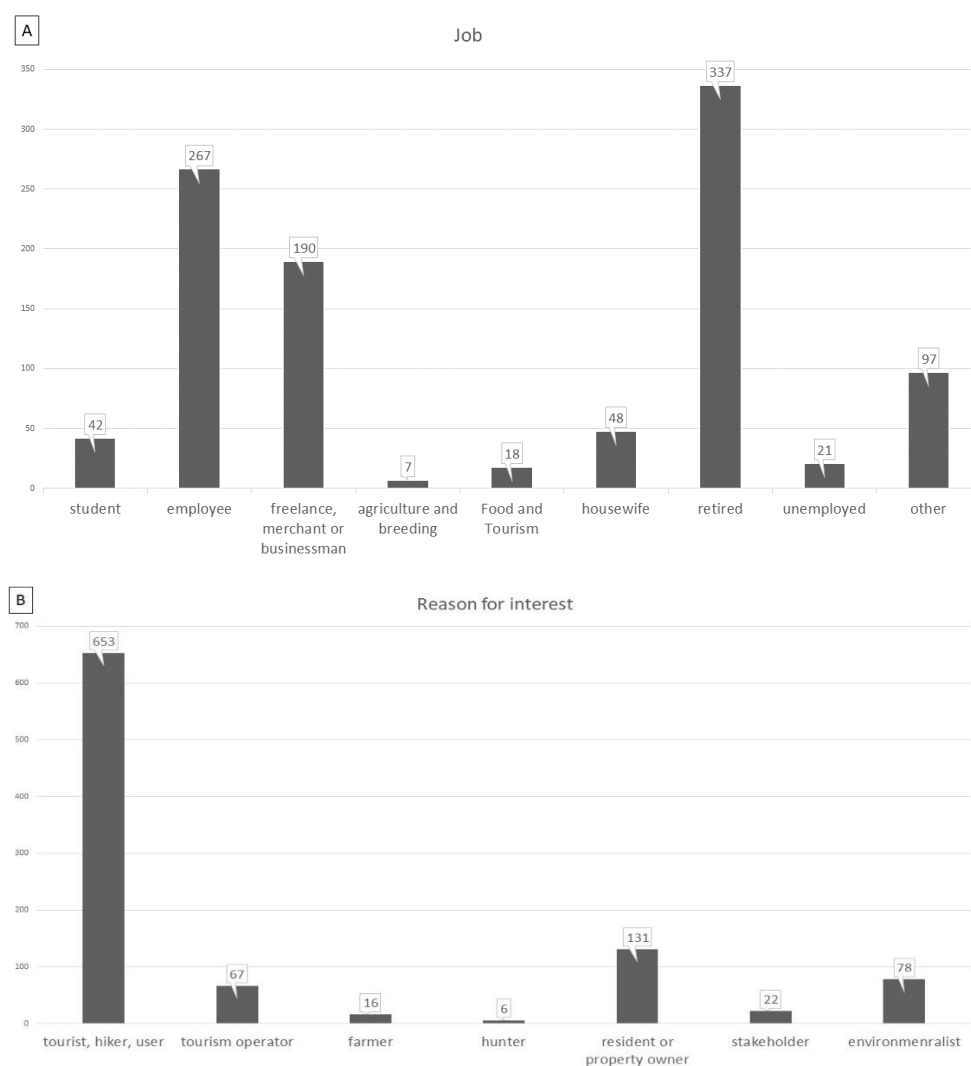
Category	Questions	Possible answers
Level of information	Are you aware that in a National Park agricultural land is being developed and the recovery of buildings useful for agriculture and the necessary fences are also being favoured?	Yes/ No
	Are you aware that within the parks there is a wildlife control plan in place to rebalance wildlife, such as breeding plans to reduce the number of wild boars or roe deer?	Yes/ No
	Are you aware that some Italian National Parks have been closed or blocked by the will of residents?	Yes/No (If yes, wich one?)
Personal impacts	If you are a resident or owner of a property or land, do you think it would be appropriate for some hilly areas of your municipality to be included in the Portofino National Park?	Yes/No/Maybe/Don't know

The sample is rather representative of the demographic composition of this territory, with a high percentage of retired people and a low number of young people (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Master data of questionnaire participants (Own elaboration).

Among the respondents, there is a clear majority (over 63%) of park-goers (such as hikers or tourists) but also a 10% interested in the measure given their status as citizens or owners of property and land in the affected municipalities (Figure 6). Finally, 7.5% of the participants say they are simply nature lovers, environmentalists or animal activists and therefore interested in the topic. These are followed by those who have professions in some way related to the park (6.5% tourism workers, 1.6% farmers and 0.6% hunters), the rest do not specify.



**Figure 6.** (A) respondents' job (B) reason for interest with respect to the park.

In relation to economic aspects and in terms of job offerings, almost 87% of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “do you think that the presence of a PN, due to its notoriety, would offer greater benefits to the economy of the area, for example, to hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, stores, supermarkets?”. Only 2% answered “no” and the remainder answered “maybe/not sure” to this question.

In addition, 54.7% of respondents identify tourism as a “fundamental” aspect of local development, while 36.4% identify it as “very important” and 7.4% as “fairly important”. Only 1.5% consider this economic sector “not very or not at all important”.

On the other hand, 85.7% of respondents believe that the park would provide more job opportunities for tourism and transportation operators (including maritime), and in particular, more than 60 % claim that it could stop the loss of young people seeking work in other regions or states.

Turning to the landscape-environmental aspects, 93.2% think that the presence of the NP, thanks to funding, would be useful for the care of the territory, to recover the forests, olive groves, dry stone walls and ancient hillside paths. 5.4% are not sure or do not know, and only 1.5% disagree with this statement.

In terms of information on the conflicting aspects and stereotypes related to protected areas, only 5% of respondents are aware of other cases of opposition to the establishment of an NP. Not all specify which one, but many point to the case of Gennargentu in Sardinia (*cf supra*), while about 20% were

unaware of the possibility of encouraging agriculture within the protected area and controlling wildlife with selection plans.

When we asked “How would you use National Park funding if you were the one to decide how to spend it?”—offering an opportunity to answer multiple items—respondents to the questionnaire rather agreed on the desire to rehabilitate trails and historical artifacts (82.3%) but also olive groves and agricultural areas (69%), followed by hiring a congruent number of park rangers and environmental hiking guides (63.5%). Less successful is the resettlement of horticulture and animal husbandry in the form of agricultural cooperatives (55.5%).

Only 60.7% of residents owning properties in the potential new park areas support the inclusion of their municipality in the protected area. Although, they specify that only hilly, not urbanized areas would be subject to protection. 9.3% are against it, while the remaining 30% do not know or are not convinced, further confirming the problems related to the correct information of the regulations that would be introduced with the NP.

In conclusion, the dissimilarity between the percentage of those in favor of the park in general terms and those in favor of the park as it is affected by the enlargement, represents a typical manifestation of what is called the “nimby (not in my backyard) syndrome” in that almost everyone agrees that the environment should be protected, but many fewer agree that it should start from their own territory.

#### *4.2. Analysis of the perception through daily press articles*

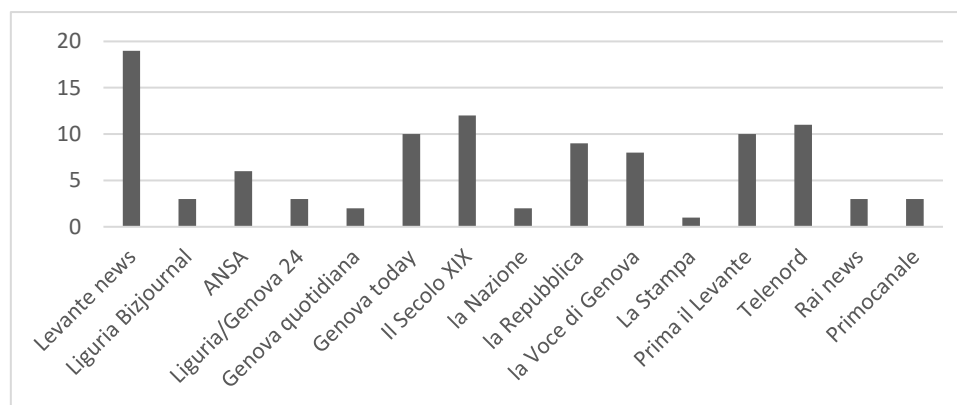
For the analysis of the perception of the new NP, articles on the Internet regarding its establishment process were collected through the search engine “Google news” by conducting the search periodically with the keywords: “parco nazionale portofino”. A qualitative-quantitative database was then constructed where articles were categorized by year, month and day; masthead/broadcaster; keywords/concepts in the title and involvement or non-involvement of politicians, associations and experts.

The results show a steady growth of interest in the topic. Of the 115 articles received, only two were published between 2017–2020, twenty-seven in 2021, thirty-seven in 2022 and forty-nine in the first quarter of 2023.

The newspaper that has dealt the most with the issue is “Levante news” with 19 articles; followed by the best-known Ligurian newspaper “Il Secolo XIX” with 12 articles. The newspaper of national importance “La Stampa” has only one article. In addition to newspapers, reports from TV stations also emerged, among which the most prolific was “Telenord” with 11 articles (Figure 7).

In terms of content, the most recurrent theme in the headlines is that of perimeter. More than 60% of the articles make direct or indirect reference to the boundaries of the new park. Closely related are references to judgments, decrees and appeals (30% of articles) and to cancellations or annulments (24%). Instead, 16% of the headlines report more softly proposed solutions and hypotheses, where verbs such as meet, propose and advise are often used. Conversely, 13% report clashes between the parties with terms such as controversy, storm, rebellion, discussion, tug-of-war and blitz. 10% report expressions of firm opposition such as unacceptable, rejection, veto, etc.. Finally, 8% highlight victimizing positions with expressions such as imposition, decisions, orders or dropped from above, while 3% expose defensive positions to protect some category or simply concerns.





**Figure 7.** Number of articles about the topic published by newspapers and TV stations from 2017 to the end of April 2023.

The fact that only five articles report content related to opportunities, and seven related to constraints and problems due to the protected area, confirms a generally negative stereotype of protected areas and demonstrates overall poor technical information, outclassed by a sometimes-sterile political debate without arguments to support its positions, particularly by the anti-PN side. In fact, as many as 71 articles (61%) give voice to politicians, 28 (24%) to members of associations (*Italia nostra*, *Amici del Monte di Portofino*, *Comitato Tutti per il Parco*, *WWF Italia*, *Legambiente*), but only two articles question experts, who are moreover politically involved and often are members of associations and therefore not entirely neutral. The remainder do ordinary reporting of events often taking up other newspapers or press releases.

## 5. Conclusions: is new research needed on the role of natural parks?

With this paper we set out to analyze the complicated path of establishment of the Portofino NP—not yet concluded—and to highlight how often in Italy and in other countries it is difficult to find a meeting point between the interests of the local community, of governance and the demands of environmental and landscape protection. The difficulties encountered in effective implementation of this park confirm that even today, despite the topic has been studied for many years in various aspects—for Italy, these include Gambino’s volume [52], those edited by Brandis and Scanu [53], Brandis [54], Zanolin [7], and Piccioni [35], the issue of *Geotema* edited by Cardinale and Scarlata [55], but also the editorial series directed by Renzo Moschini entitled “*Aree naturali protette*”, now at the 38<sup>th</sup> issue—there are some doubts on the usefulness of natural parks by local communities, although nature tourism, especially if linked to natural parks, has been growing steadily for several years [56,57]. Not surprisingly, Gross et al. [58] observed an increasing trend of empirical research on tourism evaluation of protected areas from 1977 to the present. As the European Commission points out, “Biodiversity conservation has potential direct economic benefits for many sectors of the economy. [...] The overall benefit/cost ratio of an effective global programme for the conservation of remaining wild nature worldwide is estimated to be at least 100 to 1. Natural capital investment, including restoration of carbon-rich habitats and climate-friendly agriculture, is recognized to be among the five most important fiscal recovery policies, which offer high economic multipliers and positive climate impact. It will be important for the EU to tap into this potential to ensure prosperity, sustainability and resilience in the recovery” ([59], p.1).

Despite this, it is still necessary to implement studies on this field to expand the skills to analyze all the benefits that environmental protection can bring, not only economic related to tourism but also psycho-social and not tangible.

New research insights on the conflicts in natural parks are going to emerge because of the new ambitious targets set by the EU's Biodiversity Strategy 2030 to protect 30% of the land area and 30% of the sea area by 2030—at least 1/3 of which (10% of the land and 10% of the sea) is going to be subject to strict protection—through the establishment of a trans-European network of protected areas. In addition, new militarization process in Europe and beyond is threatening globally important ecosystems, not only in Ukraine but also in UE boundaries where several states have equipped themselves with walls or military garrisons to stop migratory flows from Asia and Africa [60]. These facts will certainly cause new social and economic conflicts and further case studies for which new analysis models may be needed.

### Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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