

Protected area

In French the phrase used in "Espace naturel protégé", or protected natural space, the addition of the epithet "natural" being intended not so much to distinguish its content, which is debatable, as to differentiate this type of protected space from others, for instance in urban areas (e.g. AVAP, Aire de Valorisation de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine formerly ZPPAUP, Zones de Protection du Patrimoine Architectural, Urbain et Paysager), or historical monuments. These areas are socially endowed with values, they are outlined and marked out on the ground, and they can comprise several "zones" indicating gradients in the range of possibilities for land use accentuating towards the boundaries, with a reverse gradient of environmental protection (greater in the centre and less strict on the fringes). In these zones, public authorities (at different hierarchical levels), individuals and associations implement protection measures (concerning landscapes, the heritage, the fauna, or the flora), either globally or with regard to a particular species, basing this on legislations and rulings that are sometimes specific to each "zone" (Héritier & Laslaz, 2008; Laslaz et al, 2014).

Protected spaces, which may be administered and managed by States, public administrations (public or federal agencies, etc.) territorial collectives, associations, NGOs or management bodies, belong to wider areas that are often characterised by major challenges (the "content" of the space concerned, threats to this content) which justify the "need" for a protection policy. There is indeed nothing immanent or heaven-sent in either the content or the containing space itself, which differs markedly from discourse among the pioneers of the creation of protected areas, well-rooted in spirituality in the 19th century.

The assumption that protected status is inherent in the content of a space no longer holds. Biodiversity is one argument among others. J. Milian and E. Rodary (2010) have discussed the use of prioritisation tools, such as the hotspot classification (Myers, 1988), which became the essential reference frame of NGOs and certain researchers working on protected species. In this view, biodiversity is threatened by the intrusion of the manifestations of globalisation, such as tourist flows and world-system transport flows (Grenier, 2000). Yet in the setting of public or private policies for the appropriation, delineation and development of such spaces, the very choice of the said delineation, marking out and status belong to social and cultural situations (Viard, 1990) that fluctuate considerably in time and space. There are forms of protection that do not amount to protected spaces: preserving a forest to provide the timber required for the construction of a naval fleet in modern times, or protection from over-grazing or flash flooding in contemporary times, are not operations that produce a protected area, because the priority is not given to protection objectives. The year commonly quoted for the appearance of protected areas is 1872, with the creation of the Yellowstone National Park (Wyoming/Montana/Idaho), although it was preceded by the Hot Springs reserve (Arkansas) in 1832 and the Yosemite State Park (California) in 1864. In all events, protected areas are a product of modernity (Laslaz, 2012) and they appeared as a corollary to agricultural, mining, industrial and energy source developments in the second half of the 19th century. They took time to spread, shifting progressively from North America to Europe (Gissibl et al, 2012), and certain European countries experimented with the system in their colonies. Protected areas also belong to the logic of the "ecological frontiers" (Guyot & Richard, 2009; Guyot, 2009), developing as a rampart against processes of urbanisation and the "artificialisation" of land (loss of its natural attributes by human intervention, such as river channelling, roads, light pollution, interference with natural cycles etc).

The protected areas are created by political acts and territorial authorities, and they are elements in the deployment of public territorial development policies. Discrepancies between national priorities and local development priorities often lead to tension or even environmental conflict regarding either the delineation or the content of these areas (Laslaz, 2010; Laslaz et al, 2014).

Protected areas are differentiated by way of their status (nature reserve, Natura 2000 site, etc.) and the degree of stringency of their protection measures. On international scale the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), an NGO created in 1948, has defined six categories to enable international comparisons between States in which protected areas go under various names: Category 1, the most restrictive, concerns "strict nature reserves" while category 6 corresponds to "protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources". This classification is disputed by certain researchers (Locke & Dearden, 2005), who disagree on the reality of the status of protected area for categories 5 and 6, while its limitations can also be seen in the fact that 37% of the world's protected species are not covered by any category. These types of governance are today used rather as criteria enabling distinctions. This evolution also underlines the issue of the efficacy of protected areas, since many of them are unable to ensure their protecting function for lack of political will, manpower or funding. They are known as "paper parks", since they are outlined on maps and on the ground, but have no means to implement their protection policies. Qualitative and efficiency criteria are not readily reconcilable with a

runaway increase in the numbers of protected zones and their surface areas (21M square kilometres for around 120 000 protected species in 2012, amounting to 13.2% of the surface area of the continents) questioned by certain authors (Roe & Hollands, 2004). But this state of affairs is set to persist; the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya in 2010 fixed the objective of 17% of the world's surface area). It is in this sense that participative systems (charters, shared profits from tourist activities), or the restoration of lands to indigenous peoples (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) are developing to ensure a better appropriation of protection policies and the administrative sets-ups in charge of them (Laslaz, 2010).

The policies for the development of Protected Marine Areas, which only appeared in the 1970s, are also a way in which efforts have been redeployed (6000 of these areas for 1.42% of the ocean surfaces, or 5.1M km²) in favour of spaces hitherto not generally involved, some in international waters, where the legal status has been an obstacle thus far difficult to overcome.

Supposedly insurmountable obstacles have given way to search for compromise between the logics of urbanisation and protection policies, as is well-illustrated by urban national parks, in particular in countries in the South and emerging economies (LÃ©vy & Bruno, 2013). The "integrator paradigm" (Depraz, 2008) and that of "man with nature" are tending to replace the "radical paradigm" (nature without man), while the naturalist-sensitive paradigm, which appeared in the 19th century, and that of "nature for man" based on criteria of aesthetics and the spectacle of nature, still predominate across the globe. Protection is accompanied by measures of territorial control, and certain densely populated protected areas (in India or East Africa) are subjected to forced displacements of populations (South Africa, Giraut et al, 2005), in particular of ethnic minorities (China), on the basis of radical ecology dogma claiming the incompatibility between human presence and the aims of conservation. Socio-cultural domination, the will to hold power over a territory and geopolitical control are also relevant issues. As for international and media visibility for protected areas, this type of coverage can be seen in operations for the creation and management of protected areas by States or by NGOs (e.g. the Wildlife Conservation Society in Gabon, which was behind the creation by Omar Bongo of 13 national parks in 2002). In 2007 the Yasuni ITT project launched by president Correa for the non-exploitation of oil resources in the Yasuni National Park (Ecuador) in exchange for compensatory funding by countries from the North was finally abandoned in 2013.

The protected area, which is a spatial object and not a concept, is the mirror in which contemporary societies seek to understand their relationship with the environment. But for geographers it embodies major social and political issues.

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see also: «sustainable development», «biosphere», «oikumene»

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