

THE ROLE OF MONUMENTAL TREES IN DEFINING LOCAL IDENTITY AND IN TOURISM. A CASE STUDY IN THE MARCHES REGION

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Abstract

The paper presents an explorative research about the relict Monumental Trees in the Marches region, with the aim to describe and give some interpretations about the problematic relationship between economic activities and the landscape. After the definition of Monumental Tree, we describe its multiple meanings, in religion, mystics, education, environment, and even in tourism. The paper gives the inventory of the resource in the Marches, and reports results of Key Informants' perceptions about the necessity to conserve Monumental Trees in the framework of the Regional Landscape and Environment Plan and the role of Monumental Trees in defining the local 'territorial identity'.

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.

Herman Hesse (1972, p.178)

1. Trees and Forests

Recently, people showed an increased sensitivity towards nature, giving greater consideration even to the 'physiognomic' characteristics of trees and forests. Trees and forests have, therefore, found major respect and a subsequent placing within the cultural heritage, especially when they are of particular aesthetic or historical and monumental interest. We can easily affirm that today the category of 'monumental' tree or forest is well accepted by common sense and public opinion. Nevertheless, the success of the protection of veteran trees has been fluctuating. In

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many cases people saved them, in some other old trees have been cut and forests cleared to make room to alternative, and more remunerative, uses of the land. Furthermore, researchers claimed for the bio-ecological importance of ancient and venerable vegetal formations and the necessity to preserve them for scientific purposes (see Lisa, 2011).

In Italy there are many centuries-old trees, located in historic gardens, parks and even in the open countryside (see OPHRYS, 2012, Capodarca, 1984, Alessandrini et al. 2005). They are a heritage of inestimable value, historical and cultural assets, and real natural monuments. The presence of a veteran and monumental tree is evidence of a long relationship between humans and places full of memories, events and emotions. The big and tall trees have not only a scenic and aesthetic value, but are also important for their historical aspects, local traditions and the maintenance of the ecological balance.

The 5% of the world's forests are located in the EU (European Union) Countries, where they have continuously expanded for over 60 years, contrary to what occurred in the less developed regions of the world. The EU forests and other wooded land cover, respectively, 155 million and 21 million hectares, being together more than the 42% of the EU land area. Nevertheless, there is no common forest policy and the formulation of forest policies is the competence of the Member States within a clearly defined framework of established ownership rights and with a long history of national and regional laws and regulations based on long term planning. Neither the Treaties for the EU made a provision for a common forest policy, but there are many EU measures supporting certain forest-related activities, and a EU Forestry Strategy has been adopted in 1998, forwarding overall principles for the application of sustainable forest management and the multifunctional role of forests (see EU, 2013).

The presence of forests and trees in urban and rural areas depends also on Agricultural Policy, Rural Development Policy and Urban Planning Policy, any of them related to local and regional intervention for the effective implementations.

The analysis of the regional Landscape and Environmental Regional Plan (LERP) of the Marches seems to be an interesting field for investigation due to the peculiar asymmetric distribution of forests, the relatively 'scarce' density in some provinces and the subsequent relative 'high density' of relict old trees in the whole territory.

After describing the importance of trees in mythology, religion and symbology, and briefly introducing the theme of local identities, the paper aims at investigating perception by local inhabitants (residents) about the assets and role of monumental trees in shaping the regional landscape and their contribution to the local territorial identity.

In order to answer to this main research question, we made a dozen of face-to-face interviews to key informants, both from public administrations and private entrepreneurs and residents.

2. Trees, myths, religions and symbols

Trees perform great utility for people, and are notable for their habits and habitats, size, or longevity. The diversity of forms and functions is a direct consequence of the complex and graceful organization of their growth in response to environmental and biological stimuli. They grow up in a myriad of striking forms, sizes, and habitats. Besides material functions for the everyday life, trees have a great significance in mythology, legends, symbolism and religion.

The association between trees and mythology works in a very profound way. Trees offer a sense of mystery, probably due to being the largest of plants (see Porteus, 2002), and the association with particular myths takes place not only on a species level but also in geographical terms or with individual trees. Both human 'scientific' curiosity and mythology deal with the capability to discover the secrets of real world and so trees offer humans a living reminder of happy or terrible events or even so marvelous as to be beyond human comprehension. The long life of trees allows humans to imagine they have been witnesses to ancestral happenings, then being sacred to religious rites.

Legends are a different phenomenon to Myths, these latter being less based on actual facts and merely stories of fiction. Nevertheless, they both don't concern with happenings beyond human comprehension, but in associating places and people with particular events or stories. The novel of Robin Hood is well known, yet the true identity of the man is lost in the mists of time but his relations with woods are well clear and told in several storytellings. In Italy, the famous chestnut of the Etna, called as 'of hundred horses', owes its name to the popular narration about the recovery of Princess Giovanna d'Aragona and her hundred escort horsemen suddenly threatened by a violent storm. The tree canopy was enough for covering a crowded troop of cavaliers. This tree is still rooted and visited by hundreds of tourist coming from several parts of the world.

Trees are symbol of boldness, being capable to live even in the most extreme conditions. A tree has three parts in terms of symbolism, roots, trunk and branches which have large meanings rooted in many cultures and popular traditions. Different cultures traditionally usually plant trees in honor of an important rite of passage such as a graduation, wedding, retirement, the birth of a child or in memory of relatives lost in wars. In recent times, trees have become a powerful symbol of capability of aging and reliability, being the logo of many businesses involved in long term investments or in life insurance.

The World Tree is a common suggestion to many communities and cultures (see Burkert, 1998). We can assume a simple resuming idea from the Encyclopedia Britannica that reports:

world tree, also called cosmic tree, centre of the world, a widespread motif in many myths and folktales among various preliterate peoples, especially in Asia, Australia, and North America, by which they understand the human and profane condition in relation to the divine and sacred realm. Two main forms are known and both employ the notion of the world tree as centre. In the one, the tree is the vertical centre binding together heaven and earth; in the other, the tree is the source of life at the horizontal centre of the earth. Adopting biblical terminology, the former may be called the tree of knowledge; the latter, the tree of life (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003, p.757).

In ancient pagan religions some special trees were regarded as sacred, and became the focal point for worship. In Northern European cultures, the Druids did value the trees considerably and even planted trees to form groves in which they could worship, avoiding to celebrate religious rites inside a temple enclosed by walls and a roof. Their sacred tree was the oak, planted in stand to generally form a circle enclosure. Many early Christian churches took on this shape and the circle was even the basis for the orientation design of great Christian cathedrals (see Burckhardt, 2000).

The use of trees by Pagans was embraced by Christianity even in other ways, first of all in the sign of the cross, where Christ suffered and died, that was roughly hewn from a tree and often appears to grow organically from the ground (see Howard, 1996).

The prevalent union of the human figure and the tree appears a deliberate correlation with Christian symbolism where the tree can represent either life or death (Howard, 1996, p.84).

Even today, the symbolism of trees finds its way into human expression, especially in labeling person who have achieved great age and even great wisdom. As the numbers of older people in Europe continue to grow, maybe the symbolism of trees will find new resonance. Indeed the profile of trees amongst health care professionals is rising up the agenda as in the latest EU project ‘Action on Forestry – Human Health and Wellbeing’ (see COST, 2013).

3. Definition of Monumental Tree

In Europe many Countries have care about and made a census of monumental trees, whereas a common (and legal) definition is still lacking. In Italy, the very first act for protecting monumental trees has been adopted in 1939 (see GU, 1939), and the essential policy lines (see Lisa, 2011) are today absorbed in the Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape (see GU, 2004), lastly modified in 2008 (see GU, 2008). For the first mentioned law, a monumental tree can easily be paired to a natural beauty, in itself to be protected by law, even if it is a more complex thing than an immobile good, as literally stated in the text of the law. In 2004, the Codice Urbani reorganized the State and Regional responsibilities about protection of landscape, devolving powers and planning decisions to local authorities, the Italian Regions, which indeed have the actual responsibility for the protection of monumental trees (see Regione Marche, 2005, GU, 2013).

The Landscape and Environment Regional Plan of the Marches (LERP) (Regione Marche, 1989) made monumental trees subject to restriction under the Art. n. 10:

[...] are part of the agricultural landscape, oak trees isolated or scattered groups in the country, tree-lined avenues or monumental oak, rows of poplars, elms, cypress and other species, hedges, forms of ancient cultivations in danger of extinction (such as tree-lined roads); isolated trees at crossroads, secular tall trees, of any species, the parks and gardens attached to houses, churches, castles and abbeys, even when of exotic species.

The Art. n. 13 defines the main objectives to be planned:

The main objectives of the Plan, with respect to botanical and vegetation assets, are:

- protection and conservation of rare species of flora, exclusively specific and threatened with extinction, including areas of particular biological interest and sheltered natural and plant associations.
- [...]

The protection of trees in the Marche is currently and specifically guaranteed by the R. L. (Regional Law) 23 February 2005 n. 6, namely the 'Regional Forest Law', which Chapter IV is entirely devoted to 'Protection of plant stands that are not included in forests and towns'. Previously the management of tall trees was provided by the R. L. n. 7/1985, namely 'Provisions for the protection of flora in the Marche'⁴, modified and integrated by the Regional Laws n. 8/87 and n. 9/01, and in its turn deriving from the preceding R. L. n. 6, 22 February 1973.

The Landscape and Environmental Regional Plan of the Marche (LERP) clearly claims that monumental trees are part of the regional identity, as we describe in the following.

4. Identity of the Marche in the Landscape and Environmental Regional Plan and the role of local communities

The Landscape and Environmental Regional Plan of the Marche poses as an axiom the existence of:

[...] a clearly recognized image of the Marche in Italy and anywhere else. It is that of densely cultivated hills, rich of trees, tree-lined roads, vines and lands cultivated with cereals. It has actually had origin through the urban mediation: any town, city or villages had, already in the late Middle Age, established its dominated territory, colonizing over centuries vast land areas, clearing the forests and cultivating fields, never disturbing the nature/cultivation equilibrium and intensively exploiting any cultivable squared inch (Regione Marche, 1989, p.72).

And about trees the plan says:

A fundamental component of the landscape are surely the plants, both as singular and as particular stands.

[...]

The components of the botanical landscape are several: from singular specific species to monumental trees of the same species, as in the case of century trees in areas with natural vegetation (forests, meadows, swamps, pastures); gardens and parks attached to villas, castles, churches and abbeys; then urban and agricultural green areas.

In the Marche, each of these components has peculiar characteristics.'

[...]

Monumental trees. They are century trees of big dimension, varying for species, typical of the region (elms, oaks, turkey oak, beech, hornbeam, yew, silver fir);

[...]

They are point elements scattered in different territorial conditions that, considering the international definitions of protection of nature, should be considered as "natural monuments" (Regione Marche, 1989, p.75).

Still, the public 'smart' planner clearly claimed the importance and role of trees and their monumental items in the definition of the regional landscape identity. But

⁴ This law derived from the preceding R. L. n. 6, 22 February 1973 and has been lastly modified by regional laws n. 8/1987 and n. 9/2001.

the 'smart' planner had actually performed smart choices in his/her current time and could not have intuition of the new present shape of the world.

Today, the globalization of economy and culture puts in danger the affirmation of the identity of places and regions, also in view of regional competitive policies. The self-identification of local identity for development is far from its reality, in particular in case of peripheral regions, marked by dispersion of administrative power and fragmentation of sense of place (see Roca Z. and M. de N. Oliveira-Roca, 2007), as in the case of the Marches.

In this framework, the 'territorial identity' could actually be a misleading and inoperative concept. On the contrary, the concept can be implemented into a valuable category, to be studied empirically if previously defined as sets of spatial contents of natural and cultural landscape features combined with socio-economic activities, relationships and meanings within horizontal and vertical networks and systems, to be monitored as lifestyle features in a selected (*idem*).

The role of perception of local communities in defining the diversity of its own landscape is fundamental as well as historic and cultural features are essential for the respect and safeguarding of the identity of the population itself and for individual enrichment and that of society as a whole. This implies recognition of the rights and responsibilities of populations to play an active role in the processes of acquiring knowledge, taking decisions and managing the quality of the places where they live (see Cannizzaro S. and G. L. Corinto, 2012).

5. The census of Monumental Vegetational Formations (MVF) in the Marches

When the humans still did not significantly settled in the area, the Marches region was almost completely covered by forests. The 'Piceni' civilization, which developed in the southern part of the region between the 7th and 6th centuries BC, was predominantly agricultural with some clearing of the forests. In the period of the Lower Empire, with the creation of huge estates and the institution of serfdom, the agricultural population decreased a lot. During the following barbarian invasions in 500 AD (invaders being Heruli, Ostrogoths, Franks, Burgundians) agriculture was almost abandoned with the consequent recovery of natural forests. Starting from the 6th century there was a gradual recovery in rural and agricultural land-use purposes at the expense of the forest. The statutes of the Marches (see Carocci, 2003) of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries posed the question of regional development and a more correct exploitation of the forest. That, however, did not prevent the gradual deforestation and the disappearance of the forest in a very few centuries.

Until the seventeenth century, the main cause was to be found in the grain trade, and then in the recovery of land for this crop more than the growth of the resident population. The intensification of activity of deforestation took place at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this period the phenomenon was accelerated by the privatization of the commons and state property and the subsequent sale at public auction of the municipal assets. Moreover, the alienation of the ecclesiastical property occurred in the Napoleonic period increased the farming use of the land.

After the Unification of Italy, starting from the second half of 1800, the impoverishment of the heritage of tall trees in the hilly areas has been intensive,

especially with respect to the oak trees due to the needs of the Royal Navy and State Railways. In the period between 1880 and 1910 there was a further impoverishment of the tree heritage due to the further building construction of railways, using oak sleepers (see Zamagni, 1993, Regione Marche, 2009).

The evolution of forest area from 1847 to 2009 is exposed in table 1.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Ha</i>	<i>Source</i>
1847	132,325	Catasto Gregoriano
1877	111,510	Inchiesta Jacini
1910	99,916	-
1947	130.692	ISTAT
1974	154,715	ISTAT
2000	256,170	Forest Census
2009	300,000*	National Forest Inventory

Table 1: The Marches. Forest Area in different historical years

*Estimated data. Source: Regione Marche, 2009

We avoid to make any systematic comparison over time among different data in terms of percentage of forest area on total regional area. Many historical events occurred, often changing the regional boundaries, and even in very recent time the area of the region significantly changed⁵. Anyway we can say that the minimum percentage of the 10% occurred in 1910 and, presently, the total forestal area is increasing up to the “40%, considering the current total area of 969.349 hectares of the Marches.” (see Regione Marche, 2009).

Today, the geographical distribution of forests is strongly asymmetric, among both provinces and altimetric zones. In the coastal zones the density of forest in very often pair to 0%. The major forest covering is retrievable in the mountain area, located in the Apennine and pre-Apennine dorsal, while in the hilly areas the average density is lower than the 10%. The average covering area in the provinces of Ancona and Macerata is equal, respectively, equal to the 26% in the province Macerata the forest covering is discontinuous and scattered, whilst the maximum pertains to the province of Pesaro-Urbino, reaching near the 32%, followed by the province of Ascoli Piceno with the 27% (see Ipla, 2000) (fig. 1).

⁵ In 2009 seven municipalities obtained the passage from the Province of Pesaro-Urbino in the Marches to the Province of Rimini in the Emilia-Romagna Region.

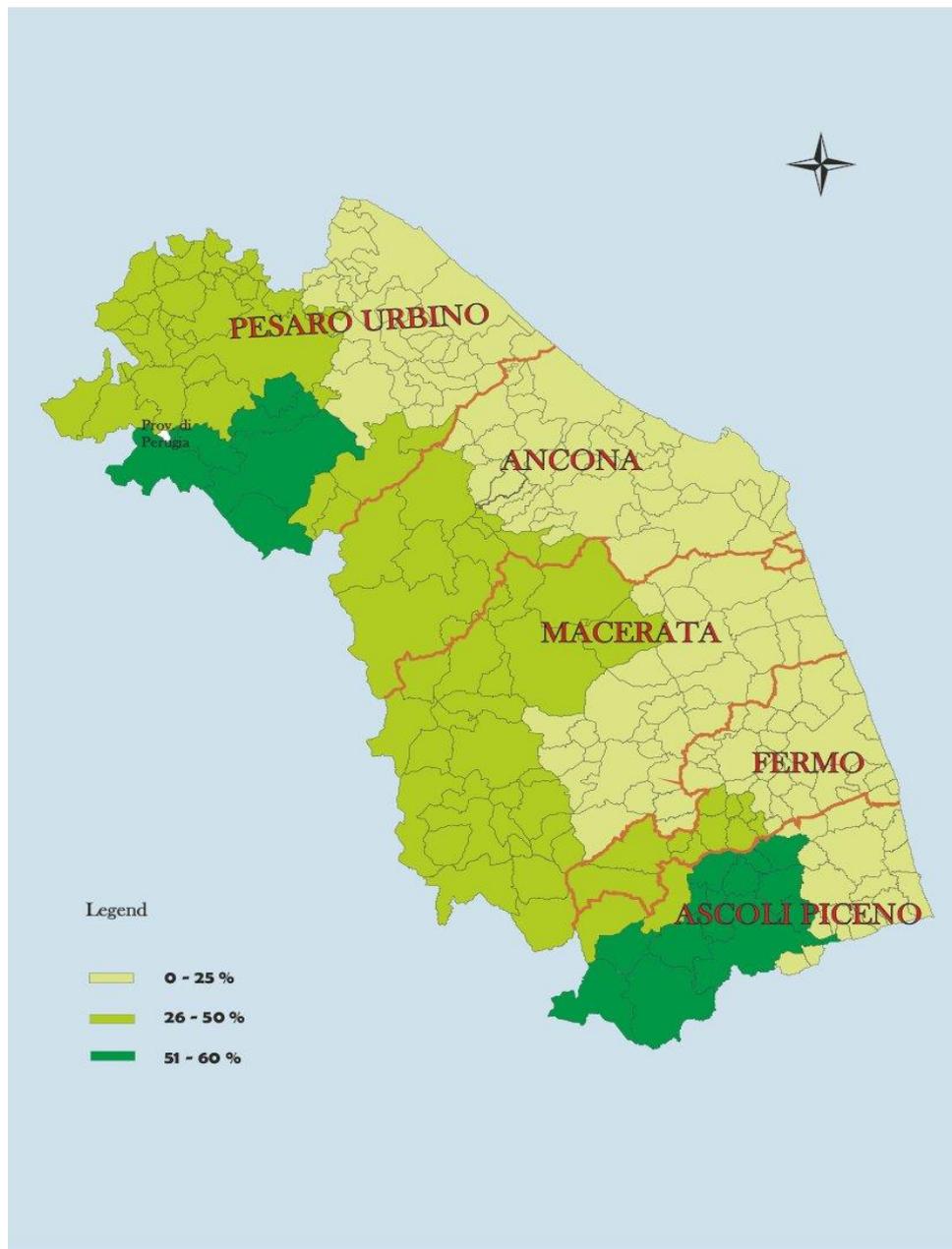


Figure 1: The Marche. Geographical Distribution of Forest Density

Source: Ipla, 2000. Our processing.

The Regional Forest Law of the Marche with the article 2/1 defines the meaning of Monumental Vegetational Formation:

trees of any species, tree-lines, groups and any other vegetal element or formation of particular historical-cultural interest, or having particular natural and landscape quality, which for their age and dimension can be considered rare examples of stateliness and longevity or giving a precise reference to events or memories which are important in a historical, cultural and local traditions' point of view.

A MVF can be an isolated tree or shrub, or an homogeneous stand of trees, a singular forest and a tree-line. This is the first law (see Regione Marche, 2005) in Italy that considers as ‘monumental’ not only isolated trees, but also groups and homogeneous formations of trees, pertaining to both autochthonous and exotic species. In this way the census (see Guidi, 2012), conducted by the Regional Forest Service starting by 2009, has considered not only the MVFs rooted in the countryside, to be considered as near natural, but also in the more anthropized urban landscape, including castles, villas, monasteries and cities.

<i>Province</i>	<i>n. MVFs</i>	<i>%</i>
Pesaro Urbino	110	28
Ancona	51	13
Macerata	122	31
Ascoli	58	58
Fermo	56	56
Totale	397	100

Table 2: The Marches. Number of MVFs per Province.

Source: Guidi, 2012.

The monumental trees root all over the regional area, but the main part of the total regional MVFs are located in the Province of Macerata, followed by the Province of Pesaro Urbino, Ascoli Piceno, Fermo and Ancona (tab. 2). The presence of the high number of monumental trees in the province of Macerata is an intriguing fact, being the inverse of the forest density. We can argue the massive clearing of forest has left isolated trees for farming purposes, shepherding and cattle breeding.

In 143 Municipalities (the 60% of the total 239 in the region) there is at least one MVF, and Pesaro is the first with 13 ones. In 79 Municipalities there are two MVF, and in the rest 64 at least one (fig. 2).

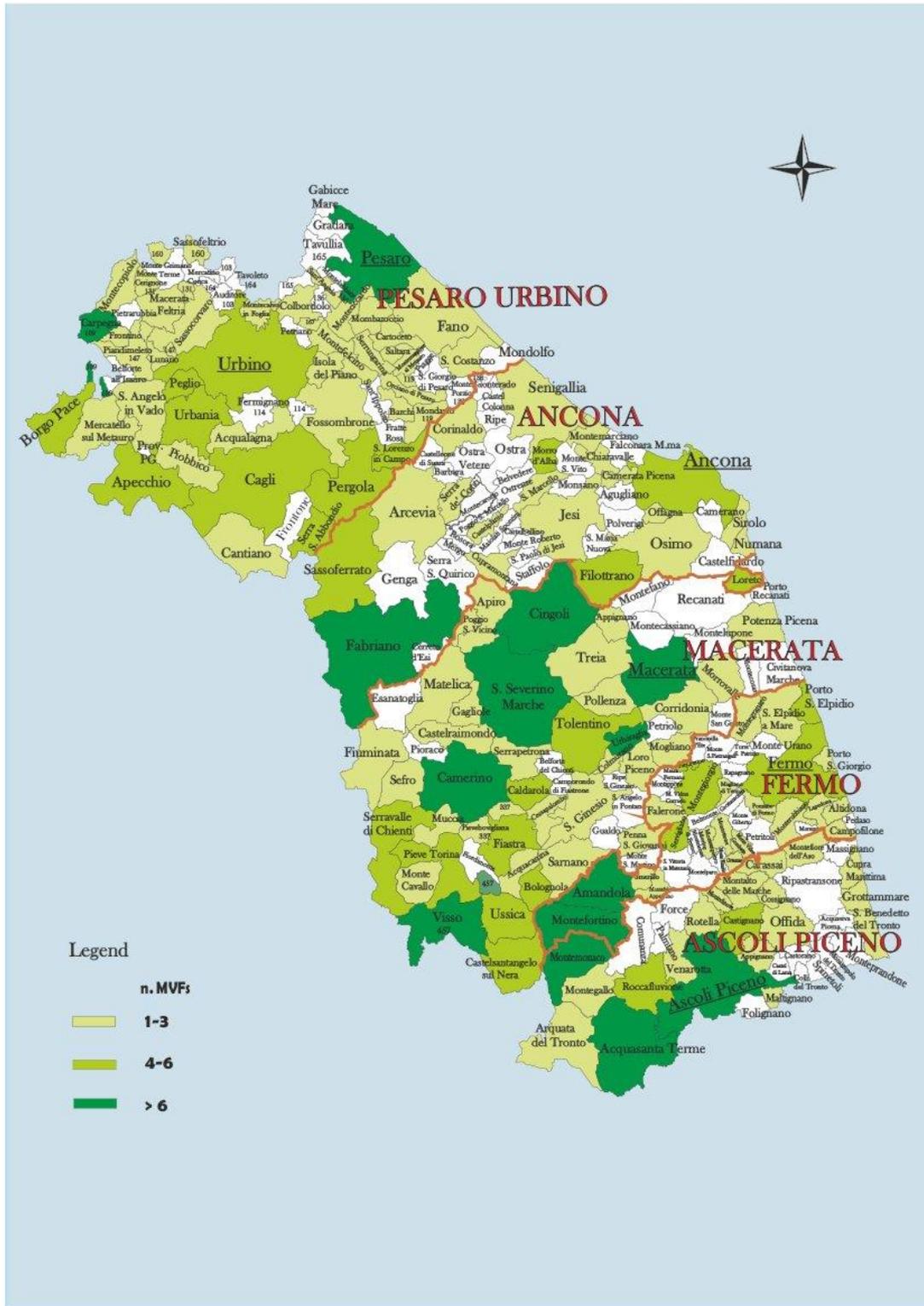


Figure 2: The Marche. Geographical Distribution of MVFs per Municipality

Source: Guidi, 2012, our processing.

6. Aim and methodology for the field research

The aim of the field research has been to understand the importance of monumental trees and monumental vegetal formations in the definition of the landscape identity in the Marche as perceived by residents. We have considered as ‘residents’ both inhabitants and entrepreneurs, mainly acting in the tourism sector, all of them living and working in the region, and specifically in the immediate proximity of a MVF or, at least, within the boundaries of the municipality where it roots.

The field survey followed the qualitative research ‘face-to-face’ interview method, after having selected key informants (see Fontana and Frey, 1994, Kvale, 1996). We chose this method because it can catch right and numerous informations with less time and costs, assuring in the same time high quality data collection due to the involvement of the interviewees (see Tremblay, 1955, Marshall, 1996, Berry, 1999).

The interview structure has been prepared in order to clear the main research issue, regarding ‘the role and assessment of monumental trees and MCFs both in the regional and local environment of the Marche.’ This main issue has been itemized in 3 research topics: (i) Knowledge and Awareness; (ii) Landscape Identity; (iii) Tourism Opportunity, and 3 related questions as follows:

- (1) Do the Marche’s Inhabitants Know Their Monument Trees’ Assessment and Role?
- (2) Do They Perceive Linkages Between Trees and Landscape Identity?
- (3) Are or Could Be Monumental Trees a Tourism Product?

In order to answer these main question and itemized topics, we have selected twelve key informants, interviewing them during a total of 12 hours, in the May-July 2013 period. We performed all the interviews following a semi-structured form, with the aim at collecting exhaustive information and an intense understanding of the interviewee’s point of view. Actually, each interview was an effective and productive ‘conversation’, interacting with the interviewee in order to learn about his/her experience, feelings and sentiment and the perception of the surrounding environment. Any interview has been previously prepared, contacting people by phone and/or mail, exposing the aim of the research and discussing during the face-to-face interview any uncertain aspect. All the reported data come from reliable involvement of the interviewees.

The list of interviewed persons, their activity, duty, municipality of residence and Province, are reported in table 3.

<i>N</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Duty</i>	<i>Municipality</i>	<i>Province</i>
1	Resident	B&B owner	Serra de’ Conti	Ancona
2	Resident	Housewife	Fabriano (AN)	Ancona
3	Resident	Housewife	Fabriano	Ancona
4	Resident	Housewife	Cingoli	Macerata
5	Resident	Teacher	Pioraco	Macerata
6	Resident	Retired teacher	Castel Raimondo	Macerata
7	Resident	Retired farmer	Montegiorgio	Fermo

8	Forest Service	Officer	Pesaro	Pesaro
9	Forest Service	Officer	Visso	Macerata
10	Entrepreneur	Restaurant owner	Corridonia	Macerata
11	Teacher	Archeoclub President	Treia	Macerata
12	Entrepreneur	Social Media Manager	San Benedetto del Tronto	Fermo

Table 3: List of Key Informants

7. Results

Results can be classified under the three issues above identified as (i) Knowledge and Awareness (first research question); (ii) Landscape Identity (second research question) and (iii) Tourism Opportunities (third research question).

For the first issue, there is no general awareness by the most part of inhabitants. Near all the interviewed residents answered they had never heard anything about the topic of ‘monumental trees’, both in the region and in their own municipality. Contrarily, there is a scattered but deep knowledge of the specific natural resource and understanding of the importance to preserve monumental trees, and more in general the natural heritage, within some local communities, as well as individual reliable knowledge and even personal direct involvement in particular cases.

The spread of ‘Knowledge and Awareness’ in local communities depends upon:

- diffusion of legends about wizards and witches of the past and ancient myths (mainly reported by oral tradition) or anecdotal storytellings about historical facts linked to a monumental tree;
- the effective productive and environmental functions of trees in agricultural technology and farm organization.

In the municipality of Ascoli Piceno there is a well known plane tree called the ‘Plane of Piccioni’ located in a very visible location, along the roman route “Salaria”. Its fame is due to the story of the brigand Giovanni Piccioni who fought against the unity of Italy supporting the Vatican State during the second half of the Eighteenth Century. (Key Informant n. 8); (fig. 3).



Figure 3: The 'Piccioni Plane' in Ascoli Piceno

Monumental trees are surely not known by 'normal' people. The issue is well known by some 'fan' of environment or curiosities, regarding very particular trees reported in legends and oral storytellings about historical facts. (Key Informant n. 12).

Here, in my municipality there is a very important beech forest of Montecanfaieto. It is well known and people come to have relax time during the week-ends and in the summer. There is also a very well known yew tree in the monastery of Fonte Avellana. This tree should be the oldest one in the region. It is located out the monastery and I don't really know if it has a religious meaning and attractiveness, but I suppose it hasn't. Anyway, it is magnificent and important for many persons. (Key Informant n. 6).

In the very centre of my city, Corridonia, on the top of the hill, there was a tall and broad elm tree. It was the "emblem" of our city and still is in the official municipal flag. The ancient name of our village was 'Montolmo', that literarily means the mount of the elm. That was the place for the cattle market, where breeders sold and bought livestock, benefiting of the large canopy of the tree during the full sun. People tell the elm rooted since the Middle Age. It has survived until few decades ago. Today we have forgotten the story and this is a pity, because without knowing our "roots" we cannot promote our territory. (Key Informant 10).

The productive functions of monumental trees are presently obsolete. In the past these 'practical' or productive functions were part of the current organization of farming. Isolated trees supplied shadow for the relaxation of shepherds and sheep and, in the case of oaks, lot of acorns for the feeding of porks. This was essential for the household food consumption, because pork was, and still is, a basic food for all the residents in the Marche, both in rural and urban settlements. We could even say that pork should be considered as an actual 'typical animal' for the Marche,

due to the traditional economic importance in the rural households' balance and in the current agroindustrial sector.

Some tree species were cultivated by selecting very peculiar productive attitudes, such in the case of 'gentle grafted helm', that produces protein rich leaves, important for feeding labor cattle. Elms are today endangered by extinction, and 'selected' individuals are currently very rare.

Isolated oaks were called 'Merigge'⁶, indicating the opportunity for shepherds to sleep under their canopies after having meal at twelve o'clock. (Key Informant n. 6); (fig. 4).



Figure 4: 'Merigge', isolated oaks in Regional Natural Reserve of Monte San Vicino and Monte Canfaieto, Sanseverino Marche (MC)

Some monumental trees are located in villas of noble landowners and are often exotic species and always a distinctive social mark. Nowadays we spend happily our own money to prevent their death. But we will welcome a future public help. (Key Informant n. 11).

About the issue of 'Landscape Identity' we can resume a diffused awareness that the landscape of the Marche has an anthropic origin, in particular that it is an actual farming landscape. Over centuries trees have been cleared to have more farmland areas to be cultivated with cereals, for trading purposes. The resulting shape is a very smoothed landscape, generally figured as soft hills with a big tree on the top. This most typical tree is the oak (*Quercus pubescens*) to be considered the actual 'regional identity' tree. Near all the respondents agreed on this topic.

⁶ Dialectical for 'meriggio', meaning the relaxation time in the afternoon.

The current logo of the Region⁷ doesn't identifies the whole spirit of the Marches. But it will impossible to consider an alternative 'sign', as the oak as an official flag, even if it is broadly identified as a regional mark by people. (Key Informant n. 12).

About the 'Tourism Opportunity' linked to the monumental trees heritage, we can say that, notwithstanding the recent and very exhaustive inventory of the Monumental Trees made by the Forest Service and the Region, no private initiative have been run to supply a dedicated itinerary or some initiative linked to trees as a 'tourist product'. Only sporadic initiative from individuals with some success have been carried out. We can mentioned the 'Garibaldi Itinerary' and the 'San Francesco footway', indicated in particular by informant n. 8.

There are big potentialities but not in the sense of a large tourism supply, but in the direction of exploiting niche market and experience tourism. The man part of the key informants declared that the political and promotional initiative of the Region is scarcely coherent over time. In fact, the Region too frequently changes strategic guide lines of intervention and acts splitting the financial budget in dispersed initiatives, not supporting the same strategic vision over years. There is a broad perception about clientelism, patronage and discontinuity in territorial relationships between the Region and the singular Provinces.

I myself have tried to propose some theme itineraries using the nexus and linkages between monumental trees and cultural and historic heritage. I had a great success! but only within my personal acquaintances. Many friends of mine, from abroad the Marches, have organized itineraries about Giuseppe Garibaldi and Saint Francesco in the territory of our region. But none of the local tourism entrepreneurs understood and caught the economic opportunity, imitating or repeating the foreigners' experiences. (Key informant n. 8).

I manage a small tourism business and I am a curious man. I knew that a very old oak is rooted in my Municipality. And I would like to offer this opportunity to my guests. We have lot of cultural attractions around our home and I think that also the big trees should be a 'curiosity', not so narrow as apparently it is. I have asked my neighbors something about that, but none told me anything. I localized it by myself, not far from my bed and breakfast business. Now I am proud for this. (Key informant n. 1); (fig. 5)

⁷ The regional logo depicts the initial letter of Marches, the 'M', that includes a stylized woodpecker bird (Picus sp.)



Figure 5: Monumental oak in Serra de' Conti (AN). Courtesy of Key Informant n. 1

8. Discussion and conclusions

The research performed in the Marche region enlightened some meaningful findings about the perception by local communities about the worth of natural heritage, starting from the role and importance to know and preserve monumental trees. The free participation by a dozen of interviewed key informants allows us to consider results as reliable and useful for further researches and for policy making recommendations. In particular, results have been discussed with the key informant n. 8, a chief expert of the Forest National Service, acting in the regional boundaries and having also a national perspective.

Notwithstanding a recent and broad research on the topic, promoted officially by the Region and performed by the regional office of the National Forest Service, the knowledge of monumental trees is still sporadic and scattered, fortunately very deep in some 'curious' people. Anyway, the very idea that monumental trees should be a tourism product, marketable by several (or few but not isolated) local entrepreneurs and tourist operators, is far from reality. The research demonstrated that only sporadic initiative has been undertaken, mainly by non resident entrepreneurs and scarcely perceived as feasible by local tourist operators.

On the contrary, some local issues are to be well emphasized, even because will enlightened some future research topics. For example, the perception of the oak as a very typical tree is largely diffused as well as the awareness of its role as landmark, figuring the shape of the regional landscape. Thus, even though the 'monumental' trees are not part of the 'collective imaginary', the perception of 'normal' trees in the formation of the landscape identity is a very clear topic and

freely declared by all the respondents. Normal and monumental trees are surely landmarks for the local communities and their importance depends on cultural and socio-economic issues. We have to emphasize also the finding regarding the relationships between 'private' and 'public' sensitivities as perception of local communities very often diverges from public choices.

The public institutions have a recent and a deep sensitivity about the care of trees and forests, necessitating a public intervention for a preservation imposed by law. Common people, being landowners, inhabitants, farmers or even private tourism entrepreneurs, due to oral storytelling or sharing of legends and myths, feel the 'historical and cultural breath' of trees, which preservation still depends on their effectiveness and practical functions. As a matter of fact, the presence of monumental trees depends on the economic functions they supplied to local communities over centuries. The presence of monumental trees in private real estates is to be linked to the function of being a sign of social distinction, remembering financial power and wealth.

The findings of the research derive from a regional survey and should be compared to other regional researches, both in Italy and abroad, to have a broader framework of the research issue. Nevertheless their importance can be considered in a larger meaning because the detected inhabitants' perception of the specific topic strongly confirms some preceding research findings, as well as a largely shared social opinion about the lacking of knowledge of natural and cultural heritage in the Marche and more in general of the awareness of tourism potentialities of the region. Without self consciousness of local assets there cannot be any stronger tourism promotion. Moreover, the absence of a continuous, still tiring and paved of many difficulties, exchange of ideas between residents and policy makers will stop any initiative.

It is true that the Marche Region is the very first regional administration that adopted a specific law for the protection of monumental trees. The law is to be considered effective and updated, with a modern vision for the protection of natural resources. In fact it takes into account not only isolated trees, but also groups of trees, stands, tree-lines and any other important vegetal formation, including exotic species, mainly located in villas, castles or monasteries. Indeed, after the regional initiative, during 2013 the Italian State adopted a national law for the protection of monumental tree with the same policy lines. Regions that will carry out an inventory of the resource can surely conserve and manage veteran trees in many strategic directions, including research aims and productive initiative, through the definition of a clearer image of the territorial identity that is useful for the entire society and its economy.

Many private entrepreneurs claim for a more strategic vision for the public intervention in the tourism sector as well for the conservation, managing and planning of natural resources. The findings of this research can support the future orientation of public choices in improving the nexus between natural and cultural resources and tourism. On the other hand, researchers can help public bodies in transfer the results of sectorial analyses in political choices and territorial and geographical studies could be deepened and implemented in order to help private companies and policy makers in increasing social awareness. We like to stress once again the importance of the community's perception in defining the regional and local identity as well as the landscape policy, even considering specific issues such as the monumental and veteran trees. The European Landscape Convention

actually claimed for a more democratic participation in defining the landscape features to be protected by national and regional laws. Also the social awareness of monumental trees should help public bodies to choose the most effective policies by means of an actual democratic, and thus more effective, process.

9. References

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