

The Breakthrough of Tourism in a Rurbanised Area

Territorial Changes and Conflicts in the Val di Magra (1945–1975)

Abstract: This article aims to contribute to filling a research gap in current environmental history, since the effects of the spread of mass tourism on urban-rural relations in Mediterranean floodplains throughout the *trente glorieuses* of mass consumption (1945–1975) have hitherto attracted little scholarly attention. The study therefore focuses on the environmental conflicts engendered by the attempts to increase mass tourism through construction of a bridge and zoning of the promontory of Montemarcello at the mouth of the River Magra, a coastal area in north-west Italy. A twofold perspective is applied to analyse both the tangible transformations of the riverine landscape and the intangible values of the river's natural heritage according to the advocates of traditional landscapes and the supporters of modernisation.

By tracing the key environmental impacts of tourism while reconstructing the narratives of place according to different stakeholders, the article's goal is to bridge the gap between the "cultural" and the "material" approach in the environmental history of urban-rural relations.

Keywords: tourism, river, conflict, environmentalism, Mediterranean Sea, Italy

Introduction

Over the last few decades, urbanisation and tourism growth have been deeply interwoven since attempts to promote tourism – whether successful or not – have involved relevant interventions into infrastructures and settlements and shaped landscapes to meet vacationer's expectations.

Correspondingly, the surge of mass tourism has had a significant environmental impact in terms of soil and water consumption, landscape transformation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, especially in rural areas experiencing a belated and incomplete industrialisation, as was the case with many Mediterranean destinations. Throughout the *trente glorieuses* of the European economy from 1945 to 1975, the travel industry was expected to contribute to economic growth and foster modernisation in rural coastal areas; the proliferation of seaside resorts came to represent an ideal outcome in the sum of all planning goals. However, the

DOI: 10.25365/rhy-2020-6



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double-blind).

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advent of mass tourism also called into question the traditional identity of rural communities and their relationship with nearby cities, while rural-urban blurring significantly affected the tourism supply over the following decades.

Despite the increasing interest of environmental history in tourism issues,¹ little attention has been paid to the transformations in coastal rural regions enhanced by the travel industry throughout the golden age of mass consumption, and especially to those in Mediterranean Europe, which experienced significant urbanisation as a consequence of the popularisation of the seaside holiday.²

Broadly speaking, our knowledge of the role played by tourism in the renegotiation of city-countryside relations during the twentieth century is limited by the increasing “heterogeneity of methods” in current environmental history, which focuses either on the “discourse” and narratives on nature – as is the case with authors influenced by the cultural turn – or on the material changes and conflicts in human-environment interactions that were targeted in the early stage of the discipline and have been experiencing a resurgence in recent years.³

This study aims to contribute to filling a research gap in the environmental history of tourism by broadening the geographical context of investigation and strengthening the methodological framework, since it focuses on a coastal floodplain in north-west Italy, an area that has been largely neglected by riverine history, and applies a holistic approach to the impact of tourism on urban-rural relations.

The article retraces the breakthrough of tourism in the Val di Magra, a coastal floodplain in the Italian region of Liguria that experienced attempts to promote mass tourism during the *trente glorieuses*. As a result, the area provides a typical example of the environmental conflicts sparked by the so-called touristification of Mediterranean coasts still characterised by rural features, yet it also includes certain exceptional aspects such as the commitment of several well-known intellectuals against the urbanisation of the Magra river mouth. Furthermore, the limited success of the attempts to increase tourism in the lower Val di Magra allows us to draft a counter-history to the urbanisation of riverine Mediterranean landscapes in the age of mass consumption, shedding light on the contradictions and the “dark side” of mass tourism from an environmental perspective.

The first part of this paper provides an overview on the most relevant research avenues in the history of tourism in the countryside in terms of urban-rural nexus; it does so by focusing on the contribution of riverine history. The second section focuses on the case study by retracing the debates on tourism development at the mouth of the River Magra in the media

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- 1 John K. Walton, *Seaside Tourism and Environmental History*, in: Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud/Stephen Mosley (eds.), *Common Ground: Integrating the Social and Environmental in History*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, 66–85; Scott Moranda, *The Emergence of an Environmental History of Tourism*, in: *Journal of Tourism History* 3 (2015), 268–289.
 - 2 Among the few exceptions to be found are: Federico Paolini, *Salting Fresh Waters: Industries, Tourism and the Environment on Tuscany's Central Southern Coast*, in: *Storia e Futuro* 29 (2012), <http://storiaefuturo.eu/salting-fresh-waters-industries-tourism-and-the-environment-on-tuscany-central-southern-coast/> (15 June 2020); Dennis M. Fox et al., *A Case Study of Land Cover Change (1950–2003) and Runoff in a Mediterranean Catchment*, in: *Applied Geography* 32/2 (2012), 810–821; Giacomo Parrinello/Renaud Bécot, *Regional Planning and the Environmental Impact of Coastal Tourism: The Mission Racine for the Redevelopment of Languedoc-Roussillon's Littoral*, in: *Humanities* 8/1 (2019), DOI: 10.3390/h8010013 (15 June 2020).
 - 3 Fabien Locher/Grégory Quenet, *Environmental History: The Origins, Stakes, and Perspectives of a New Site for Research*, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56/4 (2009), 7–38, 8.

and local institutions with a view to determining key changes to the riverine landscape, investigating the clash between supporters of tourism-related urbanisation and landscape advocates, and assessing the achievements and failures of environmental measures aimed at preventing land consumption and pollution. The final chapter draws conclusions on the basis of the case study analysis and assesses the research findings in the light of current debates on urban-rural relations in riverine landscapes.

A twofold perspective is applied in order to analyse both the tangible transformations of the river landscape and the intangible values associated with it by the stakeholders participating in the most relevant environmental conflicts between tourism development and environmental protection at the mouth of the Magra (local institutions, private enterprises, secondary residence owners, pro-environment intellectuals).

In doing so, the article aims to merge the conceptual tools introduced into environmental history by the “cultural turn” with the methodological framework formed by material environmental history; it does so by tracing the main landscape changes and environmental impacts of tourism while reconstructing the narrative of place according to different subjects.

The “touristification” of rural and riverine landscapes in mainstream historiography

The heritagisation of the countryside in the modern period

The growing public concern with environmental issues has acted as a new impetus for research into the relationships between rural areas and cities and the impact of urbanisation on the countryside: Generally speaking, scholars have increasingly begun to consider urban-rural relations from a long-term perspective with particular regard for leisure practices.⁴ Most recent contributions to this field deal with the “heritagisation” of rural landscapes, meaning the association of cultural values with the material aspect of the countryside for leisure purposes,⁵ which gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century when “the production of amenities has become as relevant as food production in rural landscapes.”⁶

Current research endeavours on rural-urban blurring try to merge the cultural perspective with the reawakened interest of environmental historians in materiality, focusing on landscape as the product of both natural and anthropic transformations; in doing so, this theoretical approach places emphasis on the “subjective” character of the rural heritage and

4 John Towner pointed out that the countryside has been perceived as a playground for the upper classes since the mid-sixteenth century, as confirmed by the spread of leisure practices in the rural surroundings of the first industrial centres. John Towner, *An Historical Geography of Recreation and Tourism in the Western World 1540–1940*, Chichester 1996.

5 Luís Silva/Elisabete Figueiredo, *Shaping Rural Areas in Europe: Perceptions and Outcomes on the Present and the Future*, Dordrecht 2013.

6 “[...] la production des aménités des paysages agricoles périurbains devient une pratique aussi importante que celle des biens alimentaires.” Pierre Donadieu, *La construction actuelle des villes-campagnes. De l’utopie aux réalités*, in: *Histoire urbaine* 2/8 (2003), 157–170, 170. English translations of this and all following quotations by the author.

the dichotomy between city and countryside reflected in personal beliefs, socio-economic practices, and traditional habits.⁷

Many such attempts to reconsider urban-rural relations from a holistic perspective can be found in works dealing with tourism as a twofold practice influenced by – and in turn affecting – both material and cultural factors: Marc Boyer, one of the originators of tourism history, sheds light on the overall transformation of the countryside following the rise of mass tourism and leading to the advent of agritourism:

“In the second half of the twentieth century, the countryside offers a good example of the qualitative change of the cultural origin. Local politicians, farmers, and some ministers attempted to foster rural tourism to counter the desertification of the countryside and provide peasants with supplementary income; the results were poor; this tourism seemed cheap. In 1968, the ecological wave arises: Tourism goes green. It is the overall rural space and the environment that are enhanced.”⁸

A broader analysis is offered by British historian Peter Borsay, who reconsiders rural tourism in light of the blurring city-hinterland relations in eighteenth-century Great Britain:

“The spa, sitting at the border of town and country, constituted the ideal compromise, offering the best of both worlds. There was the convenience and civility of the town without the degradation of industrialization; the innocence and beauty of the countryside without the muck, uncouthness and claustrophobic parochialism of agrarian society.”⁹

The clash between rural and urban identities in Austrian interwar tourism was the object of an inquiry by Corinna Peniston-Bird, who argued that the portrayal of Austria by artists and intellectuals after the end of World War I merged tradition and modernity as well as rural and urban features, thereby raising “complementary paradoxes” that influenced tourist propaganda: “In Austria the old could blend seamlessly with the new: technical progress and rural historical sites complementing each other.”¹⁰

More recently, Laurence Cole and Katharina Scharf have argued that the surge of tourism in the Austrian crown lands of Salzburg and Tyrol from the mid-nineteenth to the early twen-

7 Mirek Dymitrow/Marie Stenseke, *Rural-Urban Blurring and the Subjectivity Within*, in: *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History* 3/1 (2016), 1–13, 4.

8 “Dans la deuxième moitié du Vingtème siècle, la campagne offre un bon exemple de changement qualitatif d’origine culturelle. Les élus locaux, les agriculteurs, certains ministres s’efforçaient de développer un tourisme rural pour lutter contre la désertification des campagnes, pour fournir aux paysans des revenus d’appoint; les résultats étaient médiocres; ce tourisme paraissait au rabais. Vint 1968, et la vague écologique: le tourisme se met au vert. C’est l’espace rural tout entier et la nature qui se trouvent valorisés.” Marc Boyer, *Le tourisme de l’an 2000*, Lyon 1999, 242.

9 Peter Borsay, *Town or Country? British Spas and the Urban-Rural Interface*, in: *Journal of Tourism History* 4/2 (2012), 155–169, 169.

10 Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, *Coffee, Klimt and Climbing: Constructing an Austrian National Identity in Tourist Literature 1918–1938*, in: John K. Walton (ed.), *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*, Clevedon 2005, 162–178, 170.

tieth century resulted in a “masked transformation” since rural civilisation proved remarkably resistant to the supposed modernisation stimulated by the travel industry.¹¹

From a different perspective, Blake A. Harrison provides an original interpretation of the touristification of the countryside in North America relying on the idea that travellers spend their vacation in places characterised by rural workers, whether the latter are farmers or not:

“the very act of vacationing integrates the space and experience of rural work into the tourist trade, redefining them according to the social and cultural discourses guiding that trade in any given context. That integration has made the meanings, spaces and practices of leisure inextricable from those of rural work. This continual reconfiguration of work, leisure and the relationship between them, I believe, is what gives the historical continuity of the rural tourist experience.”¹²

The debate about the role of modern tourism in urban-rural relations summarised above provides useful methodological suggestions for this study, especially in terms of the importance of “landscape” as a cross-cut notion embedded in both natural and anthropic phenomena. More specifically, recent contributions to the discourse on the *mise en tourisme* of rural landscapes has highlighted the intrinsic contradiction of attempts to turn rural regions into well-known destinations by improving their transportation networks and tourism infrastructure, thereby strengthening the city-countryside nexus and accelerating the urbanisation process, while simultaneously advertising their traditional, unspoilt natural and cultural heritage.

However, historical research on tourism in the countryside often relies on a blurry concept of rural landscape and rural identity that fails to take into account the significant differences in regional and local contexts, thus devoting little attention to specific features like those of Mediterranean rural floodplains.

Taking cues from the achievements (and limitations) in the field of history of rural tourism, this essay aims to contribute to a better understanding of the environmental consequences of tourism-induced urbanisation in the Mediterranean countryside, the renegotiation of urban-rural relations, and the conflicts caused by the increasing commodification of rural heritage to meet the expectations of a tourism demand coming primarily from urban areas.

The case study analysis will therefore focus on the tangible transformations of the “challenged” landscape at the mouth of the Magra while tracing the differing subjective views on the river’s heritage and its exploitation.

11 Laurence Cole/Katharina Scharf, Alpine Tourism and “Masked Transformation”. Salzburg and Tyrol before 1914, in: Zeitschrift für Tourismuswissenschaft 9/1 (2017), 33–63. On Alpine tourism, concepts of tradition, and divergent paths of development in two villages in Tyrol, see the contribution by Rike Stotten in this volume.

12 Blake A. Harrison, *The View from Vermont: Tourism and the Making of an American Rural Landscape*, Burlington/Hanover/London 2006, 13.

Transformations and aesthetic values in riverine landscapes: Research cues from water history

In recent years, there has been an undeniable interest in the environmental history of inland waters that has involved broader reflection on the profound changes to the tangible and intangible heritage of rivers through the ages as well as on the interdependency between natural ecosystems and human societies.¹³

The material transformations of riverine areas in the modern period have been investigated with reference to the advent of industrialisation and the increasing competition among agriculture, industry, and cities for limited water supplies.¹⁴ Some of the most rewarding research avenues in this context deal with the urbanisation of riverbanks, improvements to water technology (aqueducts, pipes, irrigation systems, etc.), exploitation of water for energy production (hydropower), wastewater treatment and river pollution, and land reclamation for agricultural purposes.¹⁵

In addition to these fields of research, the cultural turn in environmental history has given rise to a newfound interest in intangible river heritage and the aesthetic and cultural values associated with riverine landscapes, which have come to be considered as “hybrid landscapes in which natural and socio-cultural phenomena are inextricably interwoven”.¹⁶ Such perspectives have enabled broader reflection on the recreational uses of inland waters: Taking cues from both the material and cultural approaches to river history, scholars have pointed out that while rural watercourses have served as stages for a vast array of leisure practices since the times of early civilisations,¹⁷ urban rivers became the cities’ playgrounds only after the onset of the industrial revolution, as confirmed by the increasing number of urban parks located along riverbanks; moreover, urban growth during the industrial age supported the proliferation of riverside retreats in rural areas.¹⁸

13 “Most historians now discuss rivers in terms of permanent or dialectical interchanges between the dynamics of nature and human intervention. Ideas about rivers and water projects – cultural and technological constructions – have changed both the appearance and the function of rivers over the centuries. At the same time, rivers are themselves agents, providers of energy and resources, and a driving force in history”. Christof Mauch/Thomas Zeller, *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America*, Pittsburgh 2008, 7.

14 For an overview of this field of research, see Paula Schönach, *River Histories: A Thematic Review*, in: *Water History* 9/3, 233–257. See also the contribution by Salvatore Valenti in this volume.

15 Verena Winiwarter et al., *The Long-Term Evolution of Urban Waters and Their Nineteenth-Century Transformation in European Cities: A Comparative Environmental History*, in: *Water History* 8/3 (2016), 209–233; Martin Knoll/Uwe Lübken/Dieter Schott, Introduction, in: Martin Knoll/Uwe Lübken/Dieter Schott (eds.), *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations*, Pittsburgh 2017, 3–22.

16 Martin Schmid, *The Environmental History of Rivers in the Early Modern Period*, in: Martin Knoll/Reinhold Reith (eds.), *An Environmental History of the Early Modern Period: Experiments and Perspectives*, Berlin 2014, 19–25, 20.

17 “In the countryside, rivers appeal to people because they retain much of their natural beauty and offer opportunities for fishing, boating and other forms of recreation.” Bruce Prideaux/Dallen J. Timothy/Malcolm Cooper, *Introducing River Tourism: Physical, Ecological and Human Aspects*, in: Bruce Prideaux/Malcolm Cooper (eds.), *River Tourism*, Wallingford/Cambridge 2009, 1–22, 2. On this topic, see also Joëlle Burnouf/Philippe Leveau (eds.), *Flueves et marais, une histoire au croisement de la nature et de la culture*, Sociétés préindustrielles et milieux fluviaux, lacustres et palustres: pratiques sociales et hydrosystèmes, Paris 2004.

18 Stéphane Frioux, Fléau, ressource, exutoire: visions et usages des rivières urbaines (XVIIIe–XXIe s.), in: *Géocarrefour* 85/3 (2010), 188–192.

Broadly speaking, the review of current riverine history reveals certain research gaps: Firstly, scholars have focused their attention almost exclusively on major rivers,¹⁹ whereas minor watercourses and riparian areas such as peri-urban and urbanised floodplains have been the subject of comparatively little research;²⁰ secondly, despite the growing interest in the aestheticization of rivers and inland waters, modern tourism is rarely mentioned in current river history research with the exception of occasional references to the cultural and environmental threats posed by excessive tourism, including the loss of intangible river heritage and the “tacit knowledge” grounded in traditional landscapes and ways of life.²¹

These limitations notwithstanding, river history provides a consolidated methodological framework hitherto applied mostly to major rivers that can prove useful for assessing the riverine landscape transformations at the mouth of the Magra: According to current literature, the most relevant issues are represented by the agents involved in the commodification of nature, the environmental, social, and cultural consequences of anthropic interventions pertaining to the river, and the competition for inland waters between different sectors and users.

In addition, the cultural history of riverine landscapes suggests a focus on the changing meanings of intangible river heritage to different social groups, which requires examination of a wider array of sources including newspapers and other mass media.

Taking into consideration the research cues provided above, the following section will deal with the case study beginning with a brief overview of the long-term historical and environmental processes affecting the Val di Magra with emphasis on the period from 1945 to 1975. Subsequently, two instances of conflicts caused by the tourism-induced urbanisation of the Magra river mouth will be discussed, and finally, further threats to the river habitat will be analysed along with the measures taken to preserve its natural heritage and mitigate environmental risks.

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- 19 For the sake of brevity, only a few bibliographical suggestions will be provided here, limited to the Western World in the modern age: Peter Schöttler, *The Rhine as an Object of Historical Controversy in the Inter-war Years: Towards a History of Frontier Mentalities*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 39/1 (1995), 1–22; Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, New York 1995; Lucien Febvre/Peter Schöttler, *Le Rhin: histoire, mythes et réalités*, Paris 1997; Isabelle Backouche, *La Trace du fleuve. La Seine et Paris (1750–1850)*, Paris 2000; Michael F. Logan, *The Lessening Stream: An Environmental History of the Santa Cruz River*, Tucson 2002; Gavin Weightman, *London's Thames: The River That Shaped a City and Its History*, New York 2005; Piet H. Nienhuis, *Environmental History of the Rhine-Meuse Delta: An Ecological Story on Evolving Human-Environmental Relations Coping with Climate Change and Sea Level Rise*, New York 2008; Robert E. Henshaw, *Environmental History of the Hudson River: Human Uses that Changed the Ecology, Ecology that Changed Human Uses*, Albany 2011; Sara B. Pritchard, *Confluence: The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhône*, London/Cambridge 2011; Verena Winiwarter et al., *The Environmental History of the Danube River Basin as an Issue of Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research*, in: Simron J. Singh et al. (eds.), *Long-Term Socio-Ecological Research. Studies in Society: Nature Interactions across Spatial and Temporal Scales*, Berlin 2012, 103–122; Sarah Rosalind Palmer, *Archives and Resources in the Thames Region for Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Environmental History*, in: *The London Journal* 40/3 (2015), 218–224; Jennifer S. Schiff, *The Evolution of Rhine River Governance: Historical Lessons for Modern Transboundary Water Management*, in: *Water History* 9/3, 279–294.
- 20 Among the relatively scarce case study analyses on such issues is: Jérôme Rollin, *La protection des petites rivières périurbaines dans les Bouches-du-Rhône depuis les années 1960: une analyse de la construction locale de la norme environnementale*, in: *Géocarrefour* 85/3 (2010), 229–240.
- 21 Verena Winiwarter, *The Role of Cultural Heritage for the Sustainable Development of the Danube Region*, in: Stefano Brumat (ed.), *DIAnet International School Proceedings 2015: The Role of Cultural Heritage for the Sustainable Development of the Danube Region*, Gorizia 14–23 March 2015, Trieste 2015, 27–44, 29.

The breakthrough of mass tourism in the Val di Magra: Urbanisation and environmental conflicts

The Val di Magra, a landscape “so incredibly varied and contrasting”

“The mouth of this river is the border between the Ligurian and Tuscan landscapes: On the one side are rough olive trees and bare rock, on the other tender reeds, plains, and long beaches of finest sand. Perhaps nowhere else in our incomparable Italy is the landscape so incredibly varied and contrasting.”²²

The River Magra in the north-western part of Italy is around 70 km long and has a catchment area of 1,698.5 km². The geological features of its basin, which is characterised by a twofold lithological division with predominantly non-cohesive riverbanks in the middle to upper reaches and composite banks in the lower reaches,²³ along with its occasional torrential current caused by high precipitation levels in the nearby Alpi Apuane give rise to frequent and severe flooding events and significant river channel migration.²⁴

According to studies by geologists and archaeologists, alluvial deposits have gradually silted up the river over the past 2,500 years and turned its former deep estuary into a coastal plain, thereby causing a 2.5-km seaward shifting of the coastline to its present location and a displacement of the river bed across the plain towards the foothills on its right-hand side.²⁵

The Val di Magra covers an area of about 126 km² along the final stretch of the river that touches seven municipalities: Vezzano Ligure, Santo Stefano di Magra, Arcola, Sarzana, Castelnuovo Magra, Luni,²⁶ and Ameglia, where the river drains into the Ligurian Sea. According to the 2011 census, this area is home to 31 per cent of the entire population of the Province of La Spezia (70,000 inhabitants, of which 21,000 in Sarzana).²⁷

As mentioned in the citation above, the Val di Magra lies at the border between Liguria and Tuscany; it is crossed by two of the most important road axes connecting Central and Northern Italy (the Via Aurelia and the Via Cisa), thus providing a strategic passage between the

22 “La foce di questo fiume è il confine paesistico tra Liguria e Toscana: di là oliveti scabri e nude rocce, di qua teneri canneti e campi di pianura, e lunghe, finissime spiagge. Forse in nessun altro punto della nostra incomparabile Italia la varietà, e lo stacco, dei lineamenti terrestri sono così impressionanti.” Piero Conti Gadda, *Il Golfo dei poeti*, in: *Le Vie d'Italia* 5 (1951), 561–569, 566.

23 Massimo Rinaldi et al., *Scientific Design Strategy for Promoting Sustainable Sediment Management: The Case of the Magra River (Central-Northern Italy)*, in: *River Research and Applications* 25 (2009), 607–625.

24 Daniela Raggi, Stefano Palandri, *Descrizione dei caratteri orografici e geomorfologici del bacino del fiume Magra*, in: Marinella Abbate/Vincenzo Damiani (eds.), *Studio ambientale del Fiume Magra*, Rome 1989, 15–21.

25 Monica Bini et al., *Environmental Features of the Magra River Lower Plain (NW Italy)* in *Roman Times*, in: Morgan De Dapper et al. (eds.), *Ol' Man River: Geo-Archaeological Aspects of Rivers and River Plains*, Ghent 2009, 111–126.

26 The village of Ortonovo was recently renamed “Luni” after the well-known Roman city whose ruins lie within the borders of the municipality.

27 The 2011 census data are available online: Istat – Istituto nazionale di statistica, <http://dati.istat.it/?lang=it> (15 June 2020).

plain of the River Po and the Tyrrhenian coast and representing an important crossroad since ancient times, with the earliest signs of human presence dating back to the sixth century B.C.²⁸

Consequently, archaeological surveys have found evidence of settlements built by the Ligurians (an ancient people inhabiting the north-west Mediterranean coast) during the Iron Age. In the second century B.C., the Romans founded the city of Luni, whose inland port became a leading centre of trade until late antiquity, when the city began to suffer from the overall decline of the Roman Empire: Besides losing its importance as a trading centre, the degradation of the public administration impeded maintenance of the drainage network surrounding the city, resulting in the spread of marshes along the coastline.²⁹ In the Early Middle Ages, wetlands, frequent incursions, and other historical events – the Gothic War, for example, caused severe damage to the coastal area of the Val di Magra, which belonged to the Byzantine Empire at the time – created harsh living conditions in the lower floodplain, thus spurring the local population to establish new villages in the surrounding hills (Castelnuovo Magra, Ortonovo, Arcola, Ameglia, Santo Stefano) and causing Sarzana to inherit the urban and political functions previously provided by Luni.³⁰ During the High Middle Ages, the valley situated along the most feasible routes leading from Northern Europe to Rome and Southern Italy (including the Via Francigena, a well-known pilgrimage route between Canterbury and Rome) gained a strategic position for trade and service provision to travellers.³¹ During this period, the revival of urban life triggered frequent conflicts between local communities, landowners, and private citizens for the right to use the river (including toll collection, transport services, cultivation, and exploitation of the riverbanks).³²

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, after long being disputed by the most important Italian regional states for its strategic location,³³ the area fell to the *Banco di San Giorgio*, a Genoese banking and financial institution with public powers, and was eventually ceded to the Kingdom of Sardinia.³⁴

Until the industrial age, scattered farms prevailed in the lower basin while the coastal area itself was deemed an “empty space” unsuitable for human settlement and economic activities:

28 Anna Durante, La necropoli preromana di Ameglia, in: *Rivista di Studi Liguri* 48 (1982), 148–164.

29 Catherine Delano Smith et al., Luni and the ‘Ager Lunensis’ the Rise and Fall of a Roman Town and Its Territory, in: *Papers of the British School at Rome* 54 (1986), 81–146.

30 Gioacchino Volpe, *Toscana medievale*, Massa Marittima, Volterra, Sarzana, Firenze 1963, 313–354; Enrica Salvatori, Poteri locali e popolamento in Lunigiana tra XII e XIII secolo, in: Antonio Manfredi/Paola Sverzellati (eds.), *Da Luni a Sarzana 1204–2004. Ottavo Centenario della Traslazione della Sede Vescovile*, Sarzana 30 Settembre – 2 Ottobre 2004, Rome 2007, 255–272.

31 Enrica Salvatori, La Francigena nella Lunigiana medievale: una strada da percorrere?, in: Roberto Greci (ed.), *Studi sull’Emilia occidentale nel Medioevo*, Bologna 2001, 177–203.

32 Giovanna Petti Balbi, *Governare la città: pratiche sociali e linguaggi politici a Genova in età medievale*, Florence 2007.

33 Anna Ivaldi, La signoria dei Campofregoso in Lunigiana, in: *Atti della Società ligure di storia patria* 7, new series 7 (1967), 87–142; Eliana M. Vecchi (ed.), Papato, stati regionali e Lunigiana nell’età di Niccolò V: atti delle giornate di studio, La Spezia, Sarzana, Pontremoli, Bagnone, 25–28 March 2000, La Spezia 2004; Giorgio Chittolini, Note sul Comune di Firenze e i “piccoli signori” dell’Appennino secondo la pace di Sarzana (1353), in: Diogo Ramada Curto et al. (eds.), *From Florence to the Mediterranean and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Anthony Molho*, Florence 2009, 193–210.

34 Patrizia Meli, *Gabriele Malaspina marchese di Fosdinovo. Condotte, politica e diplomazia nella Lunigiana del Rinascimento*, Florence 2008, 127–130.

“fra la bocca della Magra e quella della Parmignuola, non vi è sul lido del Mare alcun luogo degno di memoria, a riserva delle Rovine di Luni.”³⁵

In addition, the regular changes to the river course caused by flooding³⁶ required frequent surveying to reassess property boundaries and prevented the construction of a bridge over the lower course, leaving boats as the only way of crossing the Magra (and a relevant source of income for the locals): “Si passa a guazzo il detto fiume assai cattivo ne’ tempi piovosi d’inverno; e quella gente per passarlo usa gran rigore co’ viandanti, facendo pagare cinque e sei scudi per corriere; e perciò conviene sfuggire tal cammino.”³⁷

Following the unification of Italy, when the management of the inland waters became more and more institutionalised, specialised public officers like the *Genio Civile* and newly established bodies like the *Consorzio per l’arginamento della sponda sinistra del fiume Magra* founded in the late nineteenth century made efforts to reclaim marshes and improve the inland water network in the floodplain.³⁸ As a consequence, land reclamation and the rationalisation of inland water promoted extensive agriculture and breeding performed by a small number of large landowners.³⁹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with agriculture and cattle breeding being the only sources of employment for the communities living by the mouth of the river, an increasing number of workers sought jobs in the nearby cities of La Spezia, where the most important military arsenal of the Kingdom of Italy and a trading port provided plenty of employment opportunities,⁴⁰ and Carrara, known worldwide for its quarries (mining was one of the most labour-intensive sectors at the time).⁴¹ Besides, fishermen moving from San Benedetto del Tronto to the Tyrrhenian coast between La Spezia and Versilia established a small community in Bocca di Magra and improved the local fishing industry.⁴²

During the first half of the twentieth century, the mouth of the Magra – located in the Municipality of Ameglia, with the village of Bocca di Magra on the right bank of the river and the village of Fiumaretta on the left – and the surrounding coastline including the village

35 “Between the mouth of the Magra and that of the Parmignola river, there is no place on the coast worth remembering except the ruins of Luni.” Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti, *Relazioni d’alcuni viaggi fatti in diverse parti della Toscana, per osservare le produzioni naturali, e gli antichi monumenti di essa*, Florence 1777, 112.

36 Massimo Quaini, *Per la storia del paesaggio agrario in Liguria*, Savona 1973, 88–92.

37 “This river, which is very bad during the wet season in winter, is fordable; the inhabitants are very harsh with travellers whenever it has to be crossed, since it takes five or six *scudi* [silver coin issued by the Republic of Genoa and weighing 38 grams] per courier; it is therefore worth avoiding this route.” Giuseppe Miselli, *Ciro Ferri, Giovanni Francesco Venturini, Il Burattino veridico, ad istanza di Nicolò L’Hullie libraro all’insegna del Delfino*, Rome 1684, 304. In the mid-nineteenth century, the River Magra was still deemed a “grossa e precipitosa fiumana” (“wide torrential stream”). Emanuele Repetti, *Magra*, in: Emanuele Repetti, *Dizionario Geografico Fisico Storico della Toscana*, vol. 3, Florence 1839, 22.

38 Historical Archives of the Italian Parliament, House of Representatives, *Disegni e proposte di legge e incarti delle commissioni (1848–1943), Petitions from January 1880 to June 1881, Petition no. 2613 by the Consorzio per l’arginamento della sponda sinistra del fiume Magra to the Ministry of Public Works*, 247–257.

39 Emanuele Repetti, *Marinella*, in: Repetti, *Dizionario*, 80–81.

40 Graziano Tonelli (ed.), *L’aspetto della città, piacevole da tutte le parti sarebbe magnifico: il Golfo della Spezia dalla Repubblica ligure all’Arsenale militare marittimo. Proceedings of the Congress held in Villa Marigola, Lerici*, 1 June 2001, La Spezia 2001.

41 Marco Manfredi, *Alessandro Volpi, Breve storia di Carrara*, Pisa 2007.

42 Gabriele Cavezzi/Ugo Marinangeli (eds.), *Una Civiltà altrove. Le migrazioni del Piceno Meridionale, San Benedetto del Tronto 2003*.

of Marinella in the Municipality of Sarzana were characterised by a low level of urbanisation, dispersed settlements, and an underdeveloped road network that hampered the establishment of a significant tourism industry. Only a handful of primitive, temporary tourism facilities were available almost entirely to occasional travellers.⁴³

Once the heavy damage caused by World War II had been repaired, local communities returned to prewar economic and social habits, with the poor road network still representing the most important constraint in terms of tourism growth and urbanisation.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the area was affected by major changes that overturned the ancient patterns of human-environment interaction and reconfigured the perception of the value of the river: Similar to other areas in Northern Italy, the Val di Magra experienced a steep decline of agriculture in terms of employment, compensated by the increasing relevance of the industrial and service sectors.⁴⁵ Although the main sources of employment were still to be found in the nearby urban agglomerations of La Spezia and Carrara, the rise of shipyards,⁴⁶ houseboats, and stone crushing along the riverbanks supported economic development.

Yet the unprecedented industrialisation along the lower course of the Magra resulted in growing competition for land and water between agriculture, sand mining, industrial activities, and the service sector, causing huge environmental impacts along the river course and threatening the traditional landscapes and natural habitats, “affected by a combination of human impacts and disturbances, with sediment mining being the most important.”⁴⁷

Between the 1950s and the 1990s, as a result of intensive gravel mining and steadily increasing withdrawal of water for residential, agricultural, and industrial purposes, the riverbed narrowed significantly, losing up to 80 per cent of its width in some places, more than most other rivers in Northern and Central Italy during the same period.⁴⁸ Moreover, from the 1950s to the 1970s, when mining was subject to fewer restrictions than in the following

43 In 1930, Bocca di Magra had a population of 372 inhabitants, 245 of whom lived in “un povero, ma pittoresco villaggio di pescatori” (“a poor but quaint little fishing village”). Piero Gribaudi, Bocca di Magra, in: *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Rome 1930, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bocca-di-magra_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/ (15 June 2020).

44 According to the National Survey on Italian Tourism Heritage promoted by the Commissioner for Tourism in 1951, the conditions of the road connecting Bocca di Magra to the hinterland were still bad and the roadway was often flooded. Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, Letter from the Municipality of Ameglia to the EPT, subject: survey on national tourism heritage, 4 April 1951.

45 In 1961, primary sector workers in the Province of La Spezia represented 12.3% of the total workforce, compared to 29% on the national level. Between 1951 and 1961, their number had dropped from 17,186 to 10,639, with a significant decrease in Val di Magra, where part-time agriculture became widespread. Thanks to the adoption of updated agricultural methods, the cultivation of fruits and vegetables maintained a relatively high importance, though the produce was largely destined for the nearby markets of La Spezia and the urban centres of the Po Valley. Camera di commercio industria e agricoltura di La Spezia, *Lineamenti economici della Provincia di La Spezia*, Milan 1964, 16–17.

46 In the early 1970s, the entrepreneurial group *Intermarine S.p.A.* began to build warships not far from the river mouth, requiring significant interventions along the riverbanks as will be discussed in the following sections.

47 Rinaldi et al., *Scientific Design*, 623.

48 Nicola Surian et al., Channel Adjustments in Northern and Central Italy over the Last 200 Years, in: L. Allan James/Sara L. Rathburn/George Richard Whittcar (eds.), *Management and Restoration of Fluvial Systems with Broad Historical Changes and Human Impacts*, Geological Society of America Special Papers 451 (2009), 83–95, 89.

decades, more than 1,500,000 m³ of sand were removed from the bed of the Magra; the subsequent decrease in alluvial deposits caused significant coastal erosion and saltwater intrusion as well as lowering the groundwater level, with the latter aspect supposedly responsible for the collapse of the main bridge across the river in 1968.⁴⁹

During the *trente glorieuses* of mass consumption, private and public bodies made efforts to enhance tourism, which still played a limited role in the local economy at the end of the 1950s.⁵⁰ The Versilia region in Tuscany represented a nearby model of a successful seaside destination. Tourism-induced urbanisation generated further environmental threats and concerns, as it will be shown in the following sections.

The bridge of contention: Urban-rural conflicts during the urbanisation of the Val di Magra

In the late 1950s, the tourism industry in the Val di Magra was struggling with the inadequacy of the road network, whose main axis, the Via Aurelia (the main Tyrrhenian coast road), suffered from congestion due to growing private mobility and the urbanisation of the coastline, with numerous linear settlements established alongside the road; moreover, the Via Cisa, the principal thoroughfare linking Liguria with the Po Valley, intersected the Via Aurelia in Sarzana, thus increasing traffic even further.

In 1957, the Province of La Spezia planned to build a bridge near the mouth of the Magra, an improvement to the coastal road network that decision-makers hoped would represent a way out of the Via Aurelia congestion and support the economic growth of eastern Liguria. Besides, the absence of a direct connection to the Via Aurelia limited the accessibility of Marinella and the villages of Bocca di Magra and Fiumaretta at the river mouth, with Fiumaretta in particular suffering from the lack of a bridge crossing the lower course of the river. Several proposals for the construction of a bridge at the river mouth had been made since the end of the 1920s, but none of them had been implemented.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, the Municipality of Ameglia warmly welcomed the bridge, since it was intended to promote the touristic development of Fiumaretta and connect it to Bocca di Magra; by contrast, some citizens of Sarzana challenged the project by establishing a civic committee (*Comitato cittadino sarzanese*, hereinafter referred to as *Comitato*) and initiating a harsh debate in local newspapers. The *Enti provinciali del turismo* (EPT, provincial tourism

49 Samuela Cavazza et al., *Variazioni morfologiche del tronco terminale del fiume Magra nel quindicennio 1958–1973*, in: Ugo Bruni (ed.), *Atti del convegno di studi per il riequilibrio della costa fra il fiume Magra e Marina di Massa*, Massa, 2–4 June 1977, Massa 1978, 135–156.

50 In 1960, tourist accommodations in Val di Magra were limited to 26 structures with 204 rooms and 459 beds, representing 10% of the entire tourism supply in the Province of La Spezia. Camera di commercio industria e agricoltura di La Spezia, Ufficio provinciale di statistica, *Compendio statistico della Provincia della Spezia*, La Spezia 1962, 143.

51 At the time, traffic in the lower Val di Magra relied on the bridge crossing the river between Sarzana and Arcola (which collapsed after a flood on 9 October 1968) and the ferry service near the river mouth.

boards)⁵² of La Spezia and Massa-Carrara were asked by the *Commissariato per il turismo*⁵³ to provide formal opinions on the project, given its relevant consequences for tourism. While the EPT of La Spezia delayed its answer since it fell under the competence of the EPT steering committee (which also involved the president of the province),⁵⁴ the EPT of Massa-Carrara appraised the project favourably since it met the “aspirations” of the citizens living by the coast between La Spezia and Viareggio, who had been clamouring for a littoral road connecting the seaside tourism resorts while relieving the pressure on the Via Aurelia.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the dispute about the bridge was soon presented by the media and the opposing front in Sarzana as a clash between city and countryside since the project was supposed to serve the economic interests of La Spezia and the tourist resorts along the coast at the expense of Sarzana and its agriculture. The *Comitato* published arguments against the bridge in a pamphlet promoting a better understanding of the local perception of rural-urban relations and the role played by tourism in the tangible and intangible transformation of the countryside.⁵⁶

Effectively, it claimed that only Ameglia stood to benefit from the bridge and that the connection of the coastal boroughs to the Via Aurelia was the highest priority; it therefore proposed replacing the bridge with a road linking Sarzana to Marinella and the coastal road network, with a view to increasing tourism flows from the neighbouring regions and developing intensive agriculture in the lower floodplain.⁵⁷

The construction of the bridge, as the *Comitato* argued, would exclude Sarzana from the major traffic currents, thus leading to its economic marginalisation⁵⁸ and weakening local community spirit and sense of place as a consequence of the high “psychological value” of the road network for the locals:

“Since the roads are of great psychological value for the inhabitants of Sarzana, they would feel discouraged due to the isolation from the main transport network and no longer be spurred by the desire to make their city bigger and more beautiful; hope would fade into resignation and they would think about moving to neighbouring towns which, enlivened by traffic, would have a much greater attraction.”⁵⁹

52 The *Enti provinciali del turismo* were the public bodies in charge of tourism enhancement at the provincial level in the years under consideration.

53 From the early post-war years until 1960, when the Ministry of Tourism was created, the *Commissariato per il turismo* was responsible for the coordination of the Italian tourism system.

54 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, Letter from the president of the EPT of La Spezia to the *Commissariato per il Turismo*, 25 Feb. 1957.

55 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, Letter from the president of the EPT for Massa-Carrara, Ing. Giovanni Lazzoni, to the *Commissariato per il Turismo*, 1 March 1957.

56 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, *Comitato cittadino Sarzanese, Punto di vista dei sarzanesi circa il ponte alla foce della Magra e lo stradone Sarzana-Marinella*, s.d.

57 This road, named Viale XXV Aprile, was eventually built a few years later.

58 At the time, the equivalence between road traffic and development was widespread in public opinion, but the emphasis on the social importance of the road network can also be interpreted as a reference to the traditional economy of the Val di Magra, which was based on trade with and services for travellers.

59 “Ma poiché le strade per i Sarzanesi hanno un altissimo valore psicologico, privati della grande circolazione, si affloscerebbero, non sentendosi ulteriormente pungolati dal desiderio di accrescere ed abbellire la loro città; la speranza si smorzerebbe nella rassegnazione ed essi mediterebbero l'esodo verso le cittadine vicine che, vivi-

In addition, the pamphlet questioned the supposed benefits of the bridge for touristic development at the mouth of the river, since Bocca di Magra – known among elitist travellers as a quiet retreat far away from mass tourism – lacked a beach worth visiting, while the “uncertain and limited” tourism potential of Fiumaretta could barely offset the invested effort.⁶⁰

Several local newspapers also claimed that the improvement of the coastal road network following the construction of the bridge would proceed in favour of the industrial and service activities based in Genoa, which incited the rural communities of the Val di Magra to riot against the “city”. Other observers proposed annexing Sarzana to Tuscany, its “ancient fatherland”.⁶¹

Despite the protests, the provincial government eventually finalised the project and the bridge, currently named “Ponte della Colombiera”, was opened in July 1960; in the media, it became the symbol of “a metamorphosis that could be deemed revolutionary, with the ferry boat representing the only heritage from the past.”⁶²

On the eve of the bridge’s inauguration, the local press emphasised the benefits for Ameglia and its surroundings in terms of touristic development while still voicing concerns about the impact of increasing tourism flows (and a modern, fast way of life) on the traditional landscape and local identity:

“This bridge will especially benefit tourists by facilitating their movement to and from Versilia and thus improve knowledge of this area, which still has the flavour of virgin land [...]. Here is to the bridge we have waited and hoped for. And farewell to you, old ferry! [...] dear friend from a time that already seems very distant today. One runs, one is in a hurry, such is the world. Goodbye!”⁶³

In the end, the urban settlements in the Magra’s lower floodplain expanded as a result of demographic growth after the building of the bridge: Private housing, retail outlets, and industrial plants spread along the Via Aurelia, whose design as well as the secondary road network were adapted to link the valley’s centres and connect the coastal areas to the hinter-

ficata dalla circolazione, avrebbero una ben maggiore attrattiva”. Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, Comitato cittadino Sarzanese, Punto di vista dei sarzanesi circa il ponte alla foce della Magra e lo stradone Sarzana-Marinella, s.d., 4.

60 Ibid., 4.

61 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, O.D./A.C., Quanto fa spasimare un progettato ponte!, in: *Il Tirreno*, 26 Feb. 1957 [the newspaper articles kept at the Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria lack page numbers]. Sarzana had been under the rule of the Republic of Florence in the Late Middle Ages.

62 “[...] una metamorfosi che possiamo definire rivoluzionaria in cui l’ultimo residuo dell’antico era rappresentato solo dal traghetto.” Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235; S.n., Il ponte sul Magra pronto per l’estate, in: *La Nazione*, 12 March 1960.

63 “Trarrà beneficio da questo ponte soprattutto il turista al quale sarà permessa una maggiore libertà di movimento da e per la Versilia e sarà così più intimamente conosciuta questa zona che ha ancora il sapore di terra vergine [...]. Salute a te, ponte della nostra attesa e della nostra speranza. E addio a te, vecchio traghetto! [...] caro amico di un tempo che sembra già oggi assai lontano. Si corre, si ha fretta, così è il mondo. Addio!” Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VI, 235, Ennio Silvestri, Traghetto che va, ponte che viene, in: *La Nazione*, 1 July 1970. The article also offers a brief description of the bridge: 154 m long, 9 m wide, and resting on 6 pillars, it had been built by Edilstrade ligure in about 15 months at a cost of 125 million lire, funded entirely by the Province of La Spezia.

land more efficiently. The massive funding required for these projects was provided largely by local institutions.

Such transformations irreversibly affected the relationship between local communities and the river and called into question some of the most ancient provisioning and regulating services provided by it, as it will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

“Less sentimentalism, more concrete”: Tourism and urbanisation at the mouth of the Magra

In the aftermath of World War II, Bocca di Magra was cherished by many leading figures in the European arts: Poets like Vittorio Sereni and Eugenio Montale and writers including Elio Vittorini, Giorgio Bassani, Italo Calvino, along with the likes of publisher Giulio Einaudi and Hans Deichmann, a representative of anti-Nazi resistance, established an intellectual circle, meeting in their private homes or at local hangouts like the *Locanda il Pilota* (the Pilot Inn) by the riverside.

A vivid portrayal of Bocca di Magra during the 1950s can be found in *Le Vie d'Italia*, the official journal of the Italian touring club:

“Walking on the paved road running along the right bank of the Magra, I notice, moored at grassy meadows, small boats, fishing boats, and some transport vessels. Jack London would have appreciated this environment if he had come to write adventures here. [...] I reach the coastal neighbourhood of Ameglia. Few houses, a nice, cosy trattoria offering a menu of delicious fish dishes. Above the low concrete embankments sheltering the settlement from the strokes of the open sea, one can see small and pretty seaside buildings. [...] On the other bank of the river, the settlement takes hold as well, reaching the new beaches that run towards Marina di Carrara to conquer a seaside future. The village I see two hundred meters away is another neighbourhood of Ameglia and is named Fiumaretta.”⁶⁴

Whereas Bocca di Magra began to attract an elitist, limited tourism demand thanks to the presence of famous intellectuals, thus preserving its original characteristics except for the appearance of a new residential neighbourhood in the area of La Ferrara at some distance from the river, the development of middle-class tourism in Fiumaretta led to the construction of several hotels and a large number of secondary residences, which filled the empty spaces in

64 “Percorrendo la strada asfaltata che costeggia la sponda destra della Magra, noto, attraccati agli argini erbosi, piccoli battelli, barche da pesca, qualche legno da trasporto. Questo ambiente sarebbe piaciuto a Jack London se fosse venuto a scrivere avventure da queste parti. [...] Arrivo alla frazione marina di Ameglia. Poche case, una bella trattoria accogliente, mostra la lista di prelibati piatti di pesce. Sopra i brevi spalti in cemento che difendono l'abitato dai colpi del mare aperto, si vedono piccole e graziose costruzioni balneari. [...] Anche sull'altra sponda del fiume l'abitato prende piede, si spinge sino alle nuove spiagge che corrono verso Marina di Carrara alla conquista di un prossimo avvenire balneare. Quell'abitato che io vedo a duecento metri di distanza è un'altra frazione di Ameglia e prende il nome di Fiumaretta”. Renato Albanese, *Lungo il litorale della Lunigiana*, in: *Le Vie d'Italia* 1957, 1522–1523.

the ancient settlement without providing an adequate supply of associated services (parking spaces, sewage etc.).

These contradictions came to a head in the early the 1960s when *Montemarcello S.p.A.*, an enterprise founded by the large Italian real estate company *Condotte immobiliare* based in Rome, purchased a significant amount of land from the residents and submitted to the local authorities a request to zone the slopes of the Montemarcello promontory above Bocca di Magra for the establishment of a scattered residential settlement, along with the installation of basic services such as sewerage and public lighting.

The intellectuals who had chosen Bocca di Magra as their secondary residence were unsurprisingly not amenable to the project, which they viewed as a threat to the traditional landscape and natural heritage; they consequently established a committee named *Società degli amici di Bocca di Magra* (Society of the Friends of Bocca di Magra, hereinafter *Società*) and including among its more than 80 members some of the internationally acclaimed intellectuals mentioned above (Giulio Einaudi and Vittorio Sereni as well as the writers Mary McCarthy, Jean Bloch Michel, and Italo Calvino, among others) with the goal of “preservare i caratteri naturali dell’estuario e favorire un più ordinato sviluppo economico e sociale di questa parte del nostro paese.”⁶⁵

The *Società* argued that secondary residence owners, who contributed significantly to the local economy, should have a say in the debate on the future of Bocca di Magra, whose environmental heritage was described as “spiaggia, scoglio, fiume e collina.”⁶⁶

With a view to reaching a compromise between the supporters and opponents of the project, the Municipality of Ameglia⁶⁷ charged Giancarlo De Carlo,⁶⁸ one of the most renowned Italian architects of the time, to draw up a new development plan for Ameglia: Drafted in 1962, De Carlo’s proposal for the area in question included two well-defined built-up areas rather than a scattered settlement as envisioned by *Montemarcello S.p.A.* and was supported by the *Società*.

Hoping to achieve a consensus on De Carlo’s plan, the *Società* explained their rejection of uncontrolled urban sprawl by the river in a leaflet addressed to the public bodies directly concerned with the development of Bocca di Magra. The text stated that mass tourism was not inherently rewarding and that Bocca di Magra and Montemarcello were to preserve their unique identity while searching for appropriate forms of tourism; moreover, it claimed

65 “[...] preserving the natural features of the estuary and fostering a more orderly economic and social development of this part of our country.” Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VIII, 263, Manifesto della Società degli amici di Bocca di Magra.

66 “Beach, cliff, river and hillside.” Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VIII, 263, Letter from Giulio Einaudi to multiple addressees, 24 August 1961; this letter elicited a prompt reply by the local EPT, which fully endorsed the *Società*’s statements.

67 At the time, the mayor of Bocca di Magra was Aroldo Marchi, a physician; since the municipal election had resulted in a stalemate, with both the Catholic-Centrist coalition and the Left holding 10 seats in the city council, Marchi and another representative of the Democrazia Cristiana joined the Partito Comunista and managed to form a left-wing municipal government.

68 Giancarlo De Carlo (Genoa, 1919 – Milan, 2005) was a well-known architect and university professor; he was the author of particularly innovative urban plans and became familiar with Einaudi and the other members of the *Società* while spending his holidays in his secondary residence in Bocca di Magra. Francesco Samassa, De Carlo, Giancarlo, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome 2014, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giancarlo-de-carlo> (15 June 2020).

the investment company's plans were intended to privatise the coast and would increase the number of tourism accommodations along with traffic and pollution.

The *Società* argued that the economic development of Bocca di Magra relied on the preservation of natural and traditional heritage, which represented the area's main touristic assets. The priorities put forth by the leaflet thus included restoring the riverine wilderness by limiting the construction of private homes and high-impact facilities such as docks and houseboats, the restriction of private river navigation and fishing, investments into sewage treatment, the realisation of pedestrian paths along the river, and the enhancement of civic engagement by way of a bottom-up decision process.⁶⁹ Protection of the riverine environment was the program's top priority, with the leaflet asserting that "Il Magra deve restare quello che è: una mediazione fra costa e campagna, una pausa di silenzio tra la Versilia e il Golfo di La Spezia."⁷⁰

The reaction of the residents to De Carlo's plan and the *Società's* commitment was decidedly unfriendly, with the inhabitants of Montemarcello – including the local parish priest – calling for "less fruitless sentimentalism, more concrete buildings" in local newspapers, asserting that *Montemarcello S.p.A.'s* plan would bring employment and prosperity to their village.⁷¹

There was considerable tension between locals and the members of the *Società*, particularly during a public meeting held on 1 December 1962 in Montemarcello at the initiative of the *Società* to secure an agreement on De Carlo's plan: Several of the participants sharply criticised the endeavour and almost came to blows with Giulio Einaudi and his associates, claiming that only the "Romani" (meaning *Condotte Immobiliare*) could ensure prosperity for the village after its long decline, whereas the "Milanesi" (the members of the *Società*, most of whom belonged to the Milan intellectual establishment) were only protecting their interests as private owners.⁷²

Given that the journal *Le Vie d'Italia* had criticised the erection of new buildings in Fiumaretta as an "assault" on the riverine environment and spotlighted the "Montemarcello affair" since 1959,⁷³ the clash between locals and international intellectuals even attracted attention from some of most widely read Italian newspapers:

"Who are the real contenders? For here in Bocca di Magra I have seen a strange, astonishing spectacle: The entire village has literally attacked a small group of 'poets'. [...] Someone claims: 'the Romans helped us, the Milanese didn't, and now they are trying to deceive us. Down with the Milanese!' [...] Tonight some of the 300 inhabi-

69 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VIII, 263, Letter from Giulio Einaudi to multiple addressees.

70 "The Magra must remain as it is: a mediation between the coast and the countryside, a silent break between the Versilia and the Gulf of La Spezia." Ibid.

71 Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, fond Ente provinciale del turismo della Spezia, classe VIII, 263, A. Domenighini, Deciso parere degli abitanti di Montemarcello: il "piano regolatore" frena lo sviluppo del paese, in: *Il Secolo XIX*, 21 November 1962.

72 Marco Nozza, La predica inutile, in: *L'Europeo*, 9 December 1962, 26–27, 24.

73 Mario Fazio, Continua la distruzione del paesaggio Ligure, in: *Le Vie d'Italia* 12 (1959), 1466–1476.

tants of Montemarcello will ask themselves ‘Are they really our enemies?’ [...] ‘What if they were right?’⁷⁴

In 1963, Antonio Cederna, a popular figure in Italian culture, committed himself to the environmental cause by denouncing the potential irreparable damage to the promontory of Montemarcello, the only unspoiled area left in eastern Liguria.⁷⁵

In the end, De Carlo’s plan was rejected and the municipal authorities gave *Montemarcello S.p.A.* permission to proceed, but the project could only be partially realised due to the building restrictions imposed for the area by the Soprintendenza alle Belle arti (Regional Inspectorate of Fine Arts) and the regional regulations (since the early 1970s), the crisis in the construction industry and the campaigns launched by the *Società, Italia Nostra* (the most relevant non-profit association for protection of the Italian cultural and natural heritage) and other civic movements.

The struggle for environmental protection and the difficult coexistence with the river at the mouth of the Magra

Not far from Bocca di Magra, a further attempt to promote tourism was responsible for the urbanisation of the coastline starting in 1958 when a *piano regolatore comunale* (communal development plan) approved by the Municipality of Sarzana⁷⁶ zoned the coastal community of Marinella as a tourism area, thus allowing the construction of a seaside resort and improvements to the road network.⁷⁷

The city’s efforts to increase the tourism supply and attract more vacationers involved *Monte dei Paschi di Siena*, one of the most powerful financial corporations in Italy and owner of a large farm in Marinella; although initially sceptical, the company eventually supported the rededication of the waterfront area.⁷⁸

Given the limited results of the development plan issued in 1958, a new *piano* was commissioned eight years later from the aforementioned Giancarlo De Carlo, the spearhead of sus-

74 “Chi sono i veri contendenti? Perché quello che ho visto qui a Bocca di Magra è stato uno spettacolo inconsueto, stranissimo: un paese intero ha preso d’assalto, testualmente, un gruppetto di ‘poeti’. [...] Ma uno, dal di fuori, grida: ‘I romani ci hanno aiutato, i milanesi no, e adesso ci vogliono ingannare. Abbasso i milanesi!’ [...] Sono proprio questi i nostri nemici? Si chiederà stanotte qualcuno dei trecento abitanti di Monte Marcello. [...] E se la ragione fosse dalla loro parte?” Nozza, *La predica inutile*, 24.

75 Antonio Cederna, *Guasti e sconci lungo la costa toscana*, in: *Le Vie d’Italia* 4 (1963), 414–424.

76 From 1946 to 1971, the mayor of Sarzana was Paolo Ranieri (Communist Party), former member of the Italian Resistance movement. Giovanni Contini Bonacossi, Ranieri, Paolo, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 86, Rome 2016, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/paolo-ranieri_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (15 June 2020).

77 The *piano regolatore* was aimed at shaping the coastline according to the model of the well-known seaside resorts in Versilia, and prescribed the zoning of the waterfront (634,330 m², corresponding to 49.5% of the entire area of Marinella) and the construction of a road linking Marinella to the Via Aurelia. *Piano regolatore generale del Comune di Sarzana*, Relazione, progettisti: Arch. Giulio Roiseco, Ing. Giulio Mazzocchini, approved on 27 December 1958, 30, <https://www.rapu.it/> (15 June 2020).

78 After World War II, the farm at Marinella, which amounted to 466 hectares between the territories of Sarzana and Ameglia, became the second largest agricultural holding of the bank. It included 60 dairy farms. *Monte dei Paschi di Siena, Le aziende agricole del Monte dei Paschi di Siena*, Florence/Milan 1953.

tainable development in Bocca di Magra, in order to secure the approval of pro-environment intellectuals;⁷⁹ however, the allotment of a huge swath of land at the edge of Marinella for the Luni Mare resort beginning in the late 1960s antagonised the ambitions for sustainability and led to further urbanisation of the coast.

Ultimately, both the tourism resorts in Luni Mare and Marinella became marginalised areas characterised by environmental degradation, social decay, and decreasing tourism appeal. They have thus become the targets of numerous potential development projects throughout the decades, most of which have relied on enhancement of the property owned by Monte dei Paschi – and none of which have been realised so far.

Tourism is not the only sector blamed for the unsustainable urbanisation of the Magra river mouth, however: In order to reduce the environmental impact of sand mining, ship-building, and other economic activities and preserve the Magra's natural heritage from increasing anthropic pressure, the regional government of Liguria⁸⁰ committed in the early 1970s to creating a protected area by the river mouth, but the project was shelved at the end of the decade. In the first half of the 1980s, precisely when pro-environment movements were being delegitimised at the global level by resurging conservatism,⁸¹ the Magra environment faced several major threats. Sand mining companies won their appeal against the ban on sand exploitation introduced by the competent authorities, and *Intermarine S.p.A.* obtained permission – despite protests by several members of the Italian Parliament, pro-environmental associations, and private citizens – to replace the Ponte della Colombiera with a drawbridge that would allow large warships built at the company's shipyard to reach the sea.⁸²

It is not surprising that a scientific survey conducted by *Italia Nostra* in collaboration with the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* (National Research Council of Italy) confirmed in 1981 that anthropic pressure on the riverbanks was responsible for increasing coastal erosion and water salinisation.⁸³ This result spurred the regional government to establish the *Parco regionale del fiume Magra* (Magra River Regional Park, 1982) and the *Area protetta di Montemarcello* (Montemarcello Protected Area, 1985), which were joined to form the *Parco Naturale Regionale di Montemarcello-Magra-Vara* (Regional Natural Park of Montemarcello-Magra-Vara) in 1995.

Broadly speaking, the concept of sustainable development gained momentum throughout the 1990s, affecting environmental policy at all levels of territorial organisation: As far as the Magra is concerned, the most relevant achievements were the creation of the *Autorità di Bacino* (Basin Authority), an interregional public body responsible for preserving water resources and managing the hydrogeological risks in the river basin, and the implementa-

79 Mario Fazio, L'invasione del cemento in Versilia minaccia la selvaggia bellezza delle pinete, in: *La Stampa*, 22 January 1966, 9.

80 Although Italy's 1948 constitution established a "Regional State", regions with ordinary statutes only came into force in 1970, with their competences becoming effective in 1972.

81 Riley E. Dunlap, The New Environmental Paradigm Scale: From Marginality to Worldwide Use, in: *The Journal of Environmental Education* 40 (2008), 3–18.

82 S.n., Tagliato il ponte sul Magra. Passano le navi, in: *La Repubblica*, 12 May 1984, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1984/05/12/tagliato-il-ponte-sul-magra-passano-le.html> (15 June 2020). The Ponte della Colombiera collapsed after a flood in 2011 and was subsequently replaced by a drawbridge that is still in place today.

83 Arrigo Antonelli/Giovanni Raggi, A difesa del Magra oggi. La pianura del basso corso del fiume e la falda di subalveo, in: Arrigo Antonelli et al. (eds.), *Tra fiumi, mare e terraferma*, Milan 1981, 32–50.

tion of several EU-funded projects to improve conservation of the riverine habitats and raise environmental awareness among local stakeholders (the riverbanks were declared a Site of Community Importance [SCI] and became part of the *Natura 2000* network⁸⁴).

Nevertheless, this increased awareness for environmental values in the riverine context did not necessarily translate into recovery of the sites damaged by unsustainable exploitation – nor did it give rise to sustainable tourism at the mouth of the Magra despite the initiatives of the regional park in the areas of edutainment and green tourism. Moreover, long-term environmental issues such as overexploitation of natural resources, pollution, and urban sprawl still threaten habitats and local communities along the Magra. Over the last two decades, recurring flooding events have caused severe damage to the settlements of Fiumaretta and Marinella, while effective coordination among public and private agents involved in river management is still lacking. Finally, the closure of the farm owned by *Monte dei Paschi* in Marinella in 2018 has increased uncertainty regarding the future of the lower floodplain.

Conclusions

The research presented in this contribution shows how the transformations affecting the rural environment of the Val di Magra during the *trente glorieuses* were grounded in economic trends and social behaviours stemming from contemporary urbanisation.

The Val di Magra thus provides a useful case study for current historiographical frames on urban-rural relations while inviting broader reflection on established paradigms in river history: From a methodological point of view, the research confirms that older urban histories applying a linear perspective while foreseeing the inevitable assimilation of the countryside by the city prove inadequate for interpreting urban-rural blurring, particularly when collective habits and cultural beliefs are taken into consideration. As a consequence, different thematic layers (social behaviour, cultural habits, economic trends, political system, etc.) could be investigated to gain a deeper understanding of urban-rural relations and the environmental impact of tourism-induced urbanisation in riverine landscapes.

The lower Val di Magra shares a common ground with most Mediterranean riverine landscapes in which the tourism supply relied on “fewer roads, limited amenities, and more rustic facilities”⁸⁵ until the boom of mass tourism, which triggered huge transformations of the river environments to meet the expectations of travellers and increase tourism revenues; however, the case study features a unique blend of natural and historical characters that allow the investigation of urban-rural relations from different perspectives.

The overall history of the attempts to enhance mass tourism in the Val di Magra shows that the urbanisation of riverine landscapes in Mediterranean Europe during the *trente glorieuses* was the consequence of global transformations in urban-rural relations, such as the

84 Regione Toscana/Autorità di bacino interregionale del Fiume Magra/Regione Liguria, Ente Parco di Montemarcello-Magra, Nuovi approcci per la comprensione dei processi fluviali e la gestione dei sedimenti: applicazioni nel bacino del Magra, Sarzana 2006; Attilio Arillo et al., La gestione della biodiversità. Le buone pratiche per la tutela del paesaggio, Genova 2012; an overview of the *Natura 2000* in 2011 is provided in: Sylvain Gallais, Preserving Biodiversity in the European Union, in: Mikko Rask/Richard Worthington (eds.), Governing Biodiversity through Democratic Deliberation, London 2015, 66–86.

85 Pritchard, Confluence, 177.

commodification of the countryside for leisure purposes, as well as local factors including regional law and urban planning.

In addition, the environmental conflicts at the mouth of the Magra reveal that long-term processes grounded in broader economic trends and social behaviours were closely intertwined with short-term events connected to local political issues and the ability to achieve consensus among local stakeholders; as a consequence, opposing views on the development of the riverine communities resulted in different perceptions of the river environment and of proposed plans for exploitation of its natural resources.

Broadly speaking, the conflict engendered by the construction of the Ponte della Colombiera highlights a stark contrast between the city and the countryside, with the *Comitato cittadino sarzanese* considering the building of the bridge at the Magra river mouth an attempt to consolidate the economic hegemony of Genoa at the expense of peripheral areas; in the end, parochialism prevailed – and this in turn hampered the coordination of tourism investments and exposed the river to environmental risks.

The Montemarcello case highlights further aspects of urban-rural relations in the age of mass consumption: The intellectuals committed to the preservation of the river mouth pursued an idealised vision of a countryside unspoilt by contemporary urbanisation in which the river epitomised traditional values and a pre-modern way of life. Consequently, they believed touristic development should take into consideration (and rely on) cultural and environmental heritage and considered mass holiday patterns unsuitable for Bocca di Magra.

Nevertheless, the clash between the *Società* and the local community stemmed from a failed negotiation between public and private interests in environmental heritage management⁸⁶ and the lack of a true dialogue between stakeholders. On the one hand, the *Società* aimed to convey their values relating to the river to the inhabitants, who were assigned a passive (and somewhat stereotyped) role, while on the other hand the locals themselves shaped contrasting narratives pertaining to the city. In their eyes, the “Milanesi” – Giulio Einaudi and his associates – were merely defending their interests as secondary residence owners with disregard for the needs of Montemarcello, whereas the “Romani” in the shape of the investment company from the capital were trying to stimulate the local economy by generating employment opportunities and improve the residents’ quality of life by introducing basic urban services such as street lighting and sewerage.

Here, too, we can draw a parallel between the call for “less sentimentalism and more concrete” by the Montemarcello inhabitants and the emphasis of the *Comitato cittadino sarzanese* on the “psychological value” of infrastructures, both of which reveal the great expectations raised by tourism in peripheral rural areas and the common belief that urbanisation would automatically bring economic growth.

Moreover, the civic engagement against the construction of the Ponte della Colombiera and the zoning of Montemarcello in the early 1960s, the pro-environment campaigns promoted by *Italia Nostra* over several decades, and finally the establishment of a regional park

86 Patrick Fournier, Les leçons d'une hydro-histoire: quelques pistes de réflexion, in: *Siècles* 42 (2016), <http://siecles.revues.org/2970> (15 June 2020).

represent instances of “politicisation” of environmental issues merging public and corporatist interests, which also entailed a “Europeanisation” of environmental policy.⁸⁷

The efforts to promote urbanisation and tourism at the mouth of the river Magra were ultimately not successful, as the coastal settlements have remained scarcely integrated with the nearby urbanised areas and the corresponding zoning of parts of the floodplain proved inadequate for stimulating tourism demand in the absence of additional services and facilities. Moreover, the attempts to “domesticate” the river were undertaken without consideration of the long-term environmental impacts of these anthropic activities.

The research for this study suffered from certain limitations, especially due to restrictions imposed by Italian law regarding access to records issued in the past few decades and the poor condition of many local archives (most of the sources mentioned in the previous paragraphs are kept at the Historical Archives of the Region of Liguria, an outstanding case of heritage conservation in Italy), which prevented in-depth analysis of the shared beliefs of the Val di Magra politicians and public officers and the decisional processes within local institutions.

Furthermore, the overall environmental impact of urbanisation along the riverbanks and the coastline is difficult to assess in either quantitative or qualitative terms, even though frequent flooding and pollution represent the tangible outcomes of unbalanced development and unsustainable land and water consumption.

Despite these limitations, the study confirms that a deeper knowledge of the transformations of urban-rural relations in Mediterranean riverine areas throughout the decades could shed light on the historical roots of current contradictions in tourism-induced urbanisation and contribute to their resolution.

87 Stéphane Frioux/Vincent Lemire, Pour une histoire politique de l'environnement au 20^e siècle, in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 113/1 (2012), 3–12.