

BEST PRACTICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ADOPTED IN ITALIAN NATIONAL PARKS

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Abstract: *The accessibility of a natural protected area should be seen as a possibility for people with special needs to access to a structure or open space in order to fully enjoy their services and activities. The European Union has issued numerous documents on the accessibility and a resolution on equal opportunities for disabled people in all fields, including leisure time. Also, in Italy there are very detailed regulations on accessibility and social inclusion, both at the state level and at the region level of the individual. Following these rules, several Italian national parks have adopted guidelines to make their areas accessible and provide physically challenged people with all the services. The aim of this paper is to examine legislation and best practices adopted to make accessible the Italian national parks to people with disabilities.*

Keywords: *Disabilities, Natural Parks, Protected Natural area, Accessibility.*

1. INTRODUCTION

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has defined protected areas as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley, 2008) (IUCN UNEP WWF, 1980).

Laws and technical standards have been established to delineate the requirements and actions necessary to ensure the accessibility of a public place. On the matter the United Nations has published various documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (United Nations, 1948), the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons of 1971 (United Nations, 1971), the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons of 1975 (United Nations, 1975), the Declaration on the Rights of Deaf-Blind Persons of 1979 (United Nations, 1979), the Resolution 37/52 of 1982 called the World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (United Nations, 1982), the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities of 1994 (United Nations, 1994), the Global Disability Action Plan 2014-2021 (WHO, 2015), the Convention on the Right of the Persons with Disabilities of 2016 (United Nations, 2016).

The „accessible tourism” or the so-called „tourism for all” is a set of structures and services made available to people with disabilities or special needs so that they can enjoy the opportunity to travel, enjoy and take part in events without facing any problems or difficulties, in conditions of autonomy, but also of safety and comfort (Setola et al., 2018).

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Additionally, some studies have highlighted the benefits that outdoor activities have for the population and even more for people with disabilities (Maller et al., 2015).

A service is defined accessible when the information on it can be easily found and are easily accessible and usable by people with disabilities, especially when there is qualified and trained, and there are also other accessible facilities (such as hotels, restaurants, museums, transport etc.).

Some disabilities can be temporary (for example pregnancy), others which are permanent since birth or after accidents or illnesses or linked to the old age. The disabilities include:

- Physical disability: for example, inability to walk;
- Sensory disabilities (visual, auditory);
- Intellectual disabilities (Down syndrome, autism, etc.);
- Food disabilities (celiac disease, allergies to certain foods, diabetics etc.) (Vila et al., 2015).

Accessible tourism should be able to provide people with special needs and their families' equal rights and participation in social life through a range of services: autonomy in traveling and as users of various services, information reliability on the structures, satisfying personal needs for the whole holiday. (Darcy 2010) (Kastenholz et al. 2015) (McKercher and Darcy 2018) (Michopoulou and Buhalis 2013). Many laws on disability issue have been enacted in order to achieve these objectives, even for tourist services and nature tourism, to give all those people the opportunity to enjoy protected natural areas.

2. REGULATIONS: REQUIREMENTS FOR STRUCTURES FOR THE RECEPTION OF THE DISABLED

2.1. International Regulations

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, aims to „promote, protect and guarantee the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and all fundamental freedoms of people with disabilities and to promote respect for their intrinsic dignity”. In particular, article 9, concerns accessibility, and claims that States must take „...adequate measures to guarantee people with disabilities, on an equal basis with others, access to the physical environment, to transport, to information and communication systems and technologies, and other equipment and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and rural areas...”. These measures also include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers limiting accessibility (such as architectural barriers) (United Nations, 2016).

The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) adopted by the World Tourism Organization in 1999, highlights the role of tourism, collectively, acknowledging and strengthening social and cultural ties between peoples, while respecting their diversity. The Code, on the individual level, highlights, on the one hand, that tourism allows everyone to enjoy rest, cultural knowledge and enjoyment of natural resources. On the other hand, the Code emphasizes that the development of tourism needs to respect the natural and cultural environment. Thus, all actors must aim at protecting the environment. Moreover, another objective of the Code is to ensure to all tourists, including those with special needs, the right to access to the natural area equally and without any impediment (UNWTO, 1999).

The Montreal Declaration, drawn up by the Bureau International du Tourisme Social in 1996, defines social tourism. The goal is to strengthen the concept that tourism, stating that it must be accessible to all without distinction, should allow the greatest number of people accessing to it. The principles enshrined in the Declaration, recognizing the physical, social and economic benefits deriving from social tourism, aim at the inclusion of all the potentially interested subjects and wish a fight against inequalities towards all those who have a different culture, have less financial means, have reduced physical abilities or live in a developing country (ISTO, 1996).

2.2. European Regulations

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union was proclaimed on 7 December 2000 in Nice (Nice Charter) and defines a group of rights and freedoms of exceptional importance to be guaranteed to all citizens of the Union. Article 26 states that „The Union recognizes and respects the right of disabled people to benefit from measures aimed at guaranteeing their autonomy, social and professional integration and participation in community life” (European Union, 2000).

The European Union has issued others specific documents, among the most important resolutions, there’s the one released on 26 November 1993 about the accessibility of transport (European Union, 1993) and another one published on 20 December 1996 on equal opportunities for disabled people in all fields (European Union, 1996), including leisure time.

2.3. Italian Legislation

Also, in Italy there is a detailed regulation on accessibility and social inclusion, both at the state level and at the level of the individual regions. Following these rules, several Italian national parks have adopted guidelines to make their areas accessible and offer all the services that people with special needs (www.turismoaccessibile.eu).

Law no. 118/1971 is the first Italian law, which reaffirms the need for public buildings to be accessible to all and introduces the restriction on the removal of architectural barriers in the existing buildings.

The Law no. 41/1986 provides funding for specialized renovations to the elimination of architectural barriers with the obligation of compliance with the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic no. 384/78 also extended to interventions carried out with grants or public subsidies. This law establishes the „general design criteria”: accessibility is no longer considered as a discretionary element but becomes a quality requirement, indispensable even in the presence of historical-artistic constraints. In fact, the highest level of accessibility assumes that every part of the building and its equipment can be used by all persons, including those with reduced or impaired motor or sensory capacities. Indeed, the highest level of accessibility presupposes that every part of the unit and its actions have been used by all people, including those with reduced or impaired motor or sensory skills, easily and safely.

The Decree of the Minister of Public Works n. 236/1989 defines the three levels of building quality, lists the different types of buildings, indicating the degree of usability required, that is, whether the buildings must be accessible (art. 4), visitable (art. 5) or adaptable (art. 6).

Law no. 104/1992 (framework law on the handicap) highlights the need to make sports facilities, bathing facilities, motorway services, collective transport services, accommodation facilities and related tourist services, building structures and buildings accessible to all users' railway carriages of the Italian State Railway Authority, by benefitting from subsidized housing. It also provides the possibility of carrying out temporary works to overcome architectural barriers for historic buildings which are subject to restrictions. The Decree of the President of the Italian Republic no. 503/1996 was issued with the main objective of standardizing the regulations for public buildings with those for private buildings (the aforementioned Ministerial Decree no. 236/1989).

3. BEST PRACTICES ADOPTED IN ITALIAN NATIONAL PARKS

The accessibility of a protected area is measured by the degree of accessibility of places and structures connected to it; that usability should also be seen as a possibility for people with special needs to access a structure or open space to fully enjoy services and activities connected to it or related to it. There are many projects and best-practice models in terms of accessibility and usability for the disabled promoted in recent years, one of the first steps was the Norcia Declaration in 2003. This document asks the European Union to „define a community policy for protected natural areas; to introduce in European programs particular attention to the use of nature for citizens with disabilities; to start the discussion on a non-discrimination directive on disability as the conclusion of the European Year „while member states are asked to” promote good practices and train park staff, technicians and operators”. Managing bodies play an important role to ensure accessibility in parks. These entities must include in their statutes and regulations instruments that allow the usability and training of park operators and technicians. This is also a function of the creation of an „accessible building” that places the individual („able” and „disabled”) at the center even before the more formal and aesthetic canons. In this sense, the „Universal Design” or „Design for all” approach is aimed at designing spaces without taking into account age and psychophysical ability. (www.appuntiturismo.it) (www.italiaccessibile.it).

Subsequently, in 2003, the „Parks for all: usability for an extended user” project, created by the ACLI Anni Verdi Association, communicated the problems of accessibility for the usability of all citizens and competent or decision-makers in protected natural areas, sites, services, equipment and means of transport. This communication took place through the creation of the website www.parchipertutti.it and implementation of „Guidelines for accessibility and use of national parks by a consumer extended to persons with disabilities, the elderly, the children”. These guidelines provide the rules to monitor accessibility of all disabled persons to the existing structures of a park (www.minambiente.it).

The Italian Federation of Parks and Natural Reserves (Federparchi) has grouped a list of all the paths and nature trails of the Italian Protected Natural Areas, which are currently accessible to all. These include: the path for the blind (PLIS Colline di Brescia), the underwater path for disabled (Protected Marine Area of the Cinque Terre), the nature trail for the blind and the sensor of Parco Naturale Lombardo della Valle del Ticino, a path for everyone at Sacro Monte di Varallo (www.europarc.it) (www.parks.it).

An important contribution was also one of the National Parks. Italy has 24 national parks, and some of them have adopted practices to facilitate access to people with disabilities. Below there is a review of the best practices implemented by the Bodies to make the Parks more accessible.

In the Cinque Terre National Park, there is an underwater path for the disabled (www.parconazionale5terre.it).

In the Circeo National Park, a walkway has been built which is also accessible to people with walking difficulties. In addition, the project was implemented in the park: „The friendly park” intended for children of primary school and kindergarten, which also includes the participation of children with disabilities to stimulate their sensory skills, to encourage inclusion and raise the acceptance of their communities (www.parcocirceo.it).

The Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park Authority proposes, in collaboration with the AIPD (Italian Association of People Down), a guided excursion program and environmental interpretation workshops in areas of the park, which are accessible to the disabled. The activities are designed specifically for disabled people, according to different disabilities, and people with Down syndrome. These activities are extended to all, to bring „able-bodied” people closer to the reality experienced daily by the disabled. Some examples of eligible activities are: workshops on flower scents and tactile recognition of natural objects for blind people, recognition of the noises of the forest and of the verses and songs of the animals, excursions „silent” with earplugs to understand the reality experienced by deaf. In the park, three parking areas have been created for disabled people with public toilets, one of which for disabled people. The Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park has also joined the „Nature without barriers” initiative, promoted by Federtrek – Hiking and the Environment (a federation made up of about 40 associations), which brings together events throughout the national territory to promote participation in nature excursions, including of people with disabilities (blind, with reduced mobility or with other difficulties) (www.dolomitipark.it).

In the Gargano National Park, two paths for the visually impaired were completed, complete with signs with Braille characters, handrails with a guide and parapet function, pile drivers, and two specific tables for people with motor disabilities complete with benches. Within the framework of facilitating accessibility for people with disabilities in the protected sea area of the Tremiti Islands, various initiatives have been implemented, in particular a diving course to guide blind people accompanied by diving instructors (Cappelletti et al., 2019) (www.parcogargano.it/).

The Gran Paradiso National Park has expanded the tourist offer of the protected area also for the disabled. On their website, there is a section where you can find information on the accessibility of the protected natural area, the accommodation facilities, and on some paths in the area. The information of Park structures and potentially accessible routes was collected; each structure has its own detail sheet in order to inform about the degree of accessibility (www.pngp.it/parco-accessibile).

The Gran Sasso National Park and Monti della Laga, in implementation of the Action Plan of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, allows free use of the persons concerned of five carriages „jolette”, a special mode of transport, with the help of two companions, it also allows people with disabilities and impaired mobility to walk the paths of the park. Through a network of operators, it is thus possible for people with special needs to take advantage of accessible and sustainable tourism-recreational offers (www.gransassolagapark.it/).

At the National Park of La Maddalena there are two walkways for the disabled that allow direct access to the beach and the sea. All those architectural barriers that prevented access have been

removed. There are also parking spaces reserved for the disabled near the entrance to the catwalks www.lamaddalenapark.it.

Inside the Monti Sibillini National Park, a path has been created with environmentally friendly material that can also be used with strollers and wheelchairs (www.sibillini.net).

The Sila National Park devotes particular attention to ensuring maximum accessibility to all its visitors. In particular, the Visitor Centers „Cupone” and „A. Garcea” are equipped with two means of transport for people with reduced mobility, the wheelchairs for the disabled called “Joelette”. The Park Authority has printed information brochures in Braille for the blind. The „Cupone” visitor center offers itineraries for visitors with walking difficulties and for blind and partially sighted people. There is also a „Botanical Garden” accessible to the blinds, thanks to the presence of panels of mp3 audio files that explain the various essences present. At the Visitor Center „A. Garcea” there is a path dedicated to people with motor disabilities. It has been also realized a path equipped with tactile signaling systems orientation to the ground and handrails and tables describing the surroundings, built on a metallic substrate with alphanumeric characters in Braille for blind and visually impaired (www.parcosila.it/it/visita-il-parco/turismo-accessibile).

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the accessibility legislation and the best practices adopted in the National Parks in Italy have been presented. The legislation available to encourage the development of accessible tourism in Protected Natural Areas has allowed the proliferation of the best practices in many Italian national parks. From this study, it emerged that, to encourage their diffusion in the Protected Natural Areas, it would be appropriate to define guidelines that organize such a system according to positive experiences of accessibility for people with disabilities. This could be done, more easily, by creating a network between the management entities of the national parks that have implemented these best practices, reaching even to the creation of an association that certifies a label dedicated to „accessible park” with the highlight levels of accessibility.

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Contribution of Authors

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