

A Century of National Parks



HISTORY AND FUTURE OF PARKS IN SPAIN

*Protected areas are a modern idea.
But that does not mean they have no history.
Their best known form,
national parks, have reached their first century
in Europe. Sweden was the first European country
to set up national parks, a hundred years ago now,
on May 24th, 1909. Other states on the
Old Continent soon followed suit, including Spain,
where those of Covadonga and Ordesa
were created in 1918 and so have
just celebrated their ninetieth birthday*

Regeneration and nature

It is true that the year of Spain's great "national disaster", 1898, was ill-fated for the country's history and not just because of the loss of Cuba and the Philippines to the might of the US Navy. The real problem, so many people believed, was deeper and more extensive, so the political crisis was something of a touchstone for a general reflection on the country's pitiful state. By arousing that reaction in the population, 1898 was also the watershed for many positive changes, initiatives for renovation, reform, modernization, often referred to collectively under the somewhat confusing term of regenerationism. One such initiative was the reconquest, not of Cuba and the Philippines, but of the territory closer to home. A reconquest of the forests that was to be led, for educational and cultural reasons, from the school classrooms.

First we shall hear the forestry engineer Rafael Puig y Valls, in the pages of La Vanguardia newspaper on September 21st, 1898, calling for the "reconquest of our long-abandoned mountains, without it costing the nation a single tear nor a drop of blood". How? By turning every schoolchild into a lover of trees and forests.

"Schoolteachers [...] should take charge of the celebration of 'Arbor Day' in every town and village, instituting this festivity [...] so that the children, accompanied by the civil and ecclesiastic authorities, can go up into the hills and there, in an area to be called the "School Woods", can practise the art of planting one or more trees, thus giving them the delight of an excursion into the countryside, a communal picnic and the appreciation of the forest for what it is, and must forever be: the best guarantee of the existence of the nation's woodland towns."

The idea sown by Puig y Valls took root and gave abundant fruit. Arbor Days spread, slowly at first and later with greater impetus, across half the towns and schools of Spain. Twenty years later, in 1918, it was no child but rather the nation's sovereign in person, King Alphonse XIII, who dug away with his shovel to plant, on September 8th, 1918, a symbolic tree during the inauguration of Spain's first national park, the Covadonga National Park. Shortly before, in 1916, Spain had enacted its own National Parks Act, one of the world's first examples of legislation devoted specifically to this type of conservation effort.

The first park

Covadonga was the first National Park created in Spain. At the same time, it was also intended to be a symbol of many things. A symbol of that new “reconquest”, not by warriors this time but with a conservationist and tree-loving spirit, of the territory, just as had been mapped out by Senator Pedro Pidal in his defence of this novel concept of national parks before Parliament. A symbol, too, of a return to nature by an increasingly urban society, in an attempt to recover values and feelings that are perhaps essential for the human condition. If there are sanctuaries built by Man, why not create, Pidal argued, “Sanctuaries for Nature”, as had already been done in the United States since 1872.

Quoting Pidal once more, these new parks were to store up “the splendours of Nature” because these enshrine the “breath of life, of potentiality, exuberance, energy”.

Devoted to politics in the great tradition of his family, the Asturian Pedro Pidal, Marquis of Villaviciosa, was also a hunter, a mountaineer and, in short, a lover of nature. The first, together with Gregorio Pérez “El Cainejo”, to scale the Naranjo de Bulnes, he had always favoured the Picos de Europa as the setting for his hunting and mountaineering exploits. Once the National Parks Act was adopted in 1916, these same mountains were to become the first of these new sanctuaries in which to restore the symbiosis between Nature and Mankind.

"And that is precisely what the National Park of the Covadonga Mountain represents, an unbeatable frame provided by Nature herself for this unique, peerless, sublime image in which the hopes of Religion are melded with the memories of History, the Shrine of the Virgin of Covadonga becomes wedded with Spain's Epic beginnings in a grotto, a place where Immortality in the contemplation of Beauty, i.e. Religion, seems to spring from the Rebirth or Reconquest of our Nation, the discoverer and conqueror of worlds, i.e. History ..."

The vision conveyed in this quote from Pidal, with his special attention to the symbolic power certain natural scenarios seemed capable of imbuing into the sense of identity and in the collective spirit of the decadent Spanish nation, clearly explains the choice of Covadonga as the first National Park in 1918. King Alphonse XIII, a personal friend of Pidal, provided his august presence to give the inauguration the greatest importance, as reflected in media as disparate as the Montes magazine and the Espasa encyclopaedia.

The "event took on a particularly solemn tone thanks to the beauty of the location, without any artificial decoration other than a rug-covered stage with two seats for their Royal Majesties facing a sapling ready to be planted and a hole already dug in a small treeless area just under esplanade of the Hotel Pelayo, from which a huge crowd witnessed the ceremony. The King planted the tree and, after speeches by the Marquis of Villaviciosa, the Marquis of Armenteras and Mr. Cambó, the Minister for Public Works, such a

beautiful tribute to culture was closed with a series of enthusiastic hurrahs for their Royal Majesties and the speakers”.

Secondly, that same year of 1918 saw the creation of the Ordesa Valley National Park. This tribute acknowledged the magnificent landscape of this corner of the Pyrenees in Huesca that had been discovered some time previously and highly praised by French mountaineers. Ordesa underlined the same values found at Covadonga. Spectacular landscapes, colossal nature and the capacity to evoke historic legends and traditions. To put it in the words of the Royal Decree creating the new park, in Ordesa “the hills and valleys retain the peculiar aspect of the Mother Country in their original natural state, integrating the memories of their origins as the living witness of its traditions”.

Nature and culture

It was probably reasonable for the first conservationist impulse to be supported by an idealized vision of nature and its virtues for redeeming modern society. A vision centred on grandiose landscapes and particularly on northern mountains, seen under the aesthetic canons of Central Europe and North America. A vision that sought wilderness and a primitive state in an allegedly virgin nature, almost as a metaphor for the lost paradise

on earth. But it soon gave way to a more sophisticated conservationism that started, as it did other in countries around Europe and particularly in Germany, from the verification of huge degree of humanization afflicting the landscapes of the Old World.

This conservationism, represented by the geologist Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco, one of Pedro Pidal's collaborators on the National Parks Committee, took as its basis the major achievements of the first two national parks in order to put forward new conservation categories. Categories that could be applied to smaller areas, without entering into any conflict of interest with pre-existing uses, and that could protect other values, for example of a scientific or cultural nature. Nature and culture, in the Spain of old, were so intimately entwined that, on occasion, protected natural spaces could precisely underline that mutual harmonious influence.

From 1927 on, Hernández-Pacheco successfully created a new protection category for Natural Sites of National Interest, which was applied to landscapes such as the rock formations of El Torcal de Antequera, the lagoons at Ruidera or the granitic outcrops of the Pedriz del Manzanares, among others. Over time, that pioneering protection has been embodied for the most part under more modern categories applied by the Regional Governments of today, such as those of Natural Park or Nature Reserve.

Another category used in recent decades, that of Natural Monuments, was also anticipated by Hernández-Pacheco in 1927. At the time they were to be known as Natural Monuments of National Interest but only one such title was ever granted, in 1930, to the hilltop known as Peña del Arcipreste de Hita, in the Guadarrama mountain range, as a fine example of that combination between nature and culture mentioned earlier.

Parks and people

After the pioneering stage led by visionaries and modernizers such as Pidal and Hernández-Pacheco, the conservation movement and park promotion become stagnated, as did so many other things, by the devastating effects of the Civil War and the long post-war depression. Slowly, however, the creation of protected spaces was taken up again by Franco's regime during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. For the purpose, the pre-existing concept of National Park was revived for application to such valuable areas as the Teide volcano on Tenerife island in the Canaries, Aigüestortes in the Pyrenees of Catalonia, or Doñana at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River.

This last space, protected as a National Park in 1969, more than half a century after our first park, represented a major novelty for

Spain's conservation efforts and how these were to be reborn and grow in subsequent years.

On the one hand, Doñana represented the enlargement of the criteria for conservation. It was no longer only the large, spectacular mountain landscapes that deserved protection, now sandy, marshy flatlands could also be a National Park if it was home, as was the case of Doñana, to an exceptional wealth of life forms.

Water fowl, imperial eagles, lynxes were among the treasures that the zoologist and ecologist José Antonio Valverde, the main driving force behind the protection of Doñana and its first Director, wanted to preserve. This attention to animal and plant species was to mark our conservationism over the decades to come, especially with regard to the alarming processes of rarefaction that, due to anthropic actions, were often threatening their survival.

This regard for biological matters, and the concept of protected spaces as a reaction or defence against the widespread processes of economic transformation, is present in the explosive expansion of protected spaces that took place in the next period of history, marked by the arrival of democracy and the creation of the Regional Communities.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, alongside the previous national parks, other protection categories begin to proliferate,

such as natural parks, nature reserves, protected landscapes, and natural monuments, largely due to the action of the regional governments as they assumed their powers over environmental matters.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the consolidation of a wide and varied range of protected spaces across the length and breadth of the country has become a reality. Of course there are shortcomings and imbalances, but the sensation of having achieved a solid basis for future work has stimulated conservation professionals and the citizenry working in favour of environmental causes to stop and think. The time has come to assess what has been achieved so far and to reconsider future goals.

In recent years, we have therefore been witnessing, to some extent, the recovery of that founding spirit reconnecting, or trying to reconnect, the parks with the people. The current view of national parks and the other protected spaces stems from this verification. Parks are created with and for people. Although they focus on nature, their function is still a social one.

As we celebrate the centenary of national parks in Europe and commemorate the first steps toward protecting natural spaces in Spain, we once more pose the basic questions about the goals of conservation and the strategies to achieve them.

Over a century of history, we have learnt that parks are merely a tool that must be integrated into wider environmental, territorial and socio-economic policies. That their creation and management must be participatory, counting on the citizenry and the sectors directly involved as allies with joint responsibility for a shared strategy. That they are places for science and for the transfer of knowledge for technical management and public debate. That they must form part of the alliances and strategies we are building as a society in the scenario of global change and with a view to the challenge of sustainability.

As Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco put it in 1931, they are destined to contribute “the pleasure of living, the aspiration for the true progress and civilization of Mankind, providing that this ideal is beneficial for all and not just for the strong or the fortunate at the expense of the weak and wretched”.

90 years of parks in Spain

Since the inauguration of that first Covadonga National Park in 1918 until today, the idea has grown greatly. In the intervening ninety years, one and a half thousand protected spaces have been declared in Spain, slowly at first and then almost explosively

in recent decades, to reach the more than 1,600 currently in operation. In total, these represent a little over six million hectares of land and another quarter million hectares of marine areas. In other words, 12% of the surface area of Spain is today protected with regard to its natural values.

This calculation includes 14 spaces classified under the category of National Park and hundreds of natural parks, nature reserves, monuments and other protection categories that are not always easy to classify due to the large variety of names and specific regulations that have been created as the various administrations at the State, Regional and, in some cases, Provincial or Insular levels have developed their powers in this area. All the institutional networking has its nexus and forum for interchange at EUROPARC, a European federation of protected spaces created in 1973. Since 1993, there has been a Spanish section within this pan-European body, EUROPARC-Spain, which voluntarily groups together for the purposes of collaboration practically all the administrations involved in the realm of protected areas and conservation, from the Ministry of the Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, through the National Parks Autonomous Body, to the corresponding departments of the 17 Regional Governments, as well as several Provincial Councils and the Island Councils of the Balearic and Canary Islands.

The Fernando González Bernáldez Inter-University Foundation for Natural Areas (FUNGOBE in its Spanish acronym) acts as the technical and scientific office for EUROPARC-Spain.

Without detriment to the freedom of action of each body, more than fifteen years of joint work have allowed advances to be made towards a shared diagnosis on what the protected areas have contributed and must contribute in future to society and on the challenges that have to be faced in this regard. Building on the vision and the successes of the pioneers who started on this road at the start of the last century, and also learning from the errors and difficulties that have arisen in the course of the process, the new Work Programme for Protected Areas 2009-2013 sets out a shared view so that administrations, specialists, researchers, non-governmental organizations and society in general can advance towards the consolidation of the system for protected areas as tools for coping with the challenges of conservation, sustainability and global change over the century to come.



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GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
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AUTÓNOMO
PARQUES
NACIONALES



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PARA LOS ESPACIOS NATURALES



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