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The category of mountain as source of legitimacy for national parks

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to show that the category of mountain has been a useful resource for justifying that national parks be major instruments for environmental knowledge and action throughout their history. The first part relates how mountain national parks became major tools for nature conservation. We describe the shift that took place during the era of nature conservation, from a register of representativeness (mountains as miniatures of the globe) to a register of exceptionality (mountains as the last refuges for remarkable species and ecosystems). The second part presents the changes that accompanied the emergence and rise of the notion of biodiversity and how these changes undermined the exceptionality register of legitimacy and raised sharp criticism against national parks. The third part shows how mountain national parks' managers sought to respond to this criticism by associating a new register of legitimacy (sensitivity) to the category of mountain (mountains as sentinels in a rapidly changing globe) and combining it with previous registers of legitimacy (representativeness and exceptionality). Focusing on scientific programmes recently carried out in French national parks, we identify two complementary means of mixing these three registers of legitimacy. We conclude by characterizing the category of mountain as a long-standing, situated and constructed resource that requires social skills and competences to be maintained over time.

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1. Introduction

National parks were often created in mountains or rugged environments. For instance, the only Swiss national park was established in a very mountainous area in 1914 (Kupper, 2012). In Italy, the two first national parks, the Gran Paradiso national park (GPNP) and the Abruzzo national park, were also created in mountain ranges in the 1920s. In France, the first embryo of national park was created just before WWI in the Pelvoux massif (Zuanon, 1995). With the exception of the Port-Cros national park, all first French national parks were created from

the 1960s onwards in mountain ranges: three in the Alps, one in the Massif Central, and one in the Pyreneans (Merveilleux du Vignaux, 2003). The over-representation of national parks in mountainous areas remains true these days (Debarbieux et al., 2000; Araujo et al., 2011: 488), albeit to a lesser extent. But the important shifts over the last decades from an era of nature conservation to an era of biodiversity management (Blandin, 2009) have challenged the legitimacy of national parks as major policy tools.

This raises several questions: why have national parks and more generally protected areas been disproportionately created in mountains? How have their managers coped with

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the shifts from nature conservation to biodiversity management and sought to justify that mountain national parks remain major tools for environmental science and policy? Practical reasons might come to mind to answer the first question. It was undeniably easier to create national parks in areas with fewer and dwindling human activities such as mountains than in densely populated and economically active regions. Yet, the projects to create the Pelvoux national park in the 1910s (Zuanon, 1995), the GPNP in the 1920s (Hardenberg, 2011) and the Mercantour national park in the 1970s (Merveilleux du Vignaux, 2003) did generate very harsh opposition from the local populations. We intend to show that the over-representation of national parks in mountains has another and less obvious explanation: the category of mountain was turned into a very powerful and enduring resource to legitimize mountain national parks (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2014 [2010]).

We found Gieryn's work on the notion of 'truth-spot' to be very inspiring here. Gieryn (2002, 2006) defines a truth-spot as a delimited geographical location that lends credibility to claims. A place can be defined as a truth-spot if the knowledge that is produced in it, which is inevitably situated (Haraway, 1988), can escape "into the space of universal knowledge". Gieryn shows that this capacity rests on characteristics that are attached to places and connect them to truth. These characteristics vary from one case to the next; moreover, they can be combined to turn a particular place into a truth-spot. For instance, Thoreau constructed Walden Pond as a celebrated truth-spot by associating to it four place-based registers of authenticity: nativity, solitude, typicality, and unsulliedness. Gieryn concentrated his attention on specific knowledge production sites, such as Walden Pond, an Indian Institute of Plant Industry, a molecular biology laboratory, the city of Chicago, etc.

We propose to extend the notion of truth-spot in two ways. First, we believe that it can be applied not only to specific places but also to generic places, i.e. places that are lumped together in the same category, such as that of mountain. These places are connected to truth by attributes that were used to construct a given category (about the construction of mountain as a category, see Debarbieux, 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2014 [2010]). Indeed, it is not only a particular mountain, island or lake that have loomed large in the work and research sites of natural scientists, but mountains, lakes and islands as categories (Drouin, 1991; Reidy, 2011). Second, Gieryn's thinking on the where of science can be extended to the where of action. Places can be connected to efficiency in the same way as they can be connected to truth. They are then turned into 'efficiency-spots', that is sites where the actions taken can be featured as having a particularly far-reaching influence. We contend that mountains have been defined both as truth- and efficiency-spots where environmental knowledge should be produced and action taken in priority; and that this has been possible through the attachment of several registers of legitimacy to the category of mountain, which has thus become a useful and enduring resource for environmental knowledge and action.

The outline of the article is as follows. The first part stages how mountain national parks became major tools for nature conservation. We describe the shift that took place during the

era of nature conservation, from a register of representativeness (mountains as miniatures of the globe) to a register of exceptionality (mountains as the last refuges for remarkable species and ecosystems). The second part presents the changes that accompanied the emergence and rise of the notion of biodiversity and how these changes undermined the exceptionality register of legitimacy and raised sharp criticism against national parks. The third part shows how mountain national parks' managers sought to respond to this criticism by associating a new register of legitimacy (sensitivity) to the category of mountain (mountains as sentinels in a rapidly changing globe) and combining it, to a certain extent, with previous registers of legitimacy (representativeness and exceptionality). Focusing on scientific programmes recently carried out in French national parks, we identify two complementary means of mixing these three registers of legitimacy. We conclude by characterizing the category of mountain as a resource that has enabled national parks to remain major tools for environmental knowledge and action in two successive eras.

2. Mountain national parks as a major tool for nature conservation

2.1. Mountain as unsullied miniature of the globe: the representativeness register as a basis for the creation of national parks

The late 19th century was marked by rising awareness of damages to nature and an increasing will to protect it. Protected areas appeared as a major policy tool to achieve this goal. And national parks were among the oldest, largest, most highly protected and most famous protected areas. They occupy a prominent place in the IUCN typology of protected areas (category II out of VI).

At this stage, it is necessary to consider how the category of mountain was elaborated by natural scientists and, in particular, the inventors of biogeography. (A) Humboldt deserves a special mention here: his five-year exploration of South America enabled him to show that mountains can be considered microcosms (Debarbieux, 2012). Humboldt's work was continued and refined by Hooker in the Himalayas (Reidy, 2011). Hooker confirmed the possibility of studying the distribution of vegetation types across the globe by investigating relatively small mountainous areas rather than by covering very large areas from low to high latitudes. Therefore, mountains could stand as miniatures of the globe and be defined as sites of global representation (Bigg et al., 2009; Aubin, 2009; Vetter, 2011). The high diversity of plant and animal species was one of the key assets identified by natural scientists for the creation of the Swiss national park, along with the relatively large size of the area and its pristine character (Kupper, 2012: 184–185). In the US, biological and geological representativeness was an explicit criterion to select tracts of land to be protected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Shafer, 1999: 191–192). For instance, the Ecological Society of America stressed that many typical stages of forests were represented in Glacier Bay to promote its preservation for science (Rumore, 2012).

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