



# The Ambiguous Geographies of Protected Areas in Galicia\*

Las geografías ambiguas de los espacios protegidos en Galicia

Les géographies ambiguës des espaces protégés à Galice

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## Abstract

This paper analyses protected areas in Galicia (Spain) by adopting the perspective of critical human geography. The paper begins by providing an overview of critical literature on protected natural areas. Then, it traces the evolution of the protected areas in this case-study geographical region, correlated to the different socio-political and cultural contexts in which decision-making occurred. In this context the final section discusses the evolution of protected areas in Galicia in light of the theoretical section. The paper argues that protected areas in Galicia have to be understood as political products and, despite the common (and rhetoric) mention of existing protected areas in planning documents, tourism promotion, or signposting, the contribution of these protected areas to effective spatial planning and conservation management is marginal.

**Keywords:** protected natural areas; human geography; spatial planning; conservation management; tourism; Galicia

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\* Reflection article: This is a text in which the authors present the results of a research with an analytic and interpretive perspective. They are based on original observations or sources.  
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## Resumen

Este trabajo analiza las áreas protegidas en Galicia (España), adoptando la perspectiva de la geografía humana crítica. El artículo comienza ofreciendo un panorama general de la literatura crítica sobre los espacios naturales protegidos. A continuación traza la evolución de las áreas protegidas en la región geográfica estudiada, correlacionándola con los diferentes contextos sociopolíticos y culturales en los que se han tomado decisiones. En la última sección se discute la evolución de las áreas protegidas en Galicia, en relación con la sección teórica. Se demuestra que las áreas protegidas en Galicia deben ser entendidas como productos políticos. Asimismo, se argumenta que en Galicia, a pesar de que los documentos de planificación, la promoción turística o la señalización hacen una mención habitual (de forma retórica) a las áreas protegidas existentes, su contribución a la eficaz ordenación del territorio y gestión de la conservación es marginal.

**Palabras clave:** espacios naturales protegidos; geografía humana; ordenación del territorio; gestión de la conservación; turismo; Galicia

## Résumé

Le propos de ce travail est l'analyse des aires protégées en Galice (Espagne), adaptant l'approche de la géographie humaine critique. D'abord, l'article offre un aperçu général de la littérature critique sur les espaces naturels protégés. Ensuite, il est réalisé une évolution des aires protégées dans la région géographique étudiée, en la rapportant aux différents contextes sociopolitiques et culturels dans lesquels les décisions ont été prises. Dans la dernière partie, une discussion sur l'évolution des aires protégées en Galice est établie par rapport à la partie théorique. Nous démontrons qu'en Galice les aires protégées doivent se comprendre comme des produits politiques. Ainsi, l'argument est qu'en Galice même si les documents de planification, la promotion touristique ou la signalétique font couramment mention (et de manière rhétorique) aux aires protégées actuelles, la contribution de ces dernières à l'efficacité de l'aménagement du territoire et de la gestion de la conservation est marginale.

**Mots-clés:** espaces naturels protégés; géographie humaine; aménagement du territoire; gestion de la conservation; tourisme; Galice

## Introduction

In recent years it has been assumed that protected areas are an essential element in planning. Scholars tend to uncritically present and describe the maps of protected areas as a kind of neutral decision, when in fact they have been contested, imposed and negotiated. Similarly, it is widely assumed that protected areas are the key attractions for nature tourism in a given region; this approach often overlooks the more relevant and higher-value assets outside protected areas than within them.

This paper focuses on the case of protected areas in Galicia by contributing a critical perspective on protected areas as presented in the next section. Analytical results follow, based on an evolutionary consideration of the protected areas in this case-study geographical region, correlated to the different socio-political and cultural contexts in which decisions have been taken. The paper concludes by discussing the evolution of protected areas in Galicia in light of the theoretical section.

It is important to clarify that this paper is not an analysis of the protected areas in Galicia (i.e. the landscapes that are contained within them) or a systematic explanation of the land-use management and planning conflicts. It is, rather, a deconstruction of them through a critical perspective. In Galicia there are already comprehensive analyses of these protected areas, including fauna, flora, landforms, etc., as well as reflections on their protection needs and related issues, such as habitat destruction, overcrowding, and so on. In this respect, we can quote Cabalar (2010), but as the aim of our research is different, we do not want to replicate insights. While we share the same object of enquiry (protected areas of Galicia), this article adopts the perspective of human geography. In contrast, many of the previous contributions have followed the path of physical geography, both in a traditional sense (geomorphology, biogeography, etc.) and in today's most applied perspective of environmental management.

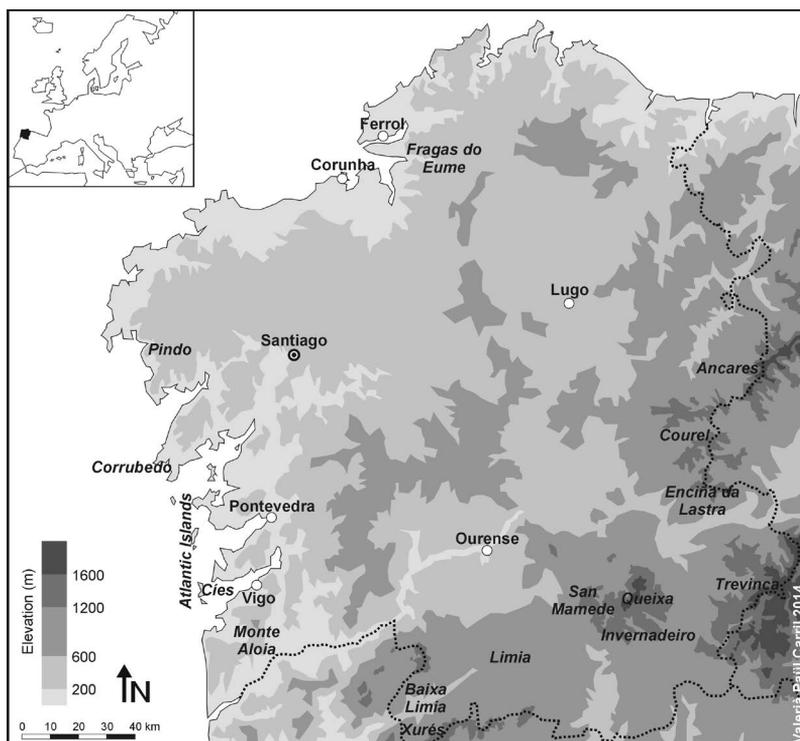


Figure 1. Location and regional topographic map, indicating the main places mentioned in the text and the seven big cities of Galicia

Source: Map by Valerià Paül, 2014

## Towards a critical human geography of protected areas

A protected area can be defined as “An area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection of biological diversity, and of natural and cultural associated resources, and managed through legal or other effective means”, which is the classic definition by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.<sup>1</sup> It can also be defined as an area “that has been the subject of legal declaration with the primary and explicit purpose of nature conservation” (EUROPARC-España, 2010, p. 19; translation is ours). Without going into the many debates that such definitions may raise, it is worth highlighting that they share the idea that protected areas are specific spaces determined by political decisions: law, recognition, management, and so on, thereby unswervingly placing protected natural areas in the field of politics.

The protection of specific areas considered nature-dominant begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the ideas of romanticism, nationalism, and the spread of hiking and mountaineering (Hall & Page, 2002; Mata, 2002; Nogué, 2005; Depraz, 2008; Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2010). Naturalist and environmentalist motivations — although present — were not the main reasons that led to the designation of the first parks, as often argued. In short, symbolic, patriotic, and nationalistic connotations (all cultural) were the reasons behind these protective designations.

In the cases of Yellowstone or Yosemite in the United States, considered the first designated protected areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, research has shown that they acted as symbols of the new independent nation (Hall & Page, 2002; Depraz, 2008). Hall and Page (2002) state how naturalistic reasons were secondary in the designations of protected areas by other Anglo-Saxon nations such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, where patriotic values were attributed by law to the protected areas. These governments did not hesitate to designate protected areas as “National Parks”, a designation which shows a nationalist intention. Many European countries show the same romantic attitude, as seen in Switzerland and France (Depraz, 2008; Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2010). In Spain, Gómez Mendoza (1998), Mata (2002) and Ortega Cantero (2007) have studied the origin of the protected areas. In their analysis nationalism and patriotism are highlighted and, as in the United States, the first protected areas were designated “National Parks”. Not surprisingly, the first one was Covadonga (1918), a symbolic space due to the first alleged victorious battle of Christians over Muslims in the Early Middle Ages, even if Murado (2013) has shown that this event is an historical myth.

Authors like Ojeda (1999, 2006) argue that the protection of areas since the 1970s stopped responding to the expressed romantic and nationalist ideas. From that decade onwards, protected areas satisfy the needs of advanced capitalism in order to apparently cope with the environmental consciousness. Ojeda (2006, p. 194) speaks of environmental “cliché or varnish” fulfilled in protected natural areas, while the prevailing political economy model does not bear the consequences of the pursuit of growth. What it seeks is an apparent loophole which gives something visible to the public. Authors such as Lovelock (2007) point out, through the implementation of environmental policies, capitalism does not change its predator model, it only camouflages it. Protected natural areas are presented as selected areas in which, it is said, the model will either not act or it will do so less intensely.

Ojeda (2006) also notes that these protected areas are located in marginal regions that are normally without significant economic value. Thus, their protection does not question the prevailing capitalist economic model, which is developed in central areas where the environment is widely abused. In these peripheral areas it is commonly said that the protected area will be an opportunity for local and endogenous development (Troitiño, 1995; Deverre *et al.*, 2002; Depraz, 2008). However, this is often contradictory: if protection aims to conserve, opportunities for development cannot be unlimited, no matter how much that development is declared sustainable. Tort (2000) referred to the “boomerang effect” of tourist visits that occur when an area is designated as protected, leading sometimes to overcrowding. Hence, the ground-breaking report *Loving them to death?* by EUROPARC Federation (2001) suggested with the title the need of planning sustainable tourism in protected areas.

1 [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/en\\_iucn\\_\\_glossary\\_definitions.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/en_iucn__glossary_definitions.pdf) (Access 8/2014).

An issue related to the previous one is the common disregard of the local communities directly affected by the protection of these areas. Authorities insist that the protected area will represent opportunities for development and it is clear that involving local people is critical for protected area management (Hirschnitz-Garbers & Stoll-Kleeman, 2011). However, most of the actions taken after the designation are restrictions and prohibitions which tend to arouse a strong social response, there being little dialogue kept with people who live or work in these areas or nearby (Troitiño, 1995; Alphanter, 2002; Depraz, 2008).

In parallel, protected areas are perceived as “natural”, thus excluding the human role in shaping landscapes. Rural areas, where protected areas are commonly located, are interpreted as being “natural” and they are artificially compartmentalised between “farmlands” and “natural areas”, a split that goes against a comprehensive rural management and planning (Deverre *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, rural areas are affected by the natural ideal of landscape (‘wildscapes’), which seek a “pre-cultural, pre-human, untamed nature — the wilderness” (Bell, 2006, p. 150). This procedure of protecting rural areas, but omitting the human role, is very common and is often a source of conflicts in protected areas. In Africa and America, for instance, local communities inhabiting protected areas are often labelled as “environmentally destructive” (Zimmerer, 2000, p. 357), when they have lived there for centuries. As a consequence, contradictions often emerge in protected areas. It can be said in this regard that:

“The designation of protected areas should never be raised against or confront the rural population; doing so is nonsense and a true contradiction. It has precisely been the rural people who have enabled the survival of valuable landscapes which now the government wants to preserve” (Troitiño, 1995, p. 36; translation is ours).

Governmental intervention in protected natural areas is usually in the domain of ministries or departments with powers on environmental policy devised by certain professional bodies, especially biologists and other environmental experts, who base their actions on the data available on biodiversity. Research carried out in France at the outset of the design of the Natura 2000 Network<sup>2</sup> showed the shortcomings of the French Government’s intervention (Alphanter, 2002; Billaud *et al.*, 2002). “The idea of a political decision on a rationality built from science [...] was particularly misunderstood. This not only leads to errors of a mode of governance or the weaknesses of a scientific community but also to question the use of scientific knowledge in practical decisions” (Billaud *et al.*, 2002, pp. 255-256; translation is ours).

Another relevant issue is that, while governments work diligently to protect certain areas (allowing the environmental “varnish” to be met and rapidly shown in the media), those areas, once protected, are often left poorly managed or neglected. That is, there is seldom any conservation investment or infrastructure management, or endorsement of tools that ensure effective protection (e.g. executive management plans). In this sense, it has been pointed out that there is often a protection “in law” (*de jure*) but not “in practice” (*de facto*) (Mallarach & Comas, 2008).

The previous remarks lead towards a final point in this overview of critical literature on protected natural areas: when designating them it is often assumed that the remaining lands which are not protected remain unprotected. Protection therefore implies a border effect between protected and unprotected areas (Tort, 2000). The former reinforcing the symbolic function referred to before, as “sanctuaries”, while the latter are affected by different forms of occupation and degradation. In this respect, Zimmerer (2000, p. 362) has stated that “the boundaries of conservation areas seem to cleave apart the privileged spaces of nature protection and preservation from those places of heavier human use and inhabitation”. In other words, “protecting an area [...] can be really dangerous, [...] so the rest of the areas can be destroyed with impunity” (Parra, 1990, p. 68; translation is ours).

2 The Natura 2000 Network is the main biodiversity provision from the European Union (EU). It stems from the well-known 1992 Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora), which sets the obligation of the EU member states to designate protected areas of European importance.

## The evolution of protected areas in Galicia

This section addresses protected natural areas in Galicia from an historical perspective through successive phases that match political periods. In the next section this analysis will be set against theoretical premises previously related. Due to space limitations, specific mentions to plans, acts, and norms are not included.

### The origins of nature protection

In Europe, the first protected areas occurred in the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in romanticist and nationalist ideological contexts. It does not seem that at that time there was a special feeling for the protection of certain areas in Galicia. However, Galician nationalism has existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has definitively held landscape ideas.<sup>3</sup> Why, if United States, Spanish, Swiss, and Catalan nationalism identified and defined protected areas in the mountain areas in line with their landscape discourses, was Galician nationalism not able to do so? Although the issue is complex, there are two possible explanations:

- Galician nationalism created an ideal “national landscape” based on rural areas, defined as those with farming communities. From Rosalía de Castro (1837-1885), the seminal contributor of the Galician landscape (López Silvestre, 2004; López Sández, 2008), Galicia has largely been interpreted as rural, agricultural, maternal, quiet, loving, etc. This image does not correlate with the lonely, isolated, rugged mountain areas that were appreciated, and protected, by other nationalisms elsewhere.
- Galician nationalism developed in a Galicia which was very rural, in effect a country without cities. This contrasts with situations in other places where the urban and industrial bourgeoisie, and its associated cultural elite, prompted the designation of protected areas. These areas were far away from the areas being polluted by the manufacturing sector developed during the Industrial Revolution. The bourgeoisie at that time was receptive to ideas of protection and, because they often had the power, protected areas were implemented. In Galicia the bourgeoisie was limited or non-existent.

In this far from encouraging context of area protection, the first protected areas appeared between 1933 and 1935, under the governments of the Spanish Second Republic (1931-1936). There were four small places, three coastal (the largest of which covered 50 hectares) and the fourth was a small-sized public hill (Monte Aloia, 200 hectares). These protected areas were designated under a “second class” regulation passed in 1927 which named them “natural sites of national interest”, adopted after the National Parks Act (1916). The sites were designated as “national”, but the norms under the 1927 regulation were ethereal and indeed the protection was more honorary than real.

That is to say, the first protected areas of Galicia had little consistency. Meanwhile, at that time there were already two large national parks and in the mountains of Madrid there were also more than 3,000 hectares already protected under the 1927 regulation. The comparisons are obvious and clearly indicate that it was the State power from Madrid which decided what areas deserved to be protected, linking them to Spanish nationalism ideology. Galicia and its landscapes did not appear in these preferences. The State elites in Madrid understood Galicia as a peripheral tourist region, in particular its coastal and marine areas, which were in fact the only ones to be recognised as protected in 1933 (Santos, 2005; Paül & Labraña, 2013).

### The dictatorship years (1936-75)

During the Franco dictatorship there was no designation of new protected areas. Thus, at the end of that dark period in the 1970s, slightly less than 0.01% of Galicia was protected, like in the 1930s.

3 It is not possible to report the Galician nationalist landscape discourse here. In this respect, see Mato (1998), García Álvarez (2002), López Silvestre (2004) or López Sández (2008).

This contrasts with what happened in other parts of Spain where the Spanish Government designated several national parks (such as those in the Canary Islands), often with obvious tourism intentions. The first Natural Park in Spain was designated in 1972 in Sant Llorenç del Munt-Serra de l'Obac by the Provincial Council of Barcelona. While the Provincial Council of Barcelona designated several Natural Parks, the same steps were not taken by the four Provincial Councils existing in Galicia. In Barcelona, the Natural Parks were developed with the expectation of a future political autonomy for Catalonia, which would manage a network of protected areas (Reales, 2000). This clearly places the decision of implementing protected areas with Catalan nationalism.

#### The transition to democracy (1975-81). Environmentalism's emergence

We have seen in the theoretical section how the expansion of the protectionist ideals and protected areas began internationally in the 1970s. However, these realisations did not happen in Galicia, although it is true that several environmentalist groups emerged. Hence, ADEGA (*Asociación para a Defensa Ecolóxica de Galiza*, 'Association for Ecological Defence of Galicia') was founded in 1974, being the first group in Spain to be self-defined as "environmentalist", and in 1975 the Galician Society of Natural History (SGHN, *Sociedade Galega de Historia Natural*) appeared (Díaz Fierros, 2001). These environmentalist groups have undertaken numerous campaigns for the designation of protected areas. Although success was scarce in the early years, eventually the list of areas in the campaigns has been partially used as the basis for the decisions taken by the authorities decades later.

During the political transition to democracy, the Spanish Government was working on a Coordinated Spatial Plan for Galicia (PDTCG, *Plan director territorial de Galicia*) at a time when there was not yet the current decentralised autonomous regions system in Spain and the central State still retained its powers in regional planning. The PDTCG contained a complete mapping of a network of protected natural areas in Galicia, with several Natural Parks, natural sites, and nature reserves. Hardly any of the areas proposed for Natural Park status then have been designated. Environmentalists have asked for the approval of this PDTCG for decades, even though they considered this plan scarcely ambitious (Vales, 1992).

The Spanish Government designated two small Natural Parks: Monte Aloia in 1979 (which is a conversion of the designation in the 1930s), and the Cíes Islands in 1980. These two areas, which would be the Government of Galicia's responsibility, were a tiny fraction of the PDTCG's protected areas proposal.

#### The early years of devolution (1981-97)

Galicia achieved self-government in 1981, as an autonomous nationality to which the 1978 Spanish Constitution allowed the devolution of several powers to an elected Parliament and a Government. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to highlight that Galicia was given jurisdiction in the fields of regional and urban planning, and protected areas. In theory, these are all exclusively managed by the Galician institutions and the Spanish Government cannot intervene. Nevertheless, this is a theoretical assumption as the authorities in Madrid often show willingness to retain powers; for instance, since 1978 the Spanish Government has continued to manage National Parks. However, the Constitutional Court eventually decided in 2004 (Sentence 194/2004) that the Spanish Government could not interfere in devolved matters with regard to protected areas, hence the Spanish Act 5/2007 was passed. This act finally gave autonomous regions and nationalities, such as Galicia, powers on national parks' planning, management, etc., although Madrid is still responsible for some coordination.

Be that as it may, the Galician Government (Xunta) has been very reluctant to develop decisions on protected areas. Indeed, until the late 1990s it did not designate new areas, despite having the powers to do so. This contrasts with the activity of regions such as Andalusia and Catalonia, which carried out a vigorous policy of designating protected natural areas during the 1980s and 1990s (Mulero, 2002). An example of what the Xunta thought at that time was the purchase of a huge property called the Invernadeiro. This property covers nearly 6,000 hectares and is nestled in the area that the 1979 PDTCG

draft proposed to designate as the Queixa-San Mamede Natural Park; instead of establishing a Natural Park in the area, it was converted into a sort of hunting lodge (Paül, 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s, there was hardly any decision-making on protected areas. We can highlight only the following developments:

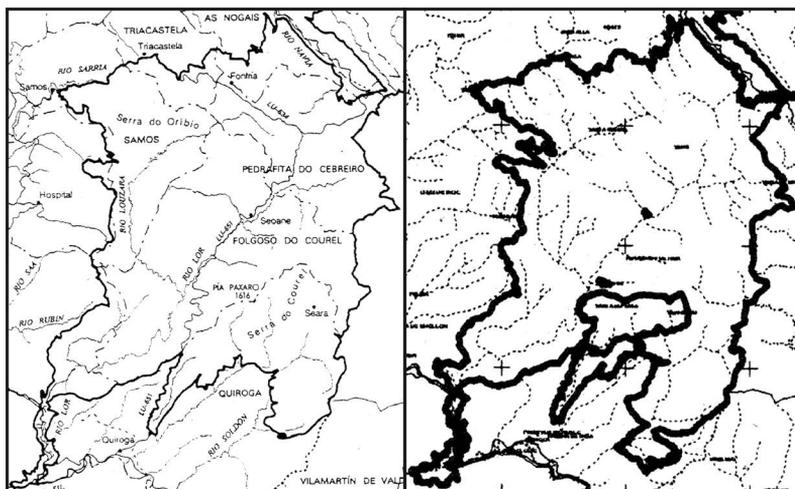
- The adoption of a soft category of so-called “natural areas under general protection”, without practical consequences beyond the need for a Government report when there was an application for implementing some activities. Since 1989, when this category was passed, until the late 1990s, there were 10 areas designated as such, many of them modest in size.
- Approval of a list of natural areas in the General Guidelines of the Government in urban planning in 1991. This list did not imply protection, but merely indicated those areas in which municipalities must have, in their “business as usual” town planning, some planning attention.
- More important was the designation of four Natural Parks in the early 1990s by the Galician Government through Spanish legislation (Spanish Act 4/1989), since Galicia had not yet passed its own legislation. Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés is the largest park in Galicia, with almost 30,000 hectares, designated in 1993 because of its contiguity with the Portuguese National Park of Peneda-Gerês, already protected in 1971. Fragas do Eume, designated in 1997, is possibly the most valuable as it covers 9,000 hectares of forest full of native species in a highly scenic landscape. Corrubedo was the first Natural Park designated by the Galician Government in 1992, in fact tiny (less than 1,000 hectares). The fourth was Invernadeiro (designated in 1997), which, as mentioned above, had already been owned by the Xunta since 1984.

In conclusion, according to Mulero (2002, p. 107), in 1999 there were in Galicia: 6 Natural Parks (4 new and 2 old), 3 natural sites of national interest designated in the 1930s, and the 10 natural areas under general protection, the latter two categories with very poor standards that hardly could be considered “protected” in international terms. All of this accounted for 2% of the Galician territory.

From the creation of a Ministry for the Environment to the change of government (1997-2005)

The creation in 1997 of a Ministry for the Environment in the Galician Government implied a turnaround for protected areas. In order to comply with the European directives (in particular, the Habitats Directive, already mentioned), this Ministry had to develop the Natura 2000 Network. While other Spanish autonomous regions based their Natura 2000 on protected natural areas already in place, Galicia started from scratch. In March 1999, the Galician Government listed the proposed Sites of Community Importance (scis) for the Natura 2000 Network and at the end of the same year designated them under the weak category of “natural areas under general protection”. Despite the low-performing Galician protection for these areas, the change in quantitative terms was dramatic: the 2% of the Galician territory designated as protected became 12%.

The new mapping of protected areas was not well-known in Galicia and many municipalities remain ignorant of the designated protected areas within their jurisdiction. This reveals that there was no local government and community participation when the designations were set. In addition, from the first list of proposed scis until the final European Commission decision in 2004, some significant changes took place, showing the pressures exerted by some powerful economic stakeholders (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The proposed scs of Courel in the first designation in 1999 and its final shape in 2004. In the meantime, a “hole” appears in the southern part of the area because of the opencast slate mines’ expansion plans.

Sources: Gazette (Diario Oficial de Galicia), 9/11/1999 (p. 13127) and 19/05/2004 (p. 7073)

In 2001 the Nature Conservation Act 9/2001 was passed by the Galician Parliament, Galicia being one of the 5 Spanish autonomous regions (out of 17) which still did not have its own legislation on this subject by then. Surprisingly, the Act 9/2001 does not establish a specific plan for developing a comprehensive and consistent network of protected natural areas in Galicia. Nor does it set guidelines on matters such as how to achieve a proper representativeness of Galician biodiversity through the protected areas. Rather, the Act 9/2001 determines that the designations of protected areas remain a discrete decision, case by case. In 2004 the scs were covered by a category in the Act 9/2001 as “areas of special protection of natural values”, which is the weakest category.

In 2002 a seventh Natural Park was designated, Enciña da Lastra (again small in size at 3,152 hectares), and representative of Mediterranean ecosystems, which are very exceptional in Galicia. Also in 2002, the Spanish Parliament passed the Atlantic Islands National Park, whose processing had been initiated by the Galician Government in 1999. This is a land-sea national park, which includes four archipelagos (Cíes among them) and offshore marine environments in the south-west of Galicia; a type of landscape that, as aforesaid, clearly links to tourism preferences (Santos, 2005; Paül & Labraña, 2013). These islands were appointed the highest level of protection in Spain, as it was the will of the Xunta to have a protected area of such category. This was seen as especially important for promoting tourism. Also, the national park category involved central state management at that time, so the facilities, staff, etc. had to be sustained from Madrid and not by the autonomous government. Ironically, the Constitutional Court later determined that national parks could not be administered by the Spanish Government. Thus, in 2008 control of the Atlantic Islands National Park was transferred to Galicia, exactly when the Galician Government had been working in the opposite direction since 1999.

#### From 2005 to 2009: a different legislative term of office?

In 2005 a legislative term of office began with a parliamentary left-wing majority, the first time in Galician history, which had been dominated for more than two decades by Spanish conservative parties. The Galician Government was a coalition formed by a left-wing Spanish party and Galician nationalists; its agenda included designating four new Natural Parks (in areas already included in the Natura 2000 Network): Ancares, Courel, Queixa-San Mamede, and Trevinca. It also intended to increase the protected percentage of Galicia from 12% to 20% through a Master Plan for the

Natura 2000 Network (PDRN 2000, Plan Director da Rede Natura 2000). None of these objectives was achieved, despite the expectations created. Only some small new piecemeal protected areas, under the “areas of special protection of natural values” weak category of the Act 9/2001, were designated in 2007.

However, some progress can be reported. For instance, the development of environmental education programmes in protected areas and the adoption of rural development programmes for the communities directly affected by protected natural areas. Also, it has to be highlighted that for the first time there was an intensive signposting of the Natura 2000 SCIS all over Galicia, since they were scarcely known to the public (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Signpost of a Natura 2000 Site of Community Importance placed in the 2005-2009 period.

Picture by Valerià Paül, 23/08/2013

The Landscape Act 7/2008 can also be considered an achievement in this period. However, it partially overlaps the protected areas policy, on the one hand, and the landscape policy, on the other. In fact, the “protected landscapes” are designated under the Act 9/2001, but quite confusingly the so-called “landscape action plans in protected areas” are developed under the Act 7/2008.

Since 2009

In 2009 the conservative party that had ruled Galicia until 2005 returned to power. In the past 5 years they have come to power no little progress has been made and there has been a clear lack of commitment to the protection agenda. In 2009 the ruling party was forced by the European Commission to designate an area of almost 7,000 hectares in the Limia district with a large bird population as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the Birds Directive,<sup>4</sup> in the Natura 2000 Network. In the Gazette (*Diario Oficial de Galicia*) published on 15/10/2009, the Galician Government openly wrote that the designation as SPA means that “the area becomes a Natura 2000 protected area but it is not considered a protected natural area” (p. 16231). With this intricate and confusing text, the Xunta meant that the SPA designation was compulsory because of an obligation to toe the line in European directives, but that the designation does not mean that the area is protected under Galician and Spanish legislation.

4 Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds.

Another case in point is the refusal to designate new Natural Parks. Pindo Mountain is an emblematic and scenic coastal mountain already designated SCI, where an intense social campaign is taking place since 2010 for the designation of a Natural Park that would reinforce the existing (but weak) protection by providing stronger planning, investment and management enforcement. The Galician Government has repeatedly denied the need for such a Natural Park.

In these 5 years, the PDRN 2000, committed in 2005, has been passed (Decree 37/2014). Instead of re-designing the network, it merely plans the areas that were already protected as SCIs since 2004. In general terms, it does not increase the percentage of protected areas in Galicia, but it does convert the SCIs into Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). This is done to deal with the 1992 Habitats Directive, which established that “within 6 years at the most” after the designation of a SCI, it should be designated as a SAC, together with the necessary management measures to ensure the favourable conservation status of those sites. In the case of Galicia that has taken 10 years and the measures do not exist in practical terms, despite the Decree 37/2014.

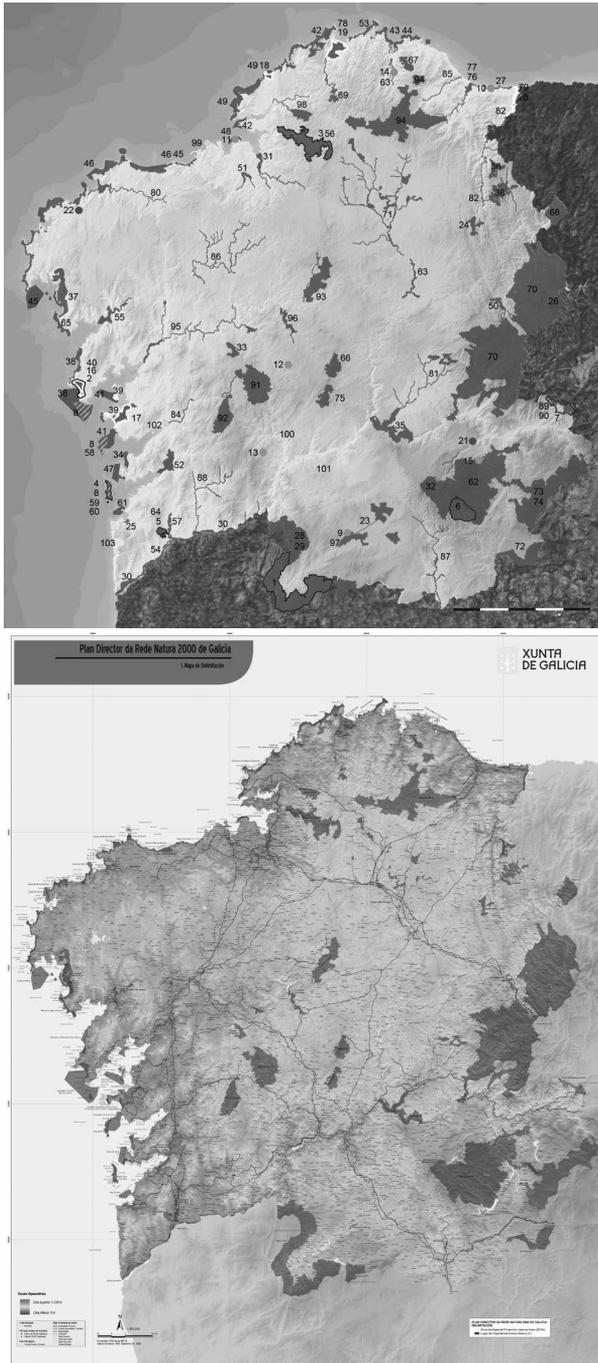
In these 5 years as well, two regional plans that had been pending since the 1990s were passed, both in 2011: the Galicia Spatial Plan (Directrices de *Ordenación do Territorio*, DOT) and the Coastal Plan (*Plan de Ordenación do Litoral*, POL). Neither of them extended the area that was already protected. Indeed, the DOT can be considered a missed opportunity as it simply compiled the previous designations of protected areas (Figure 4). Another regional plan that has been passed in the last few years is the Landscape Catalogue of the Deza District (2011), under the Landscape Act 7/2008. This Catalogue does not involve the designation of new protected areas and is only an analysis of the area's landscape; indeed, it does offer huge teaching and learning potential but in real terms it is of little value for planning, management, and protection.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, the correlation between the designation, planning, and management of protected areas, on the one hand, and successive political circumstances, on the other, has been clearly proven. This fulfils the theoretical idea that protected areas are mainly a political product. It is not just a discursive dialogue between different ideologies and political systems, but also between decision-making scales on several levels. This was evidenced in cases such as the Atlantic Islands National Park and the proposal of Natural Parks drafted by the Spanish Government in the 1979 PDTCG, never substantiated by the Galician Government. And, as clearly shown, there has only been a significant designation of protected areas in Galicia when the European Union forced the government to do so (Natura 2000), and subsequently all the decisions have assumed this network: 2011 DOT, 2014 PDRN 2000, etc. Thus, and according to Zimmerer's (2000, p. 360) words, “Scale is central to today's conservation boom”.

The influence of romanticism and nationalism in the designation of protected areas has also been evidenced in this research, although the Galician case is quite exceptional and the evidence provided has been from elsewhere (i.e. Madrid nearby mountains by Spanish nationalism). Galician nationalism did not generate the typical “mountain landscape images” and it has never actually been in office (except the term 2005-2009). In this regard, Spanish nationalism did not understand particular areas of Galicia in accordance with its national imaginary. In Galicia there was not the protected area boom in the 1970s, as recorded in other contexts, despite environmentalism's emergence in that decade. There was only the attempt of the 1979 PDTCG draft, but that has never been followed by any other comprehensive and consistent plan. The only practical outcome of the 1970s ‘environmentalist turn’ was the designation of the first two Natural Parks by the Spanish Government in 1979 (Monte Aloia) and 1980 (Cies).

Currently, the protected 12% of the territory corresponds mainly to marginal areas where there are not any excessive expectations on economic activities that protection may affect, in line with Ojeda's (1999) observations. These are basically mountainous areas which are sparsely populated and have been abandoned for decades and, therefore, are usually easier spaces to protect. In these areas it is expected that tourism will contribute to development, and in this sense we find a basic correlation between



**Figure 4.** The protected areas in the 2011 DOT (Galicia Spatial Plan), p. 261, and in the 2014 PDRN 2000 (Master Plan for the Natura 2000 Network) are merely the amalgamation of the already protected areas.

Source: <http://www.cmati.xunta.es> (Access 8/2014)

tourism promotion and protected areas (Figure 5). Indeed, in the last few years there has been an ongoing designation of Biosphere Reserves,<sup>5</sup> which are not in a statutory protected area category in Galicia although for tourism they are used as if they were. This is in line with Zimmerer's (2000, p. 358) observation that "An unprecedented profusion of the types and areas of managed territory is being produced in the present conservation boom".

The Xunta sent the proposed list of SCIS to Brussels in the late 1990s and virtually none of the affected municipalities or communities was aware of the fact. When protection was met, it usually tended to be "camouflaged" by saying that such protection did not imply limitations. An extreme case occurred in the designation of the Limia SPA in 2009, when the Galician Government implemented a Special Protection Area that in fact is not protected under the Act 9/2001. During the left-wing rule of 2005-2009, initiatives to expand protected areas or the implementation of new Natural Parks failed because there was hostility in the affected areas, namely in Ancares. All these examples show different aspects of the divorce between the bureaucratic decision-making in governmental bodies and the local arena.

In the theoretical section we pointed out that governments tend to conceive protected areas as untamed wilderness (Bell, 2006). This is less clear in Galicia, basically because protection has been limited and weak. Nevertheless, in the six Galician Natural Parks and in the only National Park there seem to be different models. While Invernadeiro is managed as an impregnable "nature sanctuary", in which environmental and ecological management are strict (highly controlled visits, access constraints, etc.), other parks are much more lenient. Be that as it may, it is true that certain professional lobbies were instrumental in implementing and managing the current protected areas. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that only the protected area expanded when the Ministry of Environment was created, not before. Or, it was in the domain that the environmental-ecological corporatism had on the issue of landscape (Act 7/2008).

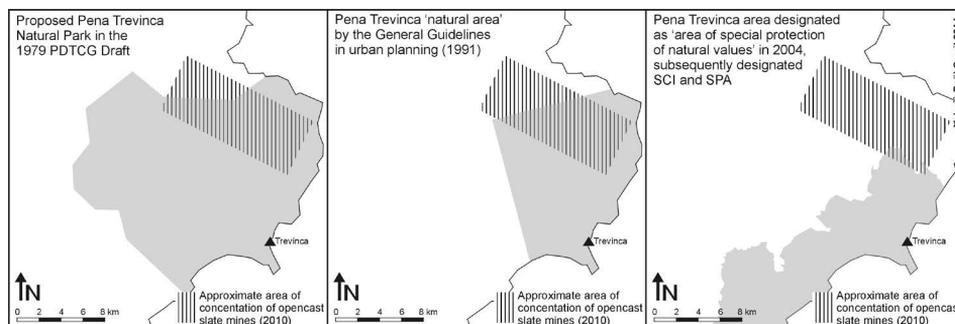


Figure 5. Brochures for tourism promotion by the Galician Government.

Source: <http://www.turgalicia.es> (Access 8/2014)

5 In Galicia there are now 6 Biosphere Reserves, more than Sweden (5), the United Kingdom (5), Finland (2), Greece (2) or Ireland (2), or almost half of those designated in France (13) or Australia (14). The reasons are unclear as to why UNESCO accepts so many biosphere reserves without real commitments of environmental protection and management.

Finally, in relation to the lack of management of protected areas once protected, it is important to note that almost all protected areas are at the lowest level of protection. Of the 350,000 hectares of currently protected lands, 210,000 are the “big four” in the Eastern mountain areas, as shown in Figure 1 (Ancares-Courel, Trevinca, Queixa-San Mamede, and Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés). Only one of them (the latter) has been designated a Natural Park, while the rest enjoy a very vague protection, which is consistent with the mismatch between “in law” (*de jure*) and “in practice” (*de facto*) status (Mallarach & Comas, 2008). This implies that the government does not carry out management operations in them and there are no budget commitments. Only the introduction of few rural development programmes during the left-wing government in 2005-2009 can be read as a slight change of direction in this matter. In relation to this, it must be said that in certain (alleged) protected areas there are repeated environmental attacks by aggressive, economic activities such as quarries and mines (Figures 2 and 6), or by intensive leisure practices such as off-road quads. Thus, the Government does not manage or truly protect the areas that supposedly it should, but cynically they are used for tourism purposes, for instance in brochures (Figure 5).

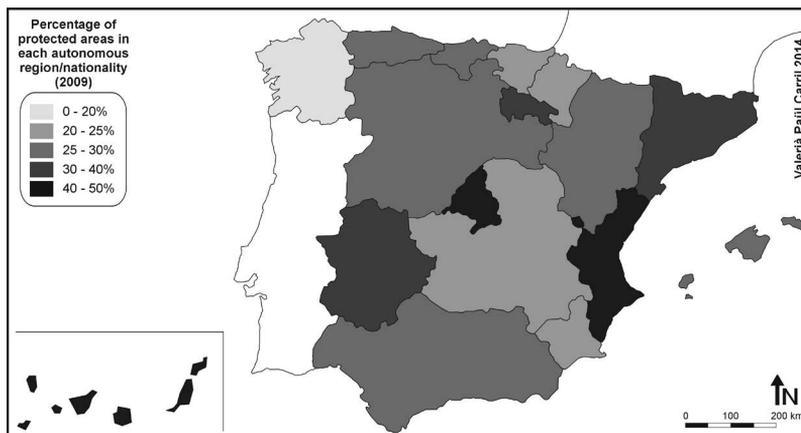


**Figure 6.** Trevinca protected area: from initial proposals to the finally passed protected area.

Sources: 1979 PDTCG draft and <http://www.xunta.es> (Access 8/2014)

Galicia has uncontrolled urban development, with residential growth occurring in almost every place, near and far from existing urban areas, following or not the approved local plans. In this context (that the current economic crisis freezes, but does not prevent), Natural Parks and other protected natural areas could be the “sanctuary” saved from these expansive dynamics, as theoretically stated by Parra (1990), Tort (2000), and Zimmerer (2000). However, this “sanctuary effect” does not happen for two reasons:

- In the protected areas multiple attacks are commonly allowed, and even the recent Galician Act 2/2010 on urban planning reform contributes to that, when allowing the implementation of several types of industries in Natura 2000 Network. This is in line with the “urban pressure without borders” explained by Delgado (2008) and Prados’ (2009) “naturbanisation” notion as a specific process of urban development in protected areas.
- Globally, protected areas represent a very small proportion of Galicia. This does not allow for the verification of their presence or their real impact in terms of planning. Indeed, Galicia is currently the autonomous region with the lowest percentage of protected lands in Spain (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Protected areas in the autonomous regions and nationalities of Spain.

Source: EUROPARC-España (2010, p. 38)

Ultimately, although signposting of protected natural areas in Galicia are placed to mark where they are (Figure 3), it can be stated that the contribution to planning is marginal. In reaching this conclusion we consider that the use of critical geography has been very useful. Largely because, as we have developed throughout this paper, geography cannot bring itself to “choose the case-study areas uncritically, without questioning the underlying motivations that explain the political-administrative boundaries that have been given” (Lois, 2009, p. 32).

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