

Enhancing geological heritage in the Apuan Alps aspiring geopark (Italy)

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The Apuan Alps, a mountain range in the Tuscany Region of Italy, are a 500 km² area subject to environmental protection under the jurisdiction of the Nature Park of the Apuan Alps (hereinafter Park Authority). The Apuan Alps are characterized by outstanding examples of geodiversity (rocks, minerals, tectonic structures, karst caves, geomorphology, etc.). Other remarkable expressions of the geological heritage are the archaeological finds and the historical-cultural emergencies related to quarrying and mining.

The Apuan Alps area has also a rich environmental and cultural heritage: natural habitats of European Community interest with endemic plants and animals are present as well as traditional villages and monuments, whereas residual activities, such as sheep-farming and chestnut cultivation, are still active.

Enhancing geological, naturalistic and cultural heritage has been identified by the Park Authority as one of its most important tasks and many actions for developing tourism in the protected area have been undertaken. The participation of local communities in the decision-making process is a fundamental prerequisite able to generate support, cooperation and a widespread sense of responsibility for upholding the geological heritage and cultural traditions. Therefore the Park Authority has involved local inhabitants, associations and other public authorities in the decision-making process, including decisions regarding sites of geological interest.

The most important results of this policy are the Corchia Underground project, a concrete example of management of geosites based on the direct involvement of the local community. This system integrates a network of equipped geosites (old quicksilver mines and underground marble quarries) and two museums with the Speleological Trail of the Corchia cave complex, the largest Italian karst complex which develops for more than 50 km. Opened in 2001, this underground trail allows to the general public the safe access to 1024 m of natural galleries.

Based on this background, the Nature Park of the Apuan Alps decided to start the path to become a member of the European and Global Geoparks Network, under the auspices of UNESCO. In accordance with the procedure, the Park Authority submitted the application dossier in November 2010. The will of local communities of supporting the initiative is stated by the formal act, approved on April 27, 2010, by the Park Community, the advisory body which assembles municipalities, provinces and mountain communities belonging to the protected area.