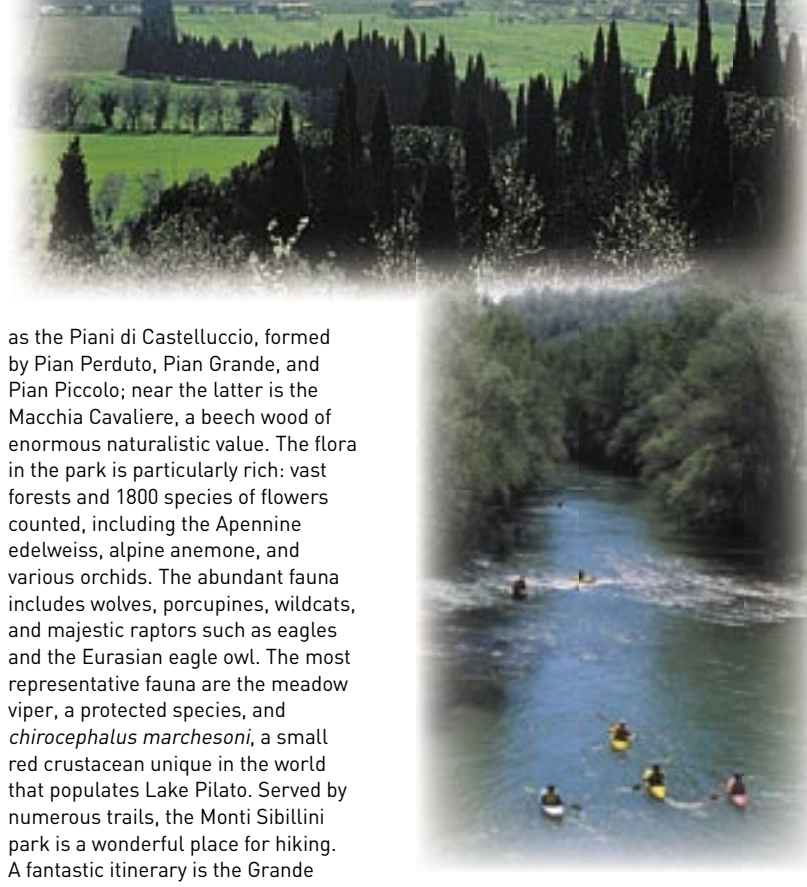


Nature and Parks.

Life and sport in the protected areas

Umbria is widely known as the “green heart of Italy”, a simple description that certainly rings true. The extraordinary balance between nature and human activity, an excellent practice handed down over the centuries and still respected, has created impressive landscapes, undoubtedly amongst the most beautiful in Italy. Crossed by the Apennines, a large part of the region is mountainous or hilly. With a limestone composition, these areas are subject to the “choreographies” of erosion: sinkholes, natural springs, rivers, streams, and lakes embellish the expanses of woods, pastures, and fields cultivated with care. Fortunately, the natural environment is treated with the utmost respect. Umbria has numerous protected areas: in “hierarchical” order, the **Monti Sibillini National Park**, a number of Regional Parks (Colfiorito, Monte Cucco, Monte Subasio, the Tiber River Park, Trasimeno, the Nera River Park), the STINA, and other smaller reserves such as the parks of Sette Frati and Villalba, Lake Alviano (WWF reserve) and La Valle (Legambiente reserve). Established in 1993, the Monti Sibillini National Park (17,790 hectares on the border between Umbria and Le Marche) covers the mountainous area where legend has it that the cave of the fortune-teller Sybil was found. It is a land of magical charm, impregnated with legends and embellished with fortified towns, towers, churches and abbeys set into the green surroundings. Here lie the source of the Nera river, which carves one of the most beautiful valleys of the entire Apennine range, and the highest peaks in the region, dominated by Monte Vettore (2476 m). Opening out on the western slope of the Apennines is a spectacular karst depression, the series of plains known



as the Piani di Castelluccio, formed by Pian Perduto, Pian Grande, and Pian Piccolo; near the latter is the Macchia Cavaliere, a beech wood of enormous naturalistic value. The flora in the park is particularly rich: vast forests and 1800 species of flowers counted, including the Apennine edelweiss, alpine anemone, and various orchids. The abundant fauna includes wolves, porcupines, wildcats, and majestic raptors such as eagles and the Eurasian eagle owl. The most representative fauna are the meadow viper, a protected species, and *chirocephalus marchesoni*, a small red crustacean unique in the world that populates Lake Pilato. Served by numerous trails, the Monti Sibillini park is a wonderful place for hiking. A fantastic itinerary is the Grande

Anello, 120 kilometres for a nine-day trek along the entire massif of the Sibillini. Other sports opportunities include ski mountaineering, horseback riding, mountain biking, hang-gliding, parasailing, and rock climbing. The **Colfiorito Regional Park** (established in 1995, 338 hectares) is a vast karst plateau formed by seven dry lake beds, encircled by gently rolling hills. Within this expanse lies the marsh of Colfiorito, a wetlands area of international importance with a rich proliferation of aquatic flora. With its abundance of birdlife, it is a wonderful place for birdwatching enthusiasts.

The heights surrounding the plain were once dotted with *castellieri*, prehistoric settlements typical of the centuries preceding the arrival of the Romans. The park territory includes the peak of Monte Orve, which offers breathtaking vistas, as well as the remains of the Roman city of Plestia. The **Monte Cucco Regional Park** (1995) is a paradise for sports lovers. It extends for 10,480 hectares around the peak (1556 m) in the northeastern part of Umbria. The area is characterised by grandiose karst phenomena: underground caves, deep valleys furrowed by crystalline rivers, and mineral springs. It conserves virtually unspoilt beech woods and hosts golden eagles and wolves, and the water courses are inhabited by crayfish. Sites of particular naturalistic interest include the Rio Freddo and Balzo dell'Aquila gorges, the imposing Corno di Catria, the canyon known as Valle delle Prigioni, and the karst plateau of Macinare, a marvel of meadows and beech woods. In the bowels of the massif, the Valdorbica subterranean caves, dug by man, extend for dozens of kilometres, while the Grotta del Monte Cucco penetrates into the depths (down to more than 990 metres) for 30 kilometres, one of the most extensive karst systems in Italy. Three towns are set on this natural backdrop: Fossato di Vico, Sigillo, and Costacciaro, embellishing the view with their ancient walls and towers. With 120 kilometres of excellent trails, the attraction for hikers is irresistible, as well as for those who love horseback riding, mountain biking, parasailing, hang-gliding, canyoning, and cross-country skiing (on the Pian delle Macinare). The Grotta del Monte Cucco affords an opportunity to practice spelunking; the Centro Escursionistico Naturale Speleologico is headquartered in a former monastery in Costacciaro. The **Monte Subasio Regional Park** (1995, 7442 hectares) is the park of spirituality, its territory encompassing Assisi, the mystical epicentre of Umbria. Over the centuries, the city of St. Francis and the mount, the

“Monte de Assisio” par excellence, have always had a close bond of interdependence: Assisi used its pink stone, forests and pastures, redesigning the physiognomy of the landscape. The peak (1290 m) rises above the Umbra Valley and also forms the backdrop for Spello and Nocera Umbra. Prevalently flat and furrowed by sinkholes, fissures, and karst pits, it is characterised by a large variety of environments. The slopes of Monte Subasio are covered with dense vegetation, like the ilex wood that surrounds the Hermitage of the Carceri, with its incredible overhang, the hermits’ caves, and the centuries-old ilex tree of St. Francis. The **Tiber River Park** (1995, 7925 hectares) winds along 50 kilometres of river, from the hills of Todi to the Alviano nature reserve, passing through the gorge of Forello, the highlands of Prodo and Titignano (not far from Orvieto), and the made-made lake of Corbara, which changed the landscape without, however, diminishing its beauty. The river banks and all the adjacent territory are dotted with ruins and finds of the epochs of the Umbrians, Etruscans, and Romans, for whom the Tiber was a vital communication artery. The park is thus virutally one large archaeological site. In the wildest points, such as the gorge of Forello, the banks are covered with lush vegetation and provide habitats for ospreys, red kites, and sparrow hawks. The waters of Lake Corbara (created for hydroelectric purposes) teem with carps, eels, and chubs, which attract as many water birds as fishermen. The blocking of the Tiber in 1963 produced, in addition to the Corbara basin, an unexpected but happy consequence: 500 hectares of wetlands, swamps, and marshes that became the perfect breeding ground and waystation for 150 species of aquatic and migratory birds,

including rare species such as cranes and ospreys. The **Oasi di Alviano** reserve is located here, managed by the WWF, with two nature trails equipped with huts, foot-bridges, and towers for birdwatchers. The Tiber River Park lends itself to numerous sports activities: in addition to hiking, horseback riding, and cycling, visitors can also engage in canoeing, kayaking, and caving. In the proximity of the park, at the foot of Monte Peglia, lies the **Sette Frati nature reserve**, 25 hectares of unspoilt woods for

hiking, affording fantastic vistas. The **Petrified Forest of Dunarobba**, in the vicinity of Avigliano, is one of the most interesting paleontological sites in the world, preserving fossil tree trunks over two million years old. The phenomenon observed here is different from that of other petrified forests, as the fossilised trunks maintain their original consistency and erect position.

The establishment of the **Trasimeno Regional Park** (1995) was of vital importance in order to preserve an extremely delicate natural environment, hard pressed especially by tourism on the lake. Excellent results have been accomplished: the water and beaches are clean, and many areas, such as the islands and valleys, have maintained their naturalistic qualities. Right from the first glance, the landscape is simply enchanting. The park (13,200 hectares) covers the entire surface of Lake Trasimeno, the largest in Italy excluding the Alpine lakes, and also incorporates the towns along the shores. Three islands emerge from the lake (seven metres at maximum height): Isola Polvese, now a scientific park, Isola Maggiore, inhabited year-round, and Isola Minore. In addition to the fish, pride and joy of the local cuisine, Lake Trasimeno is important as a waystation for migratory birds, including herons, swans, and egrets. San Savino di Magione is home to the **Oasi la Valle**, established in 1996 and managed by Legambiente: a vast wetlands of notable importance, 500 hectares of cane thickets precious for the bird life and in particular for migratory birds. The centre organises guided visits, also aboard electric boats.

Furrowed by the course of the rivers Nera and Velino, which flows into the Nera precipitating in the spectacular falls of the Cascata delle Marmore, the **Nera River Park** (1995, 2120 hectares) is worthy of its nickname “park of waters”. The valley of the Nera, or Valnerina as it is called, offers a fascinating landscape: the river is wedged between steep walls, in a

gorge that in certain parts is intensely green. The most characteristic wildlife are rock thrushes, swifts, white-throated dippers, wildcats, trout, and crayfish in the streams. The **Cascata delle Marmore** has ancient artificial origins: the Romans diverted the course of the Velino river towards the 165-metre high dropoff, creating what is now a top tourist attraction. The entire zone is popular for sports tourism, in particular water sports: kayak, canoe, hydrospeed and rafting enthusiasts, as well as free climbers, can enjoy the excellent facilities dedicated to them. Outside the park,



just a short distance from the falls, is Lago di Piediluco, the second largest natural lake in Umbria, a pleasant spot ringed by mountains and colourful houses and site of world-class rowing competitions.

In the central-western sector of the region is the **Parco S.T.I.N.A.** (Sistema Territoriale di Interesse Naturalistico and Ambientale) of Monte Peglia-Selva di Meana, recently established (1999) and managed by the local Comunità Montana. The considerable variety of flora comprises more than a thousand species, with rare jewels such as *Cytinus ruber*. The vast expanse of the STINA (44,270 hectares) includes three nature reserves: the **Selva di Meana-Allerona** (3255 hectares of forests populated by badgers and martens), the **Bosco della Melonta** (1154 hectares characterised by ilex groves and the Eurasian eagle owl), and **San**

Venanzo (126 hectares). There are also zones of paleontological interest: the prehistoric deposits of Monte Peglia, dating to 700,000 years ago, and the deposits of **Fabro and Ficulle**, rich in



fossils. Outside the park, on the border with the Monte Rufeno Nature Reserve in Latium, is the protected area of Villalba (25 hectares), with dense woods and precious flowers.

Finally, there is the splendid **Fonti del Clitunno**, situated on the Via Flaminia between Spoleto and Foligno, where crystalline water gushes from fissures in the stone, collecting to form a small lake and then channelling into the river. The springs were sacred to the Romans, who came here to listen to the oracles of the god Clitumnus. They were celebrated by Virgil, Propertius, and Pliny the Younger, and centuries later inspired Byron, Carducci, and Corot. A visit to the Fonti del Clitunno still stirs the same emotions today.