

## Monastic community conserved areas in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the significance of a particular type of religious community conserved area in Europe, namely monastic communities, focusing on the environmental practices that they have developed over the centuries and the challenges they face in the present.

Christian Orthodox and Catholic orders have established thousands of community conserved areas in Europe during the last 15 centuries, which have been joined by several Buddhist communities during the last decades. For many centuries, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, monastic community conserved areas have had extensive areas and influence in many European countries.

Being the oldest self-organised, participative and quasi democratic communities in this part of the world to exhibit a continuous record in land management, an integrated approach to cultural and natural heritage and a positive impact on conservation, their experience in adapting to, and overcoming, crises is highly relevant.

Thus, it is argued that the conservation community should pay more attention to these resilient community-conserved areas to identify lessons that may extend to other protected landscapes in general, as well as to other types of protected areas, like nature reserves with religious or spiritual meaning or significance, or sacred natural sites. It is also contended that the considerable efforts made by many monastic communities to become more environmentally coherent, based on the principles of their own spiritual traditions, should be encouraged and disseminated. The monastic communities of Mount Athos, Greece, and Vanatori-Neamt, Romania, the largest of Europe, are good examples of sound management, since they have been living for centuries in territories that continue to have outstanding natural heritage values.

During the past decades numerous protected areas have been established over monastic community conserved areas, with very diverse ownership and governance systems and styles. However, in many cases monastic communities are not allowed to participate in their management structures.

### Key words

Monastic communities, nature conservation, hermitism, protected landscape, natural area, sacred natural site.

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## **The origin of a resilient community lifestyle close to nature**

The origin of Christian monasticism is to be found 18 centuries ago in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, when these regions formed part of the Roman Empire. Indeed, it is in the Egyptian deserts where the oldest Christian monasteries are still thriving. From the earliest times, the ideal of the monastic life was closely connected to an aspiration to return to the terrestrial Paradise. More or less complete solitude in the wilderness was sought so that an aspirant might progress spiritually and attain holiness, developing a deep harmony with nature by approaching or recovering 'the Adamic state'.

From the beginning two main lifestyles developed, which have remained almost unchanged until the present day: community life – cenobitic – and isolated life – hermitic, which are usually seen as complementary paths. Hermits are often fed by monastic communities, and in some monasteries all monks become hermits during part of their lives. In other communities, a hermitic life is an option only for those who feel attracted to it. In any case, a hermit devoted to silent prayer and contemplation in solitude is the prototype of the human being in deep harmony with nature. In the words of one hermit, "hermits live a cosmic experience of communion with nature" (Mouizon, 2001).

The expansion of monastic settlements occurred quite rapidly in Europe, and by the end of the first millennium thousands of monasteries were thriving in the continent. The impact of these monastic communities on spirituality, art, science and culture has been widely acknowledged and documented (Krüger et al. 2007; Kinder, 2002, etc.), and their legacy has been, and still is, a research topic for numerous journals. However, the positive impact of these communities in the management of natural resources and nature conservation has received much less attention, despite the fact that the monasteries often very successfully developed what we would currently call 'sustainable practices'.

The result of centuries of prudent resource management by monasteries was the creation of a wide variety of extensive and harmonious monastic landscapes, well adapted to different ecosystems, from the taiga of Northern Russia to the Mediterranean islands, from the Alps or the Carpathian mountains to the coastal plains and wetlands, many of which have been well conserved until the present day.

In actuality, hundreds of modern protected areas have been established over ancient monastic landscapes that still retain their quality, values and biodiversity. Most of these protected areas are managed as Protected Landscapes, equivalent to the IUCN category V, which is the most common category of protected areas of Europe (Mallarach, 2008). This noteworthy fact provides an additional proof of the effectiveness of these types of community-conserved areas.

Almost 50 monasteries (usually including part of the lands they historically managed) have been inscribed in the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites to this day in Europe, additional evidence of the global significance of these monastic settlements. Even though most of these sites are classified as 'Cultural', some are Mixed – 'Natural and Cultural' – such as Mount Athos, Greece, or Studenica, Serbia; and many of these sites retain significant natural heritage value at either global or national levels.

Indeed, sustainability went hand in hand with monasticism from an early time. Among the Benedictines, for example, whose order was established by Saint Benedict in the sixth

century, agricultural and forestry management practices were sophisticated and diverse. St Benedict set us an early example of sustainability; the Benedictine communities had to pass on their lands in as fertile a state, if not more so, than when they found them. The sustainable forest practices of the Camaldolensians (a branch of the Benedictines), in the extensive forestlands of the Apennines, were the foundation of the Italian legislation on forestry (Fr. P. Hughes, per. com), and the area around the monastery of Camaldoli, including its Sacro Eremo – hermitage – has been included in the National Park of the Casentine Forests. Another branch of the Benedictines, the Cistercians, on the other hand, established their settlements in lowlands, usually next to rivers and water bodies, developing sophisticated systems for harnessing the renewable energy of water and developing efficient husbandry practices (Leroux-Dhuys, 1999).

Because of the alms and donations they received, coupled with careful and efficient management, many monasteries ended up managing large tracts of land and water reserves, sometimes hundreds of square kilometers in size. Until the Industrial Revolution, it is estimated that in many European countries monastic communities were responsible for between 10-25% of the productive area. Moreover, medieval monastic gardens were the origin of botanical gardens and pharmaceutical gardens in post-medieval European and Middle Eastern towns (MacDougall, 1986).

Hermitages, on the other hand, were traditionally located in wild or rugged country, providing solitude and natural shelters like caves. The deep peace of the hermitic domains results in the fact that they often now can be considered a kind of nature reserve, i.e. IUCN protected area categories I or III. The inclusion of some of these hermitages on the periphery of the monastic protected landscapes resulted in a very balanced ecological pattern, which can be still found in many regions. Monastic settlements containing scattered small monasteries of different sizes, with assorted hermitages and monks' cells, in some cases created or maintained astonishing working landscapes, like those of Cappadocia in Turkey and the Voidomatis Gorge in Northeastern Greece, and in other cases lead to the construction of imposing buildings in the midst of almost pristine natural areas, like the Grand Chartreuse, France.

The historical peak of monastic expansion varied depending on the region. While in Ireland a summit was reached in the fifth and sixth centuries, the heights of monasticism in many Western and Central European countries was not reached until the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries; and Russia enjoyed its heyday during the 1500-1600s. However the history of monasticism is not, of course, one of steady evolution. Aside from occasional disruptions due to wars or invasions, the worse setbacks suffered by monastic communities of Europe came after the French revolution, leading into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For political or economic reasons, the governments of many European countries – liberal or communist – banned religious organisations or enforced severe prohibitions on their activities, usually confiscating monastic properties. As a result, many monasteries were abandoned, sacked or destroyed and the monks persecuted and dispersed. These measures had severe repercussions on nature conservation. Some monastic forests carefully managed for centuries were razed to the ground in few decades (Urteaga, 1989), numerous traditional varieties of vegetables were lost, and much 'traditional ecological knowledge' and many related best practices, which had been prudently developed over centuries, were rapidly abandoned and forgotten. Later, when the political situation improved, and a certain tolerance for religion returned, a monastic resurgence occurred in almost all European countries, which led to the partial recovery in most places of what had been lost.

Nowadays, it is estimated that there are more than 5000 monastic communities in Europe , and over 80,000 monks and nuns, clear proof of the amazing resilience of this way of life<sup>2</sup>. Currently, most of the former European communist countries are experiencing a recovery of monasticism, as can be seen in Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, etc. The largest monastic population in Europe is the cluster of monasteries found within the Natural Park of Vanatori-Neamt, Romania, which includes over 2000 monks and nuns (Catanoiu, 2007), organised in self-sufficient communities, either in monasteries or small monastic villages.

Despite the general trend of secularisation, and the decline that a number of monastic communities of parts of Europe are experiencing, new efforts are underway to recover and protect sacred natural sites. Some examples are briefly discussed below.

- Within certain protected areas of Romania new monastic settlements are being established, e.g. Skitul Sihla, Agapia Veche, etc. At the same time, new monastic villages are developing around the old monasteries, unable to cope with the large numbers of new aspirants.
- The recovery and renewal of hermitism in the mountains of Italy, France and Spain. In Italy alone it is estimated that over 300 hermits are permanently living in the wilderness, and over 2000 temporary hermits take retreats in natural areas, staying from a few months to a a number of years (Denwahl, 2004).
- The recent creation of new monastic orders in the Latin Church, with ascetic lifestyles within or very close to nature, e.g. the Little Sisters / Brothers of the Lamb in France.
- The recovery of ancient pilgrimage ways, connecting old and new monastic lands, e.g. a number of branches of the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*) in northern Spain, and many more in the Carpathians, Romania and Hungary.

Despite the resurgence of interest in monasticism and the value of community spiritual life in nature, one must also acknowledge the fact that during the twentieth century a number of existing monastic communities adopted lifestyles not fully coherent with spiritual principles regarding nature and the environment. The reasons for this are diverse, and include the influence of the secular surrounding society and a lack of discernment concerning the environmental and social impact of new technologies and practices. Nowadays, most monastic communities are aware of these contradictions and many are working to improve their coherency, following the guidelines of their spiritual leaders.

The size of the monastic communities may vary widely, from a few members to a few hundred individuals, either male or female, but usually consist of a few dozens of single men or women. The principle of self-sufficiency is widespread, especially among Orthodox communities.

In terms of leadership and vision, the highest spiritual authorities also have demonstrated a commitment to nature conservation. H.A.H. Bartholomew I is widely known as the 'Green Patriarch', having developed numerous and very significant initiatives at different levels (Bartholomew I, 2003), including some for improving the awareness of monastic communities of environmental issues (Nantsou, 2009), while the last two Catholic Popes

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<sup>2</sup> This figure does not include the Catholic friar orders, which usually are located in urban areas, although some of them, like the Franciscans, began with a lifestyle very close to nature.

have coined the concept of 'ecological conversion', insisting in their messages on the need for a radical change of lifestyle to reduce consumption and increase respect for Creation (Benedictus XVI, 2010).

### **Values and principles**

Christian monastic communities have been in place for more than ten centuries in most of Europe. Therefore, they probably are the oldest democratic and self-organised communities of this part of the world to have a continuous positive impact on nature conservation. This significant, but often overlooked, historical fact can be explained, in part, because monastic communities are based on principles which are deeply coherent with environmental sustainability, such as:

- Stability, discipline, asceticism, sobriety, 'poverty'.
- Reducing material needs; increasing time for prayer, contemplation and meditation.
- Orientation not to material profit, but to spiritual benefit.
- Communal rather than private property; custodians or stewards, never owners.
- Cherished values which include: the sacred, silence, solitude, harmony, beauty.
- Aiming for perfection, or excellence, in the spiritual and material domains.
- Natural resources as part of Creation and thus a gift to be safeguarded and bestowed on future generations.

The values that monastic communities embrace are, therefore, very removed from the mainstream values of Western materialistic societies, and indeed in this sense the monks may be said to share common ground with most traditional local communities or indigenous peoples of the world.

Except for a few orders that have chosen to remain completely silent, like the Carthusians, most monastic communities use a variety of tools and strategies to communicate their values to society, including the way they understand the Creation and their virtuous relationship to all living beings. They may choose to use traditional channels, new technologies, or both, depending on orders, context and circumstances. Traditional religious tools, like retreats, seminars, counseling, books, and sacred art, are often combined with modern tools, like symposia, web pages (see a short selection below), DVDs, CDs, guided tours, interpretation centers, etc. Although few monasteries have explicit communication goals related to nature conservation, it is indisputable that all the values they communicate—including their own example – have a positive impact on their audiences, through increasing respect for nature and encouraging others to adopt simpler, more environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

### **Protected areas and monastic communities: diversity of contexts**

Most of the oldest and largest remaining monastic lands of Europe are found inside protected areas of international value (like the Natura 2000 network, established by the European Union based on bioregional criteria), for instance the archabbey of Saint Otilia, Germany. Indeed, many monastic lands are effectively managed as protected areas, even without legal designations, as clear examples of community-conserved areas. Some protected areas have been promoted or created by monastic authorities, such as the Natural Park of Rila, Bulgaria, or the Natural Site of National Significance of Poblet, Spain.

Land ownership is partially being devolved to specific monastic communities in some of the former communist countries, which may include portions of already existing protected areas, such as in the Natural Park of Vanatori-Neamt, Romania, or in the Natutal Park of Rila, Bulgaria.

Some monastic communities have been recovering sacred sites, including sacred natural sites, e.g. the Benedictines who manage the landscape complex of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, in Poland, a World Heritage Site. Other monastic communities are at the service of pilgrimages, like the Way of Saint James (the first pilgrimage way in the world to become a World Heritage Site), which stretches for more than one thousand kilometers through Spain and France, fostering the development of numerous protected areas along the way, specially in Northern Spain (Mallarach, 2005).

On the other hand, protected areas including monastic communities have very diverse ownership and governance systems and styles, involving management boards, planning and management regulations, public use requirements, etc. In most cases monastic communities are not allowed to participate in the boards of governance. The case of the Nature Park of Montserrat, Spain, where the Abbot of the main monastery is the Vice-President of the Board, is quite exceptional, but could be replicated in other protected areas with monastic communities. Of all the European Christian monasteries that have been declared Cultural and/or Natural-Cultural World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, only 40% of them are managed by monastic communities, the rest being managed by governmental institutions responsible for cultural heritage. Such institutions usually consider monastic complexes as museums or cultural facilities, without living religious heritage. Even in the case of the autonomous monastic community of Mt Athos, jurisdictional conflicts with the Greek State are common.

Finally, another trend that needs to be addressed when discussing the European context is the recent creation of some Buddhist monasteries (mostly related to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism) to which an increasing number of Europeans feel attracted. Most of these new monasteries are very committed towards nature conservation and environmental respect.

### **Positive trends**

From the environmental point of view, a number of significant positive trends can be identified among the monastic communities in Europe during the past years. A selection of these trends, each with a few examples, is briefly discussed below.

- Development of organic farming in numerous monasteries, such as the Rieunette and Solan monasteries, France (Delahaye, 2010); Hosios Lukas and Chrysopigi monasteries, Greece; Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Italy; and many monasteries of Romania, guided by Pierre Rabhi, the French leader and activist on agro-ecology (Rabhi, 1996). Other monasteries like those of Frauenthal and Hauterive Switzerland, or Cystersów, Poland, have been developing best practices in animal husbandry.
- Development of sustainable practices on forestry, for instance inverting coppice oak wood to high forest, combining sustained yield with biodiversity and beauty concerns, such as in Simonopetra Monastery, Mount Athos (Kakouros, 2010), or Stift Heiligenkreuz, Austria.
- Sensitising visitors vis-à-vis nature and the environment, e.g. including spiritual

principles and connecting spirituality and nature in all educational and retreat activities, for instance in the Buddhist monasteries of Plum Village, France, or the Holy Island of Arran, United Kingdom, and the monasteries of Camaldoli, Italy, and the Virgin Mary of Rodia, Greece; plus a number of inter-religious initiatives, like the Ecosite of Avalon developed by the Institute Karma Ling in France.

- Reducing fossil fuel use as much as possible, sometimes with the explicit goal to reach zero consumption and emissions, e.g. Münsterschwarzach or Marienstatt in Germany; establishing or maintaining efficient water management or including strict environmental criteria in all new monastic buildings, e.g. the monasteries of Siloe, Italy, and Himmerod, Germany, or Stanbrook Abbey, England.
- Building, restoring or adapting hermitages or places for retreats within protected areas, providing an additional layer of protection, e.g. the holy Carmelitan "deserts" of les Palmes or Las Batuecas, Spain, or the cluster of Les Ermites de Marie, France, within Nature 2000 areas.
- Restoring ancient medicinal gardens and old herbal pharmaceutical remedies and processes, e.g. Vatopedi, Mount Athos; or Stična and Prečastiti Gospod Opat Janez Nowak, Slovenia.
- Including spiritual principles in the planning and management of protected areas, e.g. Poblet, Spain, and Rila, Bulgaria.
- At the same time, an interest in the theology of nature has blossomed, as has also the dialogue between science, specially frontier disciplines, and theology, in which the contribution of the 'Green Patriarch' and his symposia has been substantial. These trends are not confined to Europe or the Middle East, but are more or less global. For instance, it is noteworthy that the theme of the third Inter-religious Dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monastic orders held in the monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, USA, in 2008, was "'Monasticism and the Environment" (Mitchell & Skudlarek, 2010).

### **The monastic self-governed territory of Mount Athos, Greece.**

The only self-governed monastic territory of Europe is the rugged peninsula of Mount Athos, located in northeastern Greece, approximately 50 km long and 10 km wide. The almost perfectly conical Mount Athos rises to a height of 2033 from the sea, and it is located on the tip of the peninsula. The isthmus with the mainland being closed, it is only accessible by sea, maintaining a sense of isolation and a strict control over access.

The spiritual, cultural and natural heritage of Mt Athos has been initiated at the end of the first millennium AD, through ten centuries of uninterrupted monastic life, and is still vibrant in the beginning of the third millennium. The twenty Christian Orthodox holy monasteries that share the Athonite peninsula are quite diverse. Established during the Byzantine times, and inspired by the monastic traditions of Eastern Christianity, they have developed through the ages in parallel paths and even have different ethnic backgrounds with Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Cypriot monastic communities (Tachiaios, 2006). Yet all the monks on Mt Athos are recognised as citizens of Greece residing in a self-governed part of the country (Kadas, 2002). The monastic population reached its peak in the eighteenth century with

almost 50,000 monks, and its lowest ebb in the 1970s. Since that time, however, the number of monks has been increasing steadily, and Mt Athos currently has about 2000 monks, with all its 20 autonomous monasteries fully restored (Speake, 2002).

The heritage of Mt Athos is multiple and integrated; and it is incorporated in a living millennial tradition (Smyrnakis, 1903). In parallel, this tradition is maintained while the monastic communities of Athos adapt contemporary techniques to their needs. Thus, state of the art methods are being used in restoring and protecting priceless icons and ancient manuscripts, while monks use mobile telephony and the internet to communicate.

The spiritual heritage of the area originates from the Byzantine Orthodox tradition with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople still maintaining the spiritual leadership of Athos. Since its establishment, the area has been dedicated to the Virgin Mary and has been known as Her 'little garden'.

The cultural heritage consists of a unique architecture, which melds many different styles from various epochs and countries, perfectly in harmony with each other and very well integrated in the rich natural environment of the Athonite Peninsula. It is complemented by invaluable collections of artefacts, frescoes and icons, manuscripts and old editions, objects of religious art and other precious gifts from devout leaders and pilgrims. Most of these are now properly maintained, although fires and insensitive restorations have occasionally caused serious damage (Papayannis, 2007).

The natural heritage is also unique due to a rapid succession of diverse climatic conditions and ecosystems from Mediterranean along the coasts to Alpine at the tip of Mt Athos (Ganiatsas, 2003). The variety of climate types provides habitat for a large number of plant and animal species, including quite a few endemic to the region (Kakouros, 2006). The absence of grazing in the entire peninsula has allowed the existence of a dense forest, of deciduous and coniferous and maquis vegetation (Dafis et al., 1996). Some of the best littoral landscapes of the Mediterranean are conserved in Athos.

That is why Mt Athos has been recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage property for both nature and culture in 1988. It has also been included in its entire area in the Natura2000 European Union network of protected areas. Both of these designations have been decided by the Greek State without the participation and the agreement of the monastic communities.

Mt Athos is governed by the Holy Community, which consists of representatives of the 20 monasteries in the area. Each monastery has jurisdiction for the management of their property; certain general matters, however, are decided at the level of the Holy Community (such as opening or roads, or entry of automobiles). For major matters, the Holy Community meets with the participation also of the 20 Abbots (Elissaïos, 2007). The State is represented by a Governor – appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – who has responsibility for security matters and the implementation of Greek laws.

Currently an ambitious Integrated Management Study for the entire Athonite peninsula is underway. The Study will include a detailed action plan of necessary measures, regulations and interventions, providing for each brief description, responsible driver, time schedule and indicative cost. The integrated and systemic Management Study of the Athos spiritual, cultural and natural heritage is a critical step in the long history of the area. The difficulty in preparing reasonable and balanced proposals and obtaining agreement on them should not



be underestimated. The major issue that needs to be considered here is the financing of all these actions, especially in view of the dire state of the national economy. This should be considered carefully by the Holy Community, which has the overall responsibility for management implementation, and discussions on funding options should be held with the state authorities and the European Union. On the other hand, if all goes well through the wise guidance of the Holy Community, the Study can play a significant role in the maintenance and strengthening of the traditions of this unique sacred landscape.

## **Conclusions**

An analysis of the management of natural resources by monastic communities in diverse ecosystems of Europe, throughout history, is of great interest from a nature conservation point of view. Such an analysis provides one of the best documented examples, in this part of the world, of effectively managed community-conserved areas that have created, and maintained for centuries, a diversity of beautiful, harmonious, productive and bio-diverse landscapes, in very different ecosystems, from the Arctic to the Mediterranean.

In particular, those concerned with IUCN Category V – Protected Landscapes – could benefit greatly from the experience of monastic communities over the ages in the management of forests, pastures, and croplands, not to mention the use of renewal energy, in particular, hydro-power.

Furthermore, the renewed interest in environmental coherence of many Christian – and also Buddhist – monasteries in Europe is a promising trend. Their message, grounded in solid spiritual principles, and extensive traditional practices that cover many centuries, provides a living example of resilient sustainable life for many other communities to follow.

For all these reasons, the conservation community ought to pay more attention to this enduring class of community conserved areas, to identify the lessons that may be learned for other protected landscapes in general, as well as for other types of protected areas, especially those with religious or spiritual meaning or significance, such as sacred natural sites or sacred landscapes. In particular, the practices that many monastic communities have developed to be as coherent as possible from an environmental point of view, within technologically developed countries that are ostensibly following opposite trends, should be encouraged and widely disseminated.

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### **Selected web pages**

Ecosite Avalon: <http://www.rimay.net/spip.php?page=sommaireECO>

Holy Island of Arran: <http://www.holyisland.org/>

Hermitism: <http://www.hermitary.com/>

Monastery of Camaldoli: <http://www.camaldoli.it/>

Muensterschwarzach: <http://www.abtei-muensterschwarzach.de/ams/kloster/konvent/index.html>

Monastery of Cantauque: <http://www.monastere-cantauque.com/english/index.html>

Abbey of Montserrat: [www.abadiamontserrat.net](http://www.abadiamontserrat.net)

Monastery of Poblet: [www.poblet.cat/](http://www.poblet.cat/)

Monastery of Solan: [www.monasteredesolan.com](http://www.monasteredesolan.com)

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