

The Gennargentu Mountains: Between National Park and Private Conservation Area

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Abstract

Various forms of local opposition have marked the history of the establishment of the Golfo di Orosei and Gennargentu National Park (GOGNP), resulting in a governance vacuum which makes it, de facto, a *paper park*. Despite this, both public and private bodies have multiplied initiatives aimed at enhancing local heritage and promoting tourism within the GOGNP territory. The Donnortei wildlife oasis provides a compelling case study, showcasing economic diversification within conservation practices on private land. Here, the intersection of traditional and innovative animal husbandry practices with experiential tourism offerings highlights the region's evolving landscape of sustainable development strategies in environmentally sensitive areas.

Profile

Protected area

Golfo di Orosei and
Gennargentu National
Park, Italy

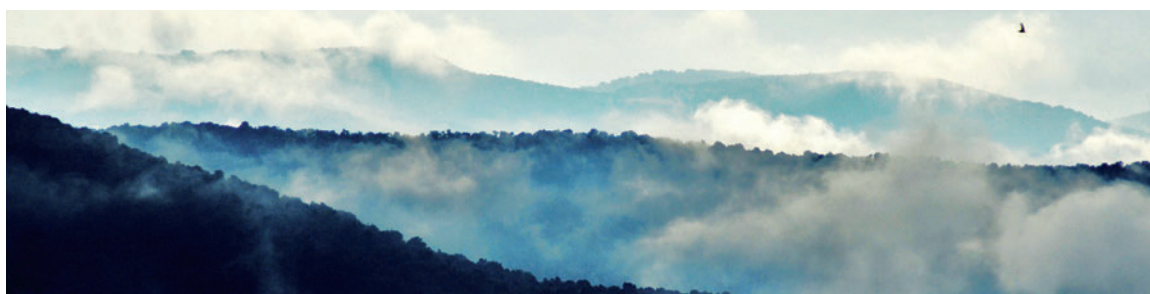


Figure 1 — Mountainous landscape in the Monti del Gennargentu SCI area. © Annamaria Pirellas

Introduction

The Gennargentu region, situated in central-eastern Sardinia (Italy), is recognized for its significant environmental value. Within this area, a Site of Community Importance (SCI), designated *Monti del Gennargentu* under Directive 92/43/EEC (SCI ITB001103), and a National Park, the *Golfo di Orosei and Gennargentu* (GOGNP) coexist. Although formally established in the 1990s, the GOGNP is presently non-operational because of the failure to set up protection bodies.

The unique territorial and environmental characteristics of the area led to a debate over its designation as an environmental protection area in the years following the Second World War. However, since the 1960s, the creation of the GOGNP has encountered opposition from a number of local communities because of the high level of human activity in the area, and they have impeded its realization. As a result, GOGNP authorities have not been appointed and the area is a prominent example of a *paper park* – that is, an *unimplemented protected area* or *under-managed protected area* (Dudley & Stolton 1999). However, the territory of Gennargentu continues to provide some environmental protection due to the presence of the Monti del Gennargentu SCI, which partially overlaps the territory of the GOGNP.

Furthermore, over the past two decades, numerous initiatives have emerged within the Gennargentu region focusing on enhancing both tangible and intangible heritage – that is, on the one hand, natural elements and physical artefacts and, on the other, aspects of local culture such as traditions and festivals. These initiatives help to promote and facilitate access to territorial and environmental assets, and foster the development of tourism. The initiatives provide potential solutions to address the challenges of depopulation and declining birth rates throughout the area.

This article seeks to outline the physical and demographic features of the GOGNP area and to trace the historical conflicts that have shaped its functioning. For an overall framing of the possible development of the area, we conduct an exploratory analysis of the cultural heritage and of the trajectory of tourism developments in the region. Finally, using this framework, we present a case study centred on the Donnortei wildlife oasis within the SCI area bordering the GOGNP. This case study highlights local initiatives that foster sustainable tourism and environmental conservation independently of GOGNP support.



Figure 2 — Abundant snowfalls typically occur in the winter months. © Annamaria Pirellas



Figure 3 — A male mouflon (*Ovis musimon*) in the woods. © Annamaria Pirellas

Geographical features

The GOGNP encompasses an area distinguished by prominent vertical relief. Including both coastal and mountain municipalities along the Gennargentu mountain chain, the GOGNP boasts the island's highest peaks, among them Punta La Marmora (1,834 m a.s.l.), Bruncu Spina (1,829 metres), and Su Sciuciu (1,823 a.s.l.). Situated within the Mediterranean bioregion, in central-eastern Sardinia, the second-largest island in the Mediterranean (24,090 km²), the GOGNP covers 73,935 hectares across the Provinces of Nuoro and South Sardinia. (Please insert figure 1).

Comprising territories historically belonging to Barbagia de Ollolài and Mandrolisài in the north and northwest, Sarcidàno and Barbagia de Belvì in the south, and Ogliastra in the east, the GOGNP hosts a population of around 41,650, although the region shows significant depopulation trends (Bachis et al. 2020).

The mountainous area features metamorphic rocks dating to the Carboniferous period, overlying Devonian-Silurian schists and Ordovician limestones (Barchetta et al. 2013). Karst systems are present, as in the Supramonte de Urzulèi area (Ginesu 1993). Where precipitation is concerned, the Gennargentu massif and Limbara in the island's northern sector receive more rainfall than any other areas in Sardinia (Motroni 2016), and abundant snowfall, particularly during winter months, with annual totals surpassing 1,200 mm (Figure 2).

With their sources in the eastern slopes of the Gennargentu are several mountain torrents, and the island's second-longest river, the Flumendosa (122 km). While Mediterranean scrub dominates the coastal regions of the GOGNP, higher elevations harbour a rich array of plant and animal species, including the European pine marten (*Martes martes*), Least weasel (*Mustela nivalis*), Sardinian wildcat (*Felis lybica sarda*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa meridionalis*), and mouflon (*Ovis musimon*) (Figure 3), as well as endemic plant species, including *Cynoglossum barbaricinum*, *Genista pichisermolliana* Vals., and *Orobancha denudata* Moris, to name but a few (Barchetta et al.

2013, 213–15). Barchetta et al. (2013, 212) provide extensive data on the flora, documenting “948 taxa, comprising 686 species, 249 subspecies, 10 varieties, and 3 hybrids, spanning 97 families and 427 genera”. Additionally, Carta et al. (2014) offer detailed insights into shrub and forest vegetation composition and distribution across the region, while the Nuragic villages, such as Ruinas (in the municipality of Arzana, altitude 1,197 m a.s.l.), attest to a longstanding human presence in the area.

The Golfo di Orosei and Gennargentu National Park and opposition to it

The history of the GOGNP, which was formally established in 1998, is closely entwined with collective actions that have continued to hinder its practical functionality. The GOGNP case symbolizes inadequate communication and collaboration mechanisms with pertinent local authorities and resident communities. These communities have persistently opposed the establishment of the protected area, fearing potential disruption to traditional civic and agro-pastoral activities (Heatherington 2011; Montaldo 2022).

Discussions about creating a park in the Gennargentu commenced as early as the 1920s, but it was not until the years immediately following World War II that establishing the GOGNP entered the political discourse. The process became entangled in contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow 2015), intersecting with social and political history, mainly due to the implementation of various public policies by the Autonomous Region of Sardinia. Indeed, following World War II, the Region embarked on a series of extraordinary measures aimed at stimulating economic development. These initiatives, encapsulated within the *Plan for the Rebirth of Sardinia* (Regional law No. 588/1962), encompassed a range of interventions that catalysed the modernization process of the island. The primary objective of this plan was to establish industrial plants associated with a basic chemical industry, alongside various initiatives aimed at fostering tourism and developing the so-called *inner areas* of the island. Among these initiatives was the creation of the GOGNP (Scanu & Madau



Figure 4 — A group of red deer (*Cervus elaphus corsicanus*). © Annamaria Pirellas



Figure 5 — Donnortei Park offers summer camps and educational activities. © Annamaria Pirellas

2001, 243). In pursuit of this objective, a company appointed by the Region, Generalpiani, presented a project in 1966 (Cassola & Lovari 1976, 249).

However, having been developed without involving the resident population, the project encountered significant resistance from some local communities. Protests were emblematic of a broader pattern of dissent within inland municipalities that were unaffected by industrialization and characterized by substantial depopulation (Pigliaru 1971). The opposition gained momentum in 1969 following the Region's approval of a National Bill concerning the establishment of the GOGNP. The project proposed by Generalpiani entailed relocating part of the population and dividing the territory into zones, comprising a *zona di riserva integrale* (integral reserve zone, an area of strict protection), a *zona di riserva guidata* (a managed reserve zone) and a *zona controllata di sviluppo turistico* (controlled tourism development zone). However, the GOGNP itself remained theoretical due to vigorous protests, which were particularly prominent in the municipalities of Orgòsolo and Baunei. These communities viewed the entire endeavour as a catalyst for further depopulation and economic stagnation (Mazzette 1984; Ruju 1998; Heatherington 2011). Feeding these protests was the perception of the GOGNP as being imposed on local communities and municipalities by the Region. This perception subsequently served as a frame (Snow & Benford 1992) for the resurgence of new protests in the late 1980s. During this period, the Sardinian Region formally established the GOGNP with Regional Law No. 31 of 1989; the Italian Parliament followed with Law No. 394 of 1991 (Diana et al. 1998).

In the early 1990s, the issue of the designation of a national park generated widespread discussion and debate among the public. Certain environmental organizations, such as WWF, also initiated direct campaigns to underscore the benefits of a park for the region. Despite some surveys indicating majority support among Sardinians for the designation of a national park, a political obstacle persisted in the form of opposition from several municipalities in the area, including Orgòsolo, Baunei, Urzulei, Àrzana, Talana

and Villagrande Strisàili (Ruju 1998). This opposition endured until the Minister of the Environment designated the *Coordinamento del parco* (Park Coordination Committee) within the agreement of 29 December 1995 between the Ministry of Environment and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia. Subsequently, a 1998 government decree defined the GOGNP's boundaries, accommodating additional municipalities that sought inclusion. In fact, some municipalities that had initially been excluded from the GOGNP's perimeter saw the development opportunities it could represent. Conversely, in some municipalities opposition continued to prevail, especially concerning constraints on land use. It is notable that during this period dissent emanated primarily from the more educated segments of local communities, manifesting as criticism of top-down imposition and a general distrust of institutional actions (Diana et al. 1998).

The latest act in the story of the GOGNP unfolded in the early 21st century. Despite the Region's attempts to mediate with the Ministry of the Environment for appointments to the Coordination Committee, prompted by demonstrations, protests and pressure from local communities and interest groups (notably hunters and fishermen), no agreement with the government was reached on the establishment of governing bodies. Consequently, Law No. 266 of 23 December 2005 (a financial law) stipulated the need for a new State–Region agreement regarding the allocation of resources, postponing indefinitely the operationalization of the GOGNP.

Heritage and tourism

The municipalities of the Gennargentu territory are home to a rich tangible and intangible heritage. In the last two decades and despite the failure to realize the GOGNP, private and public actors have begun to exploit this natural and cultural heritage to develop the territory. Cultural traditions (such as local carnivals or local feast days), ethnographic and archaeological museums, archaeological areas and natural landmarks are used to promote the territory. There are also nu-

Table 1 — Local assets in Gennargentu municipalities. Source: Based on ISTAT data and *sardegnanatura.com*

Assets	Absolute value
Museums and archeological areas	18
Natural monuments	6
Public libraries	28
Farmhouses	60
IGT/DOP producers	733

merous protected food products, such as Barbagia wine (IGT; Indication of Geographical Typicality), Mandrolisai wine (DOC; Controlled Designation of Origin), or the cheese known as Fiore Sardo (DOP; Protected Designation of Origin) (Table 1).

If we look at the number of guest beds per 100 residents and their occupancy rate, it can be seen that tourism offer and demand have evolved significantly since 2003 (Table 2). The data show the consolidation over time of a network of non-hotel-based services aimed at tourism (Figure 6), including the growth of B&Bs and room rentals, and of agritourism businesses that combine accommodation and the offer of local products. Finally, it is worth mentioning the presence of a network of paths in the GOGNP which allow for *slow* forms of tourism and hiking (see Podda et al. 2020).

The analysis of the area's heritage indicates not only resources for development but also the initiatives of local community actors in revitalizing the area. In particular, several initiatives focusing on cultural heritage and tourism involve private actors as promoters. However, it is crucial to emphasize the role of public policies (both regional and European) in stimulating and supporting such initiatives, which often face challenges to become established within territories.

Case study: Donnordei wildlife oasis

Despite the GOGNP existing only on paper, parts of the area enjoy protected status, notably the Site of Community Importance (SCI) or Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Special Protection Area (SPA) of the Gennargentu Mountains, which form part of the Natura 2000 Network. Within this protective framework lies the Donnordei estate. This is a family-operated farm and includes a nature *oasis* which was conceived and established by the Serusi family in the 1990s on their land in the municipality of Fonni, stretching from Mount Spada to the Aratu Valley. The elevation of the oasis ranges from approximately 700 to 1,200 m a.s.l. Diversification is the estate's primary economic strategy, structured around two main areas of activity: livestock farming (both traditional and wild – i.e. farming of wild species), and hospitality services. Despite considerable opposition to the GOGNP from some local communities, which halted the establishment of the National Park, data indicates that public and private entities are using the region's

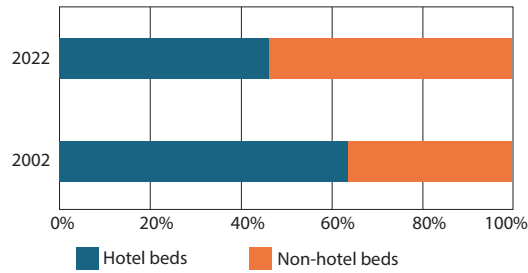


Figure 6 – Hospitality evolution in Gennargentu municipalities 2002–2022. Source: Based on ISTAT data

territorial capital to rejuvenate the area for tourism and environmental purposes. The case we present, that of the Donnordei wildlife oasis, exemplifies this trend, as its narrative intertwines with that of the GOGNP. Particularly in its inception, the wildlife oasis faced opposition and stigma similar to those faced by the GOGNP.

During the early 1990s, the Serusi family created the oasis amidst heightened opposition to the GOGNP. The establishment of another (albeit privately owned) area of protection – a *nature oasis* within a protected area – was perceived as a threat by segments of the local population who were against the GOGNP.

According to an interview conducted in Donnordei in February 2024, this land was unsuitable for grazing but was home to the mouflon, a species of ungulate typical of the Sardinian mountains. Serusi's concept was to integrate the traditional use of the land for sheep farming with the rugged mountain terrain to protect and increase the wild mouflon population, which is not amenable to domestication. Serusi received support from his wife Annamaria Pirellas, who also hailed from Fonni. Annamaria had lived in Argentina, where she was acquainted with deer and guanacos on farms, and agreed to replicate, in a local context, the traditional Argentinian form of *wild* husbandry. Consequently, the process of fencing off the land began.

However, the project encountered significant opposition from Serusi's own family (particularly his father) and the local community, and a clash emerged between an ethos of *traditional* livestock farming and a more *modern* environmentally conscious vision, as advocated by the Serusi couple, which also served economic ends. One segment of the local population opposed the project as part of wider protests against the GOGNP. Other opposition was voiced by hunters, mainly due to certain areas of land no longer being accessible because of fencing. The development of the oasis has been marked by intimidation and attacks on the family and the farm, including killing animals and arson. However, over the years, especially since the 2010s, opposition to the project has gradually diminished thanks to the regional and national recognition of what Donnordei wildlife oasis is beginning to achieve as a leading example of nature tourism activities.

Table 2 — Touristic impact indicators in Gennargentu municipalities. Source: Based on ISTAT data.

Municipality	Bed capacity index	Non-hotel bed index	Touristic pressure
Aritzo	20.4	3.8	0.89
Arzana	3.2	-	0.06
Atzara	1.2	1.2	0.00
Baunei	15.8	6.5	5.24
Belvi	5.7	1.4	0.00
Desulo	2.9	2.0	0.06
Fonni	6.3	3.6	0.20
Gairo	31.5	31.5	2.94
Gavoi	14.2	2.3	0.12
Lodine	17.0	17.0	0.00
Meana Sardo	18.9	8.5	0.15
Oliena	0.6	0.6	7.04
Ollolai	0.8	0.8	0.01
Olzai	21.7	14.5	0.00
Orgosolo	0.5	0.5	1.71
Ovodda	5.9	4.3	0.01
Seui	2.0	0.7	0.02
Seulo	-	-	0.28
Sorgono	70.0	57.4	0.17
Talana	7.0	3.1	0.05
Tiana	11.4	3.7	0.00
Tonara	0.4	0.4	0.72
Urzulei	0.5	0.5	0.53
Villagrande Strisaili	5.3	2.5	0.87
Municipalities Gennargentu area	11.0	7.0	0.9
Sardinia	14.1	7.0	2.84

Animal Breeding and Tourism

Tourism and animal husbandry constitute the primary activities within the oasis, which has chosen to diversify its farming approach (authors' interview with Daniele and Annamaria, 22 February 2024; unpublished). Alongside traditional livestock farming, notably sheep and horses, the farm also raises native wild species for the production and sale of food products, regulated in Sardinia by the Regional Department for the Defence of the Environment. In the present scenario, alongside the existing mouflon population, the farm also raises both fallow deer (*Dama dama*) and the Corsican red deer (*Cervus elaphus corsicanus*) (Figure 4). The red deer originate from the WWF reserve of Monte Arcosu in Sulcis, southwestern Sardinia, while the fallow deer were reintroduced from Liguria in 1999 in the context of a collaborative project with the Region of Sardinia to restore species that were extinct in their native habitats.

Dairy products and meat from traditional livestock farming are not commercially marketed; instead, they are consumed on-site by guests staying locally. The mouflon, red deer and fallow deer undergo controlled slaughter for human consumption. Crop production, constrained by the geographical context, focuses primarily on fodder for livestock and potatoes.

Diversification is seen also in the tourism offer more broadly, particularly experiential tourism. Tourists comprise mostly families and small groups, both local and foreign. Visitors from the Netherlands are

particularly noticeable, attributable to a partnership established with an agency catering specifically to that market segment. Additionally, there are significant numbers of French, Spanish and German visitors. The interview referred to above also revealed the notable fact that most Italian tourists originate from Sardinia, particularly from the province of Cagliari. These local tourists represent a significant influx, estimated by the interviewees to be approximately 20,000 per year. This level of visitation also extends to the town of Fonni and the surrounding territory.

Diversification is also evident in the activities provided by the oasis, which align with environmentally oriented tourism. For instance, Donnortei wildlife oasis has been designated an Educational Farm which welcomes schools (Figure 5) and offers educational activities about the region and the environment (such as recounting the history of the area's deforestation since the 19th century). Additionally, the farm organizes summer camps featuring excursions in the oasis and the Gennargentu massif, cookery workshops and horseriding lessons. Excursions take various forms (on horseback, on foot, by quad, or off-road), with the option of helicopter tours, even though these (especially the quad and helicopter tours) would not normally be deemed to be in line with environmental tourism.

Notable strengths of Donnortei wildlife oasis are its dedication to economic activities (tourism and animal husbandry) and fostering collaboration with scientific research, including the farm's participation in

a LIFE 2014–2020 project. This resulted in the farm being recognized as one of Italy's 38 exemplary farms within protected areas (Calvario et al. 2018).

Conclusion

The establishment of the GOGNP, which encompasses Sardinia's highest peaks and the Gennargentu Massif, has had a complex history marked by vigorous opposition from segments of the local population. This resistance stems from the perceived top-down imposition by the state and reluctance to adhere to restrictions on customary resource usage. Currently, *“the Park is [...] ‘temporarily coordinated’ by the province of Nuoro; therefore, its establishment ‘on paper’ remains, but in practice, the conditions necessary for it to be realized are all lacking”* (Redaelli 2015, 35). Consequently, *“the prospects for its possible implementation are fragile now. The Gennargentu and Gulf of Orosei National Park risks remaining a ghost park for a long time”* (ibid.). Nonetheless, in recent years, numerous public and private initiatives have emerged within the GOGNP's territory that target the enhancement of local tangible, intangible and environmental heritage, with a particular focus on tourism development.

The Donnortei wildlife oasis represents an innovative approach to conservation and economic development in the region, effectively balancing private land use with environmental conservation goals. The oasis is exemplary because it successfully combines multiple economic activities while conserving and enhancing the mountain environment, thus providing a model of sustainable development in the region. In the initial phase, it faced criticism and even physical attacks, mainly due to its association with the GOGNP, which was vehemently opposed by some in the surrounding municipalities. However, in a subsequent phase, the normalization of relations led to widespread acceptance. It is now a reference point for this mountainous region regarding conservation and tourist hospitality. Although Donnortei wildlife oasis is a family-run business, it employs about a dozen local people (depending on the season), and the fact that it attracts numerous tourists and visitors also has positive effects on Fonni and other neighbouring municipalities. It effectively illustrates the evolving landscape of conservation practices (Zupančič-Vičar 2006) and the array of economic activities possible within a private protected area, helping demonstrate the political, economic and socio-environmental complexity of protected areas (Paradiso 2024).

Discussion of the activation of the GOGNP is still ongoing, especially during local election campaigns, highlighting the strategic importance of environmental issues in the local political context. Several regional initiatives, both public and private, aimed at promoting sustainable tourism demonstrate a growing interest in nature-based tourism. In Sardinia, renewed interest in mountains, which are now considered not only places of work but also leisure destinations, represents a con-

stantly evolving phenomenon that needs to be closely monitored, particularly in inland areas.

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