

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF LANDSCAPE CONSTRAINT: ANALYSIS OF THE SITE OF ALPE VERCIO IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF MERGOZZO (PROVINCE OF VERBANO-CUSIO-OSSOLA, ITALY)

This is a synthesis of my thesis presented at the end of degree course called *Superior technician of improvement and conservation of green spaces*.

The research of my thesis has had as relator Dr. Andrea Polidori (forest landscaper at the Andrea Polidori Agronomy and Landscape Architecture Studio - Biella) and is the outcome of detailed work of in-depth research on a unique place of its kind: Alpe Vercio at Mergozzo (VCO).

This discussion has been inspired by the aim to protect Alpe Vercio from eventual inappropriate constructions, thanks to the request of an association called “Friends of the Hermitage of Vercio and Don Piero” to protect an area of considerable public and landscape interest. This association, notably, has the object of “*maintaining continuity and inheritance for the spiritual work started with Don Piero, who has created a place of listening, silence and hospitality within the Christian tradition but open to a dialogue without prejudice with other expressions of spirituality in the context of an increasingly globalized society*” and “*promoting and implementing all initiatives for the protection and improvement from the point of view of the landscape, wildlife and the environment of the entire area of the Hermitage of Vercio*”.

This place has been subjected to landscape constraint by the Piedmont region ([D.G.R. 30 July 2018, n. 55-7316](#)). This legislative instrument, envisaged by the Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape, is aimed at protecting properties and areas of great landscape value.

The scope is to mitigate the insertion of buildings and infrastructures in these places. This doesn't completely preclude the possibility of building and expanding existing buildings but according to parameters and indications so that interventions cannot damage the landscape and environmental value of the area and they respect and preserve it.

For this work of my thesis landscape constraint isn't meant to crystallize this area in a sort of utopian and immutable “Indian reserve”, but as an instrument that allows to safeguard the surrounding area as it has been selected.

This place, Alpe Vercio, is situated at 900 meters above sea level in the municipality of Mergozzo (VCO) and extends over a large plateau that dominates the area of Verbano, Cusio and the lower Ossola valley.

Since XIV century this alp has been cultivated for pasture meadows. Families from Bracchio and Rovegro built livestock shelters and huts for milk processing.

Nowadays, Alpe Vercio, which still partially used as a mountain pasture, as conserved the bond with the local population and the significant historical and religious importance of the site, with the oratory of the “Beata Vergine delle Grazie e la Croce”.

In addition, the dramatic scenic value of the alp, the mule track that climbs from the hamlet of Bracchio and the extensive view panoramic points over the landscape below remain intact.

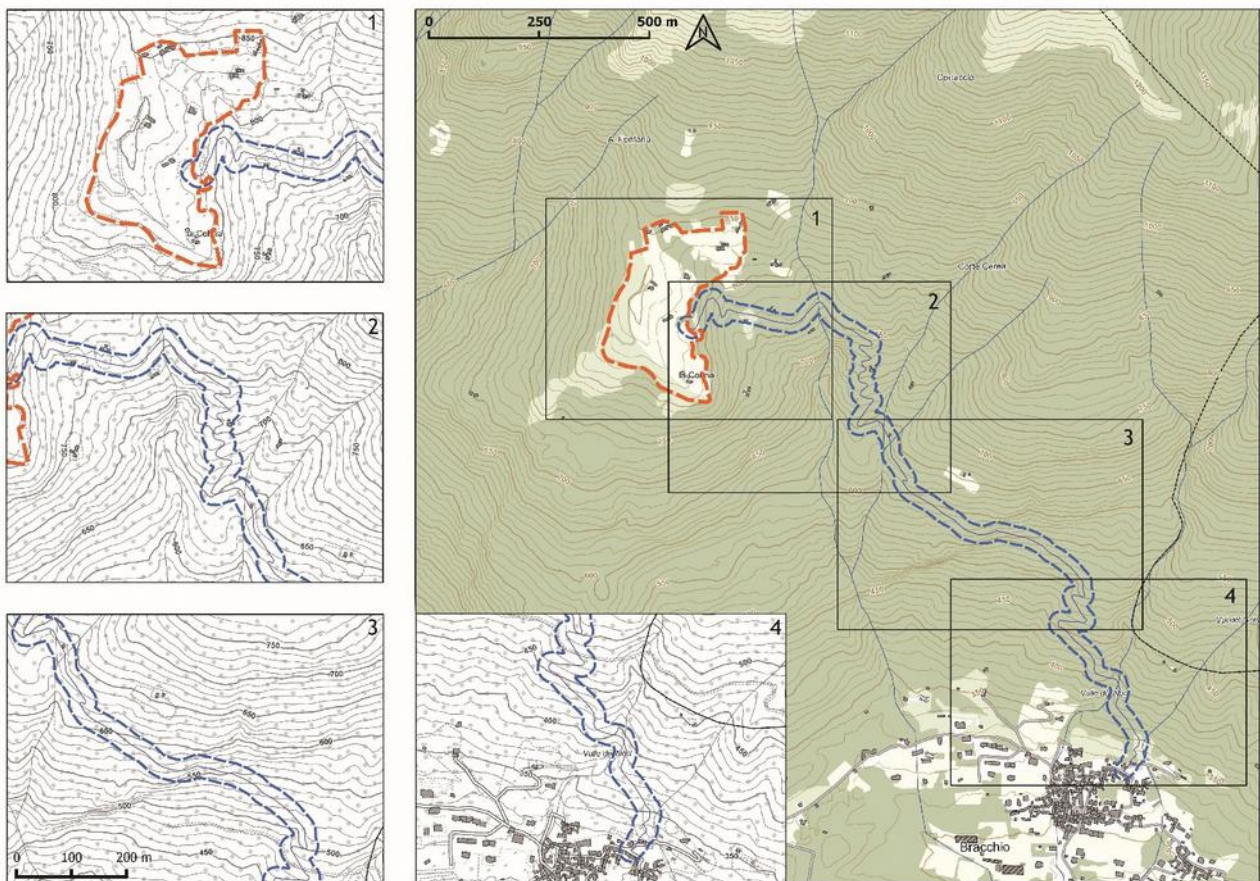


Image (1). Landscape constraint boundary of Alpe Vercio.



Image (2). Boundary of the area of interest.

On the whole it's an area that represents a "hinge" space between the foothills of lake Maggiore which has a large number of magnificent acidophilic gardens (we're in the flower-growing district of lake Maggiore, right in the middle of Europe's main production zone of Azaleas and Rhododendrons) and the typical alpine zone with its landscape of pastures and deciduous forests. So beautiful is the panorama that you enjoy by Alpe Vercio: as well as lake Maggiore and lake Mergozzo you can see lake Orta, lake Monate, lake Varese and the Toce river.

Despite its small size (the area of the site is only 7.4 hectares), the Ermitage of Vercio belongs to the group of territorial zones, with reference to Art. 136 of Decree Law 42/2004 with particular regard to belvederes, panoramic views and places of supreme scenic and esthetic value.

This area is of special landscape importance for:

- The presence of extraordinary examples of isolated trees (basically *Betula* and *Robur*, but also *Fagus* and *Acer*) that are grown naturally, without any pruning, and have developed unusual shapes over the years;
- The presence of patches of vegetation consisting mainly of acidophilic shrub species like *Azalea*, *Rhododendron*, *Pieris*, *Juniperus*, etc... all situated in the most opportune points: small outcrops of stones, steep slopes, watersheds, etc...;
- Turf that has developed spontaneously through frequent cutting and thanks to the unusual microclimate featuring high rainfall and relatively mild temperatures with very high quality and uniformity.



Picture (1). Territorial framework of Alpe Vercio.

Picture (2). Photographic detail of Alpe Vercio.

Having mapped this area in detail, through inspections and surveys, I moved on to a census to check the state of conservation of the plants and shrubs, evaluating the possibility of an eventual increase and botanical improvement of this area.

With regard to the conservation and improvement of this area, I reached the conclusion that no intervention is necessary, considering the excellent state of health of the trees and shrubs in this place.

I took the opportunity to increase the value of the marginal areas of Alpe Vercio by planting some shrubs (*Ilex aquifolium* and *Juniperus communis*) and perennials (*Stipa pennata* and *Carex comans* 'Red') to enhance the perimeter of the site from the botanical, esthetic and landscape point of view.

I reached the conclusion that, if the idea is to maintain this area with optimal conditions, the priorities to be respected are:

- To safeguard and improve the fields and the muletrack;
- To protect all the trees and shrubs;
- To conserve and optimize the rural buildings;
- The Oratorio della Beata Vergine delle Grazie and the surrounding area must be protected and kept free of obstacles that would impede views of the Oratory from a distance;
- To maintain the views of panoramic places in the area;
- To control some of the spontaneous vegetation that grows along paths that could block the views around it;
- To prohibit the building and installation of structures and any other additions that do not fit in with the character of the place;
- To protect historical artefacts and trees of great importance to the landscape;
- To prohibit the installation of telecommunication systems and artificial lighting;
- To prohibit the creation of new paths within this area.

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