From Royal Hunting Reserve to National Park: How the Gran Paradiso Became a Sanctuary for the Ibex

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg

Summary

From the nineteenth century onward the Piedmontese royal house contributed to the preservation of the Alpine ibex. As such, the Gran Paradiso, first as a hunting reserve and then as a national park, became the last Alpine refuge for this iconic animal.

The Gran Paradiso area has historically been at the core of attempts made by the Piedmontese royal house to preserve the ibex (*Capra ibex*). By 1821 the Piedmontese government had forbidden ibex hunting. Nonetheless, poaching continued almost unabated on the Gran Paradiso massif, where between 1850 and 1856 King Vittorio Emanuele II established a royal hunting reserve, based on a complex system of tenancies with private landowners. This act saved the Alpine ibex from extinction and the ibex populations in the Alps today stem from this original stock.

Hardenberg, Wilko Graf von. "From Royal Hunting Reserve to National Park: How the Gran Paradiso Became a Sanctuary for the Ibex." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2011), no. 1. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.
https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/2647.
Print date: 27 November 2026 20:22:39



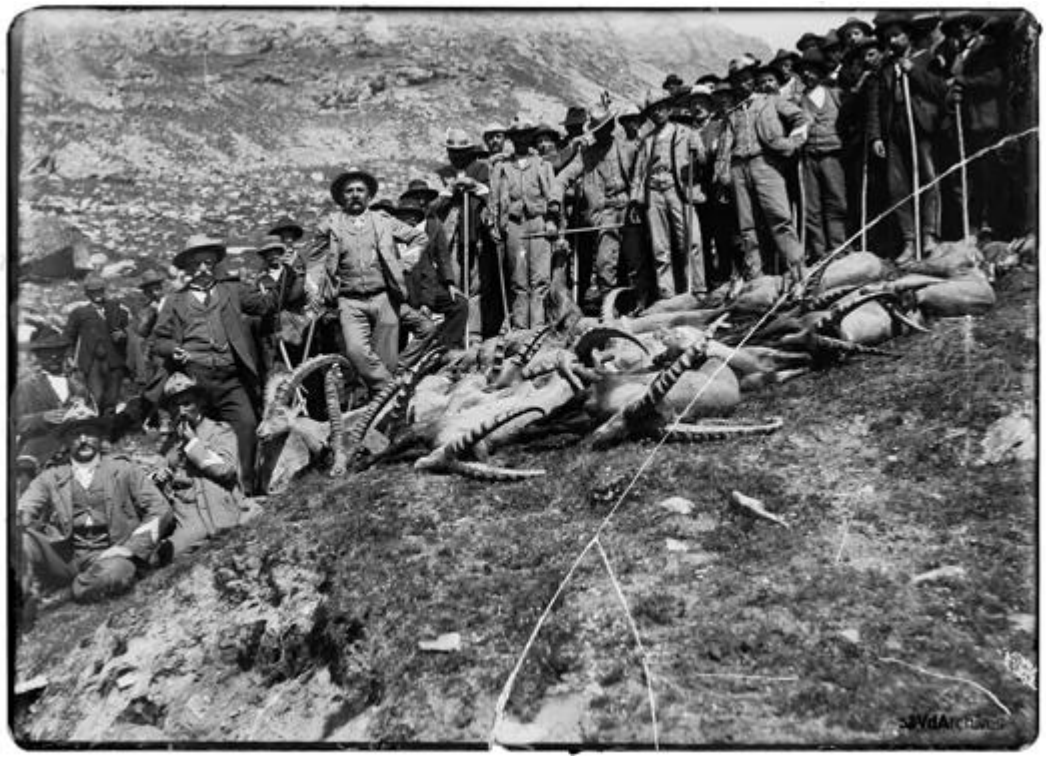
Ibex in the Gran Paradiso National Park (1933)

1933 Photo by Ugo Beyer for "Le Vie d'Italia" of the Touring Club Italiano

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In September 1919 King Vittorio Emanuele III offered to donate the hunting reserve to the Italian state. However, its inauguration as the first Italian national park was delayed until the end of 1922, when the new Fascist regime decided, as an act of propaganda, to support the project. In the interim, the former hunting reserve became something of a no-man's-land and a veritable paradise for poachers. Ibex and chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) hunters, dressed in military outfit and armed with machine guns, were a common sight before 1922.

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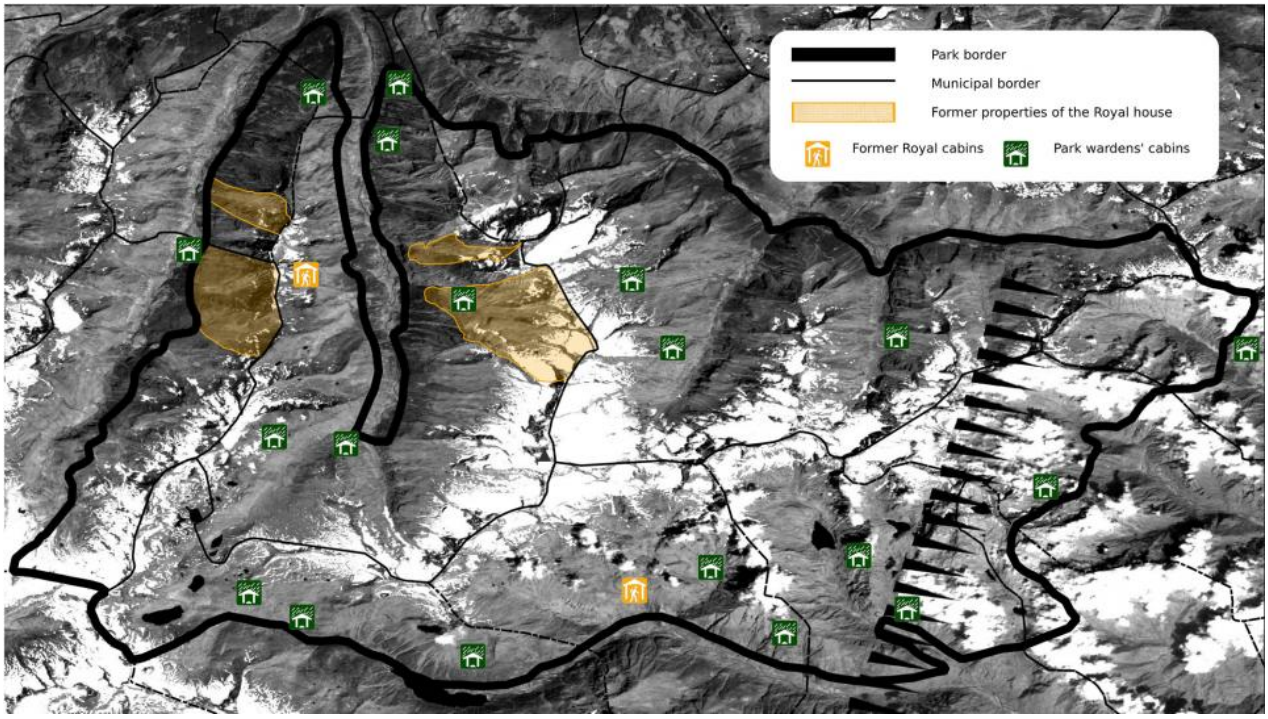
A scene from the royal hunts in the Gran Paradiso area, early 20th century

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Thereafter, conflicts with local communities entitled to hunting rights outside the King's former private properties arose. These rights were dismissed without provisions being made for compensation. Further conflicts arose between those planning a park for the promotion of mountain tourism in accordance with the so-called American model of recreational parks and those in support of an "ibex sanctuary," a park purely intended for the purposes of conservation and scientific research in accordance with the Swiss model. The Gran Paradiso National Park was ultimately a compromise in which tourism and conservation could coexist.

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Map of the Gran Paradiso National Park

2011 Wilko Graf von Hardenberg
Raster image by Sando Furieri/USGS Landsat imagery

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Arcadia Collection:
National Parks in Time and Space

Further readings:

- Hardenberg, Wilko Graf von. "Act Local, Think National: A Brief History of Access Rights and Environmental Conflicts in Fascist Italy." In *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall, 141–158. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010.
- Passerin d'Entrèves, Pietro. *Le Chasses Royales in Valle d'Aosta (1850–1919).* Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 2000.
- Piccioni, Luigi. *Il volto amato della Patria: Il primo movimento per la conservazione della natura in Italia, 1880–1934.* Camerino: Università degli Studi di Camerino, 1999.
- Sievert, James. *The Origins of Nature Conservation in Italy.* Bern: Peter Lang, 2000.

Related links:

- Homepage of the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso
  http://www.pngp.it/

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- Short historic movie (1932) about creation of the Gran Paradiso
  http://www.youtube.com/watch

How to cite:

Hardenberg, Wilko Graf von. "From Royal Hunting Reserve to National Park: How the Gran Paradiso Became a Sanctuary for the Ibex." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2011), no. 1. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/2647 .

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ISSN 2199-3408
Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia

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Wilko Graf von Hardenberg is a modern historian focusing on socio-political aspects of nature perception and management in Europe and the history of the environmental sciences. He holds a degree in history from the University of Torino, Italy, and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Cambridge. He was a postdoc, funded by the Autonomous Province of Trento, at the University of Trento, Italy, a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany, and a Scholar-in-Residence at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, Germany. His most recent research projects focus on the history of nature conservation, management, and rhetoric in the Alps and on the development of the idea of mean sea-level.
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