

Lessons from the Italian Alps (1) â?? home from home

Description



Look familiar? Cattle grazing in the Valle Vogna

I have not blogged for almost a month because I have been away in Italy walking the northern half of the Grande Traversata delle Alpi, the Italian equivalent of the GR5 in France â?? which I wrote about a couple of year ago ([see here](#)), ([here](#)), and ([here](#)) â?? but longer. Apart from my partner who joined me at Quincinetto in the Aosta Valley, I did not meet or hear anyone from the British Isle. from the Nufenen Pass in Switzerland to the Roman town of Susa. That is despite two guidebooks being available in English.

Part of the explanation for this was the low number of people walking the GTA from any country. It is not like the Tour de Mont Blanc or West Highland Way which are generally mobbed. There were days when I/we saw no-one in 8 hours of walking. It was difficult to know how far this was due to the economic crisis and the increasing poverty across Europe, which has significant implications for rural and mountain tourism, how much due to fashion among those who can afford to go on holiday and how much due to outdoor recreational culture in Italy. On the higher ground I saw more Italian trail runners

than walkers.



The sole occupant of a posta tappa in Rima, I wandered around the beautifully preserved Walser village a few times, was struck by the chimneys on this new building and went to have a closer look:



Home from home!

Much to my surprise the building turned out to be a former Scotch Whisky centre. This had gone bust about eight years ago and was now a private residence for people from South Korea. There is now apparently a new whisky centre somewhere on the Italian coast.



It was interesting that some entrepreneur had thought that people would come to a remote mountain village to taste whisky, the Italian equivalent to attracting visitors to Tomintoul in the Cairngorms National Park.

By contrast I saw little evidence of the Italians trying to market their own food and drink. While I mostly camped for the first half of the walk in the villages along the GTA, I ate some of the best food I have ever had and it was neither pasta nor pizza. This included a memorable six course vegan meal in the Albergho Fontana in Rimella, run by five sisters. •••Vegano••• •••no problem•••!

I was equally surprised to walk through the herd of Highland Cattle in the wild upper reaches of the Valle Vogna (top photo). There was a sign on a nearby hut explaining why their presence:



100% PURE HIGHLAND BEEF!



Lo Scottish Highland è un bovino primordiale; la sua carne è la migliore di tutte le carni bovine per il minor contenuto di grasso e colesterolo e il maggior valore proteico. Povera di calorie e altamente digeribile, è ricca di Omega 3 di Vitamine A/E e di CLA (Acido Linoleico coniugato) considerato uno dei più potenti anticancro. Il nostro allevamento oltre ad avere la certificazione biologica, segue i principi steineriani Bio-Dinamici con particolare attenzione alla cura degli animali ed al loro benessere. I nostri animali vivono liberi, allo stato brado e vengono alimentati solo con erba e fieno, non vengono somministrati mangimi aggiunti o integratori, per questo sono 100% GRASS FED. La nostra carne è 100% GLUTEN FREE e può essere consumata anche da persone che

hanno intolleranze alimentari. Il vitello vive con la madre per 9 mesi, non si castrano i vitelli e la monta è solo naturale. La macellazione è eseguita da Ottobre a Maggio, solo sui manzi di 3-4 anni, poiché in questa età raggiungono un peso ed una maturazione idonea per ottenere una carne di altissima qualità. Sono disponibili pacchi famiglia preparati da esperti macellai costituiti da: Bollito, Arrosto, Spezzatino, Costate, Fettine e Carne Macinata, tutto confezionato fresco, in pacchi ben distinti e sottovuoto.

Certificazione Carne Biologica IT BIO 008-W418/3

PER PRENOTAZIONI CARNE SCRIVERE A: info@montanahighlandcattle.it

TABELLA DEI VALORI NUTRIZIONALI

Razza	Grassi g/100g	Colesterolo mg/100g	Proteine g/100g
Bovino Highland	4,5	40,9	20,7
Altra carne bovina	15,6	64,3	18,6
Maiale	22,4	77,5	16,9

Home from home! Like much written Italian, the sign is not too difficult to understand for anyone with a little knowledge of Latin languages, but basically claims the beef from Highland Cattle is better than any other for your health: less fat, less cholesterol and more protein.

Whether true or not, what struck me is the role that Scotland currently plays in the European imagination. While few people from Scotland may be exploring the remoter parts of northern Italy or contributing to its economy, a significant proportion of people I talked to had either visited Scotland or wanted to do so.

That is a enormous economic and cultural asset, an asset which the Scottish Government is in the process of destroying through its free market approach to renewable energy developments which is plastering Scotland's landscape with wind turbines, electricity pylons, enormous pumped storage schemes etc etc.



The unspoiled Valle Vogna BELOW the Highland Cattle herd. Perhaps people will need to go to Italy to see Highland Cattle in unspoiled settings in future?

This brings me to the primary purpose of this series of posts. Apart from the pleasure of walking through mountains, my main interest in walking the GTA was not to discover what others think of Scotland but to think about what Scotland and its National Parks could learn from the Italian Alps. Where better to start than red deer?



Red deer on paper table mat

Red deer are iconic enough to feature on table mats in Alpine eateries and clearly valued by the Italians but these were the ONLY deer I saw in 24 days of walking. What a contrast to Scotland where red deer of everywhere. Part of the explanation, of course, is that red deer in Italy live in forests and therefore are very hard to see but those forests have only survived and expanded because red deer numbers are so low.

The primary explanation for this is that hunting laws in Italy are very different to Scotland, with a right to hunt on other people's land ([see here](#)) akin to our Right to Roam. In Scotland such hunting is illegal. How the Italian hunting law works in practice is complicated, varying from region to region and area to area, but there are 800,000 registered hunters in Italy and that is what keeps deer numbers way below those in Scotland where deer stalking is the preserve of an elite.

The Italian right to hunt enables a completely different approach to forestry - there is little need to plant trees as they regenerate without human interference - but also allows people living in mountain villages to cultivate their vegetable patches without deer fencing:



Vegetable patch Usseglio. Plots like this would have no chance of surviving over most of the Highlands. In Italy many such plots have no fence at all

The anaemic Land Reform Bill still being considered by the Scottish Parliament never contained any proposals to reform hunting laws in Scotland. That would be the single most effective measure we could take to restore nature following centuries on overgrazing. Instead of learning from other countries like Italy, Scottish Ministers and the entire apparatus of government acts as though there is no alternative to the current system of sporting estates. Nothing is allowed to get in the way of the landowners whose interests lie in maintaining the population of red deer at levels which impoverishes the natural environment and imposes huge economic costs on everyone else (e.g deer fencing to protect trees and gardens, car accidents, the lost opportunities from being able to use the land in more productive ways).

The secondary and more recent explanation for low deer numbers in Italy is the wolf. This has re-colonised the whole of the Italian Alps and Dolomites since being protected, i.e exempted from the right to hunt, along with various other species. Their main prey are red deer, roe deer and wild boar and research suggests these are generally preferred to domesticated livestock ([see here](#)). The wildlife highlight of my trip was standing outside the Bivaccio Marigonda one morning and hearing a pack of wolves howling to each other for a couple of minutes on the hillside opposite.

Instead of the frenzy which accompanies any mention of the re-introduction of the wolf to Scotland, we should learn from the extensive research that has taken place in countries like Italy, why people in rural communities there are generally so much more relaxed about living among wolves and how conflicts between wolves and humans â?? which are increasing as the wolf population increases â?? can be managed ([see here](#)).



After the flowers of most other species had died off, heather was in bloom as in Scotland. In this photo the heather, along with other shrubby species, is in the process of recolonising an alpe, an area previously used for livestock grazing in the summer.

I do not recall seeing as much common heather in the Alps before as I saw along the GTA. Some of that may be due to the underlying geology and the altitude of the walk as well as my own perceptions. The resulting habitat, however, looks very different to grouse moors in Scotland. The heather forms part of a much wider plant assemblage which is evolving naturally, a contrast to Scotland where heather is promoted in favour of other species of plant through burning designed to increase numbers of red grouse. In the photo above the heather is likely to be replaced in due course by woodland, a contrast to Scotland where, as a result of human interference, it forms an impoverished monoculture over vast areas of hillside, including a large proportion of the Cairngorms National Park.

If we banned muirburn in Scotland we too could have hillsides like this. Instead last year the Scottish Parliament passed a useless bit of legislation, the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024, while the Scottish Government pays sporting estate landowners and voluntary organisations to plant native woodland in enclosures, using environmentally destructive forest practices such as mounding and tree tubes. In 24 days of walking the GTA I saw not one case of the land being burned unlike the GR5 in France where there was some burning in the south not a single deer fence, not one example of soil being mounded to plant trees and not one plastic tree tube.

Instead of listening to the vested interests in Scotland, who far from restoring nature or helping to offset carbon are destroying it further, Scottish Ministers and other policy makers should start visiting other mountainous countries like Italy that would be a good use of taxpayer money and learn from how land is managed there.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. Deer
2. forestry
3. grouse moors
4. landscape
5. outdoor recreation
6. renewables
7. Scottish Government
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