

Lessons from the Italian Alps (3) – the management of livestock grazing

Description

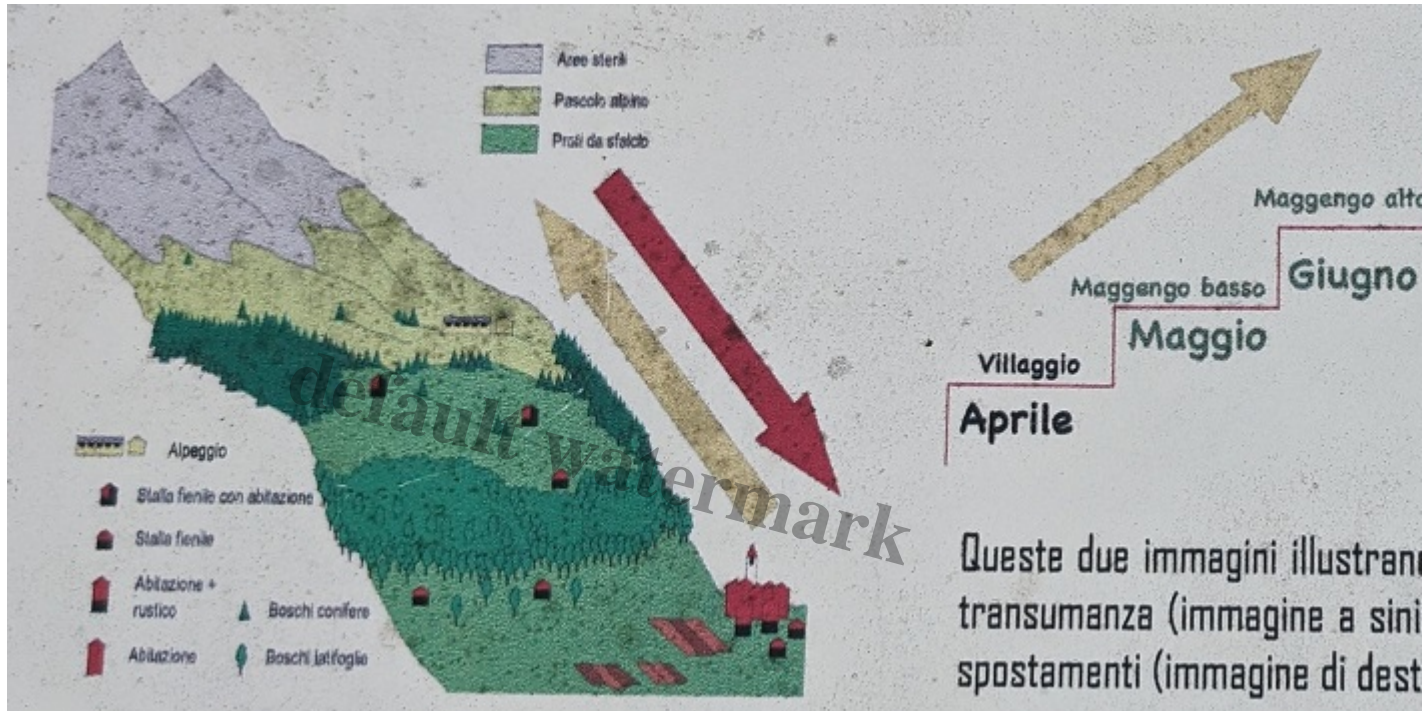


Diagram from interpretative sign illustrating how transhumance works, with livestock being gradually moved up hill in summer and then back down again

Traditional systems of transhumance, where people move their livestock up hill in summer and then back down in winter, are still fairly widely practised in the Italian Alps, in contrast to Scotland where the summer migration to the shielings ended when large flocks of sheep replaced people. In some ways walking the Grande Traversata delle Alpi (GTA) was like going back 200 years, although the quality of the rural and agriculture related buildings in Italy (which I will consider in a further post) was far superior to anything that has survived from Scotland at the time.



Right hand arrow points to cowherd who we watched walking around this herd of cattle below the Rifugio Chairamonte (2045m). We also spotted a single Highland cow (left hand arrow).

What struck me most from an ecological perspective was how ALL the grazing livestock I saw in three and half weeks of walking were being actively managed, a contrast to Scotland where normal practice is that sheep are let out onto the hill and allowed to wander where they will.



There was a goatherd minding this flock above Alpe Devero who had just disappeared out of sight below the near horizon when I took this photo. The forest behind was unfenced.

Some of this management was by people â?? cowerds, goatherds and shepherds â?? actively herding livestock and using dogs to direct the animals where to graze.



Starting young!

Herding animals enables forests to regenerate naturally without fences or planting.



A herd of sheep, with some goats, descending along the line of the GTA to the south of Ceresole. The red arrow points to the shepherd, a man of black African origin.

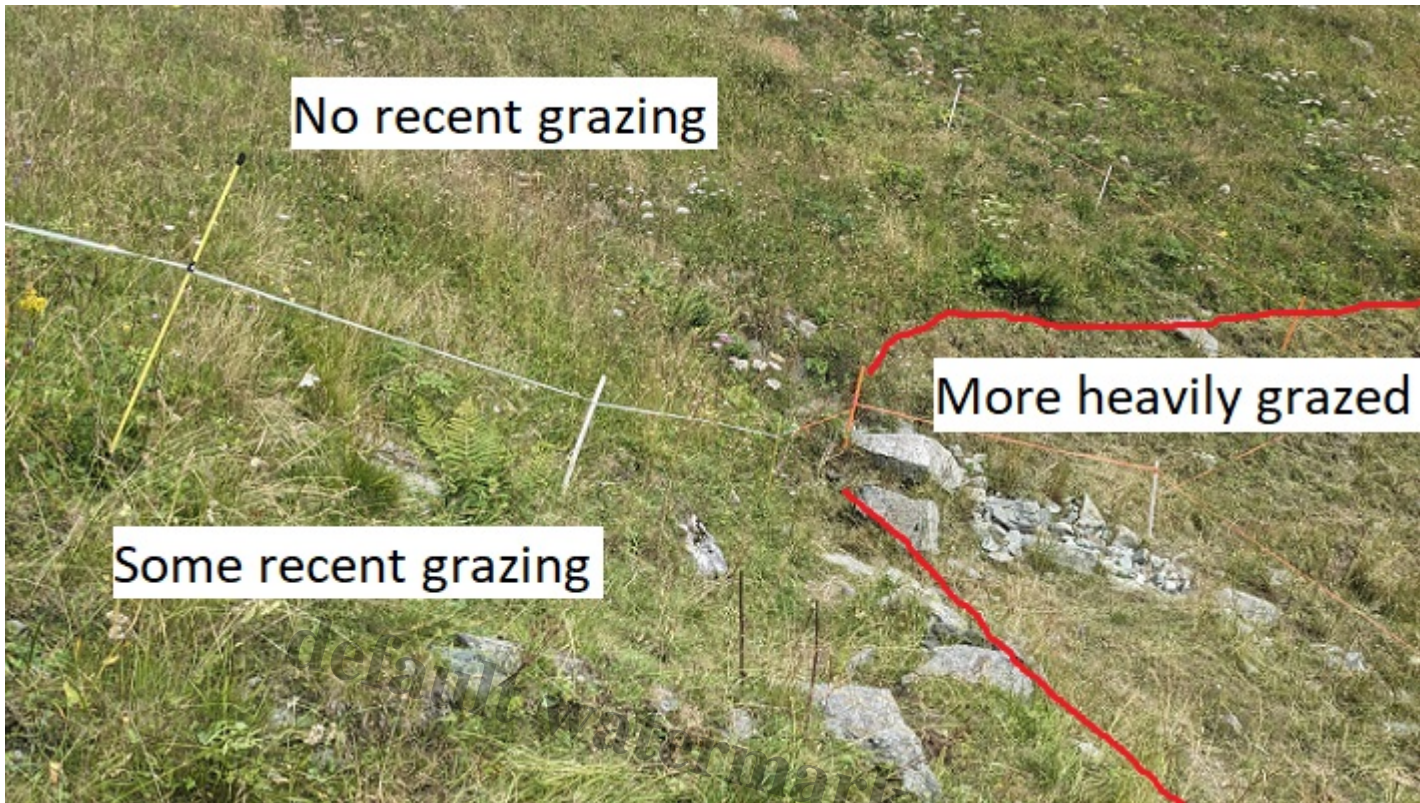
Livestock graze as they go and the vegetation on the routes used to take them up and down between the main pastures (alpes) was noticeably different to that on the surrounding land. Regular use of the route in the photo above has created a grassy swathe down the otherwise wooded valley.



In this case the shepherd had five dogs helping him to direct the herd. Keeping the herds compact helps prevent predation by wolves. These are tough jobs, which require those doing them to spend significant periods of time in the mountains away from others, and are not well paid – which may help explain why an African was able to get work as the shepherd. Such employment, which enables more people to work on the land, basically does not exist in Scotland.



Fencing was the other main means used to manage where livestock grazed but I saw not a single deer fence and hardly a stock fence on my walk, a massive contrast to Scotland. Instead, the people managing livestock made extensive use of electric fencing. This is moved up and down the mountains with the herds and used dynamically to direct where grazing occurs and to what extent:



Note how the fencing in the bottom right hand quarter of this photo has been moved so part of the more heavily grazed area is now protected

It is also used to protect forests:



The red line shows the line of the electric fence along the edge of the forested area. (Not every electric fence had crossings like this and those too high to step over we crawled under).

The contrast with Scotland is again significant. Instead of fixed fences, which are expensive to install, have a significant impact on wildlife but require very little management, temporary electric fences are easy to install, appear to have little impact on wildlife but require frequent management:

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Large flock of sheep being grazed above Alagna Valesia. Above the steep slopes on the far side of the valley, marked by sheep tracks, were crags which together with the fence served to contain the herd. The extent of shrubby vegetation below the fence suggests it has recently been moved uphill towards the viewer.

The impact of grazing by livestock was in some areas as great as anything I have seen in Scotland but, unlike Scotland, where that heavy grazing occurs is limited by the controls I have outlined and also means the land can be given a rest.



An electric fence was responsible for the sharp dividing line between the heavily grazed slope above and the more vegetated slope below. Slope above Usseglio. Photo credit Louise Brimelow.

Once livestock has been moved into a different area, the electric fences are also removed..

Looking at the photo above and the photos in my previous post ([see here](#)), it should be obvious that while heat and drought caused by global warming poses a serious threat to pastoralism in the alps, the most heavily grazed areas are also those most severely affected by heat and lack of water.



Cow browsing on bilberry shortly after tearing apart a green alder.

One way I saw this being managed was livestock being moved into areas of montane scrub, which retains water and stays greener far longer than the main pastures. Such habitat is so rare in Scotland that at home I would probably regard such grazing as ecological vandalism. But in the instances I saw in Italy the grazing within the montane scrub was also being actively managed, with electric fences used to control where the cattle browsed. I would have liked to understand more about how it works and its impact.



Areas where livestock have been kept overnight are even more worn than the heavily grazed land around and quite distinctive

Electric fencing is also used to contain herds of animals at night which, together with the use of guard dogs, provides protection against wolves.



â??Fieldsâ?• far above Quincinetto in the Aosta Valley. The bright green areas have been cleared of boulders and intensively managed. The dry grazed strip contrasts with the boulderly land to the right and the foreground

The impact and effect of this active approach to grazing management can be seen at the landscape scale. In Scotland, the patchwork above would only be possible with extensive use of stock fencing but we walked through the area and there was not a fence in sight.



A patchwork of grazed areas in the Val Chiusella both within the forest and above the tree lines

Incidentally, directing grazing to specific areas can also have other benefits, like reducing the rate of water run-off/number of landslides (all the steeper slopes in the photo are covered with trees, another contrast with Scotland) and reducing the risks posed avalanches.



The heavily grazed areas along the ridge in the foreground (tan) contrast with the slopes on either side which have at times been grazed by livestock (and wild animals) as you can see from the lines (tracks) through the darker vegetation but not so intensively

While the ridge in the photo above is steep and will shed water quickly, the exposed ridge is far less likely to accumulate snow in winter than the valley/gully this side of it. While snow-lie affects what can grow in such places, the more vegetation there is in such places the more it helps anchor the snow.

Discussion



Field cairns, built to clear ground for grazing. Note how in this case smaller rocks have been piled onto larger immovable boulders.

Walking along the GTA and knowing little about the history of land-use in the Italian Alps, it was tempting to believe this grazing management system had existed since time immemorial and there were indeed visible links to the past. The areas most used for grazing did not exist because of factors like soil, topography etc but because of human endeavour over many centuries.



A former settlement above Varzo abandoned and reclaimed by the forest

It was also evident that many areas that has been grazed in the past and their accompanying agricultural settlements had been abandoned, with ruined buildings everywhere and many places still known as ‘alpes’ covered with trees. While I knew there had been a general agricultural retreat from across mountain areas in Europe, which had resulted in expansion of the forests, what I did not appreciate was until I started reading up about it was that I was witnessing something of a revival in managed grazing. Nor that in the Italian alps that this was being pioneered in Piedmont, the region through which I was walking.

The history, in brief, is that rural depopulation after World War II resulted in the traditional management of grazing by herding being replaced by what academics call ‘Continuous Grazing Systems’, i.e where livestock are let out onto the hill and allowed to feed where they wish as happens in Scotland. That had an adverse impact on the mix of vegetation communities across mountainsides as, where given the choice, livestock browse selectively and would travel significant distances to eat their preferred plants. But it also made them vulnerable to wolves which were recolonising the Alps.

The consequence has been a renewed focus on ‘Rotational Grazing Management’ systems, similar to traditional practices but with increased attention to pastoral productivity. Italian regions are semi-autonomous, a bit like Scotland, and Piedmont has pioneered the use of Grazing Management Plans ([see here](#)). Unfortunately I did not know about this on my walk and do not speak nearly enough Italian to have asked the people involved how it works. I suspect, however, those plans account for much of what I saw.

Managing grazing in the way I witnessed costs money but a significant proportion of that appears to have come from payments for measures to prevent wolf predation. The evidence is clear, so long as the wolf population is not too large i.e there are wild animals for them to eat herding livestock

and protecting those herds with dogs in a system actively minded by people is an effective means of preventing livestock predation ([see here](#)). It is unprotected flocks that get preyed. This has resulted in the use of EU agricultural funds to pay for the introduction of preventive measures such as guard dogs, electric fencing to contain herds and "shepherding". Hence the grazing management I saw on my walk.

Whether the agricultural subsidies that are now being provided to support managed grazing are sufficient to provide those involved with a decent standard of living and maintain the practices I witnessed is, of course, a key question. There is, however, no reason why Scotland should not consider introducing similar measures in Scotland to change how livestock grazing is managed here and reduce its adverse impacts. Our National Parks, which were created not just to protect nature but to manage the land more sustainably, would be an ideal place to start. What chance of the Cairngorms National Park Authority funding a delegation of farmers from Strathspey to visit the Italian Alps and take a look at how they manage livestock there and how this is funded?

Category

1. Lessons from abroad
2. National Parks

Tags

1. conservation
2. farming
3. Fences
4. forestry
5. natural environment
6. overgrazing

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Author

nickkempe

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