



# “Keep America Respected and Loved”: A conversation with Italian park leader Maurilio Cipparone

*Rolf Diamant*

**In a few weeks a second Trump administration will assume control of America’s public lands and the agencies that are responsible for their care and management.** We could use our imagination about what lies ahead or make assumptions from what has been already promised. In a previous Letter from Woodstock I discussed the Heritage Foundation’s Agenda 2025 manifesto and the target it explicitly places on the incredibly valuable, and increasingly vulnerable, 1906 Antiquities Act. In times like these it’s natural to focus on immediate challenges emerging from America’s deep political divisions. However, as we prepare for the next four years it also may be useful to look beyond the United States at the experiences of park and protected area systems in other countries where they have dealt with some of the same stresses we might expect to see here in the US.

In this 34th Letter from Woodstock, I asked my Italian friend and parks expert, Maurilio Cipparone, to reflect on what is happening to parks and protected areas in Italy under its current government, which is led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of the populist right-wing Brothers of Italy party. I also asked him to think about what we should be preparing for in the United States, as our institutions will likely face similar challenges.

Maurilio Cipparone has worked with parks and protected areas for more than 50 years. Beyond a lifetime devoted to the Italian parks movement, Cipparone is a recognized transnational authority on youth engagement and conservation education, and has been active with the EUROPARC Federation, WWF Italy, and IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). He played a key role in introducing “heritage interpretation” in Italy with the founding of the place-based learning non-governmental organization (NGO) Pangea, and later, under the auspices of WPCA, worked on developing interpretive training programs in the UK, Germany, and France.

In 1977, Cipparone helped plan a park framework law for the Region of Lazio, in and around Rome, establishing what was then Italy’s first and only cohesive network of 60 natural and cultural parks and reserves. He also helped create a novel professional park agency to administer this system and was appointed by the Lazio Regional Council as president of the Regional Park Agency (ARP, in the Italian acronym).



In setting up ARP, Cipparone, strongly influenced by the US National Park Service (USNPS), placed a premium on interpretation and education expertise. An admirer of America’s national park system, he traveled to numerous US national parks and facilities, including the USNPS Harper’s Ferry Training Center, which left a deep impression.

In 1991, a new national framework law was adopted for Italy’s parks and protected areas. The legislation addressed 26 national parks administered through the Ministry of the Environment in Rome, and a much larger network of regional parks, administered by each of Italy’s 20 regions. In the early 2000s, Cipparone played an instrumental role in setting up a bi-lateral agreement between USNPS and the Italian parks. Under the agreement, negotiated with the encouragement of our State Department, a series of exchanges between US and Italian park professionals took place between 2000 and 2003. These exchanges shared best practices, focusing on park interpretation, youth education, and park-branding of artisanal cultural heritage products.

When I was asked by USNPS to help implement this agreement, I had the opportunity to get to know Cipparone and admire his park work firsthand. This period was a high point for Italian park development, fueled in part with European Union encouragement and funding. At the time, our Italian park colleagues wanted to know more about USNPS visitor services, education initiatives, and NGO partnerships; we in the USNPS were keen on replicating the success of our Italian colleagues in working with local communities to integrate heritage conservation with sustainable development objectives.

Like many European parks, Italy’s protected areas encompass towns and even urban areas, similar in some regards to US national heritage areas. In fact, there are more people living within the boundaries of Lazio’s regional parks than the entire population of my home state of Vermont. USNPS was particularly interested in our Italian counterparts’ approach to preserving living cultural heritage and managing sustainable tourism, often by creating park-linked environmental quality brands for authentic artisanal products and for low-impact visitor services, including local food and lodging. As our guide, Cipparone opened doors for us in parks and protected areas across Italy, and in turn we arranged opportunities for Italian park professionals to visit US national parks and engage with like-minded USNPS staff and partners.

*As a steadfast friend of USNPS, he is watching recent events in the United States with growing apprehension.*

Cipparone departed ARP under political pressure in 2004 (as will be explained further, below), but has remained active in park and protected area conservation programs by working in academia and with a variety of NGOs. He continues to this day to hold on to his dream of a comprehensive, interdependent system of parks managed by non-partisan professionals. As a steadfast friend of USNPS, he is watching recent events in the United States with growing apprehension.

Here are the highlights from a conversation we recently had.



**ROLF DIAMANT:** To begin with, our *Parks Stewardship Forum* readers should appreciate some differences between the management of national parks in Italy and those in the US.

**MAURILIO CIPPARONE:** There are differences. For example, within the boundaries of our 24 national parks there are almost 600 communities, from hamlets to cities. A greater park council made up of municipal mayors and

various regional and provincial officials is involved in park budget formulation, local planning decisions, and sustainable social and economic development policies within park territory. But there are many similarities associated with park operations. For many of us “park people,” the USNPS park operations have always been considered a model. Many of our proposals to improve park management practice are inspired by USNPS. In



## Dr. Maurilio Cipparone

Coordinatore scientifico Dipartimento Aree Protette,  
Consorzio Universitario CURSA

Italy we don't have a real unitary system of national parks like in the United States. Of course, each park must respect the national and regional “framework” acts, and comply with any ministerial or regional directives. Beyond this, however, every protected area is more like an island, rather than part of an interdependent archipelago.

**RD:** My understanding is that Italian park superintendents are contracted for fixed terms. They are hired by appointed park boards; they are not recruited from within the ranks of a single professional governmental agency, like in the USNPS. Unless their contracts are renewed, park managers are out of work and must try to land a new contract at another park. This appears problematic in any number of ways.

**MC:** Yes, every Italian park is governed by its own eight-member board of directors plus a president, each appointed for a five-year term. Senior managers for national and regional parks are hired by these boards. Though the boards were originally envisioned as independent entities, representing a diversity of national and local interests, it is perhaps not surprising, a majority of board members have ties to the ruling political coalition currently in power. Given that the make-up of each park board changes with each new election, over time, the park management hiring process has been increasingly politicized. Recent changes in the national government in Rome have impacted the appointment of park management authorities throughout the country. In summary: does the politics of a party influence the management of a protected area? Yes, definitely.

**RD:** Given the change in government in the US, how worried are you about the integrity and durability of USNPS?

**MC:** USNPS is the most respected, most prestigious park agency in the world. We know it is loved by a majority of Americans, and the world parks community as well. In the most difficult moments, we have seen how the American public always seems to rally behind their national parks. This kind of public support cannot be easily found in other countries and realities. That said, I do think you are entering uncharted territory with the proposed policies and programs of Mr. Musk, and his DOGE [the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, which has been tasked by President Trump to propose massive cuts to the federal government]. Only strong citizen participation and commitment may protect USNPS from these DOGE threats. A lot of work for you to do ... period. Many Italians are really worried about the results of the America elections... We sincerely hope a new movement will eventually take hold in the US — we could call it KARL, “Keep America Respected and Loved.”

**RD:** Wasn't Federparchi, the association of all Italian parks and protected areas, expected to function as kind of a system, promoting the sharing of resources and greater cooperation between parks?

**MC:** That was clearly the intent when Federparchi was created—to function as an expert, professional organization, capable of interacting with the [federal] ministry, and promoting best management practices and policies in line with IUCN and other international

standards. This theoretical role, however, has not been fully exercised for many years. Part of the problem was the spoils system. Federparchi is made up of park officials, some of them politicians, appointed by their respective authorizing environments. Can an organization of politicians confront—even harshly when necessary—the policies of the politicians who appointed it? I don't want to be disrespectful to anyone, but I once heard, in a fiery, passionate assembly, that foxes shouldn't be expected to guard the henhouse....

**RD:** What happened to the new organization you tried to establish, the Union for Parks and Protected Areas?

**MC:** Some colleagues and I tried several times to improve the situation. We even went so far as attempting to create a new, truly independent parks NGO, the Union for Parks and Protected Areas. The goal was to carry out activities that Federparchi, as a political entity, could not have carried out, for the reasons I have tried to explain.

I don't know who the real culprits are for the failure of a private, independent, non-politically oriented organization like the Union. I don't wish to point a

finger at anyone. But it was clear that there was little space for constructive criticism, broader participation, and more bottom-up ideas that did not all come from the politicians in office. When we presented the idea for this NGO at two national meetings, there was a very cold reaction. There was no offer of cooperation or dialogue by the parks and other stakeholders who were too oriented to where they perceived the "power" was. Eventually, a scarcity of resources and fear of possible retaliation forced us to abandon the idea of a Union for Parks and Protected Areas—may it rest in peace.

**RD:** If I may ask, what were the circumstances that led to you stepping down as president of the Regional Park Agency (ARP)?

**MC:** ARP was the first public authority of its kind in Italy (and it has been the only and the last), with the aim of assisting and enhancing the development of a broad network of protected areas, which in the Lazio region included about 60 units of different classifications.

I tried to establish, with a bottom-up process, a true park system, inspired by NPS and the old Scottish Natural Heritage [organization].

Parco Nazionale Dell Cinque Terra ROLF DIAMANT





Park Rangers, Regione Lazio, Parchi e Riserve Tevere Farfa ROLF DIAMANT

When my five-year mandate or term expired, I was asked by the party of the president of the Regional Government to run on their list for a legislative seat in the upcoming election. In order to renew my mandate, you see, I had to demonstrate loyalty to the ruling party. I simply answered with your popular saying: “I’m not that kind of girl.” My contract was not renewed.

**RD:** What is the current status of ARP today?

**MC:** It simply no longer exists.

Soon after I departed from my position the ARP’s board of directors was replaced by a politically appointed commissioner, and the role of ARP was greatly curtailed. Four years after I left, the parks statute was modified, and the agency eliminated. The staff who worked for the ARP have since moved on to other regional departments and to European Union offices.

Now that the agency doesn’t exist anymore, “my” regional protected areas system— a treasure chest of history, culture, and nature—was considered by many as something we could do without.

It is scarcely funded. More than 50% of the park ranger positions have been left vacant after the individuals in those jobs eventually retired. Almost all the superintendents who served with me are now retired, and the few new ones that have been appointed are friends of the governing party. Even these superintendents have been hired with very short contracts. All the management bodies for the individual parks (their boards of directors) have been replaced by a single man, a politically appointed commissioner.

**RD:** The Lazio Regional Park Authority appeared to the outside world as a modern, multi-dimensional park system, supported by centralized park professionals. What role did direct political interference play in ARP’s decline?

**MC:** Why was this done? To this day, no one has been able to give a clear answer. Officially this action was taken as part of a larger reorganization. But it is important to understand the headwinds we faced. The “culture of protected areas” is very new in Italy and is not as well established as it is in the US and other countries. The international experiences and other park management models that inspired the ARP were not well understood

or valued in Lazio. In reality, I believe that ARP also had too much scientific and operational autonomy [for the liking of politicians]. ARP was not composed of “yes men” and “yes women.” The agency also opposed boundary modifications for several park and protected area pushed by powerful political interests.

**RD: Is there any hope on the horizon?**

**MC:** A new director general, an admiral of the Coast Guard, was recently appointed by the government in Rome, with overall responsibility for biodiversity conservation and parks. He recently convened a national congress on protected areas, the first in 20 years. Many reforms were promised, and I sincerely hope he can do his job free of ideological influences coming from above.

The regional government of Lazio also came out with a public tender in December to recruit 55 park rangers. *But*—it should also be noted that in recent months a new initiative was launched by a private company in the agricultural sector (you can imagine what orientation and political support it has) offering a paid course to become an “auxiliary park ranger.” There is officially no such position, but these “auxiliaries” will presumably have a competitive advantage in obtaining new park jobs.

I want to be optimistic about these developments. However, I am also realistic. If nothing comes from this, looking down the road, no doubt the whole system of protected areas in Italy will need a refoundation. I sincerely hope this will not be necessary in the United States.



**A**fter finishing my conversation with Maurilio Cipparone, it was clear that no public institution, even our long-established US national park system, can survive intact without strong public support—and the will to continually resist efforts aimed at the system’s diminution and dissolution. We cannot expect to skate our way over the thin ice that lies before us—hoping for the best and waiting for a better day—at least not for long. My mind keeps returning to a line from the dark comedy “The Dead Don’t Die.” In that 2019 film, police officer Ronnie Peterson, played by a deadpan Adam Driver, repeatedly reminds his troubled colleagues ... “this is not going to end well.”

That may certainly be the case. But neither is the future preordained. Not if we steel ourselves for the long hard road ahead; seek out new and potent coalitions (read the following op-ed by Jarvis and Machlis); and learn from and be inspired by stalwart “park people” from all over the world— like my friend Maurilio.

*We cannot expect to skate our way over the thin ice that lies before us.*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Roy Dannant".

*The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*