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An Economic Landscape and Cultural Heritage:  
Whose Commons is it, Anyway?



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Cultural Heritage and Economic Landscape  
Whose Commons is it, Anyway?

"There are botanical treasures high in the Peaks of Europe, but my own idea of heaven is their gloriously colourful hay meadows. **Managed in a traditional manner since they were first reclaimed from the primeval forest,** these meadows are among the most floristically rich Atlantic grasslands in Europe" (Grunefeld 1989).<sup>1</sup>

The Creation of a National Landscape

My concern here is to delineate some of the forces and demands that are putting into jeopardy a landscape and an associated "common property"

-- that is of historical, cultural, and economic significance.

The landscape lies in Asturias, one of the three autonomous regions<sup>2</sup> of Spain whose boundaries meet in the Peaks of Europe (map) -- the cluster of highest points and greatest dropoffs in the Cantabrian range, a range running parallel and close to the northern coast of Spain.

In 1918 under new legislation and with the assent of parliament the Spanish King decreed the <sup>Peak's</sup> westernmost massif

The Mountains of Covadonga National Park -- so as to preserve its "flora, fauna, and beauty."

The biological features of the area, in combination with an historical event associated with limestone geology (karst), give

the area the special significance required to be worthy of the national park designation.

Nature -- by impacting the limestone with heavy Atlantic precipitation, thereby dissolving the rock -- has sculpted Covadonga -- the cave of Donga -- into a formidable redoubt: situated at the end of a narrowing steep sided valley a, <sup>here</sup> full sized stream spouts out of <sup>the mouth of</sup> a cave on the side of a cliff. Here a handful Christians gathered in the year 718

to do battle against the invading Moors, appealing to their patron saint the "Virgin of the Cave" (Covadonga) for divine assistance in the upcoming battle. She, it is said, responded by dropping a rock avalanche upon the infidels, who fled up the valley walls through the groomed meadows of the mountain's flanks into the alpine grasslands and on through the karst, where among caves and precipices they perished.

The Battle of Covadonga marks, thus, the beginning of the Reconquest of Spain, taking eight centuries to complete. <sup>Exactly</sup> Twelve centuries after that mytho-historical avalanche and battle, the site, now a pilgrimage shrine, and 170 square kilometers of its surroundings, became Spain's first national park.

Covadonga National Park sets out, therefore, to conserve not only flora, fauna, and scenic beauty -- all propagated as an image of the Peacable Kingdom where lamb, billy goat, deer, chamoix, bear and man (without gun) can gather safely together -- but also to conserve the site of one of

Spain's most important historical memories. In this way the park's identity is associated with what in the social sciences is known as "the Great Tradition" and in the international lexicon of national parks distinguishes it as a "Cultural Park"<sup>3</sup>.

"The Little Tradition" (of anthropology), refers by contrast to culture with a lower case "c". The understandable confusion about Culture and culture -- makes it easy to overlook how ordinary people over <sup>many</sup> centuries, by regulating their activity in their own herders' councils, produced throughout this range of mountains the striking extensions of open country that <sup>in the park</sup> make up the commons.

The people of whom I speak reside in or upon the periphery of what is now park. Their ancestors cut down the deciduous forest on the flanks of the mountain, built shelters for themselves and their domestic livestock, and repropotioned the flora and fauna of the Mountain of Covadonga so that between outcroppings of karst<sup>4</sup>, they gradually brought verdant grasslands into existence (slide of grasslands?).

#### A Problem of Ownership

What raises questions here about common property is that the park designation was accorded without previously consulting with either the local county administration or with the local people who until very recently produced very modest cash incomes almost solely from working these commons.

Less than 2% of the national park is actually owned by the

Spanish central government. Most of what is now park land was registered in the Inventory of Public Lands (1859)<sup>5</sup> as belonging to the counties over whose territory the park was inscribed. Some of it is owned by parishes (within those counties), and a smaller amount of it yet -- such as the meadows of our epigraph -- is held in title by who inherited individuals parcels from someone who, generations ago, had enclosed it behind low walls of limestone.

Social and economic forces are now drawing these people and their offspring away from their upland activity into the lowlands, and the commons are falling into neglect (though degradation is as yet apparent only to the experienced observer).

### Grasslands as Culture

Grasslands make up actually only eight percent of the park's surface (GEA 1970:Onis), but for Asturians and park visitors alike are its essential characteristic.<sup>6</sup> Summertime the grasslands support the flocks and herds of livestock from the surrounding villages, year round the grasslands figure as the best-selling postcard image of the park, and annually the grasslands are the locus of the vastly popular Fiesta del Pastor, which itself has become the *estampa*, a mental and marketable tourist image, of Asturias<sup>7</sup>. Even the Pope on an international tour was flown here by helicopter, televised taking a "meditative walk" in green pastures. And a bicycle race of international import, -- only after overcoming strong and justifiable

administrative resistance -- was granted, this year, permission to make these uplands one day's race <sup>the</sup> destination thereby assuring

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Ad's image throughout western Europe<sup>8</sup>.

However spectacular the chasms and peaks of the park, it is the grasslands of the uplands, in combination with the managed meadows of the lowlands, of our epigraph, which are generally viewed as the park's most valuable resource -- be it a) the lynch pin of the local economy, long centered on the production of cheese; b) the site of comfortable weekends spent in herders' huts converted into urbanites' second homes; c) the image which draws to the nearby tourist establishments the most cash-expending tourists from afar; and d) the finest remaining exhibit in western Europe of the herbal diversity that once characterized much of Europe's grasslands<sup>9</sup>.

#### Related Appreciation of "the Little Tradition"

<sup>Because of occlusion by the Great Tradition,</sup>  
 Official recognition of the grasslands as a prime cultural or man-made asset has, however, come only recently -- by the park administration in 1990<sup>10</sup>, and in 1991 by one of the counties (Cangas de Onis) over whose territory the largest fraction of the park is inscribed<sup>11</sup>

Both administrative bodies now recognize , in documents as yet available only in manuscript, that these grasslands have been created by humans and require human input if they are not to

be lost.

Overgrazing puts the uplands in jeopardy of invasion by weeds and erosion, of losing the thin layer of quality soil accumulated over eons. Undergrazing puts them in jeopardy of invasion by heather, broom, and above all the woody and thorny *urce galliica* -- unattractive thickets almost impenetrable to hikers and of low fodder value to livestock -- thickets which give way to taller shrubs that restrict views and freedom of movement<sup>12</sup> -- features widely recognized as prime criteria of any national park (MacEwen 1982:253) appreciated for its "natural" features.

#### The Cheeses: What's in a Name?

Cheeses, Cabrales and Gamonedo, were traditionally made within the Peaks of Europe<sup>13</sup>: The uplands of what is now park area, and of a projected park extension, were at one time the principal if not the only site of production of these two most celebrated of Asturian cheeses: they were made in the summer when calves, kids, and lambs were beginning to graze in the uplands on their own and milk abounded in surplus. The cheese was therefore made from the mix of whatever livestock was available: goat, sheep, and/or cow. And it was spatially closely associated with

Covadonga's Peaceable Kingdom, the Battle and Miracle of Covadonga, and the making of Modern Spain. Available in only small quantities it was a cheese almost obligatorily consumed in any gastro-nationalist celebration of Asturians; whether at home,

*The cheese condenses to Great & Little Traditions; its consumption symbolizes the collaboration of King, War Shepherd & Commune*

in Madrid the capital of Spain, or abroad<sup>14</sup>. The name, <sup>of the cheese</sup> and the fame that accompanies it is, *Iargue*, part of the traditional "commons" of Cabrales.

But few countryside people remain any longer in the huts over an entire summer: images of hardship, cold, and loneliness have come to replace the image of romance and freedom that used to be associated with a summer in the uplands, when youth from the surrounding villages *worked* the meadows, *vigiled* the herds, and made cheese with the simplest of equipment in one-room huts. For them the "verdant pastures" now lie elsewhere, largely in the growing service and tourist industry of the lowlands situated outside the park.

In other words, the Spanish post-Franco economy<sup>15</sup> has brought an influx of tourists into the park and <sup>into the</sup> Peaks of Europe, and with it, an exodus of the people who created and used to maintain the scenery.

### Paradox

Withdrawal of dairy livestock from the pristine site in the uplands has not, however, diminished dairy production: while an extended grazing regime of *mostrenco*, free-ranging, non-herded, hardy livestock persists in the uplands (*: where it is* multiplying *and* looked after only from time to time), the dairying practiced in conjunction with that regime has descended to the lowlands. It has become attached there to a stall-feeding regime that, with much more productive but delicate

livestock (primarily black and white cow Guernsey or **Holandesas**), has year-round and for several generations been producing milk for big industrial dairies.

But Spain's 1986 entry into the EEC has dropped milk prices so severely that country people, instead of selling milk to the dairies, have begun to process it into cheese either at home or in small cooperative dairies<sup>16</sup>. Under certain conditions these cheeses may be labeled with **Denominación de Origen** (D.O.) Certificate of Origin and Quality, <sup>a designation</sup> which over the long term is expected to contribute considerable market value.

The descent of the production site of these cheeses to the lowlands may have compromised their "authenticity", and, for a time, their quality as well<sup>17</sup>, but has not stifled demand. Available now in large quantities (production has increased ten fold over the last four years<sup>18</sup>), most of the cheese is now made entirely of milk from cows raised on hay and commercial feed

without any direct association with the uplands. Strategically, however, <sup>possibly to offset any perception of loss of authenticity</sup> it bears the stamp of <sup>officialdom</sup> — <sup>to prove it is of the commons!</sup> (accorded by the the Ministry of Agriculture in conjunction with the Cabrales Cheese Regulatory Council<sup>19</sup>).

### Whose Commons is it, Anyway?

We have seen that the owners of the landed commons (country people and counties) are abandoning them. <sup>In that abandon</sup> We all stand to lose, for it is people in general, not only the former herders, who in them <sup>reproduce or</sup> recreate themselves: .. <sup>then</sup> Who should take responsibility for

these commons? The park which doesn't own them? The counties, whose people are scrambling under rural depression to make a living from tourism?

In commons like these of Covadonga, evolved a human lifeway . . . Might these commons be viewed as a human heritage? Might the World Heritage designation be able to save them?

The <sup>second,</sup> more abstract common property -- a traditional geographic name <sup>of reputation,</sup> become trade name and embodied in a Certificate of Origin and Quality, -- is being attached to a product of questionable authenticity, over an area much more extensive than that which it was traditionally associated, and with a possible loss of quality and reputation. Is the dilution of that name a degradation of the commons?

Perhaps a "tragedy of the commons" can, in this case, be avoided by clearly recognizing what are the common <sup>but elusive</sup> properties associated with a national park, and who stands to lose when the commons are inadvertently (even with the best intention of helping the people most immediately associated with the park) degraded.

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## ENDNOTES

1. In the early eighties LSE botanists brought over several seasons a team of faculty and students to PNMC to investigate the diversity of the grasslands of Covadonga and compare it to the already greatly declined diversity of plant life in the grasslands of the UK.
2. Cantabria, Castilla y Leon, and the Principado de Asturias.
3. "Cultural parks" as a concept was developed at the First World Conference on Cultural Parks held during the week of Sep't. 16-21, 1984 at Mesa Verde National Park (U.S.). See International Perspectives on Cultural Parks: Proceedings of the First World Conference, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 1984. U.S. National Park Service in association with the Colorado Historical Society, Publication no. NPS-D361. Publication date, January 1989.
4. The high precipitation of the area in combination with the sediments of limestone turned here on edge produce -- by dissolution -- the characteristic flutings, concavities, sinkholes, caves, and sharp edges of karst.
5. Catálogo de Montes, ICONA 1974.
6. Until very recently these grasslands were, by the park administration, not recognized as being a valuable asset integral to the park's integrity (Fernandez 1989; ICONA 1989, 1990, 1991).
7. Asturias has gone into an accelerated economic recession since Spain joined the EEC in 1986. Hence the region's planners are stressing the development of tourism as an alternate source of income. See, for example, the Guía de Asturias published just in time for the 1992 Expo in Seville.
8. The **vegas** or grasslands surrounding the Lagos de Covadonga, require the cyclist to climb from sea level to 1100 meters.
9. The Botany Department of the London School of Economics has repeatedly during the 1980s sent faculty and students to register the changing incidence of this diversity.
10. Patronato del PNMC Plan de Ordenación del Parque Nacional de la Montaña de Covadonga, ms, 1990.
11. Cangas de Onis, Ordenanzas de la Montaña de Covadonga, 1992.
12. Over a much longer period of time these shrubs would probably give way to return of the autochthonous forest. Patches of such forest -- beech in the uplands, oak, linden, mountain ash, and

live oak in the lowlands -- still exist and have long been valued by the park administration for their biological value and by the local people as browse for their animals and for fuel, even while they are being depleted.

13. Cabrales, a semi-soft blue veined cheese, like Roquefort or Stilton, is made in several of the counties that make up The Peaks of Europe, and is cured in limestone caves; its relative Gamonedo, somewhat harder and cured by smoking before its final cure in the caves, is made only within the counties of Onis and Cangas de Onis.

14. "Gastro-nationalist celebrations", work in progress for Natural History Magazine.

15. However the Asturian rural economy finds itself in an ever deepening crisis since its entry into the EEC, tourism is on the increase.

16. These dairies are receiving substantial financial and technical support from EEC, Spanish, and Asturian agencies because they lie within an officially designated "hardship" zone; additionally, some recipients get one and a half times the normal support for being situated close to a national park.

17. During the 1980s blue cheeses (produced with milk subsidized by countries in the EEC) were imported from other countries and fraudulently mixed with the local product to sell at the highest prices that only these "regional" cheeses could attain.

18. Consejo Regulador del Queso de Cabrales.

19. The Ministry of Agriculture recently ruled that the D.O. Cabrales may be applied to cheeses produced in a designated zone that is actually larger than the county of Cabrales, which for century has given the cheese its name.