

# Resistance and conservation in the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative: The complexities behind failed conservation

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## Abstract

At the end of 2019, the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative was presented publicly with the aim of creating an international ecotourism destination of 550,000 hectares located between the provinces of Castellón, Teruel, and Tarragona, Spain. In less than seven months, the proposal was withdrawn due to the high level of conflict it unleashed. Resistance to the project was led by different agents who defended cultural and linguistic diversity, traditional productive activities, and the production of wind energy in the region. In a context of confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, detractors used social networks and the press as tools to nullify it completely. The dispute was redefined as a territorial defense against top-down projects, a criticism of urban-centrism and a commitment to autonomy by local groups. The result of this confrontation meant the end of an initiative that sought to combine nature and local development through tourism in an area characterized by high rates of depopulation and a shortage of socioeconomic alternatives, but it also opened the doors to the consolidation of wind extractivism in the zone. This case study provides a detailed example of the socioeconomic tensions that permeate the implementation of a land conservation program. This article focuses on the analysis of the concept of resistance, avoiding a single simplified definition and focusing instead on the multiple dimensions of any process of opposition to an initiative of this type.

**Key words:** resistance, nature production, ecotourism, rural depopulation, international foundations

## Résumé

Fin 2019, l'initiative Maestrazgo-Els Ports a été présentée publiquement dans le but de créer une destination écotouristique internationale de 550,000 hectares située entre les provinces de Castellón, Teruel et Tarragone, en Espagne. En moins de sept mois, la proposition a été retirée en raison de l'ampleur du conflit qu'elle avait déclenché. La résistance au projet a été menée par différents acteurs qui défendaient la diversité culturelle et linguistique, les activités productives traditionnelles et la production d'énergie éolienne dans la région. Dans un contexte de confinement dû à la pandémie de COVID-19, les détracteurs ont utilisé les réseaux sociaux et la presse comme outils pour l'annuler complètement. Le conflit a été redéfini comme une défense territoriale contre des approches descendantes, une critique du centrisme urbain et un engagement en faveur de l'autonomie des groupes locaux. Le résultat de cette confrontation a signifié la fin d'une initiative qui cherchait à combiner

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nature et développement local à travers le tourisme dans une zone caractérisée par des taux de dépeuplement élevés et un manque d'alternatives socio-économiques, mais a également ouvert les portes à la consolidation de l'extractivisme éolien dans la zone. Cette étude de cas fournit un exemple détaillé des tensions socio-économiques qui imprègnent la mise en œuvre d'un programme de conservation territoriale. Cet article se concentre sur l'analyse du concept de résistance, en évitant une définition simplifiée et en se concentrant sur les multiples dimensions de tout processus d'opposition à une telle initiative.

**Mots clés:** résistance, production de la nature, écotourisme, dépeuplement rural, fondations internationales

## Resumen

A fines de 2019 se presentaba públicamente la iniciativa Maestrazgo-Els Ports con el objetivo de crear un destino ecoturístico a nivel internacional de 550.000 ha situado entre las provincias de Castellón, Teruel y Tarragona, España. En menos de siete meses, la propuesta fue retirada a raíz de la alta conflictividad que desató. La resistencia al proyecto estuvo protagonizada por diferentes agentes que defendieron la diversidad cultural y lingüística, las actividades productivas tradicionales y la producción de energía eólica de la región. En un contexto de encierro por la pandemia de COVID-19, los detractores utilizaron las redes sociales y la prensa como herramientas para anularlo por completo. La disputa fue resignificada como una defensa territorial contra proyectos impuestos desde arriba, una crítica al urbanocentrismo y una apuesta por la autonomía por parte de colectivos locales. El resultado de este enfrentamiento significó el fin de una iniciativa que pretendía aunar naturaleza y desarrollo local a través del turismo en una zona caracterizada por unos altos índices de despoblamiento y una escasez de alternativas socioeconómicas, pero también abrió las puertas a la consolidación del extractivismo eólico en la zona. Este estudio de caso nos ofrece un ejemplo detallado de las tensiones socioeconómicas que permean la implementación de un programa de conservación territorial. Este artículo se centra en el análisis del concepto de resistencia, evitando una definición simplificada y centrando el foco en las múltiples dimensiones de cualquier proceso de oposición a una iniciativa de este tipo.

**Palabras clave:** resistencias, producción de naturaleza, ecoturismo, despoblamiento rural, fundaciones internacionales

## Resum

A finals del 2019 es presentava públicament la iniciativa Maestrazgo-Els Ports amb l'objectiu de crear una destinació ecoturística a nivell internacional de 550.000 ha situada entre les províncies de Castelló, Terol i Tarragona, Espanya. En menys de set mesos, la proposta va ser retirada arran de l'alta conflictivitat que havia generat. La resistència al projecte va estar protagonitzada per diferents agents en defensa de la diversitat cultural i lingüística, les activitats productives tradicionals i la producció d'energia eòlica de la regió. En un context del confinament establert arran de la pandèmia de la COVID-19, els detractors de la proposta van utilitzar les xarxes socials i la premsa com a eines per combatre-la. La disputa va ser resignificada com una actuació de defensa territorial en contra de projectes imposats des de dalt, una crítica a l'urbanocentrisme i una aposta per l'autonomia dels col·lectius locals. El resultat d'aquest enfrontament va significar la fi d'una iniciativa que pretenia conjuminar natura i desenvolupament local a través del turisme en una zona caracteritzada per uns alts índexs de despoblament i una manca d'alternatives socioeconòmiques, però també va obrir les portes a la consolidació de l'extractivisme eòlic a la zona. Aquest estudi de cas ens ofereix un exemple detallat de les tensions socioeconòmiques que impregnen la implementació d'un programa de conservació territorial. Aquest article es centra en la anàlisi del concepte de resistència, evitant una definició simplificada i centrant l'èmfasi en les múltiples dimensions de qualsevol procés d'oposició a una iniciativa d'aquest tipus.

**Paraules clau:** resistències, producció de natura, ecoturisme, despoblament rural, fundacions internacionals

## 1. Introduction

At the end of July 2020, the Fundación Global Nature (Global Nature Foundation) announced its withdrawal from the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative. In just seven months, an ambitious initiative that aimed to create an international ecotourism destination in a region of 550,000 hectares was forced to withdraw in the face of frontal opposition led by several entities in the region that had garnered the support of both the media and politicians. The rise and fall of this NGO-led environmental project, offers a fascinating case for the study of the political ecology of private conservation in the global North (Cortés-Vázquez, 2014). The announcement of the initiative, which commenced with an attention-grabbing communication campaign via press and social

media, coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the first major lockdown and the lack of resources to combat the health crisis. While the initiative's promoters were suddenly unable to use face-to-face meetings to advocate for the initiative, its detractors successfully employed social media to disseminate and amplify their arguments until they reached their objective of paralyzing it.

The initiative, also called The Three Kingdoms by its promoters or The Spanish Yellowstone by its opponents, is an interesting case study for discussing the political process behind the creation of a conservation area that aimed to combine nature and local development through tourism in a region characterized by high rates of depopulation and a scarcity of socioeconomic alternatives. The initiative's failure resulted from opposition articulated by diverse sectors of the area. It used a top-down approach common in both conservationist and economic projects in rural areas, with an idealized conceptualization of what a natural landscape ought to be, but it ignored the local context and was perceived as colonizing (Bluwstein, 2021).

However, several features distinguished it from other such efforts. These features include the participation of international private entities in a proposal concerning nature conservation in southern Europe, a model of managed renaturalization aimed at economic development through elite tourism, a conflict between opposing interests from various extractive projects (ecotourism vs. wind energy production), and the role played by political powers in response to a novel land use program initiated by civil society actors involving multiple governmental bodies. This project embodied the landing of a quintessential neoliberal conservation project in the Spanish countryside (Cortes-Vazquez, 2020). The social movement that confronted and, eventually, derailed the Maestrazgo-Els Ports project was heterogeneous and complex, with multiple actors and moving allegiances that redefined the political ecology of the area in more than one way.

Beyond describing the proposal and the process that led to its withdrawal, we use the concept of "resistance" to identify and dissect the forms of opposition unleashed by different social actors. If one of the main goals of political ecology is to understand the actions of all the social agents involved in an environmental conflict, the term 'resistance', in a way, codes the narratives and actions of those that propose a counterhegemonic socioecological solution. This discussion will allow us to articulate all the factors that intervened in the abandonment of the initiative, as well as to highlight the modes of response of the local population to projects focused on nature conservation. On a theoretical level, the objective is twofold. On the one hand, with this case study, we provide a detailed discussion of the socioeconomic tensions that permeate the implementation of a land conservation program. On the other, by describing the emergence of a complex and heterogeneous counter narrative we introduce a reflection on the concept of resistance, avoiding a single simplified definition and focusing instead on the multiple dimensions of any process of opposition to an initiative of this type.

#### *Maestrazgo-Els Ports: The creation of a great nature destination in southern Europe*

After almost a year dedicated to prospecting different sites, at the end of 2019 the initiative was made public to transform a region shared by the Spanish autonomous communities of Catalonia, Aragon, and the Valencian Community into an international ecotourism destination. The initiative was started by Ignacio Jiménez, a biologist of Valencian origin who had extensive experience in private conservation projects in Africa and, especially, Latin America. His work as head of conservation for the Conservation Land Trust (Tompkins Conservation) in the Iberá National Park (Argentina) is one of his primary professional achievements. On his return to Spain, he proposed an initiative to apply his previous experience in Europe (Jiménez, 2020b), formulated with the concept of "production of nature" (Jiménez, 2018). The idea was to promote a process of managed renaturalization over a large territory in order to create a profitable tourism product (Jiménez in Ruiz, 2019). For the development of the first stages of the initiative (site selection, prospective meetings, search for local partners, formation of an initial work team, publicity campaign), Jiménez obtained a grant from the Wyss Foundation, a Washington-based non-profit organization founded in 1998.

The selected area met several requirements. Along with its natural assets (a large number of wild species: mountain goat, three varieties of vulture, golden eagle, roe deer, wild boar, and otter, among others), the promoters of the initiative underlined the existence of an important cultural heritage (such as cave paintings, Templar castles, Mozarabic constructions, dry stone walls, and mountain trails). The combination of natural and

scenic attributes with the beauty of its towns and cities was presented as a distinctive feature of the proposal. Thus, it was stated that "the Maestrazgo-Els Ports region is an area with the potential to become one of the great global destinations for nature and culture" (Jiménez, 2020a, p. 8).

The fact that the proposed area depended on a large number of governmental bodies (corresponding to three autonomous communities, three provinces, and 63 municipalities) complicated the initiative. However, in its favor, it had institutional recognition of its natural value that could constitute a basis for further development: two natural parks (Tinença de Benifassà in Castellón and Els Ports in Tarragona), a biosphere reserve (Terres de l'Ebre), and four natural monuments (in Teruel). Furthermore, 58% of its surface area was included in the Natura 2000 network (a European system of sites designated to prevent the loss of biodiversity) (Maestrazgoports.org, 2020). The demographic context, at a time of great social and political concern about the so-called "depopulated Spain" was an important argument in favor of the proposal: The low population density (fewer than eight inhabitants per square kilometer and a total of 42,000 people) helped to underline the natural dimensions of the landscapes while allowing the initiative to be presented as an alternative aimed at creating employment and boosting the socioeconomic fabric of the area, thereby helping to curb depopulation (Querol & Requena, 2021).

Alongside a low population density, the territory included in the proposal is marked, in the Spanish context, by low-income levels, particularly in smaller localities. In 2021, the disposable household income of its residents ranged from 10% to 27% below the national average.

To finance the start of the initiative, Wyss required the presence of a local organization that would endorse it and have the capacity to execute it, as had happened in Argentina (Ponzi, 2020). The Fundació Global Nature, with nearly thirty years of experience in environmental initiatives in rural areas in Spain, agreed to fulfill this role (although its later withdrawal prevented the initiative from moving forward).

The particularities of the process, that is, its ephemerality, required an unorthodox methodological approach to the research. The project was proposed, explained, and withdrawn in a matter of months and almost no evidence of its existence remained in the biophysical landscape. In addition, an important part of the hostilities occurred online between a very limited number of actors. The first phase of the research required a thorough and comprehensive literature review that would allow us to identify most of the documents that were produced, in print or digitally, over a very short but intense period of time. This included the previous work on the subject in Latin America by the promoters. This initial work allowed us to identify a significant number of individuals and institutions that played a role on the studied process. All of them were contacted.

During fall of 2023, we started an in-situ campaign of interviews with these individuals. These semi-structured interviews included the leader of the initiative, leaders of cultural groups, public representatives (mayors, protected area managers, environmental services), ranchers, environmentalist groups and NGO members, tourism entrepreneurs, and so on from the three Spanish provinces that would have been affected by the project. The interviews included snowball-oriented questions that helped us to broaden the reach of our investigation. Due to the level of perceived conflict some actors refused to be interviewed. The interviewing, however, continued until reaching saturation. Meanwhile, comprehensive archival research was conducted, and discursive analysis was implemented on all sorts of paper brochures, proposals, and the digital footprint of relevant institutions and organizations (websites and social media), press clips and briefings, documentaries, and so on. From a methodological perspective, this project benefited as well from the fact that the research team has ample experience studying other conservation policies in general in Spain and other similar, privately ushered initiatives promoted in Chile and Argentina. This comparative approach, even if not included here, was key for the development of the research project.

### *Chronicle*

The proposal was made public in January 2020, through the traditional press and a visually striking promotional campaign based on printed brochures and videos disseminated on the Internet. The declaration of a state of emergency and the subsequent nationwide lockdown to address the pandemic prevented the promoters from carrying out their planned in-person presentations and meetings to be held with representatives of the local stakeholders. At an earlier stage, the promoters had already shared plans for the initiative with those responsible

for regional conservation policies (the Minister of the Environment of the Valencian Community and the directors general of the Natural Environment in Aragon and Catalonia), and they had expressed generic support for it. From this point on, discussions with the regional governing bodies were maintained at a lower level (department heads and park directors).

Together with the municipal leaders, who identified themselves as the main interlocutors with whom consensus had to be reached, the promoters of the initiative recognized the need to engage in dialogue with representatives of different socioeconomic sectors present in the chosen area (cattle ranchers, tourism entrepreneurs) as well as other social agents (hunters' associations, environmental entities). Despite the preliminary support of some mayors in the north of Castellón, the few open meetings that were held reflected widespread public opposition to the initiative. This had been growing as a result of an initially unplanned campaign, promoted mostly by activists linked to different cultural entities and supported by some media outlets. During the first months of the pandemic, which amounted to six weeks of home confinement throughout Spain, a growing malaise was manifested through social media. By the time it was possible to hold face-to-face meetings, gatherings were dominated by people who had mobilized online in opposition to the initiative, with no room for an orderly debate. A robust wave of anticipatory resistance was on the move (Alena Saleth *et al.*, 2023).

In a few days, the Valencian Minister of the Environment and the main political party of the Valencian government withdrew their endorsement of the initiative (which had never been made public). The lack of political support and the strong social unrest reflected both in social media and in the few public meetings held by the promoters led to the withdrawal of Global Nature, which determined that the conditions were not met to carry out the project (nor to obtain funding from the Wyss Foundation, which was not interested in getting involved in conflicts) and, consequently, the definitive withdrawal of Ignacio Jiménez, its main promoter.

#### *Diversity of actors and regional dynamics*

Different regional dynamics manifested themselves throughout the project process. The positions held by political leaders and other social actors are not only indicative of the dynamics related to land use in each autonomous community (in accordance with their economic sectors) but are also related to the articulation and awareness of each community's civil society and its capacity to respond. In this sense, the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative did not generate debate in the counties of Catalonia that it would include. The possibility of an eventual extension of the protected area of Els Ports only met with some opposition among some landowners there. The explicit support of the Catalan administration, the natural park, and tourism entrepreneurs was minimally contested by some local associations that demanded more information and transparency in the process.

In Maestrazgo (Teruel), the debate focused on the compatibility of this initiative based on the conservation of landscapes and wind power projects that were about to enter a second phase of expansion. Most municipal officials, while they didn't explicitly oppose the ecotourism project, were committed to the guarantees of return offered by the development of infrastructures for energy production, which would generate regular income for local improvements. The population in favor of the initiative, on the other hand, did not organize itself or achieve almost any public prominence.

It was in the counties of Maestrat and Els Ports, in the affected area belonging to the province of Castellón, where the initiative was most controversial, with opposing positions and greater activism. With the development of energy projects that would affect the area in the coming years still incipient, the business sector and especially those organized around cultural and environmental associations showed open opposition until the initiative was withdrawn. In Castellón, local stakeholders suspected a hidden interest in creating a highly protected natural area that would limit activities in the primary sector or facilitate the acquisition of land for speculative purposes. They saw the initiative as foreign and imposed, especially because major international agencies were involved. The process generated open mistrust both because of historical grievances (see below) and because of the very characteristics of the project, which they feared would exacerbate depopulation, the lack of economic activities, and the unavailability of public services.

## 2. The idea of resistance(s): Conceptualizing compounded resistance

In this project we encounter a very complex phenomenon. The Maestrazgo-Ports initiative encompassed such a large and socially heterogeneous geographical area that the forms of resistance it encountered were of very different kinds. In a way, it could be described as compounded resistance. But, what is resistance? How has it been defined and how has it been used to talk about human history in general and social movements in particular? Resistance to what? As we will see, contemporary historiography has used the term "resistance" as a collective attempt focused on opposing change (Gismondi, 1988), because resistance, in the Marxian sense, is about generating emancipation (Anderson, 2013). In a post-structural world, resistance is about contesting power (Foucault, 1978) and about everyday practice (De Certeau, 1984). Everyday forms of resistance, thus, are a practice and, therefore, a social relationship as well. Everyday forms of resistance are relational, oppositional, and entangled with power, and they are intersectional and context dependent (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). Because the researchers involved in these discussions were focused on the modern era, the analysis has tended to focus on how the popular classes have attempted to tamper with, moderate, and counter the impacts of modernity and the great transformation, which consolidated the nation-state and the market as the main frameworks of social life (Polanyi, 1944).

The literature on resistance has a long tradition. It emerges from the attempt to divert attention from the monopoly on reality generated by hegemonic power and open the gaze to alternative —counterhegemonic— ways to define the social order. Scholars such as Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson focused on different types of social movements that were organized and often violent. Titles as evocative as Hobsbawm's *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (1959) and *The machine breakers* (1952), and Thompson's *The making of the English working class* (1968) explained how peasants were forced into becoming industrial workers and how they tried to resist, or how as industrial workers they tried to resist their substitution by machines. This approach studied the conflict around change as a clash between moral economies (Edelman, 2005), between hegemony and counterhegemony (Gramsci, 2011; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Later, James Scott, with his *The weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (1985) and *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (1990), brought Foucault into the discussion of resistance, so far dominated by cultural Marxists, introducing a compelling new avenue to this discussion. Sometimes the subalterns have so little power vis à vis the dominant groups that it is obvious that an open conflict will only result in a defeat and a bloodbath. In this context, resistance might take a much subtler approach, not explicit, including foot dragging, systematic misunderstanding of language or directions, and so on, what he describes as "hidden transcripts."

Scott's work created an additional debate as his approach seemed to conceptualize fairly homogenous subaltern societies, in which all members were peasants or indigenous individuals—with no intellectuals or leaders, no schoolteachers, artisans or local journalists—and who had very local agendas and little class consciousness (Gutmann, 1993). In the context of Latin American mining, Tetreault (2019) has studied social movements of resistance to mining with an analytical lens that identifies complex and shifting oppositional narratives that combine class struggle, ecological distribution conflicts, and what he calls clashes of cultural valuations over territorial vocation. The field of resistance studies has been shaken by the emergence of social media, which has the potential to magnify social impact and the dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate information (Khosravini & Unger, 2016; Neimark *et al.*, 2019).

In conservation studies, resistance is a key concept (Holmes, 2007). Different actors conceptualize nature differently and have different and often competing uses and goals for it (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Under this approach, conservation is an outcome of a political competition between actors with asymmetrical political power. This outcome is defined by the relative differential of power among the actors or assemblages of actors and how this power is exercised and studied (Shackleton *et al.*, 2023; Svarstad *et al.*, 2018).

Conservation has been characterized as a quintessential modernist and modernizing program (Escobar, 1998). Western environmentalism articulates the narrative that sustains the need for conservationism, for territorially based protected areas, the myth of wilderness, and the need to preserve a separated nature from the harmful human touch (Arnold, 1996). This trait allows us to circle back to Polanyi and his description of

modernity as the major transformation that consolidates State and Market as the overarching political and economic frameworks of the current era. On the one hand, until very recently, protected areas, for the most part, have been an exclusive jurisdiction of the State, which has allowed for their expansion over territories hitherto unregulated. In other words, conservation has become a classic territorializing tool of the State (Vaccaro *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, the conservation industry has played a significant role in the commodification of nature in its transformation into merchandise (Castree, 2003). So, resistance to conservation can easily be inserted into this long tradition of resistance to modernity that has been at the core of resistance studies from their inception (Chakrabarty, 2008).

Resistance was an early analytical focus of political ecology in general and the social studies of conservation in particular (Peluso, 1992; Peet & Watts, 1996). In fact, some of the changes in its governance structure and goals, from the early fortress approach to the participatory paradigm, have been attributed to the need to understand and adapt to the resistance (and the ensuing ecological degradation) that authoritarian and dispossessive conservation generated among local populations (Vaccaro *et al.*, 2013). As conservation is about transforming uses by altering jurisdictions, it has been a habitual target of property theory research as well (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). The focus of this research has been understanding the impact on local communities of the declaration of protected areas, with or without associated direct expropriation of land and resources (West *et al.*, 2006). This form of State territorialization has, of course, generated all sorts of resistance movements, overt or hidden, locally based or with international ramifications (Büscher & Fletcher, 2014; Kelly, 2011). The conflicts generated by conservation policies have also been examined as clashes between different moral ecologies, different culturally prescribed ideas of what uses or formats of nature might be right or wrong (Griffin *et al.*, 2019; Scaramelli, 2021).

The example we present enriches our perspective on the idea of resistance. The case of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative, we contend, is so complex that it provides ample evidence to complicate the idea of resistance. In the next section, we present the front lines of resistance to a conservationist initiative that brought together identity concerns defended by a network of individuals and associations via an intense Internet campaign, shouting matches in every public meeting that impeded dialogue, the silent but powerful presence of the extremely influential wind industry that was competing for the same geographical area, the differential margins and timing for profit that ecotourism and wind turbines have, and the small-scale lobbying of hunting associations worried about the potential expansion of protected areas. In other words, this article discusses how a fairly successful modernizing hegemonic political framework —conservation— was successfully counteracted by the unexpected emergence of a heterogeneous counterhegemonic discourse that was, in fact, the coalescence of an assemblage of variegated, often incongruous, narratives that ended up articulating a compounded resistance (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Resistance has often been described as either revolutionary and remarkable, or invisible and unassuming, as a consequence of intellectual cadres or as an everyday practice that is almost imperceptible. In this case, resistance, in order to be fully understood, must be studied as a complex phenomenon in which agency from disparate actors with the same final goal (stopping a conservationist initiative) but very different overall agendas coalesced out of seeming chaos.

### **3. The three lines of resistance that blocked "The Spanish Yellowstone"**

As we have explained, the geographical extent of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports proposal included a set of municipalities that, in many cases, are suffering from depopulation and a lack of infrastructure and services. In this context, there were multiple lines of resistance to an initiative that, at first, had been formulated as a tool to overcome these problems. The opposition was articulated in three main currents: a critique of the cultural and linguistic homogenization of the region; the rejection of the reintroduction of species and the increase in protected areas and large-scale tourism activity; and, more covertly, a competition with wind energy projects for land use (Figure 1). In these fronts of resistance, shown in the figure and then explained, "there were very diverse people, even ideologically", according to a member of a cultural association in the area.

The situation, the process, can be envisioned as a constellation of actors, ideas and initiatives that are in permanent and dynamic interaction (Figure 1). These connections, depending on their directionality, can be read as positive or negative, and, across time, have worked in favor or against the Maestrazgo project.

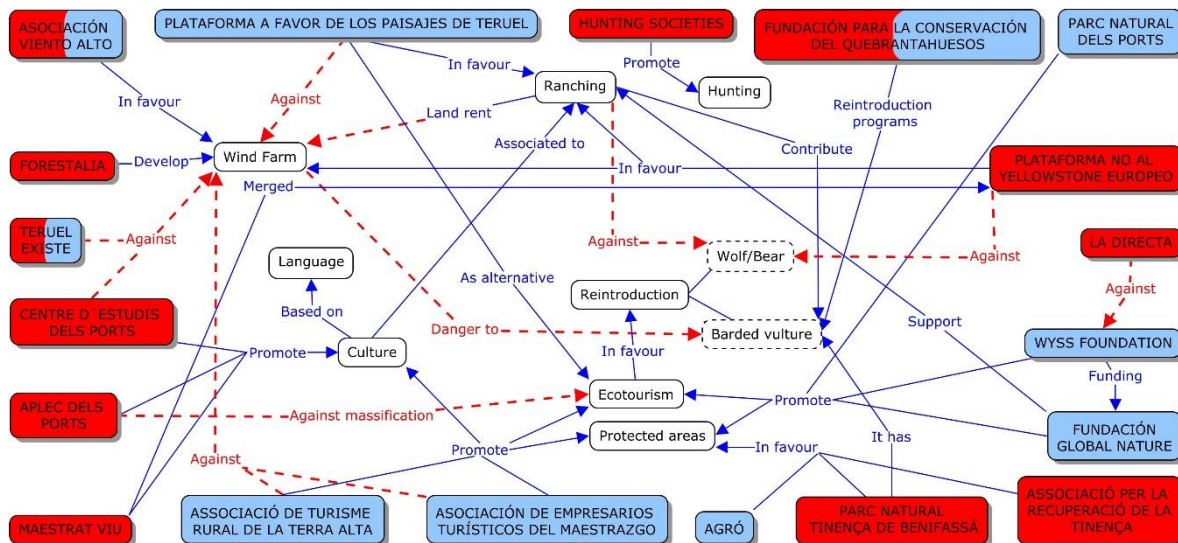


Figure 1: Agents and concepts linked to the Maestrazgo-El's Ports initiative. Source: Authors. Red boxes indicate a negative perspective and blue a positive one. The red color in the links defines a negative connection and a blue color indicate a positive approach to the relationship.

### *Cultural resistance: Language and culture*

In his first public presentations, Ignacio Jiménez stated that the space of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports was characterized by its "cultural coherence." This assessment was based on his dialogue with local agents on his tour of the area: "No one denied [that there was an] ecological and cultural unity. It wasn't an invention of mine [...]. Each of them [the local agents] felt closer to their neighbor in the other province than to [people in] the capital of their own province and much more than [to people in] the capital of [their own] autonomous community." However, the Maestrazgo-Els Ports region stands out for being a border between different languages, identities, and historical nationalities with processes that have had different effects in the three affected provinces, each belonging to a different Spanish autonomous community. The initiative treated the Maestrazgo-Els Ports as homogeneous, but some local actors, most notably in the Valencian Community, erected a defense of the unique cultural identity of each of its component parts.

This space is the confluence of the Valencian Community, Catalonia, and Aragon, three regions constituted as autonomous communities as a result of the Spanish Constitution of 1978. It is an area of encounter between Romance language varieties, including Spanish and several forms of Catalan (one of which is the northern Valencian spoken throughout the area). These languages have undergone various processes of expansion and contraction throughout history. Since the end of the Franco dictatorship, in the Valencian Community, two opposing groups have made claims about its language and identity. One group is associated with the political left and nationalism. The other group—linked to the political right, and the sectors of economic power—has a regionalist stance that claims that Valencian is a distinct language from Catalan. In not recognizing the existence of local linguistic diversity and instead presenting the initiative as simply bilingual, the Maestrazgo-Elis Ports initiative dispensed with this cultural complexity and thus unleashed a line of resistance particularly linked to left-wing movements that considered the initiative a homogenizing "agent" in the face of cultural diversity. In the words of an activist from the county of Maestrat, "They set themselves up



as linguistic managers of the territory; therefore, [as] acculturators." While the Catalan name "Maestrat" emerged during the Middle Ages, the Spanish name "Maestrazgo" was promoted during the Franco dictatorship to identify the district in a historical moment characterized by attacks on cultural differences and the attempt at cultural homogenization based on the predominance of the Spanish language over the other languages of Spain. The presumption that the initiative was aimed at the creation of a national park with land from the three provinces further reinforced this interpretation that the goal was to homogenize and acculturate the area. Because the protection of the area as a national park would span the borders of more than one autonomous community, it would favor the intervention of the Spanish state in its management, while undermining the powers of the three autonomous communities in nature conservation.

Valencian cultural entities and associations were the first to publicly oppose the initiative. Among them were Maestrat Viu, the Centre d'Estudis dels Ports (Center for the Study of Els Ports) and the Aplec dels Ports (see Figure 1). The first is an association established in 2011 for the defense of the language and culture of the historic county of Maestrat. Under the motto "Maestrat Viu" ("Maestrat alive"), the entity is concerned with differentiating itself from the Maestrazgo (Teruel), an administrative county and recently created tourist brand. This is one of the reasons why it mobilized against the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative. For one member, "The big problem is the name Maestrazgo, because they are going to assign us a tourism brand. Once again we are back to Francoism." From the perspective of its promoter, the name of the initiative "deliberately" mixed Spanish (Maestrazgo) and Catalan (Els Ports) as a strategy aimed at positioning itself. However, for the members of Maestrat Viu, the use of the Spanish name "Maestrazgo" evidenced a lack of knowledge of local history and a desire to make invisible the differential features of their county.

The Centre d'Estudis dels Ports was created in 1983 for the research and dissemination of the culture of the county of Els Ports (see Figure 1). According to one of its members, Maestrazgo-Els Ports was conceived as "an attack on the heritage of the county. So, we couldn't keep quiet." In the months in which the conflict dragged on, this entity maintained a very close link with Maestrat Viu and coordinated joint actions. Finally, the Aplec dels Ports is a social event that has been held since 1978 to celebrate the culture of the county (see Figure 1). The event is organized annually by youth commissions on a rotating basis among the ten towns that make up the county of Els Ports. In its 2020 edition, at the meeting held in Forcall, a statement was issued against the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative, denouncing its lack of transparency, local participation, and respect (Aplec dels Ports, 2020).

Beyond issues related to identity and cultural diversity, the resistance of the cultural entities of the north of Castellón was also rooted in the lack of clarity in the proposals. Local distrust was generated by the lack of a written document detailing the objectives and actions to be carried out (especially when the expensive advertising suggested that plans were highly developed). As one journalist warned, "There wasn't a proposal that was on public display, that people could submit objections or anything like that. That didn't show up." The semantic difference between whether it was a "project" or an "initiative" was a dispute between the aforementioned associations and the promoter Ignacio Jiménez. According to Jiménez, Maestrazgo-Els Ports was an initiative that had to be carried out through negotiation and consensus among the stakeholders. However, the occasional use of the term "project" suggested to detractors that there was a structured plan that was not intended for open display.

The movement against Maestrazgo-Els Ports used the lack of publicly available information to support its arguments (see Figure 1). The only public references to the initiative were those offered on its official website, which was limited to disseminating promotional information. Instead of an open process of dissemination and participation, the promoter of the initiative prioritized the idea of building consensus with public entities, through meetings with mayors, bureaucrats, and the Minister of the Environment. In addition, in 2018 the Valencian autonomous government had signed a framework agreement with the Fundación Global Nature, which could in theory cover the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative. In any case, the strategy employed was later considered to be erroneous by its own promoter, since "neither did they [the public administrators] know the area, nor did the area know them."

It is worth highlighting the context of COVID-19 lockdown in which a large part of the process took place, as well as the key role played by social media in the coordination and dissemination of digital information, as it was used by the resistance movement as an effective counterattack tool. Criticism was particularly fueled

by Ignacio Jiménez's meticulous analysis in the monograph *Producción de naturaleza. Parques, rewilding y desarrollo local* [Production of nature. Parks, rewilding, and local development] (2018) and his presentation "Maestrazgo-Els Ports: Using southern hemisphere approaches to create a great nature destination in Spain" at the 4th National Ecotourism Congress held in Guadix in November 2019 (which the initiative's detractors reported having found in their searches on social media).

The aforementioned book recounts the existence of a virtuous circle generated between protected areas, ecosystem recovery, and local development through ecotourism. Cultural activists interpreted the book as "a manual for manipulating an area to achieve an objective" and the actions of its coordinator as "an act of absolute arrogance, of contempt for the area and for the inhabitants of the area. He treated us with a lot of contempt, as if we were Indigenous people from who knows where." The presentation in Guadix was interpreted in a similar way, as Jiménez stressed that the key to the initiative was to target the international market of tourists with high purchasing power through the creation of The Three Kingdoms brand. In a context of struggle for cultural defense, the local collectives of Maestrat and Els Ports took offense at this branding strategy.

In short, and in the words of a member of Acció Ecologista-Agró (a leading environmental entity in the Valencian Community that had expressed initial support for the initiative), "The initial failure was not to have involved the active groups of the area, the living organizations" (see Figure 1). Similarly, a member of another of the associations that were most opposed to the initiative concluded that "the area's capacity to respond was underestimated." Accustomed to disputes about meanings and significance, these entities were active in defending their interests linked to cultural and linguistic particularities. Their symbolic counterattacks first took place through social media, and later through the press.

#### *Productive resistance: Ranching and hunting*

Another line of resistance was articulated by the ranchers and hunters opposed to the reintroduction of species, the promotion of international tourism, and the expansion of protected areas (see Figure 1). This resistance was mainly located in the Teruel portion of the initiative and, to a lesser extent, in Castellón.

Ranching has been an important regional activity in Teruel. From the end of the Middle Ages, sheep transhumance (seasonal movement of herds), wool production, and trade between the highest areas of Teruel and the lower areas of Castellón were consolidated. The circuit began to decline between the 18th and 19th centuries, influenced by the closure of markets, competition with other textiles, the decapitalization of producers, unequal industrialization across the region, and the scarce raw materials available due to the loss of transhumance and population increase (Castán, 2006; Peiró, 2006). The current scenario is characterized by a low number of ranches per municipality (as shown in Figure 2). A large part of the activity is concentrated in Morella (Castellón), with 179 farms, followed by Cantavieja (Teruel) with 59. These areas are dominated by extensive cattle farms, and, to a lesser extent, sheep and goats, along with some pig and poultry farms.

Among the problems faced by the primary sector are the difficulty in generational renewal, the lack of workers, low profit margins, international competition, and the loss of animals due to attacks by wildlife. According to one producer, "Now there are flocks of 200, 300 vultures. When they see a cow that is giving birth (or for whatever reason), they jump on it and kill it. They have become predators. In the past, that didn't happen." The ranchers positioned themselves against the initiative because it would supposedly reintroduce wildlife species, potentially causing further economic losses for a sector already in crisis.

As the ranching sector retreated, the Fundación Global Nature risked its reputation in supporting the controversial ecotourism initiative (see Figure 1). The foundation was established in 1993 as a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of nature and especially oriented to projects for the recovery of wetlands and transhumance. One of its members stated that "the foundation puts people at the center [...]. We became herders. We began to move livestock around Spain to protest that the livestock trails were closed." Global Nature does not adhere to the dichotomous idea of nature vs. humans but carries out projects in which the conservation of habitats and species is combined with the sustainability of the agri-food sector. Even though it was announced that the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative would give a boost to the primary sector, the proposals related to conservation (such as support for the bearded vulture program) were more specific, while the promotion of ranching was only given a very generic declaration of intent. For this foundation, the consequences of the

resistance of the primary sector were serious, and it had to carry out crisis management until it finally decided to leave the initiative in order to continue working in the rural areas where it has always carried out its projects (Fayos, 2020).

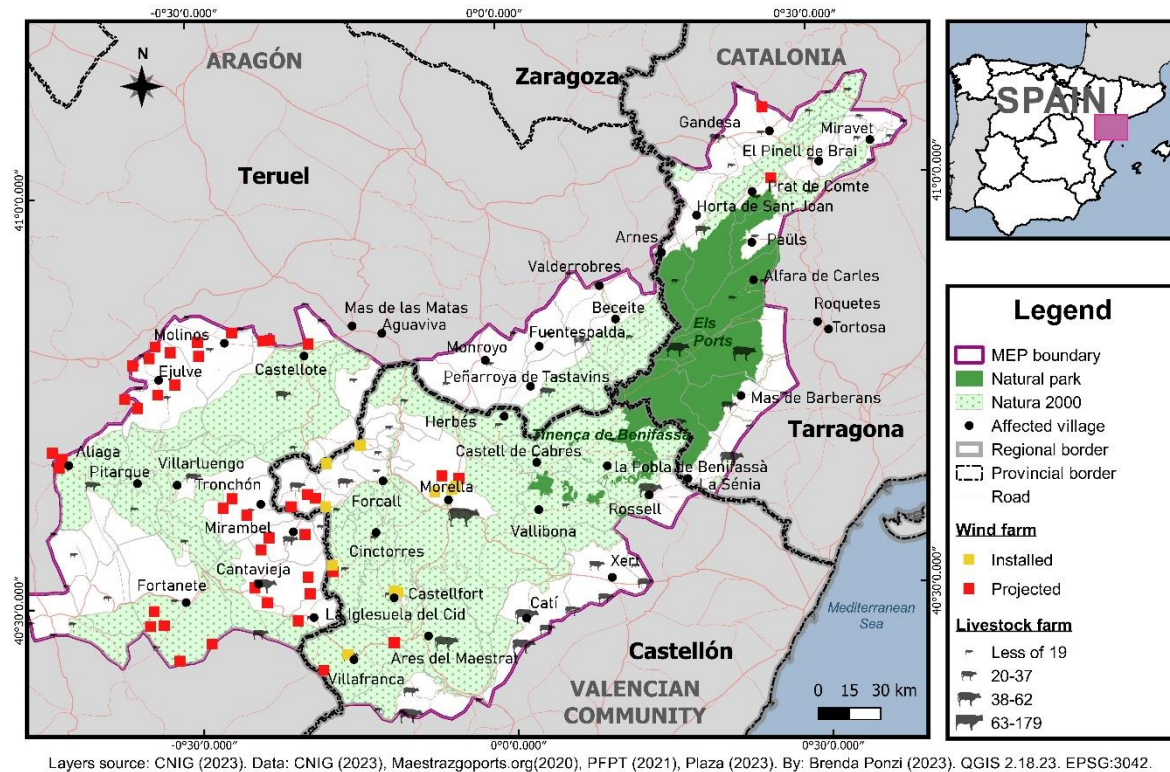


Figure 2: The Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative, ranching, and wind farms. Source: Brenda Ponzi.

Hunting is another important activity in the region, with hunting reserves attracting international visitors, particularly in the province of Castellón. The main species are wild goats, wild boar, roe deer and pigeons. Historically, hunting and ecotourism have been in conflict because during hunting season it is dangerous for ecotourists to visit natural areas. Precisely, the development of ecotourism was the main objective of Maestrazgo-Els Ports. In this case, according to a member of an association, "It was an opposition of people who have power in the area, who are mayors, who are presidents of hunting societies and who are a more conservative form of opposition." It should be noted that control over big game hunting is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people. The sector's rejection of the initiative stemmed from the fear of an increase in hunting regulations, a weakening of its political power in the region, and the possibility of being excluded from the initiative's direct profits (see Figure 1). "The people here are going to be in charge of maintaining these preserves so that others can hunt", in the words of an activist opposed to the initiative.

Consequently, ranchers and hunters were against the promotion of the region for international ecotourism linked to the reintroduction of species that would be attractive for visitors and the increase of protected areas, as proposed in the "virtuous circle of nature production" formulated by Ignacio Jiménez. This positioning, in part, is explained by the rejection of becoming dependent on outside forces, of being turned "into workers dependent on external tour operators. They're going to end up being practically enslaved", in the words of a member of the Centre d'Estudis dels Ports. On the other hand, other groups linked to tourism strongly supported the initiative, such as the associations of tourism entrepreneurs of the Maestrazgo and, mainly, of Terra Alta.

The ranching and hunting sectors interpreted the reintroduction of wildlife as a major component of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative. In reality, the initiative envisaged reintroduction only as a possibility. Thus, the interest and feasibility of locating some bison specimens inside a fenced farm belonging to one of the involved municipalities was considered. The opposition represented the reintroduction of wildlife—which was only a working hypothesis—as a key component of the proposal. For example, one of the journalists involved in the conflict said, "We saw that the bison thing is pretty common in the projects of these foundations." Soon, the supposed reintroduction would also include bears and wolves (which have become real threats to the primary sector in other areas of Spain), a position that was explicitly denied by Jiménez: "We do not believe that the region should be home to wolves and bears, as has been suggested. The region does not currently have the conditions to bring back these two large carnivores."

Opposition to the reintroduction of wildlife was one of the main arguments of the Plataforma No al Yellowstone Europeo (Platform No to the European Yellowstone) (see Figure 1) which took its name from the unfortunate comparison made by Jiménez between his initiative and Yellowstone National Park, in the United States, where tourism development and rewilding have become crucial (in his own words, that moniker was "the first nail in the coffin" of the initiative). Initially founded in the region of Maestrazgo, where fifteen years earlier the creation of a hunting reserve had been stopped through popular mobilization, the platform soon emerged as a unitary space in which entities from all the affected areas participated, from cultural associations to groups of ranchers. In this case, the opposition to the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative gave special priority to aspects related to the management of the area and to the defense of the primary sector. For the founder of the Platform, the initiative would mean "the disappearance of extensive ranching on more than 500,000 hectares, due to the pressure of the damage that all this wildlife will inflict on crops and herds [...]. Let's not allow them to turn Maestrazgo-Els Ports into a theme park" (Plataforma No al Yellowstone Europeo, 2020).

The threat that the initiative could have, as its main objective, the creation of a large protected area also worried extensive ranchers because of possible restrictions on their activities. According to a rancher from the platform, the aim was to "impose a protected area from above, regardless of the consequences it may have for the people." In fact, the previous existence of two natural parks and areas subject to other conservation categories in the area was used as an argument in favor of the viability of the initiative by its promoters. Without proposing protective status for the whole territory of Maestrazgo-Els Ports, the enlargement of the existing areas was considered a significant step for the consolidation of the initiative. The opposition, however, inferred from this proposal that the ultimate goal was to create the largest national park in Spain, which would decisively limit the productive uses of the land and its natural resources. In reality, a protected area of these characteristics would be difficult to reconcile with other assumptions attributed to the hidden agenda of the initiative, such as the reintroduction of fauna or the management of hunting.

The Manifesto for Rural Life promoted by the platform and made public on June 10, 2020 was an important milestone in the development of the process. With the support of numerous entities of all kinds based in the affected counties (neighborhood, cultural, political, environmental, trade union and agricultural, including even some companies), this declaration defended the political capacity of the population and local agents to define the future of the area. The text was essentially a plea for rural life and local ways of life against speculative outside interests. The crisis in the rural world has acquired great public prominence, especially through a discourse focused on its socioeconomic and demographic effects—that is, the absence of services, the lack of economic activity, depopulation, and the aging of the population. In this context, the defense of the primary sector has become a powerful argument for social legitimation. Thus, the aforementioned manifesto railed against "the will of outside interests", greenwashing, and speculation. Instead, it defended the local management of natural resources, stressed the environmental value of the area as a "result of the centuries-old interaction between human beings and the natural environment, a perfect symbiosis that has helped to preserve the landscape until today", and even supported small-scale landholding (understood as a local form of organization).

Despite the fact that the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative had a powerful communication strategy (and a promoter with great communication skills), it was interpreted from the outset by numerous local agents as disconnected from their way of life and interests and, therefore, linked to the benefit of outside actors and organizations. The promotional campaign for the initiative was launched without first engaging with the dense

network of popular associations in the involved counties, a move that raised suspicions. The fact that only regional and local politicians had been informed about the initiative and surveyed about their position further contributed to it being interpreted as an imposition, which local society should oppose directly. According to an activist from Els Ports, "We're used to an astronaut landing from time to time with projects like this [...]. They think they have the right to decide what people have to do in an area without involving them." In the words of one journalist, "These places have learned. They're used to having to manage their own land and their own lives. They expect very little from the government or from projects that may come from outside." The fact that the depopulation of the area was considered by the promoters of the initiative as an opportunity rather than a problem added even more reasons for mistrust. The founder of the platform stated in a newspaper interview, "They don't want to solve depopulation but to use it for their own benefit" (Tena, 2020). In this regard, the aforementioned activist stated, "Their vision is [that] of the land at the service of the city as a tourist destination. They don't understand that the villages have a life of their own, that if people leave the villages it's because there are no services, not because there are no jobs."

The press played a crucial role in supporting the mobilization of local entities, both by spreading awareness of the conflict among the public and by uncovering information through journalistic investigations (see Figure 1). Among these media outlets, *Directa* aligned itself from the beginning with the detractors of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative based on the lack of transparency and public participation and the damage caused by neoliberal conservation to local populations (Fayos & Pascual, 2020a).

With respect to the lack of transparency, the journalists of *Directa* contributed to elucidating the connections between the different actors involved in the initiative. Thus, they published the Fundación Global Nature's application for a grant from the Wyss Foundation, in which the objectives and success indicators of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative were detailed (Fayos & Pascual, 2020b). The funding request had been called "The Three Kingdoms of Spain: Establishing the basis for nature park expansion" and described the aim of establishing an international ecotourism destination capable of promoting the expansion of the existing conservation area and the recovery of species. Its objectives included the creation of a million-acre branded, tourist-oriented conservation area, the establishment of a suitable environment for the regional government agencies to expand the natural parks of Tinença de Benifassà and Els Ports (Figure 2), and the possibility of creating a new protected area in the Aragonese counties of Matarraña and Maestrazgo. For the local resistance movement, both the network of international entities and the existence of documents with concrete proposals gave reason for their distrust.

These same journalists also published their findings on the outcome of the conservation and ecotourism project promoted by the Conservation Land Trust in the Iberá Wetlands (in the Argentine province of Corrientes) and led in part by Ignacio Jiménez (Pascual, 2020). They contacted organizations in Corrientes (which the Associació per la Recuperació de la Tinença de Benifassà –Association for the Recovery of La Tinença– also did). The opinions gathered reinforced fears about the negative effects of these projects on local communities and their ways of life. The projects both featured large conservation areas (designed for the enjoyment of elite tourists from the global market) that prioritized the reintroduction of wild animals, at the expense of traditional activities. According to a Maestrat activist, "Unfortunately, [in Iberá] they found out firsthand the consequences of letting predators in."

#### *Energy sector resistance: Wind energy*

The third line of resistance to the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative was articulated, though less explicitly, around the competition between two projects conceived for the same spatial area. The geographical area slated for the initiative overlapped with areas included in plans linked to the energy transition, more precisely to the implementation of infrastructures for the production of wind energy (see Figure 1). Within the framework of numerous international and national agreements for the production of renewable energy (Kyoto Protocol, Directive 2001/77/EC of the European Parliament, Plan for the Promotion of Renewable Energies), the region had become a sacrifice zone for the deployment of macro wind projects (Castán & Sanzana, 2020; Scott & Smith, 2017). It should be borne in mind that the promotion of renewable energy must also be in line with other

regulations of the same level such as the European Landscape Convention and the Natura 2000 network (as well as regional land planning guidelines).

The new generation wind farms are made up of a set of wind turbines up to 200 meters tall that are located on the highest ground. Wind farms involve the installation of turbines but also the construction of infrastructure for evacuating and transporting the energy, both of which have a significant visual impact (beyond other disturbances generated by the activity itself). The owners on whose land the turbines are installed receive an income of €9,000 (US\$9,794) per year per turbine. This income is in addition to construction permitting fees and taxation on industrial activity benefiting the corresponding municipalities (which can multiply their annual budget by more than seven) and other types of compensation that are sometimes established for residents (such as low electricity rates).

The first wind farms were installed in the province of Castellón, around the town of Morella, in the early 2000s. The second push for wind energy began toward the end of the 2010s and has not yet ended, with a series of controversial projects in the province of Teruel (see Figure 2). One of them is the so-called Maestrazgo-Gúdar wind cluster promoted by the company Forestalia (a project transferred to the Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners fund in 2021) and which involves the placement of 125 wind turbines distributed across twenty wind farms and six towns belonging to the area slated for the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative: Cantavieja, Mirambel, Iglesuela del Cid, Fortanete, Villaluengo and Tronchón. With a total capacity of 720 megawatts, it is the largest wind project authorized to date by the Ministry for Ecological Transition in Spain. The authorization of installations with a capacity exceeding 50 megawatts is the responsibility of the central Spanish government, and as a tourism entrepreneur pointed out regarding this issue, regional and local governments "only have the right to complain."

In order to coordinate and reinvest the offsets of wind projects, the Asociación Viento Alto (Viento Alto Association) was created, which brings together a dozen municipalities in the province of Teruel (see Figure 1). Its objectives are linked to direct participation in the profits of the energy transition: "We are already suffering from the wind farms in the neighboring community of Castellón and all the wind turbines are on the border of the province. In my town there are nine windmills a kilometer from the ones in Castellón, [from which] I don't see a penny." The interviewee, the highest political representative of his municipality, was referring to the location of the wind farms since most of them are located on the borders of the municipalities (Figure 2). Some of the affected mayors became allies of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative because they believed that it would not endanger their interests. In a conversation with this interviewee, Ignacio Jiménez confirmed the compatibility between the initiative and the wind turbines while acknowledging that "wind power would have a very serious impact on the landscape if it were put in those areas." This contradiction was also part of the arguments against the initiative used in the other lines of resistance.

Wind energy also faced resistance from the association Plataforma a Favor de los Paisajes de Teruel (Platform in favor of the Teruel landscapes), the political party Teruel Existe (Teruel Exists), and the Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos (The Bearded Vulture Conservancy) (see Figure 1). Among their arguments, these associations raised the degradation of the landscape and the threat posed by the operation of wind generators to biodiversity, particularly affecting birds of prey. The biggest concern revolved around the bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), an endangered species that is the subject of various reintroduction and population reinforcement programs. The Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos preemptively halted its project LIFE Iberian Corridors for the Bearded Vulture, aimed at the reintroduction of fifteen specimens and launched in January 2022, in view of the danger posed by the turbines given the flight patterns of this scavenger. Some of the areas affected by the planned wind farms are part of the Natura 2000 network. The presence of wind turbines is not only a threat to wildlife (particularly birds) but also a disturbance and nuisance to the local population, encouraging rural depopulation. As one producer in the area explained, "Our neighbor, in another farmhouse, has them [the turbines] 40 meters from his house. He's gone. He's left the farm and gone to live in Morella. The blades go over his roof when they turn. It's just that in the end, economic interest here takes precedence over everything."

In this context, resistance to wind power became an ally of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative. Both the Plataforma a Favor de los Paisajes de Teruel and some entities in the tourism sector thought that the increase in protection would prevent the deployment of wind farms. In the words of a member of the Associació de Turisme

Rural de la Terra Alta (Rural Tourism Association of Terra Alta): "It would have been good if the [Maestrazgo-Els Ports] project had been carried out because all of this empty Spain would not be so empty. Maybe now it will be full, but with wind farms and solar farms." In this competition for space between megaprojects of different kinds, the Fundación Global Nature expressed a more belligerent attitude: "[It's] us or the wind farms."

Some of the actors attributed the failure of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative in part to the strategic importance of the planned wind farms in Teruel and the exercise of power by Forestalia, the main promoter of wind installations in Aragon. "They were telling us to pull out, that we had lost the battle because there were different hidden interests that were going to make that project fail." One interviewee added that "Forestalia is awarded the environmental impact assessments, it is awarded the tenders ... It owns the counties. It owns everything that happens." In line with this statement, according to an inhabitant of the region, "Forestalia will not be stopped."

This geographical area is strained by different territorialities that each aim to strengthen their potential and halt depopulation, while faced with the energy transition as an imposed project serving energy consumers concentrated in urban areas hundreds of kilometers away. This is a Spain emptied of opportunities, produced to respond to the energy demands of other regions. In this context, the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative ultimately failed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The confluence of the different resistance movements led to the loss of the political, financial, and logistical support that the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative had initially gathered, thus culminating in its definitive withdrawal. Undoubtedly, the confinement and restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the outcome, generating a perfect storm that doomed the initiative. The proposal had to take its first steps in a context that prevented dissemination through face-to-face meetings and events, which would have allowed for the presentation and discussion of arguments from conflicting positions (and would likely have contributed to exacerbating them). The opposition, on the other hand, benefited from the lockdown by drawing on the amplifying and connecting potential of social media. Beyond the events themselves and the terminology used by the various stakeholders, examining the opposition to the initiative provides insight into the implementation of conservation projects when local actors are not involved from the outset.

The promoter of the initiative, Ignacio Jiménez, arrived with credentials from his experience implementing projects in various locations across the Global South. Opponents of the proposal accessed the information generated in these projects and extrapolated their consequences, impacts, and narratives to the Iberian context. Theories about territorialization through private conservation initiatives that had worked in the South, failed to convince in the North (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). A local society with substantial capacity for organization, communication, and resistance rejected the project, promoted by high-profile private conservation structures in western Europe and representing the capitalization of nature under the guise of conservation (Büscher & Fletcher, 2014), the epitome of a neoliberal conservation that, with similar promoters, had succeeded, for instance, in Chile and Argentina (Busscher *et al.*, 2018; Holmes, 2015; Louder & Bosak, 2019; Ponzi, 2020).

The collapse of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative offers yet another example of a project based on an idealization of nature, the cult of wilderness (Braun & Castree, 2005; Taylor, 2012), that fails to understand the complicated socioecological systems and the cultural codes that existed in place. This is not necessarily because of a push back by a form of environmentalism of the poor (Guha, 2002; Martinez-Alier, 2002). This area, after all, is part of the countryside of a fairly rich western country. The resistance is articulated around rationalizations that emphasize the danger that the project presents to local autonomy and identity and to the integrity of an anthropogenic landscape resulting from centuries of hard work. This project was viewed as another external imposition that did not take into account local needs and demands, and that imposed (and sold) a form of nature that did not correspond with the historical socioecological systems of the area.

The Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative had some features that were unprecedented in relation to other similar initiatives. The joint promotion of natural and cultural heritage has been a frequent goal of projects aimed at the tourism market. However, compared to other small-scale projects aimed at domestic consumption,

in this case the aim was to attract an international audience with high purchasing power through the promotion of a large regional brand. The novelty of the proposal and its lack of regional references undoubtedly contributed to its identification as fundamentally a conservation initiative with a neo-extractive orientation and aimed, due to its commercial purpose, at the spectacularization of nature. The professional trajectory of its main promoter, involved in the management of reintroduced wildlife in strictly protected areas, seemed to corroborate this hypothesis.

The productive capacities of the affected area are undergoing restructuring. In a context in which the declining vocation of agricultural and livestock farming is leading the region to a progressive disconnection from regional socioeconomic networks, several options appear that offer a possible reconnection with national and international markets (Vaccaro *et al.*, 2016). Each of them (extensive ranching, ecotourism, wind energy) implies a specific social construction of the link between the human and the natural, as well as a different form of the commodification of nature (Braun & Castree, 2005): for agricultural activity, the region is a space for living and working (Cronon, 1996); for ecotourism, a place for the contemplation of authenticity (West & Carrier, 2004); and in the case of energy production, an extraction zone (Franquesa, 2018). In the failed implementation of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative, we see how ecotourism and the energy sector compete to take advantage of the social vacuum generated by the contraction of ranching, in a hidden dispute over the meanings of the region.

After the article was written, the approval of a wind farm project, on the Teruel side, by the Council of Ministers in July 2024 was confirmed, and the investment fund commenced its activities in the region (Civieta, 2024). In other words, the void generated by the fall of the conservationist project was quickly filled by the wind energy sector with one of the largest projects in the country (125 windmills and a productive capacity of 763MW) (Energía Estratégica, 2024). The negative impacts of the wind extraction infrastructures on the environment, local labor markets, and land value and ownership regimes are well documented (Franquesa, 2022). Environmental organizations are already organizing a new iteration of the resistance (Sánchez, 2024).

As highlighted by the resistance to the initiative by different social sectors, the implementation of a project of this magnitude becomes a difficult exercise in highly complex social contexts. Its own dimensions, justified by the need to create a powerful product that could compete in a highly competitive market, were specified in an extensive and heterogeneous region, with implications for a great diversity of stakeholders. Beyond the presence of various economic sectors (ranching, tourism, and services), numerous other actors played a prominent role in the process. These included the media, political parties, and local entities, each with their own diversity and different political attributions and capacities.

The existence of a cohesive, organized civil society, as well as the strength and entrenchment of political rights (in the face of proposals that do not satisfy a minimum level of transparency and participation) contributed to this complex situation. Other factors, stemming from the deep historical roots of local society, add complexity to the implementation of top-down projects. For instance, property ownership is characterized by small landholdings, with few publicly owned estates, while public authority operates across multiple levels, each with its unique checks and balances, dynamics, and conflicts.

The opposition that was generated, and the ways in which it manifested, offer a new analytical window for the development of the concept of resistance. In this case, there were acrimonious discussions, political maneuvers, document leaks, digital campaigns, and lobbying of all kinds. The Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative was faced with a multidimensional front of resistance with an extremely diverse constellation of actors, public challenge (Thompson, 1968), underground resistance (Scott, 1985), high-level political negotiation (Berry, 2015), and the use of connectivity as a digital and communicative tool for pressure (Postill, 2012).

The crisis in the rural world, especially accentuated in the area where the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative was intended to be implemented, provides new speculative opportunities to different economic sectors. In these counties, the alternatives to depopulation and the loss of quality of life that characterize it seem to be limited to extractivism (wind, at the moment) and the commodification of natural and cultural features (through the spectacularization of these as a condition for accessing sufficiently profitable market shares). In spite of the strengthening of political capacities and the promotion of initiatives arising from the local population itself, impactful proposals are formulated in response to external interests. Undoubtedly, social cohesion, forged



through resistance to an initiative judged by a significant part of local society as potentially negative for the future of the affected counties and self-esteem, nurtured by the withdrawal of the initiative, was strengthened. This is the most significant accomplishment to emerge from our research on this episode.

It is difficult to discuss the concept of resistance without revisiting that of hegemony (Gramsci, 2011). According to Nugent (2002, p. vii), "a general and marked acceleration in the 'globalization' of material forces and cultural messages has been accompanied by equally strong countermovements in which 'localisms' of multiple kinds have asserted themselves with great force." The case we have discussed presents a social context weakened, a priori, by depopulation and progressive economic decline. The Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative was presented using a series of narratives that have reached an almost generalized consensus in contemporary Europe (Fletcher, 2020): a hegemonic discourse that argues that the rural periphery is in the process of disappearing and that only the patrimonialization of nature and culture can offer future viability (Vaccaro & Beltran, 2007). This narrative turns nature into a commodity of primary necessity, generating well-being and communicating shared meanings (Douglas & Isherwood, 2021) and turns consumption into a symbolic way of generating—at the same time—culture, identity, and profit (Appadurai, 1988). The resolution of the case we present, with the withdrawal of the actors who in theory had more capital (economic and symbolic), speaks to us of the potential of counter-hegemonic discourses and of the importance of considering the textures of the microsocial for the understanding of political fields.

The unprecedented character of the initiative in this region—along with the lack of reliable information in a context of pandemic-related lockdown and the strengthening of social media—favored the articulation of this compounded resistance. The strategies deployed by the different affected groups forced the initiative's promoter to enter into a semantic, discursive battle. In this way, these oppositions not only disputed actions and meanings but also the very exercise of territorial power in the face of actors outside the region and a particular type of conservation project imposed from above. Was it resistance to an imported idea of nature? To its commodification? In some cases, probably. But, to a large extent, the dispute was re-signified as a territorial defense, a critique of urban-centrism, and a commitment to autonomy by various local collectives. The result of this confrontation meant the end of the initiative but also the reorganization of the community (through political mobilization), affecting the social fabric itself. The final irony, perhaps, is that the failure of the Maestrazgo-Els Ports initiative definitively opened the doors of this region to the consolidation of the wind industry, forcing the local population to adapt to living under its blades.

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