RESEARCH PROJECT

Marshes to search, recreate, socialize

PaCieRi – Wetlands as peacekeepers

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Participatory census of real and potential wetlands of the lower Vicenza province and its surroundings

Socio-environmental research of the course of Sociology of the Environment and Territory, Master Landscape Sciences, University of Padua, held by prof. Giorgio Osti, with the support of the research group Pa.S.T.I.S. – Padua Science, Technology and Innovation Studies, University of Padua

Introduction. Why the swamps

The research has an antecedent in the "Cantiere delle Acque" of the Province of Vicenza, which has seen visits with students, the organization of a seminar, the formation of a reference group and the preparation of a position paper.

The title "Marshes to search, recreate, socialize" is based on the search for a unifying and at the same time original theme in the Vicenza socio-water landscape, notoriously crossed by strong environmental tensions (floods, pollution, land consumption, desertification ...). The marshes, more generally the wetlands[1], have

[1] "Wetlands are areas of wet meadows, swamps, peat bogs or flooded areas, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with still or moving waters, whether fresh, brackish or salty" (A. Satta, Wetlands, FAI Scuola, 2018); Marshes, therefore, are a subspecies of wetlands, characterized by shallow, stagnant or slow-flowing waters, and by the presence of marsh vegetation. They also have a morphology, such as oxbows or floodplains.

almost disappeared from the provincial territory, yet they lend themselves to being a powerful symbol of a more balanced and fruitful relationship between local society and the natural environment. The exhortation 'to socialize' indicates a cognitive intent (to know more about the marshes), a critical posture (resocializing ourselves to the true sense of the spaces between land and water), and a choice of value (marshes as a common good, ecological heritage, source of collective identity).

The functional meanings of wetlands should not be overlooked. These are brought into play for the absorption of agricultural wastewater and nutrients; they are the subject of experimentation for the storage of PFAS, and are also talked about as rolling areas in the event of river floods. Finally, they are areas that embellish the landscape and, under certain conditions, can become recreational areas. All of this contrasts with the historical burden carried by wetlands, long considered unhealthy, sinful, unsafe, anti-modern, and even ugly.

Both functional and symbolic values are 'detached' from the lives of people and social groups, mainly because the inland wetlands have almost completely disappeared. Both a certain scientific research, which proceeds with its own rigorous experiments whose evidence is not contaminated, and the erudition of experts in the subject, who convey an idea of an abstract and inappropriate nature, contribute to the detachment. Therefore, the socialization of the marshes serves to familiarize people with the mechanisms of experimental sciences (*citizen science*) and with the canons of the artistic-literary and naturalistic world. The sociological approach also involves the processes by which technical-scientific knowledge and human expressiveness are formed, denouncing barriers that isolate and hoping for the creation of bridges between worlds. There are obviously not only social barriers and bridges, but also material and legal infrastructures; One above all is the extensive protection of land ownership which provides identity to individuals and groups but in many cases creates obstacles to the conservation and use of assets.

Alongside the conservation of relict marshy areas of the great historical reclamations, there is also the idea of considering the restoration of those lost or the creation from scratch of multiple purposive wetlands. This implies a triple role for the social sciences: to verify visions and consensus towards wetlands, to study compatibility with other land uses, in particular agriculture and livestock, and to see wetlands as infrastructures resulting from political and socio-technical choices (Silvast, 2024). It should be considered that already in the small Veneto there are several relic wetlands that are actively managed, some that have been reconstituted (such as the one nearby Cerea) and others that are planned, especially in the resurgent water belt.

Socio-environmental research

As the subtitle states, it is a matter of carrying out a census of existing and potential wetlands in the lower Vicenza province and neighbouring areas. These sub-areas with a greater agricultural-rural vocation, located downstream of large and widespread urban-industrial complexes, can obtain great advantages from marshes; at the same time, these areas end up suffering many negative consequences of upstream localities. In other words, there is a certain territorial imbalance even at the scale of the central Veneto provinces, all of which have their own “lowlands”. The marshes therefore enter into a delicate exchange of ecosystem services between upstream and downstream areas. The research is not so much on the ecological aspects of wetlands, which must also be investigated, but on how local societies mobilize for these areas, what is their perception and design capacity with respect to 'hybrid spaces', which come from centuries of reclamation.

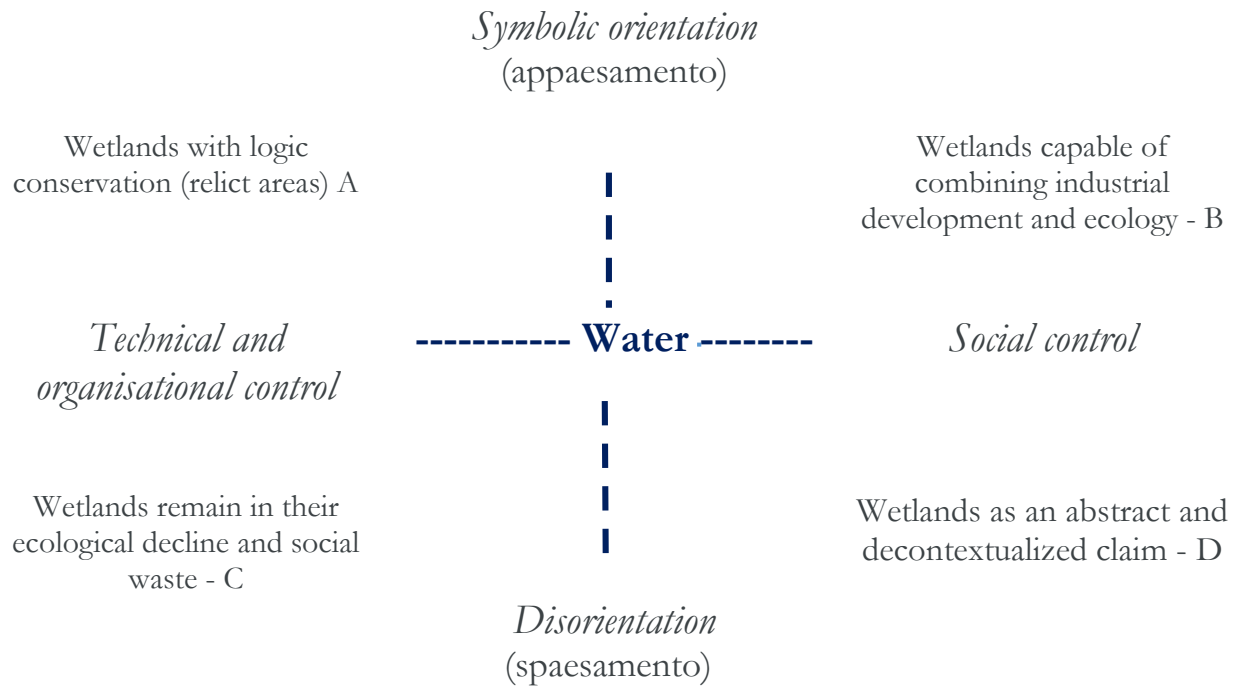
The methodology of participatory intervention-research will be followed, i.e., local authorities, social and environmental volunteer groups, and utilities will be invited to provide information both on the wetlands present in their territory and on those that could become so thanks to an enhancement project. The intervention of the research group consists in providing a stimulus to resocialize with the sense and value of

wetlands, i.e., with ecosystems that have an effective response or a potential for development in their own territory. Concretely, the research is conceived as: a) recognition of existing or potential wetland maps and projects; b) visits with local people of these areas, description of them with socio-environmental parameters (size, properties, uses, perception and potential....); and c) sharing with groups, associations, institutions and companies of the collected material and discussion on possible enhancements.

It must be said that the census will have to be very inclusive, considering not only wetlands in the strict sense, but also groves, hedges, *bocages*, permanent meadows, floodplains, oxbow trees, bends, bodies of water for phytodepuration. All these elements increase the amount of greenery, act as ecological corridors, make the landscape more varied, and certainly contribute to soil water retention, an intensive characteristic of wetlands.

The research framework, already sketched in the position paper, refers to two analytical categories: the need for social control over hybrid areas and the drive to consider certain hydrosocial assets as sources of symbolic orientation (*appaesamento*), i.e. rooting, recognition, identity. The two processes have a strong moral value, one in a generally negative sense – man's prevarication over nature – the other in a more positive sense, but with some ambivalence – territory as a source of attachment and psycho-social well-being. Here they are considered as tools to interpret the socio-environmental trends of the populations of the lower Veneto. They must be declined in their dimensions and exemplified in indicators that allow us to detect trends and dialogue with people, groups and institutions. For example, the dimension of remote control is exemplified in digital 'modules' that allow water to be monitored and in 'educational activities' that aim to empower residents. The combination of the two analytical categories allows us to identify specific cases of wetlands and their possible socio-ecological evolutions. The latter can become divergent research hypotheses (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – View of the wetlands of the lower Vicenza area and its surroundings according to the two chosen interpretative axes



Sense of orientation/disorientation and technical and social control are polarizations, which have their own theoretical background (Bracchi et al. 2024); they give rise to a continuum on which concrete cases are positioned. Often the latter tend to be located towards the center of the diagram (Fig. 1). The quadrants

identify static situations; their dynamics can be translated into research hypotheses based on theoretical reasoning. They are as follows:

A: no significant change is assumed; for the specific research area, therefore, no project to enhance the existing and no new wetlands.

B: projects, experiences and mobilizations are born; they go beyond the specific research topics and lead to broader meanings/functions for wetlands.

C: the intervention-research fails, at least in its purposes of promoting wetlands. Negative clichés about wetlands are reinforced, and social closure prevails.

D: the stimulus provided by the intervention-research generates only communicative noise and participatory procedures with no operational outcomes.

Quite similar outcomes of the intervention-research are therefore hypothesized; however, these have different matrices due to the different combination of socio-technical control and the possibility of new socialization in wetlands (*flattening*).

Stages:

- Identification of the field of investigation (first proposal): 12 municipalities of Lonigo, Alonte, Orgiano, Sossano, Poiana Maggiore, Asigliano V., Noventa V., Zimella, Cologna V., Pressana, Montagnana, and Roveredo di Guà.
- Contact with local authorities, agencies, associations, and individual citizens to illustrate the intervention-research.
- Start of the census of existing and potential wetlands:
    - Description of the physical, environmental and land characteristics of the areas, including use and ownership regimes.
    - Possible enhancement of the areas from all aspects: ecological, recreational, purifying, plumbing, etc.
    - Survey report: drafting of a research report, publication of papers in scientific journals, and dissemination.

Times

- July 2025: definition of search terms, possible partners and supporters
- 22 November 2025: study trip to Lonigo and Cologna Veneta
- January 2026: start of the research
- February-May 2026: Feedback from the intervention-research
- June 2026: Drafting of the report
- September-October 2026: public presentation event
- November-December 2026: writing of a paper for a scientific journal

Research group: Giorgio Osti, Debora Visentin, Pierangelo Miola

Bodies, associations, cooperatives and companies to consult

- Land Reclamation Consortia Alta Pianura Veneta and Adige Euganeo, ANBI Veneto
- Municipalities in the lower Vicenza area and its surroundings (see list above)
- Water utilities: Acque del Chiampo, Acque Veronesi, Viacqua, Acquevenete
- Associations, committees, social networks, press bodies

Materials and sources (in progress)

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Fig. 2 - Connection circuit between the municipalities that are included in the research

Fig. 3 – Research Area (in read) Position in Northern Italy