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Research paper

Assessing impact of forest cover change dynamics on high nature value farmland in Mediterranean mountain landscape

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Abstract - A general trend of scrub encroachment and natural forest expansion (old-field succession) has been occurring in the past fifty years in Mediterranean mountain areas. While this phenomenon enhances a series of ecological processes and environmental services, it may represent a threat for biodiversity conservation when occurring on High Nature Value (HNV) extensive farmland. These open areas, created by traditional farming systems, have been recognized as a critically important European biodiversity resource. Understanding the drivers of Land Use and Land Cover Change (LUCC) and their implications on the dynamics of forest and HNV farmland habitats plays a crucial role in biodiversity conservation in protected areas. In this perspective, the case study here presented aims to model recent (1989-2008) LUCC in a National Park of the Central Apennines (Italy) and to produce a mid-term forecast (2008-2020). In the past twenty years, 57% of the land uptake by shrubland and 46% by forest has been occurring on former HNV farmland. Mid-term projections (2008-2020) confirm further HNV farmland decline. Localization of HNV farmland habitats vulnerable to change is a valuable decision-making tool to tradeoff in protected areas the conservation of traditional landscapes with the increase of forest and shrubland areas. In this perspective, concrete socio-economical and silvicultural measures are outlined to preserve these socially and economically-fragile open habitats.

Keywords - forest dynamics, Land Use and Land Cover Changes, spatial drivers, High Nature Value farmland

Introduction

Mountain environments of Southern Europe host significant biodiversity associated to a landscape mosaic, characterized by a high proportion of forest and low-input farmland habitats, like extensively grazed uplands, alpine meadows and pastures. While the key role of forests in biodiversity conservation is widely acknowledged, it is only recently that open habitats created by traditional farming systems have been recognized as a critically important European biodiversity resource (Baldock et al. 1993, Beaufoy et al. 1994), gaining the title of high nature value (HNV) farmland (EEA 2006, Paracchini et al. 2008). HNV farmland designates areas where agriculture supports, or is associated with, either a high species and habitat diversity or the presence of species of European conservation concern, or both. In fact, many grassland and heaths listed in the Annex I of the Habitats Directive depend on, or are associated with, extensive agricultural practices, like priority habitats 6210* (Semi-natural dry grassland and scrubland *facies* on calcareous substrates) and 6230* (Species-rich *Nardus* grassland on siliceous substrates in mountain areas). About half of Europe's endemic species depends on grassland and declining trends in the population of farmland birds and butterflies depend very much on the loss of HNV farmland (EEA 2010).

The landscape mosaic of forest and open habitats associated to extensive agriculture was relatively stable in Southern Europe until the 1950s. Since then, rapid changes in land use (intensification of agriculture, urbanisation, land abandonment and movement towards urban areas) has led to the widespread collapse of the socio-economic systems that supported these economically fragile farming systems.

The decrease of agricultural and pasture activities has determined the progressive colonization of grassland and agricultural lands by shrubland and forest. Moreover, the abandonment of management of trees outside forest in agricultural areas resulted in their spatial aggregation and the creation of new forest patches. In Mediterranean areas this general trend of scrub encroachment and natural forest expansion has been clearly documented in the past fifty years (Tatoni et al. 1994, Debussche et al. 1996, Bonet 2004, Pugnaire et al. 2006, Corona et al. 2008, Barbati et al. 2013). This phenomenon, also known as old-field succession, on one hand enhances a series of ecological processes and environmental

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services, but on the other hand may represent a threat for biodiversity conservation, when occurring on HNV farmland. The disappearance of cultural landscapes with a consequent increase of woodland cover is partially causing the decline of open habitats and associated species in the Mediterranean Basin (Finck et al. 2002, Mazzoleni et al. 2004, Bracchetti et al. 2012).

Understanding the drivers of Land Use and Land Cover Change (LUCC) and their implications on the dynamics of forest and HNV farmland habitats plays a crucial role in biodiversity conservation in protected areas. In this context, the development of robust models to project future LUCC might represent a valuable decision-making supporting tool to outline natural habitats vulnerable to change and to target land planning measures. According to this perspective, in this paper we present a case study in the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park (PNGSML), a high conservation value area, containing 32 Sites of Community Importance (SCI; Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC). The whole area is also recognized as Special Protection Area (SPA; Birds Directives 79/409/EEC).

The objectives of this study are: (i) to quantify the LUCC in the PNGSML focusing on recent dynamics of forest and shrubland expansion (period 1989-2008) and the related impacts on HNV farmland; (ii) to understand driving forces of the LUCC in the investigated area; (iii) to apply a LUCC model to predict future land cover scenario in order to identify areas and habitats most prone to LUCC in the upcoming decades.

Materials and methods

Study area and land cover history

PNGSML was established in 1995 and has become one of the largest protected areas in Italy. It spans over 143,300 ha in the Apennines mountains of central Italy (42° 10’ N - 42° 50’N, 13° 10’ E - 13° 16’ E). Its elevation ranges from 225 to 2,908 m above sea level with an average elevation of 1,300 m above sea level (Fig. 1).

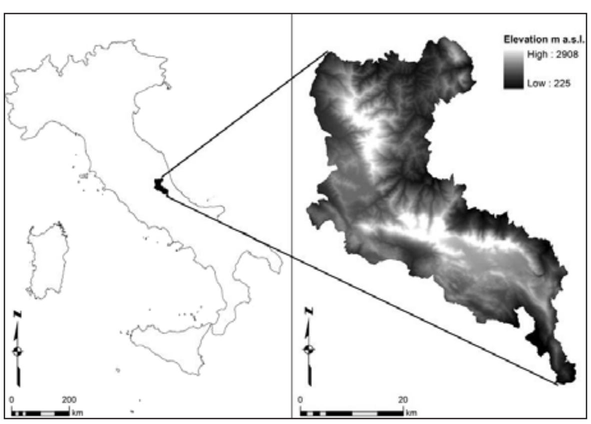

Figure 1 - Location of study area, the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park (PNGSML) in Central Apennines.

Table 1 - Park zoning of PNGSML

	Park zoning	Proportion of total PNGSML area (%)
A	strict nature reserve	11
B	general reserve with traditional sustainable use of natural resources by residents	41
C	protected landscape where new tourism, farming, pastoral and forestry activities may be permitted	39
D	economic and social promotion areas	9

Woodlands can be classified into six forest types: (i) beech forest (the dominant tree vegetation in the area), (ii) oak forest, (iii) hornbeams forest, (iv) chestnut forest, (v) mixed forest (which includes *Abies alba* remnants), (vi) riparian forest. HNV habitats are mainly represented by grassland notably priority habitats (Dir. 92/43/CEE) 6210* (Semi-natural dry grassland and shrubland *facies* on calcareous substrates) and 6230* (Species-rich *Nardus* grassland). According to the National Law on protected areas in Italy, Park zoning represents the main planning tool to pursue management objectives and to reconcile potential conflicts through a regulation of land use activities: zones vary from the strict level of protection (A Zone) to areas supporting sustainable land use activities (D Zone) (Tab. 1).

In the case of PNGSML, promoting local sustainable development becomes a key management issue also for the conservation of grassland, maintained by traditional pastoral activity. Like in other areas of the Apennines, the socioeconomic structure has been considerably altered after World War II. The population of mountain villages dropped greatly up to the first half of 1960s (Catorci 2007), while the inhabitants in the town of L’Aquila increased until 1970 and then stabilized. Today, the number of inhabitants living inside the PNGSML boundaries is 12% of the total population (137,635) of the 44 municipalities of the Park (ISTAT 2011).

Multi-temporal database and ancillary data

A summary of datasets processed for the study area is reported in Tab. 2. LUCC in the period 1989-2008 has been analyzed on the basis of high resolution land cover maps (minimum mapping unit: 0.5 ha) derived by visual interpretation of orthophotos images. Three broad land cover classes were adopted for mapping land cover in the considered period (1989-2008): (i) forest, (ii) shrubland, (iii) non-forest area. Forest and shrubland were classified according

Table 2 - Statistics of land use and land cover datasets used in the case study.

Year	Land cover datasets	Minimum mapping unit (ha)
1989	Land cover map from digital B/W orthophoto (TERRAITALY 1988/89)	0.5
1990	CLC	25
2006	CLC	25
2008	Land cover map from digital color) orthophoto (TERRAITALY 2008	0.5
2010	Land cover map from digital color orthophoto (Abruzzo Region)	0.5

to FAO/FRA2000 definition (UN/FAO 2001); non-forest class includes agricultural land, fallow land, grassland, bare ground and rocks, and settlements.

Besides the two maps at the year 1989 and at the year 2008 over the whole PNGSML territory, a third reference map, used as independent validation set, was also derived by the same method, to classify the land cover at 2010 for L'Aquila province territory included in PNGSML. To detect links between LUCC processes and the loss of HNV farmland, the Corine Land Cover (CLC) datasets (years 1990 and 2006) have been used to assess, on a coarser spatial scale, the distribution of HNV farmland in the PNGSML at the beginning and at the end of the reference period adopted for analyzing LUCC (1989-2008), following the methodology proposed by Paracchini et al. (2008).

The multi-temporal land cover databases were integrated with georeferenced ancillary information (Tab. 3). Spatial information on physiographic attributes (elevation, slope, aspect) was derived from the Digital Elevation Model (DEM, 20 m geometrical resolution). Road network was drawn from official cartographic sources provided by the PNGSML, urban areas were extracted from 2006 CLC map. As census observations indicate that population density in the study area was nearly stable during the investigated period (ISTAT 2011), inhabitants density at Municipality level for 1989 was used as reference data in this study. All spatial data were transformed to raster format with 20 m spatial resolution to match the DEM raster grid.

Forest cover change and future scenario

The integrated module of IDRISI Taiga Land Change Modeler (LCM) (Clark Labs, 2009) was used to model LUCC in the investigated period (1989-2008) and to predict a future scenario according to the steps showed in Fig. 2.

The LCM aggregates a Multi-layer Perceptron (MLP) and Markov Chains Analysis (MCA) for time prediction. The MLP neural network algorithm returns potential transition maps of each land cover class (Eastman 2009) modelling all transitions at once. The potential transition model serves as the basis for the future scenario of forest cover using a MCA. This process calculates the conditional probability of the state of a system at a given time (time t), based on the state of the system at the previous time (time t_0, with $t_0 < t$) (Reddy et al. 2009).

We assumed that (i) future LUCC dynamics (2008-2020) follows the same trend of the past twenty years (1989-2008), (ii) the changes in forest/shrubland cover most likely occur in areas close and/or adjacent to areas affected by recent changes. LCM has been run twice in this study: first to produce a short-term LUCC forecast (2010) and second to produce a mid-term forecast (2020).

The accuracy of the land cover forecast map at year 2010 was assessed by comparison with the reference map at the year 2010 for the L'Aquila province territory. Accordingly, a matrix of classification errors, Overall Accuracy (OA) index and Kappa Index of Agreement (KIA) were calculated; the Accuracy of User (AU) and the Producer (AP) were also estimated for each class (Congalton 1991).

Predictions of LUCC scenario for the year 2020 were processed in a hard prediction map to show the estimated spatial distribution of land cover classes according to results of the MCA.

Drivers of LUCC

The spatial pattern of areas affected by forest and shrubland expansion was analysed according to the set of independent spatial drivers (Tab. 1 and Tab. 3): (i) physiographic variables (aspect, elevation, slope); (ii) demographic variable (population density); (iii) distance variables, i.e. Euclidean distances between areas affected by LUCC and elements such as roadway infrastructure, town/village centres and forest edges; (iv) PNGSML zones.

A change/persistence density analysis was carried out to identify the spatial drivers most related to the spatial pattern of forest and shrubland expansion. The method is based on spatial overlay of change/persistence maps with the set of spatial drivers. Change/persistence maps were derived as

Table 3 - Statistics of spatial drivers datasets used in the case study.

Spatial drivers	Source	Unit	Mean	Coefficient of variation
slope	DEM	%	42.1	0.66
elevation	DEM	m	1,281	0.31
aspect	DEM	cosine	0.03	23.6
		sine	-0.004	177
population density	ISTAT	inhab. ha^{-1}	0.32	1.5
distance from town/village center	CLC	m	4,759	0.64
distance from road	PNGML	m	777	0.81
distance from forest edge	2008 land cover map	m	149	2.23

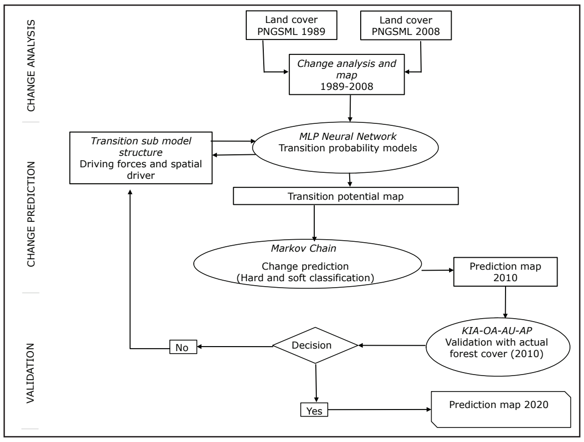

Figure 2 - Flow chart of the LUCC analysis.

Boolean raster pictures plotting the non-forest areas at the year 1989 converted to forest or shrubland at the year 2008 (change) and the remaining stable ones (persistence). The spatial overlay of the change/persistence maps with the geospatial ancillary information allowed to calculate the density of change or persistence by single spatial drivers, as follows:

$$d = \frac{r_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} r_i} \qquad [1]$$

where d is density of change, r_i is the ratio between the area occupied by change and the whole surface in the i-th class of the considered independent variable and n is the total number of classes. Such an analysis allows comparing, by independent spatial drivers, the relative proportion of areas affected by changes and the remaining stable ones.

Results

LUCC and loss of HNV farmland

Land cover change in the past twenty years occurred in 4,871 ha of the PNGSML territory, corresponding to 3.4% of total area (Tab. 4). Forest spreading is the most relevant LUCC process, occurring on the 2.1% of the area; shrubland encroachment occurred on 1.2%. Forest spreading is mainly due to the evolution of areas covered by shrubland in 1989 into forest habitats (1.5% of the territory), thus causing a slight decline of shrubland habitats (-0.34%). Non-forest land cover classes affected by forest and shrubland expansion in the period 1989-2008 are identified by spatial overlay of the high resolution 2008 land cover map with 1990 CLC map (Tab. 5). A significant proportion of non/forest areas colonized by shrubland and forest (57% and 46%, respectively) were located in HNV farmland in 1990, to a large extent represented by grassland.

Table 4 - Transition matrix of LUCC from the year 1989 to the year 2008 (values expressed as percentage of the PNGSLM territory).

Land cover class		2008 shrubland	2008 forest	2008 non-forest
1989	*shrubland*	7.30	1.44	0.08
	forest	0.01	50.83	0.01
	non-forest	1.17	0.69	38.47
	total change	-0.34	2.11	-1.77

Table 5 - Land uptake by shrubland and forest in the period 1989-2008 by HNV and other land use classes.

		Shrubland		Forest	
	Land cover class	**ha**	**% of total land uptake**	**ha**	**% of total land uptake**
HNV farmland	olive groves	1.1	0.07	2.8	0.29
	pastures	17.2	1.03	23.8	2.39
	complex cultivation patterns	12.2	0.73	10.6	1.06
	lands principally occupied by agriculture	165.7	9.90	122.6	12.30
	natural grassland	749.4	44.80	290.4	29.14
	moors and heatland	2.3	0.14	3.5	0.35
	total of HNV land use classes	*947.9*	*56.66*	*453.7*	*45.54*
Other land use classes	discontinous urban fabrics	0.3	0.02	-	-
	arable lands	67.6	4.04	44.2	4.44
	broad-leaved forests	371.6	22.21	370.6	37.20
	coniferous forests	15.8	0.95	13.4	1.34
	mixed forests	7.6	0.46	30	3.01
	transitional woodland-shrubs	234.4	14.01	79.6	7.99
	bare rocks	6.2	0.37	0.04	0.00
	sparsely vegetated areas	21.5	1.29	4.7	0.48
	water bodies	0.05	0.00	-	-
	total of other land use classes	*725.1*	*43.34*	*542.5*	*54.46*

Characterization of forest cover change according to spatial drivers

Change/persistence density statistics by environmental spatial drivers are shown by Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. Forest and shrubland expansion occurred mainly on elevations below 1,000 m, with a low slope gradient (< 40%). Distance-related variables show that change was higher near the edge of forest (≤ 500 m) and near the roads (≤ 500 m). Aspect and proximity to urban settlements have a less clear effect. However, much change (40%) occurs in the neighbourhood of villages (distinctively, within the first 3 km). Concerning functional zoning of PNGSML, the areas corresponding to strict and integral protection (zone A and zone B) are more stable compared to the C and D zones.

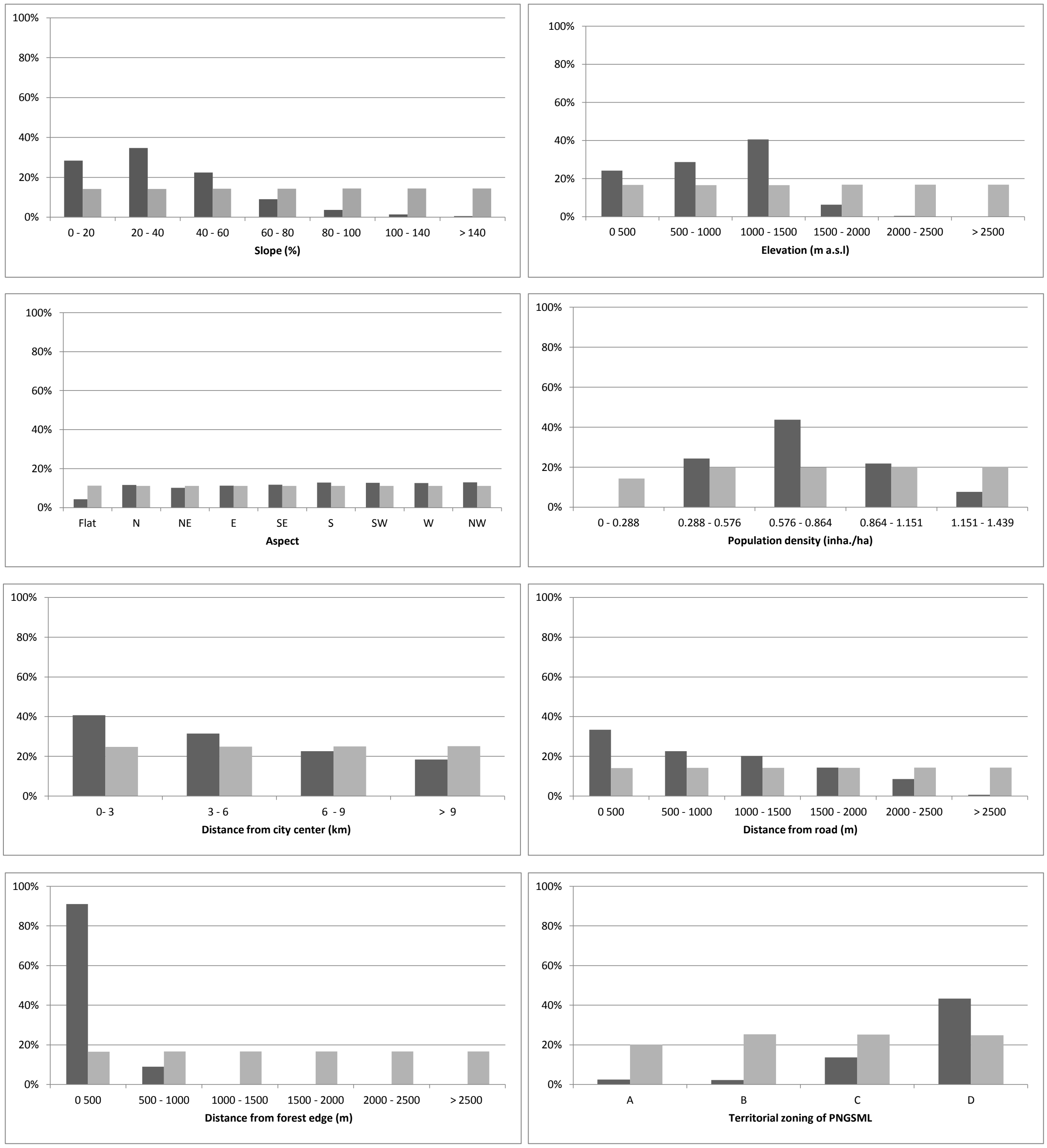

Figure 3 - Density (y-axis, values expressed as percentage) of change from non-forest areas to shrubland (dark grey) and no-change areas and other transitions (light grey) with respect to the considered spatial drivers. Data for the continuous variables (elevation, slope, aspect, density, distance from town/village center, distance from road and from forest edge) are shown by class intervals (x-axis).

Location and forest cover scenario

The transition probability matrix of LUCC in the period 2008-2010 is shown in Tab. 6. The diagonal cells represent the probability for a given land cover class to remain stable, whereas the off-diagonal values indicate the probability of a change from one land cover class to another. Results of the accuracy assessment of the model prediction at year 2010 are highly satisfactory (KIA and OA index > 0.99), as reported in Tab. 7.

The PNGSML areas prone to change cover class have been identified (Fig. 5) by projecting the transition potential observed in the period 1989-2008 into the future (year 2020), based on the transition probability matrix shown in Tab. 8. The projected landscape is characterized by an increase in forest areas and a persistence of shrubland (Tab. 9). Most non-forest land projected to be colonized by shrubland and forest in the period 2008-2020 is localized on areas currently covered by HNV farmland, 42% and 36% respectively (Tab. 10).

Discussion

LUCC analysis in the PNGSML territory reveals a general trend from 1989 to 2008 characterized by a continuous increase in forest cover, confirming the trend documented over Mediterranean Europe

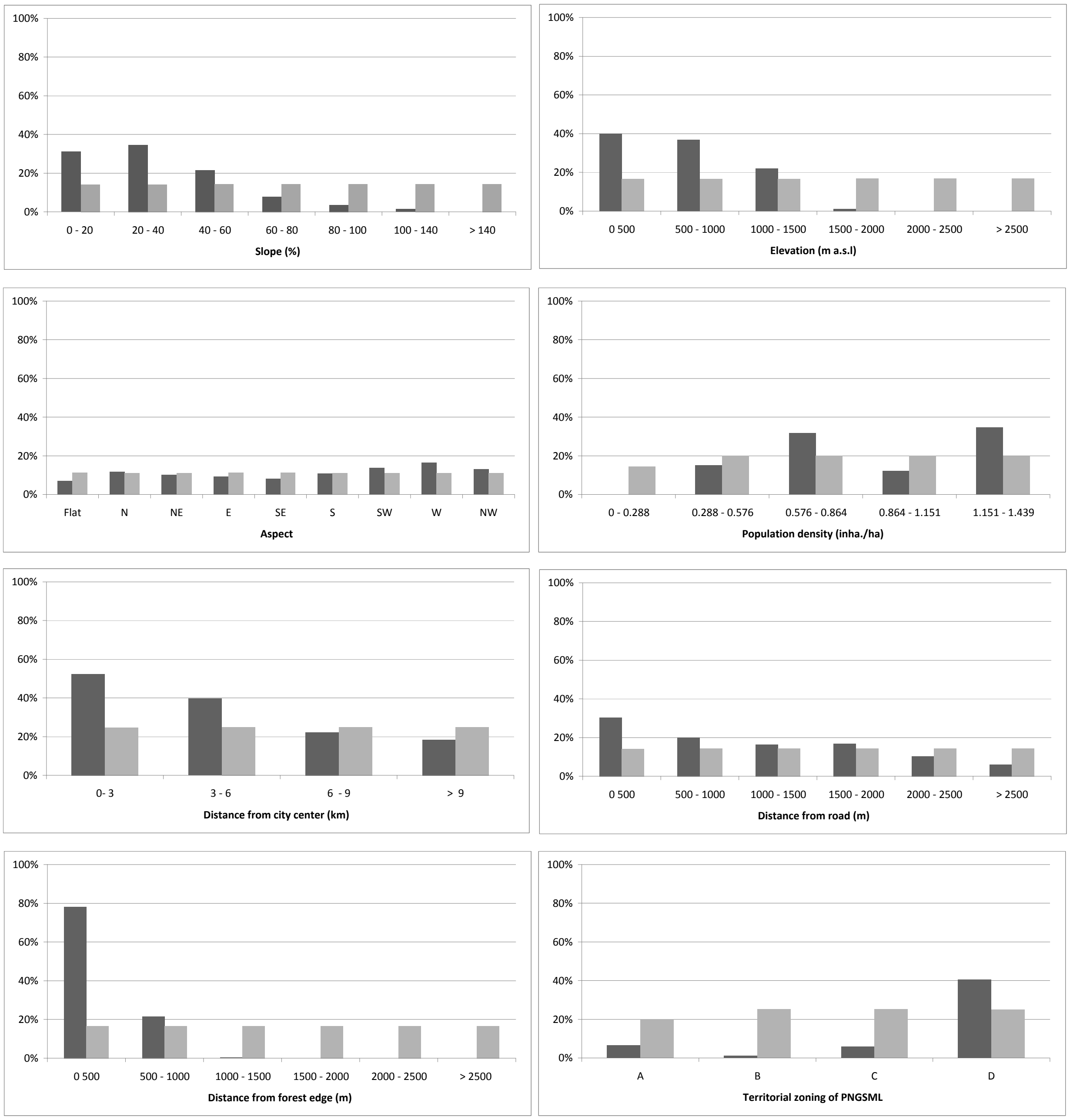

Figure 4 - Density (y-axis, values expressed as percentage) of change from non-forest areas to forest (dark grey) and no-change areas and other transitions (light grey) with respect to the considered spatial drivers. Data for the continuous variables (elevation, slope, aspect, density, distance from town/village center, distance from road and from forest edge) are shown by class intervals (x-axis).

since the early 1950s (Moreira et al. 2011). These observations indicate that a period of 19 years is sufficient for tree canopy closure from scattered trees in farmland and for the evolution of shrubland into forest. On one hand, this value is compatible with those reported by Bracchetti et al. (2012); on the other hand, our results also suggest that the considered period is sufficient for forest vegetation to colonize the most suitable sites.

Natural forest expansion produces complex and far reaching effects on rural environment: it brings production of direct and indirect benefits, mainly related to the reduction of water runoff and soil erosion (Garcia Ruiz et al. 1996, Tasser et al. 2003), the control of sediment yield (Boix-Fayos et al. 2008), the improvement of soil properties (Seeber and Seeber 2005), and the increase of presence of large vertebrates (Falcucci et al. 2007). Therefore, an enlargement of forest land is usually expected to provide the increase of ecosystem services. Conversely, this phenomenon can cause a sensible decrease of HNV farmland, including high value grassland as in this case study, which are extremely important to preserve rare plants and feeding habitats of many birds, and to maintain landscape

Table 6 - Markov transition probabilities for the period 2008-2010 derived by the 1989-2008 change analysis.

Land cover class	shrubland	forest	non-forest
shrubland	0.976	0.023	0.001
forest	0.000	0.999	0.001
non-forest	0.004	0.001	0.995

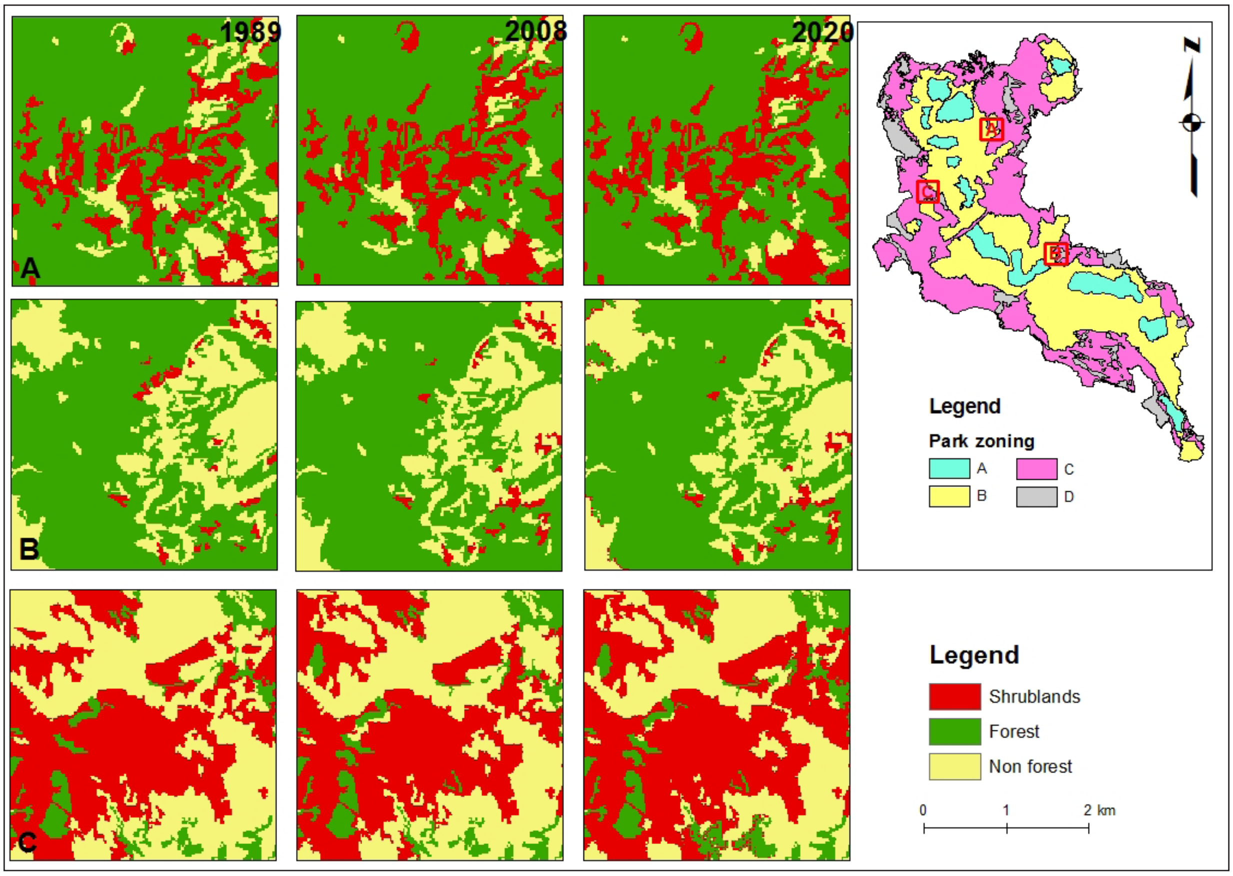

Figure 5 - Land cover maps at the year 1989 (observed), 2008 (observed) and 2020 (predicted) in three sample areas of the PNGSML.

diversity too (Bracchetti et al. 2012). In Mediterranean mountain landscapes, especially within areas designated for nature conservation, a tradeoff between the increase of forest and shrubland and the conservation of traditional landscapes is needed. In this perspective, the present study provides a methodological framework to spatially assess the localization of open natural habitats vulnerable to change. It represents a valuable decision-making support tool to better establish tradeoffs between forest expansion and HNV farmland protection.

Analyzing drivers of change and land cover general trend, we found that the increase in wooded areas is located mainly in mountain areas where a greater decrease in farming and pastoral activities has taken place, producing the same effect highlighted in other studies (Moreira et al. 2011). This phenomenon significantly decreases over 2,000 m a.s.l., confirming that in Central Apennines this altitude can be considered as a threshold for forest cover evolutionary dynamics. Distance from the mature woods is highly related to cover change. These edges are, in fact, the most susceptible to change (Matlack 1994, Oikonomakis and Ganatsas 2012). Also areas near roads are significantly affected by re-naturalization phenomena linked to the increase of the woods and scrubs: this may be explained, at least partially, by the fact that roads and other infrastructures (power lines, canals, railways) can

Table 7 - Summary of Kappa Index of Agreement (KIA) and User's (AU), Producer's (AP), and Overall (OA) accuracies for the map predictions at the year 2010.

Land cover class	AU	AP	KIA	OA
shrubland	0.977	0.999		
forest	0.998	0.999	0.999	0.995
non-forest	1.000	0.995		

Table 8 - Markov transition probabilities for the period 2008-2020 derived by 1989-2008 change analysis.

Land cover class	shrubland	forest	non-forest
shrubland	0.89	0.109	0.001
forest	0.00	1.00	0.00
non-forest	0.02	0.01	0.97

be considered as potential corridors for some generalist species (Spellerberg 1998), above all when their maintenance works are reduced or suspended.

The observed spatial drivers are not expected to change, so that the trend of HNV farmland loss, due to forest and shrubland expansion, might not be reversed, as confirmed by the mid-term scenario for 2020. Park zoning, that is the most important management and planning tool for habitat conservation, cannot provide protection against the loss of HNV farmland, as documented by the high level of HNV farmland land uptake within those zones with a low degree of protection (C and D zones). Concrete efforts are therefore required to counteract this phenomenon: specific approaches must be adopted to

Table 9 - Forest cover values at the years 1989 (observed), 2008 (observed) and 2020 (predicted).

Land cover class	1989		2008		2020	
	ha	%	ha	%	ha	%
shrubland	12,643	8.82	12,157	8.48	13,067	9.12
forest	72,867	50.85	75,897	52.96	76,579	53.44
non-forest	57,794	40.33	55,250	38.56	53,659	37.44

maintain the socially and economically-fragile HNV farming systems (EEA 2010). In this perspective, PNGSML has supported this approach, activating an European LIFE+ project to help maintaining and enhancing the presence of high value grassland by concrete conservation measures aimed at the sustainability of pastoral activities in mountain areas. This goal could be achieved by building new infrastructures such as watering places or shelters, but also by training farmers about good practices for pasture management (Felli 2013).

Moreover, silvicultural practices able to contain the expansion of shrubland and forest can be proposed. Cutting of invasive shrubs within high value farmland and grassland could be a successful measure to contrast grassland decline, as demonstrated in several LIFE+ projects in Europe (Toland et al.

Table 10 - Land uptake by shrubland and forest in the period 2008-2020, by HNV and other land use classes.

		Shrubland		Forest	
	Land cover class	ha	% of total land uptake	ha	% of total land uptake
	olive groves	0.3	0.03	5.5	0.37
	pastures	3.1	0.27	26.7	1.79
	complex cultivation patterns	1.7	0.15	63.4	4.24
HNV farmland	lands principally occupied by agriculture	16.3	1.43	185.2	12.38
	natural grassland	448.9	39.33	263.4	17.61
	moors and heatland	8.3	0.72	-	-
	total of HNV land use classes	*478.6*	*41.93*	*544.2*	*36,39*
	discontinous urban fabrics	0.05	0.00	0.7	0.05
	industrial areas	-	-	0.1	0.01
	arable lands	9.7	0.85	65.5	4.38
	broad-leaved forests	202.5	17.75	628.8	42.03
	coniferous forests	5.7	0.50	20.7	1.38
Other	mixed forests	3.4	0.30	9.6	0.64
land use	transitional woodland-shrubs	195.9	17.16	197.6	13.21
classes	bare rocks	61.1	5.36	4.7	0.31
	sparsely vegetated areas	178.8	15.67	22.8	1.52
	water bodies	5.5	0.48	1.1	0.07
	total of othe land use classes	*662.7*	*58.07*	*951.6*	*63.61*

2008). Thinning of woodlands near open areas within the forest can also create link-areas where spreading of pasture and grassland species is promoted. This practice can help enhancing the connectivity between grassland by linking many fragmented open areas (Seravelli et al. 2005). A careful management of forests near grassland, the most prone to change as demonstrated by this case study, can also help restoring grassland edges in order to control the colonization of new areas within HNV farmland.

Conclusions

In this paper we have demonstrated the close connection between forest and shrubland expansion dynamics in the last decades and HNV farmland loss. Because of the importance of HNV farmland in biodiversity conservation, especially within protected areas, the establishment of a tradeoff between forest increase and protection of HNV farmland and grassland is needed.

In this perspective, specific protection and management measures, such as building new infrastructures to support the sustainability of pastoral activities in mountain areas (Felli 2013), occasional and continuous cutting of invasive shrubs and thinning of forests near HNV grassland (Seravelli et al. 2005, Toland et al. 2008) could represent effective tools for the protection of these landscape mosaic elements strongly influenced by human traditional activities.

Under a more general framework, distinctive concern should be paid at territorial planning level to reduce the loss of biodiversity and habitats of traditional landscapes, that in Italy and in the Mediterranean mountains result from traditional agricultural and silvicultural activities of thousands of years of human presence.

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