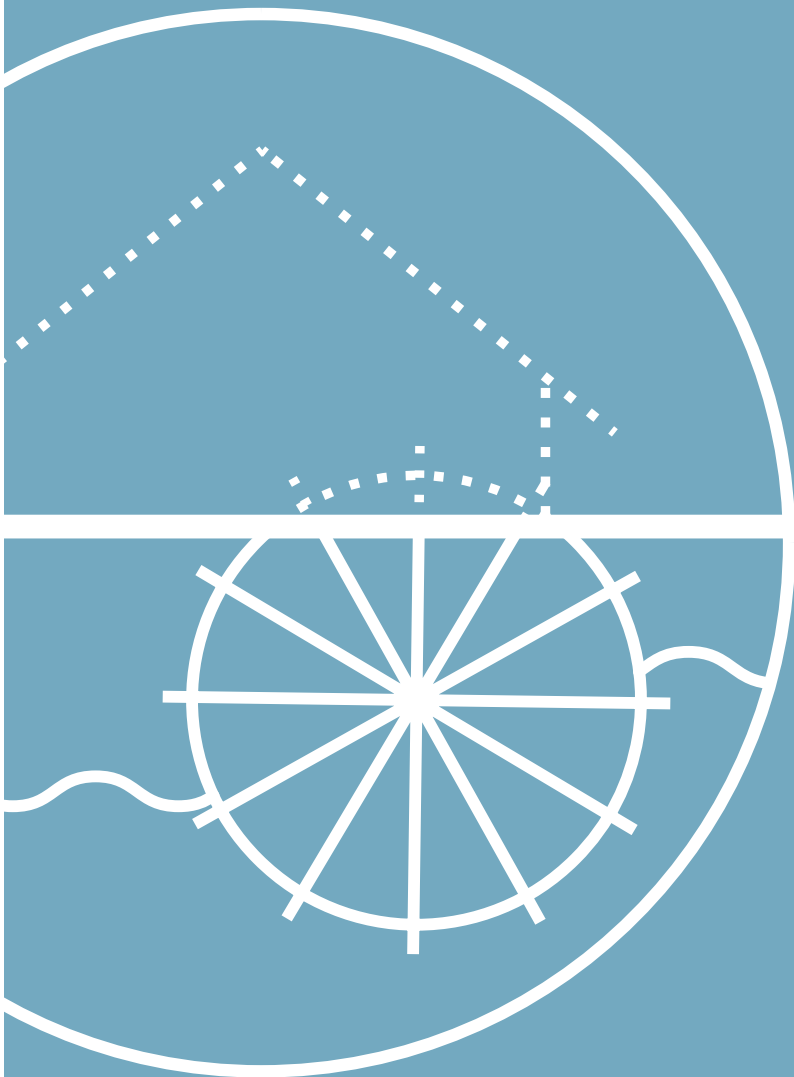


INHAVIT

Sustainability-led approaches for the rehabilitation
and revitalization of the cultural built heritage of
Montesinho Natural Park



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Montesinho Natural Park

Javier Ortega | Graça Vasconcelos | Tiago Ferreira | Hugo Rodrigues | Eduarda Luso (eds.)

Photographs in between chapters by **Juan Camilo Arias Tapiero**

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The Montesinho Natural Park

A territory with history, natural and cultural values and a stunning landscape

2



Márcia Moreno¹, Maria Correia², Paulo Mafra³, Rafael Sobrinho Correia⁴

“I’m going to tell you about a Wonderful Kingdom. Although many people say no, there have always been and will always be wonderful kingdoms in this world. What is needed to see them is for the eyes not to lose their original virginity in the face of reality, and for the heart not to hesitate. Now, what I intend to show, mine and that of all those who want to deserve it, not only exists, but is one of the most beautiful imaginable.”

Trás-os-Montes – Um Reino Maravilhoso, Miguel Torga (1950)



Figure 1. Montesinho Natural Park (photograph by the authors)

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A brief history of the Montesinho Natural Park

The whole of the Montesinho Natural Park is part of the Meseta Ibérica Transfrontier Biosphere Reserve, a declaration made in 2015 by UNESCO. This classification and international prominence result from the recognition of the natural values present, which function as living laboratories and represent an equitable balance between nature conservation and human activities. But the Park's history began 45 years ago. The Montesinho Natural Park (MNP) was created on August 30, 1979.

Decree-Law no. 355/79, of August 30, classifies the northern part of the Bragança and Vinhais municipalities as a Natural Park, a recognition given to the natural, landscape and human values present, as well as the receptiveness of local authorities to safeguarding their heritage and the potential for recreation and outdoor sports in the area.

In 1997, Regulatory Decree no. 5-A/97, of April 4, reclassified the MNP, given the “existence of animal populations and communities representative of Iberian and European fauna still in relative abundance and stability, including many of the threatened species of Portuguese fauna, as well as natural vegetation of great importance at national and world level, which, together with the reduced human pressure found in almost all of its territory, allows a large part of the ecological processes to evolve in patterns very close to natural ones”.

Later, in November 2008, the Montesinho Natural Park Management Plan was published by Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 179/2008, of November 24, justified by the urgent need to apply appropriate protection measures, in terms of nature conservation, to an area that constitutes natural and European heritage.

Recently, in 2019, Decree-Law no. 116/2019 of August 21 was published, creating the Model of Co-management of protected areas, through a participatory and collaborative process, which aims to create a dynamic of proximity management in the political, territorial, cultural, social and economic dimensions. This shared dynamic of enhancing the protected area focuses specifically on the areas of promotion, awareness



Figure 2. Montesinho Natural Park (photograph by the authors)

and communication and is headed by a Stewardship Committee, an administrative and management body with specific responsibilities, operating rules and powers of its own, made up of local and regional entities, thus allowing for a closer relationship with citizens and key players and entities in the territory.

Thus, the Montesinho Natural Park Co-Management Committee was created on January 13, 2022, by Order No. 495/2022, and has since put into practice all its powers and duties, in an articulated and consensual manner, in order to achieve the objectives it set itself.

A territory with history, natural and cultural values and a stunning landscape

The Montesinho Natural Park (MNP) is in the north-east of mainland Portugal, to the north of the municipalities of Bragança and Vinhais, in the so-called *Terra Fria Transmontana*. With an area of 74,229 hectares, it is bounded to the north, east and west by the border with Spain, representing more than half of the total delimitation of this protected area.

According to the nomenclature of territorial units in Portugal, the MNP is part of the Norte region (NUT II) and the *Alto Trás-os-Montes* sub-region (NUT III).

Several factors have contributed to the Montesinho Natural Park's unique biodiversity, making it stand out on the national, Iberian and European scene. Its location in a transition zone – an ecotone – between the Mediterranean biome of the south and the Euro-Siberian influences coming from the extension of the Atlantic Mountain ranges of the Iberian Peninsula, gives it unique ecological characteristics. In addition, its peripheral position in relation to the major urban centers of Portugal and Spain has allowed for the preservation of sustainable communities and habitats that are rarely found in other regions and at comparable times.

In fact, the geographical location of the Montesinho/Coroa massif, together with the variation in altitudes (between 438 and 1486 meters), the geological and relief diversity, as well as the influence of human activity over the centuries, have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the formation of a remarkable wealth of communities and species.

We are therefore faced with one of the largest protected natural areas in Portugal. With its gentle elevations, deep valleys carved by the Sabor, Maçãs and Baceiro rivers, green meadows, holm oak forests and impressive rock formations, the park invites us to contemplate vast landscapes from its highest points.

The duly marked hiking trails provide an excellent opportunity to explore this exemplary biological diversity and capture truly memorable moments in photographs. In fact, the MNP is home to around 80% of the mammal species found in Portugal, making it a true biodiversity sanctuary. With an impressive fauna, it brings together more than 240 species of vertebrates, including around 150 birds, and it is easy to spot otters, wolves, deer and roe deer. Many of these species are endangered, are Iberian endemics, are rare or have a very limited distribution in Portugal.

The Park's flora also stands out for its diversity, revealing unique and constantly changing landscapes throughout the four seasons. It



Figure 3
Montesinho Natural Park
(photograph by the authors)

stands out at national level for its impressive diversity and the presence of numerous rare species, including several Iberian and Lusitanian endemics. This richness is the result of a complex combination of geological, climatic and orographic factors, combined with centuries of human intervention, which have given rise to a wide variety of plant communities. These habitats are home to plants of remarkable beauty, originality and high value for nature conservation.

Among the most notable elements is the flora that grows on ultrabasic rocks – an extremely rare type of geological formation in Portugal, responsible for highly selective and toxic soils for most plant species. The plants that grow in these adverse conditions are



Figure 4. Montesinho Natural Park (photograph by the authors)

particularly unique, and some of them only exist in the ultrabasic soils of *Trás-os-Montes*, occurring nowhere else in the world.

Autochthonous woodlands, such as oak groves, *sardoais* and riparian woodlands, also play a fundamental role in the high botanical diversity of this protected area.

Over the millennia, the people who have lived in this territory have given rise to a valuable cultural heritage, deeply rooted and shared by all. Despite the growing influence of external stimuli, these communities continue to assert their identity and proudly preserve the traditions they have inherited.

The relationship between human communities and the territory that today makes up Montesinho Natural Park is deep and ancient, shaped over time. This intimate connection has given rise to a living cultural heritage, which remains visible in the practices, traditions and material traces left by successive generations. The human occupation of this region is closely linked to the material expression of the culture of the communities that settled here, translating into a humanized landscape that reflects ways of life adapted to nature and geographical isolation.

Elements such as pastoral music, a traditional dance, an *escrinho*, a monument, a rural architectural complex or an archaeological site are expressions that help define the cultural identity of the people of this region. Each of these elements carries meanings that transcend time, bearing witness to forms of social organization, beliefs, rituals and livelihoods that have remained resilient even in the face of changes in the contemporary world.

Despite progressive demographic desertification, as described below, and the pressure of urban development models, it is precisely the people who remain in this territory who ensure the continuity of these traditions. With their ancestral knowledge and strong ties to the place, these communities have become essential agents in preserving



Figure 5
Montesinho Natural Park
(photograph by the authors)

not only the cultural heritage, but also the ecological integrity of the protected area.

As far as demographics are concerned, the PNM is spread over two municipalities, with Bragança occupying 43,637 hectares of the Park, corresponding to 37% of the municipality's total land area, and Vinhais covering 30,592 hectares of the MNP, corresponding to 44% of the municipality's total land area. More than half of Bragança's population (65%) lives in the geographical area of the union of parishes that make up the urban perimeter of Bragança (Sé and Santa Maria). In other words, less than half of Bragança's population (35%) lives in 38 parishes, 15 of which are in the PNM area, giving a total resident population of 3,866 inhabitants, which corresponds to 11.2% of the municipality's resident population. The reality of Vinhais is different from that of Bragança. Only 28% of its population lives in the urban perimeter of Vinhais (the parish of Vinhais) and the remaining population spreads across the remaining 25 parishes.

It should be noted that 13 are in the Park's protected area, totaling 2,437 residents, which corresponds to 31.4% of the municipality's total population. The resident population in Bragança and Vinhais is made up of more women than men and most of them are aged between 15 and 64. However, it should be noted that there are more people aged 65 or over (28.2% in Bragança and 44.4% in Vinhais) than young people under the age of 15 (10.8% in Bragança and 6.4% in Vinhais), which reflects the existence of a resident population that tends to be older, with foreseeable present and future consequences of depopulation.

In the Montesinho Natural Park, it is the people, albeit in increasingly small numbers, who keep the soul of the territory alive. They are the ones who preserve the traditions, ancient knowledge and sustainable practices that have shaped the landscape over the centuries. Their intimate connection to the land makes them guardians of the local identity and fundamental allies in the conservation of this valuable natural heritage. Without the presence and involvement of these communities, the cultural and environmental richness of the Park could hardly be preserved with the same authenticity.



Figure 6
Montesinho Natural Park
(photograph by the authors)

In this sense, conserving the Montesinho Natural Park is not just about protecting biodiversity and natural landscapes. It also involves valuing the human and cultural dimension that gives it its identity. The collective memory inscribed in the villages, in agricultural practices and in the daily gestures of their inhabitants is undoubtedly one of the region's greatest assets.

“Knock on a door, rich or poor, and the same trusted voice always answers: – Come in! Without anyone asking any more, without anyone coming to the window to peek, the intimacy of an entire family is opened up. What is needed now is to deserve the magnificence of the gift.”

Trás-os-Montes – Um Reino Maravilhoso, Miguel Torga (1950)

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