

FILLING A GAP IN DOURO PROTECTED AREAS NETWORK. AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CREATION OF THE LOWER SABOR NATURAL REGIONAL PARK

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The Douro is a unique region of deep valleys and Mediterranean character, nestled between two important Portuguese mountains and the Iberian plateau. The original geological, morphological, and climatic characteristics allow for the survival of an extraordinary diversity of plants and animals, which is why this territory has been occupied, since prehistoric times, by successive waves of people who have gradually left their mark creating today a unique and valuable landscape.

The originality of this territory and richness of natural and cultural values have led to an impressive extension of various protected areas. Douro region currently encompasses, wholly or in part: (1) the Alto Douro Wine Region (ADV), a UNESCO Evolutive and Living cultural landscape, (2) the Côa Valley Archaeological Park, also a UNESCO world heritage protected landscape, (3) the Tua Valley Natural Park, (4) several Natura 2000 sites, (5) the Faia Brava, the first Portuguese private protected area, and also a pilot area for the European Project Rewilding Europe, (6) the Douro International Nature Park, and (6) the Meseta Ibérica Transfrontier Biosphere Reserve.

These protected areas face distinct challenges and have conservation strategies, governance tools, and development goals that are not always convergent. Managing facing such complexity demands a holistic and integrated vision and the definition of a framework to enable best practices in sustainable landscape planning and management. Here we propose the design of a connectivity corridor on the east-west axis in which all the tributaries of the Douro river are included. This system of connectivity routes, internally and with neighbouring landscapes, brings together the best-preserved continuums of each protected area and allows gaps identification in that connection.

The methodology involved identifying and mapping using ArcGIS the biophysical characteristics of each protected area and natural and cultural heritage attributes. The territorial management instruments in force for each protected area were also analysed and compared. It was thus possible to demarcate a connected network of protected areas – the Douro Valleys Park and identify a critical gap between the lower Sabor and Côa with the Douro river that should be filled with the creation of a regional natural park similar to the one existing for the Tua river.

The proposed network of protected landscapes confirms the need for this landscape to have a unique identity, with the conviction that this will contribute to reducing the asymmetries that have been seen in the Douro region concerning the various conservation statutes and protected areas classifications and management models.