

MOOC sobre Sierra Nevada

MODULE 1

1.3 AN INHABITED SIERRA NEVADA

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*Facts are facts.
But perceptions construct reality*
ALBERT EINSTEIN

Sierra Nevada as inhabited space: Some opening thoughts

In this section, more than a typical description of Sierra Nevada as an inhabited space and its most representative, valuable, or tangible manifestations (such as types of habitat, urban layout, irrigation systems, building typologies, material formulas for adapting to the environment, models for optimal use of resources, and so on), we present a series of reflections that help respond to the aims of this introductory module. Here we begin with a question that is as basic as it is inescapable: What is Sierra Nevada?

Obviously, the course content will approach the answer to this generic question analytically and meticulously. But here we will leave to one side a description of the multiple aspects and material facts that contribute to “the inhabited Sierra Nevada,” which will be covered in most of the modules and sub-sections of this programme. Instead, we would like to offer some complementary ideas that you may wish to take into account in digesting the facts described in the various sections of the course. Therefore, this module is intended to be more than an aide-mémoire or a mere extension of analytical and systematic knowledge of the Sierra Nevada as an inhabited space. Rather, we propose a series of reflections that provide enhanced contextualization of the available information and knowledge about Sierra Nevada. We believe it is essential to understand how our current concept of an inhabited Sierra Nevada came into being, with all its material expressions. Hence, whatever Sierra Nevada as inhabited space is—and regardless of associated territorial issues—our analysis and description of the objective facts that define and delimit that space will always derive from a set of circumstances (historical, economic, social, cultural, scientific, and so on) that will feed into any reading we make of those facts and how we approach them. Although these circumstances will undoubtedly be woven into the different sections of the course, at this stage we want to set out the general prior considerations that should, in our opinion, precede any analysis of the objective facts. This will foster better contextualization and understanding of our current vision of Sierra Nevada as inhabited space.

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Sierra Nevada is, was, and always will be a space built by human perceptions, values, and actions

It is an indisputable and abundantly well-argued fact that Sierra Nevada constitutes a unique space of exceptional values that can be approached from myriad scientific perspectives. Among those values, those concerned with its uniqueness and importance as a natural space are beyond debate. However, our vision, knowledge, or assessment of the values of this singular massif transcends by far its intrinsic and objective characteristics and values. The visions, perceptions, or perspectives that have evolved and varied over time—thanks to many historical circumstances—nuance, explain, and undoubtedly shape Sierra Nevada's objective values—even its values as a natural space. In fact, it has been the visions, needs, attitudes, or actions of the human beings who gazed upon it, inhabited it, studied it, or visited it, that, over time, have led to this natural space being valued—or not. But, more than that, they have also led to the various uses, exploitations, or processes of conservation or destruction that have all affected the material, potential, or symbolic values of this space. And the actions of humans have not only been confined to the inhabitants who interacted “in situ” with the Sierra—lest we forget, these mountains have also been affected by all human beings who studied, visited, and mythologised them, for example.

In the relationship between Sierra Nevada and the human dimension, its history tells of every conceivable attitude and action regarding the many resources of these mountains—from the strictest conservationism, to utilitarian and predatory exploitation. In short, it is the various ways of approaching and “using” Sierra Nevada (from scientific interest to aesthetic concerns, or sheer matters of survival) that have shaped (and explain) not only the evolution of these mountains but also their current situation and future outlook. To a large extent, the whole of Sierra Nevada is an inhabited space (materially or symbolically). And it is precisely here—in our capacity to understand and appreciate the ways in which this space is inhabited—that lies one of the greatest challenges in terms of upholding its values.

In sum, by broadening our image of Sierra Nevada to embrace its multi-secular uses and human occupation (quite apart from this being an inexorable starting point for its management) we effectively enrich the possibilities of this space, even from the perspective of conserving its natural resources.

Sierra Nevada: Space, nature, place, and environment

There is no need to reiterate that Sierra Nevada is an exceptional natural space that is deserving, without question, of the maximum possible protection. And this, irrefutably, renders us responsible for the conservation of its values. But it is worth remembering that concepts such as ‘natural space’ are only given a recognizable value when individuals and societies lend meaning to this concept by converting it, individually or socially, into lived space, places, or environments that offer a livelihood. ‘Inhabited Sierra Nevada’ captures, both materially and in a historically-constructed way, how we understand, live, and value these mountains, even from the perspective of a protected natural space. It is this human perception of the Sierra Nevada that, ultimately, has fostered (and continues to foster) the perspectives, expectations, concrete actions, or processes that have brought us to our

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present material and symbolic situation regarding Sierra Nevada. Therefore, Sierra Nevada is more than simply space and nature, in so far as it is a humanly-recognisable and recognised 'place'.

This demands that those values be recognised as belonging to an individual or society. Even the highest uninhabited summits of our Sierra, or its most valuable species 'are inhabited' in the imaginary and in the expectations or human behaviours that such a vision produces. Equally, Sierra Nevada has constituted, and continues to constitute, ways of life—very specific and valuable ways of 'inhabiting the world' in a given location, with specific physical-biological characteristics, but also human characteristics. Much of the inhabited Sierra Nevada that we have inherited has competed (and coexisted) with other ways of life, and it continues to do so to. Let us not forget, for example, that certain visions or expectations in economic development terms, far removed from the potential and values of the massif, could disrupt or destroy ways of inhabiting Sierra Nevada that, today, we may regard as valuable and worthy of conservation. The best way to preserve Sierra Nevada is therefore to convert that space, nature, and environment into a 'place' in which its users, whether they live in this territory or not, make meaning of their visions of human development. And inevitably, that happens when we reassess the worth of the inhabited space, being mindful not only of an inert kind of heritage that belongs to past eras, or a problem or enemy of the preservation of such a unique space. The inhabited space of Sierra Nevada *is* Sierra Nevada too. It expands and enriches our perspective of it and has been—can, and should be—an example of a fertile symbiosis between Nature and Culture.

Who inhabited Sierra Nevada, and who inhabits it now? Why? How?

A minimally thorough analysis of the different ways of inhabiting Sierra Nevada in what we might categorise as humanised spaces (towns, infrastructures, uses of territory, and so on, as well as the relationships and interactions between these expressions of human action) shows that the answers to the questions that open this section are the result of enormous complexity, richness, and pertinence. In effect, behind each and every one of these expressions of inhabitation in Sierra Nevada, there are a series of circumstances that explain and give meaning to them. Whatever the motives of the inhabitants or users of Sierra Nevada (survival, study, leisure ...), they have all been shaped by technical, economic, and cultural factors (in short, possibilities) that have enabled them to fulfil their particular purposes to a higher or lower degree of adaptation to the potential or real values of the Sierra Nevada. Sierra Nevada, indeed, "has served, serves, and can serve" extremely diverse human purposes, these often being contradictory or incompatible. At one end of the spectrum, from a purely utilitarian perspective in its narrowest sense, the best and most evident values of Sierra Nevada, and most worthy of our protection, would be utterly irrelevant if not contemptible. At the other end of the spectrum, ways of life, different uses of resources, and heritage values of all kinds that nowadays may be unprofitable or residual according to certain utilitarian logics were once essential for the survival, pure and simple, of these lived spaces. Today, in addition, they can (and should) enjoy a high and renewed value as inalienable and irreplaceable assets, not only as historical curios or for their aesthetic values, but as a pragmatic formula of positive adaptation to what the environment offers. We are the heirs of the material results that constitute the inhabited space of Sierra Nevada (irrigation channels, use of building materials, specific mountain crops, urban areas, intangible heritage, and so on), and that should not only be considered the surest guarantee

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of the preservation of these cultural values, but also the strongest defender of values as a natural space, with which they interacted harmoniously for centuries.

The inhabited Sierra Nevada: Challenges for the future

The present and future challenge for the sustainable management of Sierra Nevada therefore depends to a great extent on finding ways to inhabit this space that, first of all, allow its singularity to be truly valued, respecting and maintaining the well-known values of the massif. This should lead us to a serious and indeed unavoidable reconsideration of the factors that today influence how we variously perceived, think, know, or feel these values. A fresh appreciation of the inhabited space that is Sierra Nevada is also called-for—a space that has established a permanent and interactive symbiosis with the original and least-transformed sector of the massif. A Sierra Nevada that is distanced from the pressing need to consider that framework of interaction and interdependence would also be far-removed from the true functionality of that space. Sierra Nevada is also the populations that inhabit it, with all their material, cultural, technological, and productive expressions. However these populations are organized spatially, or however we are to conserve and/or reappraise the rich heritage of human uses of the territory, it is out of these considerations that derives real possibility: how to maintain and preserve the values that Sierra Nevada enjoys as a natural area of special value.

Let us suppose—and hope—for a moment, that any dangerous attitudes associated with utilitarianism or economism, alien to the values of the massif itself, have been thwarted. Sierra Nevada should be an example of ways to inhabit our planet in which symbiosis—between nature and culture, knowledge and emotion, science and experiential space—is entirely possible. In short, the inhabited Sierra Nevada should be a source and a benchmark of possibilities for a good human life. And such symbiosis should lead to processes for using, exploiting, and managing existing resources that reject static and closed positions vis-à-vis the ‘usefulness’ or ‘potentialities’ that our Sierra offers. Even cursory attention to the facts that shaped our human use of Sierra Nevada reveals how values that, in other historical periods, were irrelevant, invisible, or non-existent, are today values of the highest magnitude. To give just one example: think of the wind-turbine and solar panel infrastructures now operating on a massive scale in the Marquesado area. Just a decade ago, what particular value did the wind or the sun have in that area? What riches did Sierra Nevada bring to that area? What riches does it bring today? What about in the future?

In conclusion, out of our approach to building, as ‘inhabitants’ in whatever sense, Sierra Nevada will emerge models of interaction with the potential it offers us, not only for better conservation of its natural values but also to achieve objectives for human development—objectives the very essence of which is conservation of those values.

Reflections on the inhabited Sierra Nevada and efforts to reappraise its true value, which we witness in unique areas as disparate as Marquesado, Alpujarras, Lecrín, or Tabernas, should be our

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touchstone in seeking to understand and assess the true meaning of the question “What is Sierra Nevada?” Sierra Nevada is, was, and will be whatever its inhabitants and users have the capacity, desire, and know-how to build. And in that indivisible nature–culture binary, we cannot understand the one without the other.



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