

SPECIAL ISSUE: The Wicked Problems in the Governance of the Just Green Transitions:
between Territorial Resilience and Foresight

Clay Territories in Search of a Way out. Interpreting Green Sacrifice and Framing a Bioregional Alternative

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Abstract

Geographic areas disproportionately affected by the negative externalities of dominant development patterns – often framed in environmental justice terms as sacrifice zones – can be understood as “sacred territories” subjected to slow and cumulative forms of violence. The original notion of a sacred territory illuminates the biopolitical dimensions of regional and national planning decisions, complementing environmental and spatial justice frameworks while highlighting the limits of existing tools in addressing complex, “wicked” problems. Tuscia Castrense, in Italy, exemplifies such a condition, where locational choices for energy production, waste disposal, and the search for a nuclear waste repository site reveal a persistent entanglement of ecological, social, and infrastructural pressures. The article further explores the potential of a bioregional approach, connecting bodies and places through regenerative metabolisms, fostering non-extractive forms of territorial self-development, and participatory decision-making mechanisms. Drawing inspiration from practices of territorial defence in the Global South, this perspective opens pathways to resist and potentially reverse the logic and consequences of sacrifice, suggesting that affirmation and resistance can mutually reinforce the creation of more just and sustainable territorial futures.

Keywords

green sacrifice, just green transition, nuclear waste, bioregional planning, territorial justice

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Introduction

In the spring of 1977 in Montalto di Castro visions of life collided with the spectre of death and destruction. Activists – most prominently women (Vezzosi, 2021) – organised a festive protest they called the *Festival of Life*, precisely on the site where the Italian government had planned to build a nuclear power plant. The nascent anti-nuclear and environmental movements waged an eleven-year-long campaign, even after the 1987 national referendum that stopped nuclear energy production, until the project was ultimately abandoned. By then, the facility under construction had been converted into a conventional thermoelectric plant, which remains the largest of its kind in Italy, though now apparently entering a gradual phase of decommissioning (EJAtlas, 2021). More than three decades later, in a cruel twist of fate, Tuscia is once again confronted with the return of what was once banished.

The following paragraphs develop a reflection on the nature and implications of the locational logic of energy-production and waste-management infrastructures in Tuscia, with the aim of reconstructing the profile of a territory that has repeatedly been designated for high-impact facilities by external decision makers. The focus is on the northern part of the Province of Viterbo – here referred to as *Tuscia Castrense* – which has experienced a slow and cumulative form of structural violence. Areas experiencing similar kinds of violence, disproportionately affected by the negative externalities of dominant patterns of development, are like clay territories among iron territories, often qualified in terms of environmental justice as sacrifice zones. The analysis suggests that the transition to a green energy paradigm risks reinforcing, rather than mitigating, these dynamics.

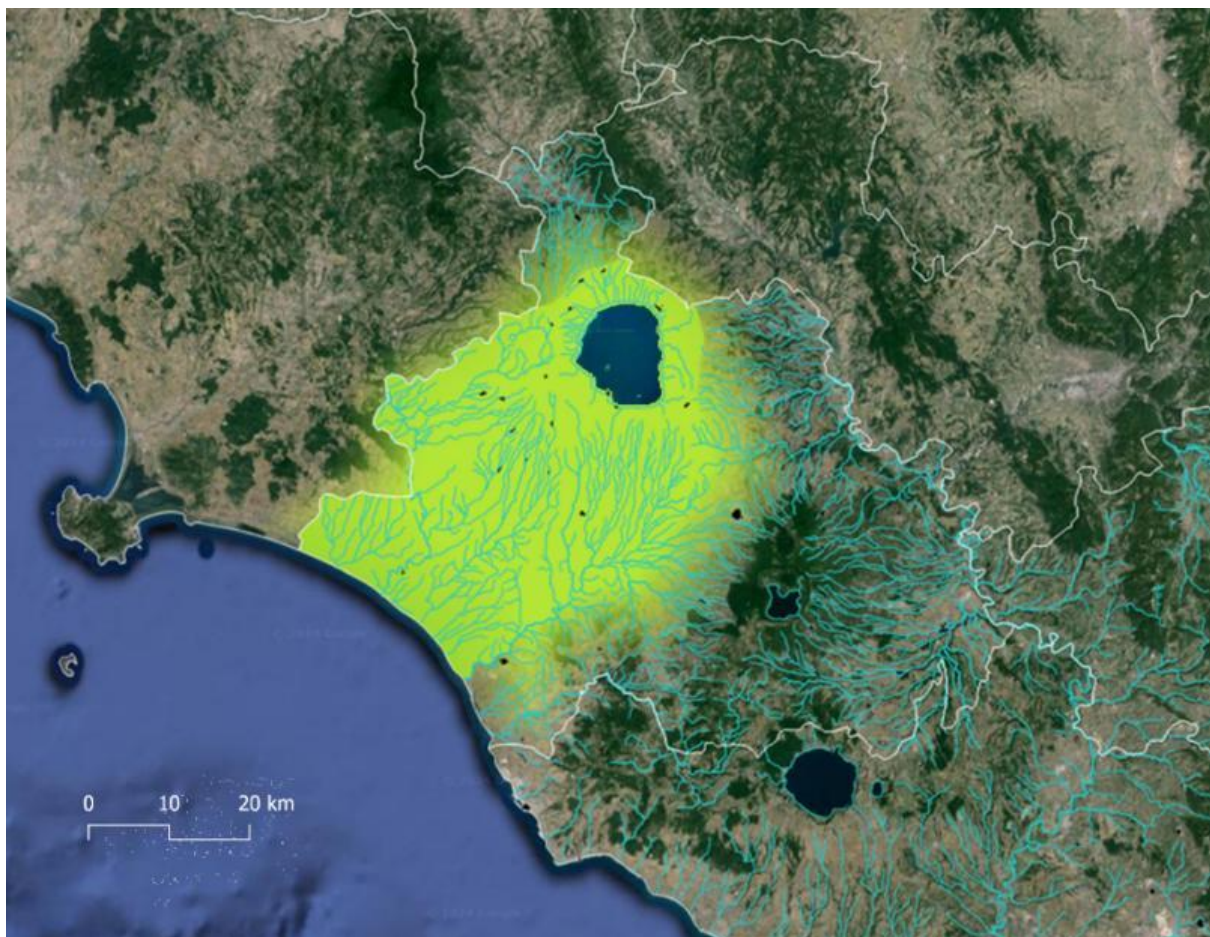
This article is structured in four parts. First, it analyses three recent conflicts in northern Tuscia – related to nuclear waste, plastic disposal, and renewable energy – to show how slow violence is reproduced through infrastructural siting decisions. The analysis includes GIS mapping, data collection regarding waste and energy fluxes (carried out in spring 2024), interpreting the perception by local population and authorities by linking their discourses to the concept of slow violence. Second, it introduces a critical reflection on sacrifice and wicked problems, to question the dominant technocratic framing of such issues. Engaging in theoretical dialogue with these concepts contextualizes and expands the findings of the previous section. Third, it explores the potential for reimagining the territory as an urban bioregion, grounded in resistance and oriented towards self-governance. Finally, it draws inspiration from practices of territorial defence in the Global South to outline potential pathways of reappropriation and self-governance.

Three-faced slow violence

The nuclear legacy continues to shape local imaginaries in Tuscia. For the activists of *Montalto Futura* — a civic committee founded in late 2021 in response to the proposed siting of a radioactive waste repository in the area — the nuclear threat remains a recurrent reference point. Yet recent mobilizations have not been limited to nuclear issues. They converge around a broader set of locational decisions that, incrementally and often invisibly, undermine the ecological and social reproduction of the territory. This dynamic exemplifies what Nixon (2011) terms *slow violence*: a process shaped by temporalities of delay and invisibility, where cumulative harm is normalized through technocratic governance.

Two central domains – energy and waste – emerge as focal points of this violence. In Tuscia Castrense (Figure 1), they intersect in three paradigmatic conflicts: (1) the procedure to identify a site for the National Repository for radioactive waste disposal; (2) the authorization of a plastic-waste landfill in Arlena di Castro; and (3) the large-scale conversion of agricultural land into photovoltaic and wind farms. Each case illustrates how external decision-making processes reproduce the perception of Tuscia as a territory destined for sacrifice.

Figure 1 – The Tuscia Castrense area (green) within the province of Viterbo (white perimeter). The area is delimited by the border with the province of Grosseto to the North-West, river Marta to the South-East, lake Bolsena and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Author's elaboration; base map: Google Satellite.



While the first case is emblematic of a clear top-down, State-imposed logic, in the second and especially the third cases violence and sacrifice are mainly driven by market forces. In the first case the State, with its agencies, is the only actor involved in the decision, with a single large facility to be located on the national territory following strict and clearly formalised procedures that progressively reduce the alternatives. In the case of renewable energy facilities, there is a fragmentation of the decision parallel to the proliferation of actors, whose agency resembles an individual fight for resource grabbing. However, at a closer look the energy conflict reveals an entanglement of State and market violence. State decisions and laws in the last two decades have aimed at supporting the process of accumulation/expropriation by market actors, reducing the already weak defences of the territories. The supporting action of the State takes various forms. Examples include a system of financial incentives, as well as the legitimization of expropriation of land in favour of private subjects through a declaration of “urgenza e indifferibilità” (meaning that the siting of renewable energy facilities is urgent and cannot be postponed).

Despite the differences, these conflicts are linked by a shared logic, revealing the entanglement of energy and waste infrastructures, which only appear as separate issues due to a narrow, technocratic framing that analyses each case as a separate technical problem. Here, this framing mainly relies on the legitimization of one form of knowledge (Raco, Savini 2019), specialist expertise with its abstract representations of reality, at the expense of other, situated ways of understanding the complexity and interrelatedness of the territory and its dynamics. Not only does this approach influence the choice of an appropriate solution to the problem, but it determines the formulation of the problem itself, setting the limits of the decisional arena with the effect of foreclosing the possibility of radical alternatives. Technocracy, this way, becomes not only a mode of knowing but also a mode of governing where decisions are taken based on scientific, objective data, that must not be debated, and often in conditions of (at least perceived) urgency and necessity.

The national site for nuclear waste disposal

The process of identification of a suitable area for the National Repository for nuclear waste is managed by SOGIN, the public company responsible for dismantling Italy's decommissioned nuclear plants and managing radioactive waste. The facility is planned to host 78,000 m³ of low- and intermediate-level waste, 64% of which derives from nuclear plant operations and dismantling, plus 17,000 m³ of medium- and high-level waste. While the latter should be permanently stored at depths of about one kilometre, in line with the guidelines provided by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the repository would only provide above-ground storage. Multiple temporal plans serve to obscure and blur the violence imposed by such a

choice. The decree establishing the National Repository (Legislative Decree No. 31 of February 15, 2010) describes the repository for this type of waste as “temporary” – since in the future it will be necessary to secure it in a suitable geological facility – but also as “long-term”, as the construction of a definitive repository is expected to take no less than one hundred years.

In January 2021 SOGIN published a list of 67 potentially suitable sites (named CNAPI), 22 of which were located in the Province of Viterbo (MASE, 2021) (Figure 2). By December 2023, the list (now named CNAI) narrowed to 51, still including nearly all sites in Tuscia, since 21 out of 22 were confirmed. Once island sites are excluded due to transport challenges, the probability that Tuscia will host the repository exceeds 50%.

Local committees highlight multiple reasons for opposing this choice, including the province’s above-average cancer incidence rates (Di Giorgio, 2021). Yet the most debated issue concerns the selection procedure itself. Decision-analysis scholar Scarelli (2021) describes SOGIN’s methodology as “simplistic” and “obsolete”, incapable of incorporating into the decision-making process parameters that would “meet the minimum requirements that an ethics of choice demands, especially for such a delicate task” (ibid.: 6). In particular, he notes the disproportionate weight assigned to technical parameters at the expense of agricultural,

Figure 2 – The potentially suitable sites for the National Repository (in yellow) identified by SOGIN in the Province of Viterbo. Author’s elaboration based on data by MASE; base map: Google Satellite.



environmental, and archaeological considerations. The argument is taken up by Caporali (2021), who comments on the marginalisation of the anthropic dimension as follows:

“The enumeration of the site suitability characteristics, placing the anthropic component at the end, defines the nuclear waste repository operation primarily as a technical issue of supposed ‘isolation’ of materials, rather than as an anthropic issue linked to democratic decision-making processes of ‘acceptance’ and ‘sacrifice’ by the local population, who act and decide on behalf of present and future generations. [...] Within this framework the human being is regarded as a mere ‘object’ of contamination in a technocratic scenario where technology becomes the true dominant ‘subject’” (ibid., p. 12).

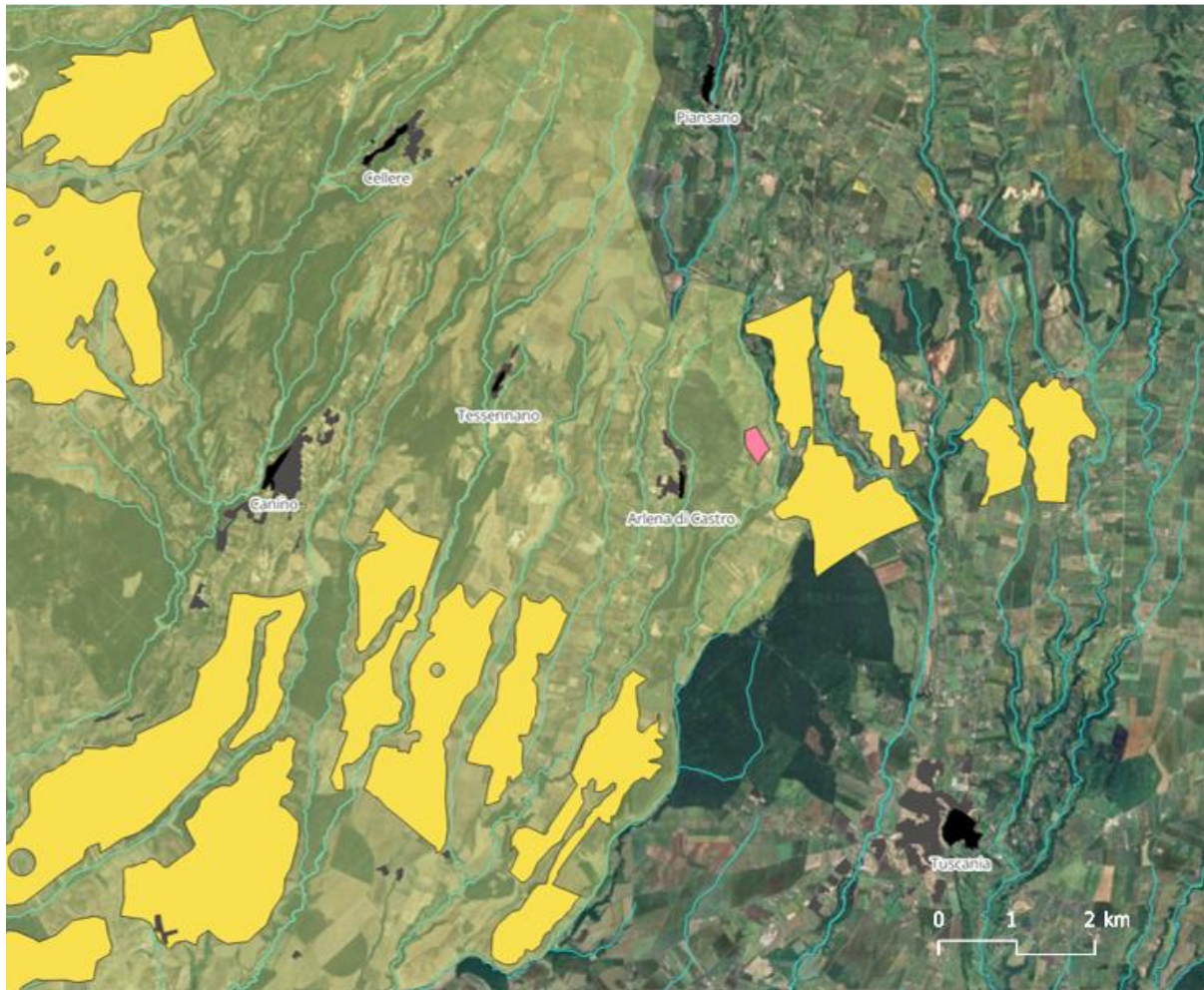
In a subsequent passage, the author connects duration and violence by defining the repository as a “monument” that would remain as a “lasting testimony of violence against the entire biological community and human rationality” (ibid., p. 13).

The plastic landfill

The second conflict revolves around a project for a treatment and landfill facility for marine and plastic waste in the municipality of Arlena di Castro, to be located 1,5 kilometres away from the urban centre (Figure 3). Approved by the Lazio Region in late 2023, the project envisaged treating 60,000 tons of solid waste annually, with 34,000 tons of non-recyclable plastics destined for permanent disposal (Med Sea Litter Italia srl, 2021). Local administrations opposed the facility, pointing to Tuscia’s already disproportionate burden in hosting waste infrastructure, such as the Monterazzano landfill – the only active site in the region for non-recyclable civil waste (ISPRA, 2023a), of which, moreover, an expansion has been requested (Il Messaggero, 2024). All this occurs despite the Province of Viterbo contributes only 4% to the region’s municipal waste production and maintains a higher recycling rate than other provinces (Mariotta et al., 2023).

The neighbouring municipalities lamented being deliberately excluded from the environmental assessment process (Viterbo Today, 2023), which reduced opportunities for contestation. Local media interpreted this lack of visibility as a deliberate siting strategy: Arlena, they noted, is “well hidden among the hills [...]: nobody sees, nobody hears” (Etruria News, 2023, translation by the author). These words, from the mayor of Tuscania, clearly resonate with the silence and invisibility that characterise slow violence.

Figure 3 – The plastic landfill site (pink). The potentially suitable sites for the National Repository are also represented in yellow. The layer in transparency represents the area of production of the “Canino” olive oil, a PDO product only produced in Tuscia Castrense. Author’s elaboration based on data by MASE and MASAF; base map: Google Satellite.



In May 2024, the Lazio Regional Administrative Court annulled the project’s authorizations, citing incompatibility with the Regional Landscape Plan and recent heritage restrictions on the Arrone River basin (TAR Lazio, 2024). In particular, “preventing modifications and transformations that are entirely foreign to the values and qualities” (TAR Lazio, 2024, translation by the author) of the territory was the explicit aim of the restriction imposed by the Superintendence (Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Provincia di Viterbo e per l'Etruria meridionale) on the area in February 2024 through a declaration of significant public interest concerning the Arrone stream basin – a tool that, in this and other cases, takes on a militant character in the defence of the territory (Devecchi 2018). The ruling represents a temporary success for local committees.

The territorial energy factory

The third case concerns the rapid transformation of Tuscia’s agricultural landscape into an energy production landscape. When the Superintendence states that “the area under

examination is affected by initiatives (in progress) that compromise its perceptual and panoramic aspects as well as the environmental and landscape value of the territory” (TAR Lazio, 2024, translation by the author), it immediately conjures up the image of the ongoing transformation of the traditional agricultural landscape into a sort of disjointed energy landscape (Figure 4).

The municipalities of Montalto di Castro and Viterbo actually register some of the highest levels of land consumption in the Lazio Region (ISPRA, 2023b) largely due to the installation of photovoltaic plants. But the issue extends across the whole of Tuscia. Among the ten municipalities with the highest per capita land consumption over the same period, six are located in the Province of Viterbo (ISPRA, 2023c). Given that this area is experiencing ongoing depopulation, these figures are particularly concerning. Much of the problem is linked to the installation of photovoltaic plants, which effectively constitute a form of land grabbing by the companies that install and manage these facilities (De Leo, 2023). The capacity of local farmers and landowners to resist purchase offers by energy investors is extremely limited, given the laws and the huge imbalance between the revenue from solar or agro-solar projects and agriculture. Land prices for agricultural uses range from 15 to 25 thousand euros in the Tuscia Castrense area, while solar investors can offer an average of 50 thousand euros per hectare. The difference

Figure 4 – Piansano, views of the historical main route. Credits: A. Mattei, L. Mecorio, G. Bordo, B. De Carli and 35mm Studio (image on the left, from Mattei, 2021); Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per la Provincia di Viterbo e per l'Etruria meridionale (image on the right).



is even larger when leasehold contracts are considered. In the case of arable lands – the ones that are more often affected by these processes – the income from agriculture is limited to the Common Agricultural Policy payments, ranging from 150 to 300 euros/ha per year, while revenues from solar leaseholds can easily be 10 times higher¹. Scholars describe this process as green grabbing – a form of land appropriation justified by environmental imperatives (Backhouse, 2014; Klingler et al., 2024) – or territorio grabbing (Lipari, 2020). Here, “territory” is understood as a living neo-ecosystem resulting from coevolutionary processes (Magnaghi, 2020a). The expression denotes a strategy rooted in power relations whereby “individuals, as member of communities, are forced to reframe partially or totally the socio-ecological relations amongst themselves and with the geo-physical space so to contribute to value extraction and accumulation mechanisms benefiting the investing entity” (Lipari, 2020: 162).

The imbalance between local production and consumption further illustrates these dynamics. By the end of 2023, the Viterbo Province hosted 13,109 photovoltaic plants with a total capacity of 633 MW, producing 846.2 GWh – 41% of regional output and 2.8% of national production, the highest percentage in Italy after the Province of Lecce (Terna, 2022). Yet the province accounts for only 5% of regional electricity consumption. By contrast, with photovoltaic alone, it contributes 6% to regional production (GSE, 2024). As for wind energy, 89% of regional installed capacity is concentrated in the province (ibid.). But even these figures do not capture the evolution of the process over time. As of May 2024, 56 new projects were under environmental assessment, including 38 photovoltaic, 17 wind, and one geothermal pilot plant (MASE, 2024). Geothermal exploitation in northern Tuscany opens further extractive scenarios (Tocchi, 2017). In this sense, energy production appears as an “imposed vocation” for the territory: green in colour but extractive in its logic.

The dynamic of the resource extraction taking place in this and similar territories is better understood if the flows of energy are considered together with the flows of money, that reveal a process of financialisation of the rural territory, driven precisely by its condition of marginality. It is marginality, in fact, that makes the investment in this kind of projects particularly profitable, because it keeps land purchase costs low. This condition is sharpened by statal norms that declare that the siting of renewable energy facilities is urgent and cannot be postponed (first introduced by d.lgs 387/2003) and therefore legitimise expropriation for public utility of the land. Such a tool has been employed in Tuscany castrense when landowners have tried resisting market offers, resulting in deeper erosion of the already weak negotiating power of local farmers and landowners. Moreover, a statal incentive system makes the investment in renewable energy economically convenient through a mechanism that transfers monetary resources from the

¹ Data obtained through an interview with an agronomist and farmer with 40 years of experience in the area.

bottom up, since it is financed by a supplementary fee applied to civil energy consumption. So, as a study carried out by S. Lipari (2021) clearly shows, while money for the incentives is taken – at least partly – from the local socioeconomic fabric, the technologies for energy production are imported, the energy produced is mainly exported elsewhere, and the revenues enter local economic networks only in small fractions through the companies that work as intermediaries in the chain between landowners and purchasers and in the implementation of the projects. This way, “the disproportion between the multimillion-euro value of [investments in renewable energy production] and the underdevelopment of the same areas [...] creates a situation similar to the extractive enclaves observable in other peripheries of the world economy” (Lipari 2021: 282).

When taken together with the waste disposal cases, the energy conflict reflects a systemic dynamic; Tuscia Castrense is treated as a site where waste is managed, energy is extracted, while decisions are made elsewhere. Despite the differences between radioactive waste, plastic landfills, and renewable energy infrastructures, they are all embedded in a shared logic – one that normalises exposure to harm through fragmented, sector-specific, and technocratic processes.

Sacrifice: the sacred and the wicked

The conflicts examined above reveal a pattern of incremental harm and technocratic normalisation that exceeds conventional environmental justice frameworks. In order to grasp the symbolic, political, and epistemic dimensions of this process, it is necessary to shift from a descriptive analysis of infrastructural siting toward an interpretative lens that can illuminate the deeper logic underpinning these dynamics. This section therefore introduces two conceptual perspectives, the sacred and the wicked, as tools to interrogate how sacrifice is produced, legitimised, and rendered invisible in contemporary forms of territorial governance.

The first concept draws on Giorgio Agamben’s reflection on *sacertas* (Agamben, 2018) to reinterpret the notion of “sacrifice zones” as spaces of ordinary and administrative violence, rather than as exceptional tragedies or sites of ritual consecration. Agamben’s account on *sacertas* and bare life is rooted in Foucault’s reflection on biopolitics, the techniques used by state apparatuses for the control of the population, as a result of modern development (Mendoza, 2025). Agamben, in radicalising² and revisiting this perspective, reveals a particularly disquieting character of the contemporary world, where all life has been virtually reduced to “bare life” – precarious, exposed to violence – and a state of exception and suspension of rights has been normalised to the point that it has become the structure of contemporary government techniques (Agamben, 2003).

² For Agamben, biopolitics is not a historical product – as for Foucault – but the original function of sovereign power, the hidden foundation of Western political culture.

The second subsection mobilises the concept of wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973) to expose how technocratic framings of energy and waste management suppress value conflicts and make sacrifice appear as necessity. The two seminal authors introduced the concept to criticise the then dominant reductionist approach in planning practice. They argued that in social policy, unlike in natural sciences, problems have no definitive formulation and no given, objective solution. The concept has become increasingly popular in policy analysis but has also been criticised as an analytical tool. For instance, some authors note that the assumed difference between social and natural sciences perpetuates a false dichotomy (Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). However, despite some recognised theoretical flaws, the concept of wicked problems is useful as a sensitising and critical tool, to challenge dominant approaches, trigger further reflection, open spaces for discussion and make alternative perspectives visible, rather than provide accurate and definitive definitions (Lönngren and van Poeck, 2021). It is precisely with this scope that it is used in this paper.

Taken together, the two lenses of the sacred and the wicked help unpack the entanglement of symbolic legitimation and procedural depoliticisation through which territories such as Tuscia Castrense are continually exposed to harm while deprived of the means to contest it.

Sacred territories of ordinary violence

In the debates surrounding the siting of the National Repository, local committees often employ the language of sacrifice (Caporali, 2021). Caporali contrasts the call to sacrifice with the notion of sacredness arguing that “the construction of the repository would be irreconcilable with the ‘sacredness’ of these places” (ibid.: 13, translation by the author). This rhetorical move is not new to environmental justice discourses. As Juskus (2023) shows, in many sacrifice zones the rejection of sacrifice logic is reframed as an affirmation of the sacred: “a call to make sacred – to love and seek abundant life for – that which has been slated for a false kind of sacrifice” (ibid.: 21). Here, however, I propose an alternative reading of the relationship between sacrifice, the sacred, and violence in the context of Tuscia Castrense.

The concept of sacrifice zone has undergone multiple semantic shifts (Juskus, 2023). Initially used by the U.S. government to designate territories devastated by nuclear testing and waste facilities, the term has since been applied to landscapes targeted for large-scale resource extraction or to communities disproportionately burdened by capitalist accumulation (Little, 2017). In much of this literature, the language of sacrifice carries a tragic dimension, emphasizing testimony, memory, and monumentalisation of harm. Violence, in this framing, produces territories that serve as enduring monuments to a supposed higher good.

Yet Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of the *homo sacer* in Roman law complicates this interpretation. Sacred life, in Agamben’s account, is originally not defined by sacrificial ritual but

by exclusion from juridical protection: it may be killed without constituting homicide, yet it cannot be offered in sacrifice (Agamben, 2018). The sacred is thus tied not to ritual consecration but to a particular exposure to violence. As Agamben observes, “the meaning of the term sacred in our culture continues the semantic history of homo sacer rather than that of sacrifice [...]”. What we see before us is a life exposed as such to unprecedented violence, but precisely in its most profane and banal forms” (ibid.: 107, translation by the author).

Seen from this perspective, the struggles in Tuscia appear less as a tragedy of sacrifice than as a normalisation of exposure to slow, administrative violence. Whereas the anti-nuclear protests of the 1970s retained a sense of tragic sacrifice, today’s conflicts are increasingly absorbed into routine bureaucratic procedures. The transition to a green paradigm may have further depoliticised these dynamics by framing them as consensual and technocratic processes (Swyngedouw, 2011). In this sense, the “green sacrifice zone” (Scott & Smith, 2017; Zografos & Robbins, 2020) can be read as sacred territories not in the religious sense called for by environmental justice movements, but in Agamben’s sense of *sacertas*, i.e. a life exposed to incremental, prosaic violence, made killable without acknowledgment. The sacred territory does not migrate, through the tragedy of sacrifice, into the religious dimension; rather, it remains a no-man’s-land, exposed to the most prosaic forms of violence that can be perpetrated by anyone without even being recognised as such. Here, slow violence unfolds as a gradual killing of land and landscape, followed by the erosion of local livelihoods and, ultimately, the biological integrity of human bodies.

Applied to the territory, this perspective implicitly recognises the territory as a living being (Barbanente, Pazzagli & Poli 2025; Giampino & Serra, 2025) whose life can be characterised in terms of qualified life and bare life. In this sense, the well-known biopolitical distinction between people and population would be reflected in the couple formed by territory and space – in other words, a complex, “thick” socio-ecological organism versus an area delimited by a perimeter. The condition of *sacertas* implies the creation of “zones of indistinction” where legal/illegal, moral/immoral actions are blurred (Minca, 2007): a zone of indistinction between territory and space. It implies a territory that becomes exposed to violence – killable without sacrifice – as it transitions into such a zone of indistinction. This transition is rendered possible through a set of operations, including planning tools, evaluation and authorisation procedures, technical devices and rhetorical strategies that are discussed in the following section.

The making of *sacertas*

The making of Tuscia Castrense as a sacred territory is enacted through a set of planning and administrative procedures.

The development of renewable energy plants in the Lazio Region is governed by a multi-level regulatory framework combining national legislation and regional administrative procedures implemented by the Region. The foundational legal basis for authorisation procedures was established by the Legislative Decree 387/2003, which introduced the Single Authorisation Procedure (Autorizzazione Unica, AU) for renewable energy installations, and by the Legislative Decree 28/2011, which defined simplified procedures such as the Simplified Authorization Procedure (PAS) for smaller projects. Environmental assessments are regulated under the Legislative Decree 152/2006, which establishes the framework for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes at regional or national level depending on project characteristics. More recent reforms have further reshaped the authorisation landscape: the Legislative Decree 199/2021 introduced new provisions to accelerate renewable deployment, including the identification of suitable areas for renewable energy development, while the Legislative Decree 190/2024 reorganised the regulatory system by harmonising the different authorisation regimes and simplifying administrative procedures. Within this framework, smaller photovoltaic installations are typically authorised through municipal-level PAS procedures, whereas larger projects require regional AU and, when applicable, EIA processes, involving coordinated evaluation among multiple public authorities through formal administrative conferences.

A regional-level EIA, evaluated through a conference of services, is also key to the process that led to the issuance of the Single Regional Authorisation Measure (PAUR) by Lazio Region to the landfill project proposed by Med Sea Litter.

Contrary to the bottom-up approach of the energy and landfill cases, the siting process for the National Repository established by Legislative Decree 31/2010 follows a multi-stage procedure that progressively narrows down the pool of suitable areas starting from the whole national territory. First, SOGIN identifies suitable areas by delineating spatial perimeters that exclude areas considered unsuitable mainly according to technical and safety criteria. A National Map of Potentially Suitable Areas (CNAPI) was thus published, and underwent public consultation and was discussed in a national seminar. After that, a shortlist of candidate sites (CNAI) was produced. At that point, voluntary candidatures to host the repository were expected. Since no candidatures were presented, the CNAI should now be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA/VAS). The following steps outlined by the Legislative Decree include negotiations with selected sites, technical assessments and an Environmental Impact Assessment before the final authorisation is issued.

In the case of renewable energy facilities, the increasing simplification of the authorisation procedures makes the smaller injuries to the territory almost invisible. In the area, however, there is a disproportionately elevated number of projects subject to EIA because of their dimension. Despite providing more accurate evaluation of the requests, the EIA fails to capture the real

impacts of the proposed installations. There are various reasons for this (Preston, 2020). First, the EIA procedure is a proponent-led process, which causes voluntary biases in the assessment of impacts and evaluation of alternatives. Impacts are based on predictions that are never re-examined after the implementation, while alternatives are considered not before the project is even developed but only once it is defined, resulting in a mere ex-post justification of opportunistically chosen solutions. Second, cumulative impacts are rendered invisible in the EIA procedures, where projects are analysed one by one – which configures a typical slow violence issue.

The prevalence of a one-by-one approach must also be linked to insufficient planning – especially of integrated planning – on a higher level. Energy planning in Italy operates as a cascade-model framework, where European constraints and targets flow down to local project design and authorization. EU directives such as RED II set binding renewable energy and decarbonisation targets, expressed in percentages, which are transposed nationally through the Integrated National Plan of Energy and Climate (PNIEC) and its implementing legislation. Regional and local levels identify suitable areas, integrate environmental and landscape constraints, and govern authorisation procedures. Throughout this process, the territory is virtually absent: the energy transition is not considered a territorial planning issue. There is almost no territorial planning of the energy transition, only quantitative planning, where numbers are hierarchically passed down and homogeneously spread over territories. The only aim of legislative acts so far has been to remove obstacles to private initiative – not to plan but to neutralise planning. In the absence of true and integrated territorial planning, profitability equals suitability as a criterion for the siting of energy production facilities.

Despite significant differences, the siting process of the National Repository is similar in this key aspect: planning follows a top-down path where territories are considered and consulted only when the bigger picture is already defined and fixed. Like the top-down chain that leads from the EU directives to the PNIEC to the regional targets naturalises the “numbers” (that “we have to reach that fixed percentage of renewables” becomes a matter of fact), the chain that goes from the CNAPI to the CNAI and finally to the choice of the disposal site turns the territory into a surface, abstract perimeters into reality. Seemingly objective and scientific procedures and tools (criteria, indicators, weights, coefficients) operate as “technologies” (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2014)³ and hide the fact that these numbers are a social product.

³ The authors suggest some practices can be considered technologies “because they offer certain prescribed routines, techniques, and practices whereby the standardization and the ensuing comparability is achieved, which in turn opens up the possibility to move issues and dilemmas, for example of controversial urban planning, from the mess of local claims and into the clarity of numbers, that is from the sphere of politics to that of science” (ivi, p. 281).

Moreover, in all three cases planning remains sectoral. This approach promotes the reiteration of standardised methodologies, limits awareness of injustice and understanding of the associated conflicts, blocks the possibility of searching and finding integrated alternatives. Sectoralisation, together with administrative procedures, technical devices and rhetorical strategies, by treating each problem separately contributes to reducing these conflicts to managerial – and manageable – problems (Table 1). The combination of procedures, devices and strategies makes the destiny of the sacred territory by depicting it as a suitable area for the siting of such infrastructures, reducing conflicts into managerial problems and constructing the perception of an absence of alternatives. Table 1 shows how the main tools and strategies are combined to achieve this threefold objective.

Table 1 – Administrative procedures, technical devices and rhetorical strategies, combined, achieve three interrelated objectives. Some procedures/devices/strategies apply to one conflict, some others to two or even to all the three of them.

	Administrative procedures	Technical devices	Rhetorical strategies
Configuration as suitable area for impacting infrastructures	Absence of planning (suitability equals profitability) [R]	Presence of infrastructural nodes [R-N] State incentives [R]	Description of the territory as a surface [R-L-N] Absence of people and value [R-L-N]
Reduction of the complexity of conflicts to managerial problems	Process designed as if conflict was not expected [N] One-by-one impact assessment [N-L] Procedural simplification [R] Sectoralisation [R-L-N] Spot interaction with local actors [N]	Economic compensation [L-N] Predictive models (masked uncertainty) [N] Seemingly objective criteria and weights [N]	Temporal confusion [N] Narrow framing of environmental problems (CO2-focused) [R] Problem framing narrowed to civil demand/waste [R-N] Emphasis only on recyclable waste [L]
Construction of the absence of alternatives	Top-down, cascade-like chain narrowing down alternatives [R-N] Sectoralisation [R-L-N]	Naturalised percentages [R]	Emergency discourse [R-N] Seemingly unquestionable problem formulation [R-N] Seemingly unquestionable development model [R-N]
R: renewable energy plants; L: landfill; N: nuclear waste disposal			

Energy and waste as wicked problems

As the previous section has shown, the political logic of sacrifice is sustained by a specific epistemic operation – the framing of complex territorial issues like energy transition or waste management as purely technical problems. In this sense, the technocratic framing of energy and waste issues does more than obscure value conflicts: it actively produces the perception of necessity. By presenting solutions such as large-scale renewable energy deployment or centralised nuclear waste storage as the only viable options, this framing erases the space for political disagreement and constructs sacrifice as inevitable. This logic does not only manufacture necessity, it simultaneously erases possibility. The absence of alternatives is not a given but an effect of the framing itself.

In this sense, sacrifice becomes possible and acceptable only when conflicts of value, power asymmetries, and plural forms of knowledge are actively suppressed through technocratic procedures and sectoral compartmentalisation. It is precisely the failure to recognise these issues as wicked problems (Rittel & Webber 1973) – that is, as problems marked by irreducible uncertainty, conflicting rationalities, and competing visions of the good – that enables their depoliticisation and normalisation.

In Tuscany this epistemic narrowing is evident in all three conflicts: nuclear waste is framed as a logistical problem, plastic disposal as an issue of spatial efficiency, and renewable energy as an unquestionable environmental imperative. In each case, the wicked nature of the problem is obscured and sacrifice is normalised. These issues should instead be recognised as wicked problems in that they resist not only to definitive solutions but also to definitive formulations. In other words, what should be questioned is not just the solution, but the problem itself.

As Kinsella (2020) shows, the case of nuclear waste disposal is not merely a technical issue, but a moral and epistemic challenge involving multiple temporalities and irreducible uncertainties. Schwab and Combariza Diaz (2023) suggest using wicked problems as a “sensitising concept” to reveal the power dynamics embedded in “just transition” narratives. Recognising the wickedness is therefore not a call for better management. The call to reframe these problems as wicked is rather a demand for re-politicisation, an invitation to reopen the space for contestation, where sacrifice can no longer be naturalised as necessity.

The dual lens of the sacred and the wicked helps probe the depths of the injustice experienced in Tuscany Castrense. The notion of *sacertus* brings to light the symbolic and existential dimension of territorial exposure to harm revealing how communities are made “killable” without recognition. The wicked problems perspective, on the other hand, interrogates the framing of policy issues such as waste disposal and energy transition exposing how they are constructed as apolitical, technical challenges rather than value-laden, contested processes.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that decision-making in Tuscia operates through both the symbolic normalisation of harm and the procedural foreclosure of alternatives.

The urban bioregion as the possibility of a way out

What are the possible pathways for moving beyond the condition of *sacred territory*? Agamben (2005) identifies *profanation* as the act that restores to common use what has been separated into the sphere of the sacred. Profanation implies an opening to new possibilities. Agamben suggests that the transition from the sacred to the profane may occur through an incongruous reuse of the sacred – that is, through play. In this sense, “playing” with the territory might be understood as experimenting with new roles and identities. For Tuscia Castrense, the role of an *urban bioregion* (Magnaghi, 2020b) could open up new possibilities beyond extractive logics.

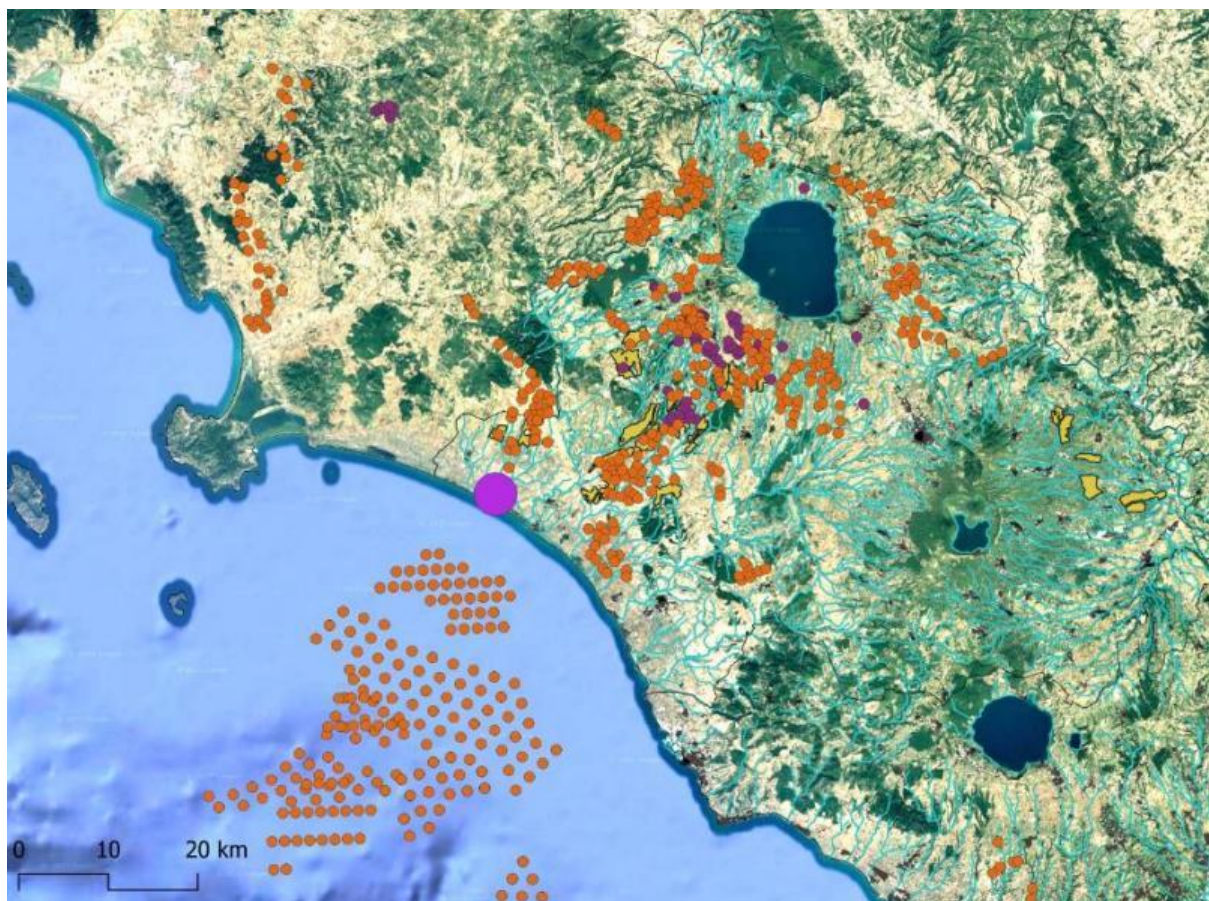
The concept of urban bioregion is meant at the same time as conceptual reference, interpretative tool and operative framework for an integrated territorial project. It describes a local territorial system whose main elements are (a) a reticular settlement system characterised by synergistic rather than centre-periphery relations, (b) hydro-geomorphological and environmental systems that coevolve with the settlement and the agro-forestry systems, and (c) forms of self-government by the local community, aimed at assuring the self-sustainability of the territorial ecosystem and the well-being of the inhabitants. The urban bioregion approach explicitly refuses the idea that wellbeing should result from the extraction of resources and profit. Rather, true well-being derives from a wealth-producing enhancement of territorial heritage and a tendency to the closure of the territorial metabolic cycles (ibid.).

Considering the three essential elements of the urban bioregion in the Tuscia Castrense area, while the first two are readily identifiable, the latter – linked to collective self-awareness, self-governance, and the capacity to define autonomous development – still poses a challenge. At present, a shared territorial project seems to be lacking. Nevertheless, resistance to extractive projects has contributed to the emergence of a collective identity that may, over time, foster community-building and the articulation of a project-based subjectivity “as an extension of community resistance” (Castells, 1997/2014: 12, translation by the author). Such a perspective may enable resistance and project, negation and affirmation to reinforce one another.

If a project-based identity (affirmation) is to emerge from resistance to the destruction of the territory (negation), the urban bioregion can be identified not only by ecological systems, settlement patterns, and forms of self-governance, but also by its negative, the destructive practices affecting the territory. In fact, these destructive practices are interrelated with the other three elements.

The case of the Tuscia Castrense offers a compelling example in this regard: an examination of the maps depicting infrastructural colonisation reveals how these practices delineate, for instance, an "energy basin" shaped by a shared locational logic connecting areas of production with those of waste disposal. The image of a basin is not just symbolic. It also points to the material and relational dimensions of territorial transformation: flows of energy, waste, and capital traverse these spaces linking disparate sites into a functional system that is simultaneously productive and extractive. Recent and planned facilities exemplify this dynamic. Even the most recent projects, such as the Scansano-Magliano wind farm in Tuscany, converge toward the node of Montalto di Castro, where the thermoelectric plant is located (Figure 5). According to TERNA's plans (the Italian company managing the national electricity transmission network) Montalto is set to become a key hub within the so-called Hypergrid. Energy from the Sardinian backbone, capturing the vast output of the island's energy production, will also flow into Montalto, from where another planned corridor will transport it toward Milan, in order to "increase the transit capacity from South to North" (TERNA, n.d.: 39). To this we can add that, among the possible futures for the Italian decommissioned power plants, a possibility was opened by a recent meeting between the Italian prime minister and Blackrock's CEO for them to

Figure 5 – The energy-waste basin. Above the potentially suitable sites for nuclear waste disposal, the map depicts already existing wind turbines (violet) and wind turbines for which permission has been requested. The site of the thermoelectric power plant of Montalto Di Castro is represented in pink. Author's elaboration based on data by MASE and Amici della Terra Onlus; base map: Google Satellite.



become data centres supporting the development of AI-based technologies (Rociola, 2024), Needless to say, it would only enormously increase the energy demand in the site.

The recognition that destructive practices also delineate the bioregion may support the emergence of a resistance-based identity potentially oriented toward self-governance. The bioregional project, in fact, does not emerge from the territory as a given, but must be actively constructed through the politicisation of resistance practices. The recognition of shared threats – energy colonisation, extractive planning, waste governance – can foster a shift from reactive opposition to a proactive, place-based projectuality and identity. Far from being predefined, project-based identity is shaped through struggles over territorial metabolisms and through bottom-up practices of care, management, and planning.

This way, the bioregion evolves from a response to sacrifice to a counter-project alternative to externally imposed development logics. Material and energy flows, rather than serving merely as indicators of extractive colonisation, can become sites of political reappropriation involving decisions about the kind of society and development model a community aspires to. The bioregional project could materialise through the reconfiguration of territorial metabolisms as a form of resistance to circulatory power (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016) beginning with the flows of energy and waste. These metabolisms, once spatialised, generate specific socio-environmental configurations and power relations (Heynen et al., 2006). Taking them into account could help develop an explicit bioregional understanding of issues of justice, moving beyond its framing within the three classic dimensions (distributional, procedural, recognitional).

The envisioned metabolic reconfiguration constitutes the material ground upon which local self-governance can emerge. It also entails reclaiming decision-making power over the infrastructure and resources that shape daily life. For example, the energy system, currently organized around extractive uses of renewable sources, could be reoriented towards self-sufficiency and community management with energy communities gradually evolving into forms of local self-government (Bolognesi & Magnaghi, 2020). The absence of such a perspective is evident in the current development strategy for the *Alta Tuscia–Antica Città di Castro* inner area (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, n.d.), which, despite including a section on energy planning, makes no reference to self-management or endogenous valorisation of bioregional energy resources. Some positive signs may nonetheless emerge from the joint planning process undertaken by the municipalities in the inner area, which should also involve coordinating renewable energy development (De Leo & Altamore, 2024). The reconfiguration of territorial metabolisms, in Tuscia Castrense and other “sacred territories”, indicates a concrete project-based trajectory through which local democracy and ecological processes may converge to sustain the very conditions of life.

Life vs death: a biopolitics of the territory

While the proposal of an urban bioregion offers a situated and constructive reimagination of Tuscia's future, it is not an isolated or uniquely local response. Across the Global South – and increasingly in marginalised territories of the Global North – communities affected by forms of extractive violence have developed alternative territorial imaginaries, rooted in the defence of life. These experiences often articulate in more explicit and advanced ways what is still emerging in Tuscia: the connection between territory, identity, and self-government; the opposition between life and death logics; and the formulation of alternative planning tools grounded in collective self-determination.

The defence of life, with its lexicon and imagery, is a recurrent theme in the experiences that oppose extractive and destructive projects, often characterised in turn as “death projects”. Territorial planning and management, as part of a political process of community organisation, are infused with the language of life vs death, suggesting the idea that a biopolitics of the territory is at play, where at stake is the body-territory (Cabnal, 2019). Drawing on the concepts of “territories of life” and “life plans”, this section explores how such experiences can inform and inspire pathways of transformation in contexts like Tuscia Castrense, where sacrifice has not yet given way to project.

The concept of territory of life describes a grassroots phenomenon that has diverse forms. Also known in international policy as ICCAs, territories of life are self-defined as “territories and areas governed, managed and conserved by custodian Indigenous peoples and local communities” (ICCA Consortium, 2025). Interestingly, this image recalls the bioregional definition of the territory as a “life place”⁴ (Thayer, 2003). For both perspectives, a crucial element is the rootedness of people in place. Territories of life, in fact, have three common characteristics: a “close and deep connection” between an indigenous people or local community and a territory, on which they rely for their material and non-material wellbeing; a functioning governance system enacted by the community; and an effective contribution of this governance system to the wellbeing of both nature and the community (ICCA Consortium, 2025).

The definition of territories of life is not static but rather processual and dynamic. Depending on their status, territories of life can be *defined*, *disrupted* or *desired*. Desired territories of life, in particular, “have not yet satisfied the three characteristics, but could develop them today as some communities are ready to act as custodians” (ICCA Consortium, 2023). When

⁴ “A *bioregion* is literally and etymologically a “life-place” — a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. Most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to *take place*” (Thayer, 2003: 3).

communities “decide to pull themselves together in relation to a common environment, socioecological principles and vision [...], they develop a common identity for themselves as “community” and for their territory as an “ICCA”” (ibid.).

The Kichwa people of Sarayaku in the Ecuadorian Amazon offer an example of a self-defined territory of life. Their declaration of *Kawsak Sacha*, the Living Forest, aims to achieve recognition of a new category of protected Indigenous territory, which would acknowledge its spiritual, heritage and ecological dimensions (Pueblo Originario Kichwa de Sarayaku, n.d.). The resistance to state and corporate extractive policies, including oil, mining and logging, has strengthened their autonomous protection systems, based on self-government, community zoning, and traditional ecological knowledge (ICCA Consortium, 2021), thus reversing a logic of sacrifice in one of care and reaffirmation of life.

Another case worth considering is that of life plans. Interestingly, in both cases the reference to life was introduced by the communities of practice as an alternative to externally imposed names and definitions. In the case of the territories of life, the designation in use in early 2000s was “CCAs,” standing for *Community Conserved Areas* (IUCN, 2004). The acronym was subsequently expanded to include an “l,” acknowledging the central role of Indigenous custodians. The custodians also insisted that what they protect are *territories* - i.e. living, inhabited places – rather than simple “areas”. Therefore, many members of the ICCA Consortium have embraced the expression territories of life to better capture the complex, interdependent, and multidimensional nature of the places and ecosystems they sustain (ICCA Consortium, 2025). “Life plan”, on the other hand, is a definition for the Indigenous alternative to development plans that was first used by the Guambiano people in Colombia. Besides stressing that the concept of “development” does not make any sense to Indigenous culture, it refers to the fact that the plan covers all aspects of the people’s culture and society and is structured around a long-term vision (Gow, 1997). Its wide use also reflects how these plans address the threat to the very existence of the Indigenous communities posed by conventional approaches to development, by outlining strategies to survive and prosper in the contemporary world (Hermission, 2010).

Life plans emerged when the 1991 Colombian Constitution recognised the “*entidad territorial indigena*”, which implied the Indigenous people had to design plans to autonomously manage public funds in line with their own development priorities (Gow 1997; Vieco 2010). Life plans, though, are not just meant to manage public funds. They encompass all aspects of Indigenous culture and society in keeping with the people’s specific cosmovision, often represented in stark contrast with the western idea of progress and development, and counter the threat to the very existence and persistence of the community. In other words, they are not just planning instruments but rather processes of community empowerment and political

organisation for the defence of the territory. Actually, in the principles expressed by most such plans, the territory is tied to two other pillars – identity and self-government⁵.

Similar life plans have been developed by other communities outside Colombia. In the Sierra Norte of Puebla, Mexico, the life plan of the Masewal, Tutunakù and Mestizo people, known as Códice Masewal (Eckart & Fernandez, 2021), recognizes energy sovereignty among its pillars. As the plan itself states, it was born in the middle of a broad regional movement opposing the exploitation of the territory for energy production and natural resource extraction – what the plan itself calls “megaproyectos extractivos de muerte” (Boege & Fernandez, 2022; Sapocchetti, 2019). The life plan, using a composite language made of both words and images (Figure 6), communicates “how we defend life in the region, how we organize ourselves in the face of threats, about insecurity and violence, and the incursions into our territory by large mining, hydroelectric, and oil companies, hotels for mass tourism, and many other death projects” (Eckart and Fernandez, 2021, translation by the author).

In this and many more cases, the assault on the territory, its designation as a sacrifice zone triggers a process of self-recognition that, beginning with resistance and self-organisation, leads to the formulation of a life project for the territory and the community.

As is manifest in the Global South, modern civilisation has generated profound disintegration, oppression, and alienation. This condition, however, is not unique to one half of the world only. As Parascandolo (2022) observes, “a long red thread connects these multifaceted pathologies to the multiple and diverse forms of ‘sacrifice’ inflicted not only upon the poor of what was once called the ‘Third World’, but upon ordinary citizens across the globe, including those of developed countries” (ibid.: 141, translation by the author).

In this wider perspective, the struggles emerging from Tuscía resonate with other contemporary mobilisations that contest extractive and sacrificial paradigms. The Sámi people in Norway, opposing wind energy projects imposed on their reindeer herding lands, appealed to Indigenous rights (Blokzijl & Dueholm Rasch, 2025). The Norwegian Supreme Court ruled that the installation of wind turbines on Sámi grazing territories violated Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the culture of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Echoed by Sardinian activists opposing large-scale renewable projects, this case shows how the defence of life and territory increasingly intersects with the recognition of the interconnectedness of people, place and life.

Yet rural and “non-Indigenous” communities – often deemed peripheral or underdeveloped – possess even fewer instruments to defend their life places. This shared condition of vulnerability, visible across both the Global North and South, reveals how green extractivism

⁵ Information on life plans was gathered through literature review and through an interview with Andres Felipe Garcia Pineda and Erika Cristina Acevedo Mejia from University of Antioquia (September 2025).

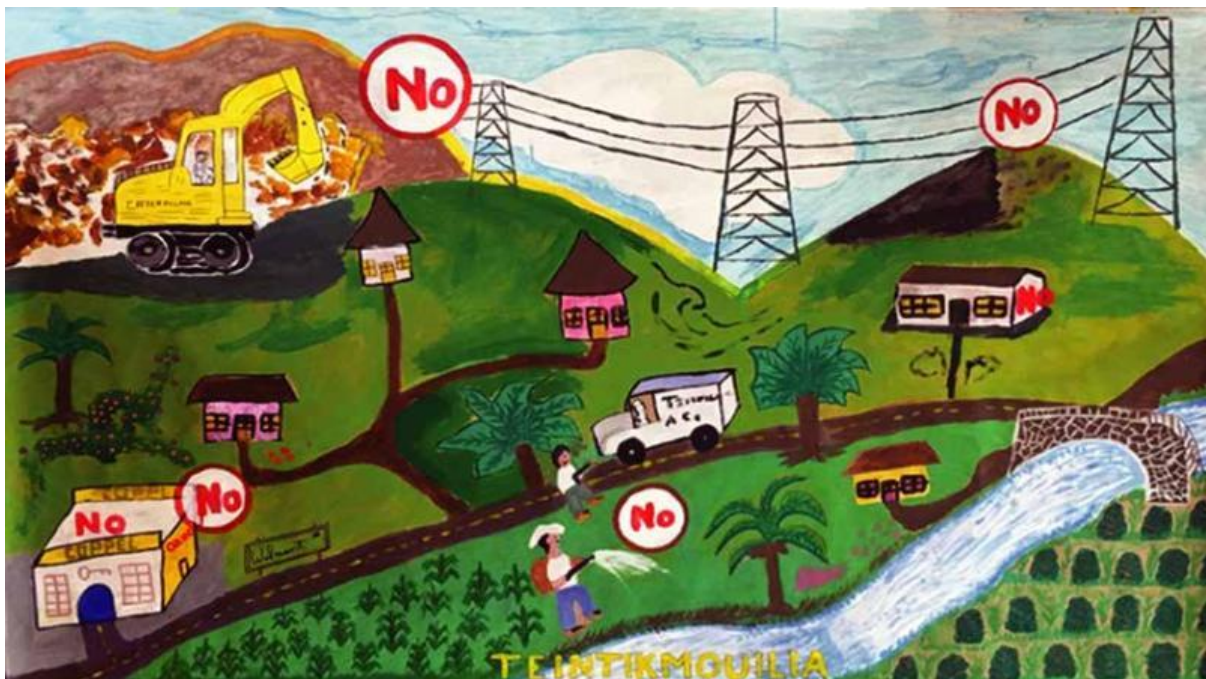
continues to expose local populations to global imperatives of progress while denying them the power to define what development and life should mean within their own territories.

Towards a bioregional “life plan”

The case of Tuscia Castrense exposes the enduring reproduction of a sacrificial territorial logic under the guise of ecological transition. Despite the shift from nuclear to renewable paradigms, the same spatial and epistemic infrastructures of violence persist in externalised decision-making, technocratic framings, and the normalisation of exposure to harm. This continuity demonstrates that the “green” transition, when governed through technocratic necessity rather than democratic deliberation, risks perpetuating instead of dismantling extractive relations.

Interpreting Tuscia as a sacred territory, where life is rendered vulnerable to unacknowledged violence, invites a rethinking of both the material and symbolic dimensions of environmental injustice. Profanation, in Agamben’s sense, becomes here a political gesture: the reactivation of collective capacities for common use and self-determination. The urban bioregion embodies this gesture proposing a framework in which resistance evolves into a project-based identity, and territorial metabolisms are reconfigured as foundations of local democracy.

Figure 6 – TEYIN TIKMOWILIAH (threats and risks) as represented in the Códice Masewal. Image from (Eckart and Fernandez, 2021).



While the long-term horizon of the urban bioregion approach is a form of local self-government inspired by Bookchin's libertarian municipalism (Bookchin, 2023)⁶, structured through federated networks of self-governed urban bioregions, a short- or middle-term perspective should take advantage of the many available tools to pursue community empowerment and network-building. The territorial project, in fact, logically comes before the identification of the most suitable planning tools since planning tools are, by definition, instrumental to the achievement of territorial (self-)development objectives.

The core of a bioregional approach is to encourage and support the formation of "bioregional project communities" (Poli, 2019) including public authorities, active citizenship, social and economic actors. Pact-based tools – organic districts, agricultural parks, river contracts, landscape observatories, ecomuseums, etc. – seem to offer a valid support to bring these communities together to develop and implement socially-shared visions and projects (Luciani, Allen & Robinson, in press). Voluntary pact-based tools offer an opportunity to strengthen local self-government and experiment with forms of local democracy, potentially paving the way for more decentralised and autonomous forms of territorial self-governance in which higher levels of government progressively devolve authority, as envisaged by Bookchin (2023) and Magnaghi (2020).

Instruments such as the Statutes of the Territory, introduced by Tuscany Regional Law n. 5/1995, can potentially provide an institutionally recognized framework for developing a self-determined, long-term vision of the territory. The Statute, in fact, is "the set of interpretative and regulatory acts, preceding and supraordinate to planning acts, which encompasses the definition of the territorial heritage and its constituent elements, the structural invariants, and the related generative, protective, reproductive, and transformative rules" (Magnaghi 2012, p. 17). As evoked by their name, the Statutes are "constitutional acts" through which the settled community defines the identity of the territory and the rules of its future transformation. However, their application has largely been limited, and, also due to the absence of meaningful participatory processes, they have in effect been reduced to a set of planning constraints (Maggio, 2014). The challenge therefore lies in recovering their original meaning and transforming them into the powerful statutory tools they were intended to be.

In this perspective, for sacred territories, the statutory "core" of the bioregional project may be reinterpreted as a situated form of "life plan": a counter-project to sacrificial development rooted in the reappropriation of ecological processes and decision-making power. The capacity to reject dominant logics that claim to be the only way of being in the world, and instead to live according to one's own ways and values. The transition from sacrifice to care for life thus marks

⁶ Alternative conceptions of self-government may also support similar processes of territorial governance reorganisation in other contexts – see, for example, Gandhi's approach to self-rule.

a shift from governance through death and necessity towards the collective reproduction of life as the organising principle of place.

Conflict of interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Author statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

I confirm that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the research, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. I also confirm that all references cited in the manuscript are genuine, have been consulted by the author(s), and are not fabricated or generated by AI.

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