Sustainable Tourism Ecosystem Balancing Territorial Values: A Place-Based Perspective

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Abstract. Specialized tourism based on investments for the construction of main attractors does not represent an effective generalized regeneration strategy for the recovery of European inland rural areas. Remarking on the expected results of national policies and the relative effectiveness of the investment in tourist carriers through the evaluation of case studies, this research argues that the hypothesis to invert abandonment trends through generalized tourism development strategies may not be considered a suitable option in the decision-making process. Instead, the paper proposes a territorial analysis structure that explores socio-ecological dimensions to build knowledge for sustainable strategic plans. The study identifies territorial values in abandoned settlements in Calabrian Greek Area (southern Italy), and presents a new scenario for tourism development that prioritizes investment in supporting local informal tourism welcoming systems as an alternative to large infrastructural investment. Such investment is expected to produce long-term benefits for resident communities in abandoned inland rural areas. The study concludes with general recommendations to improve tourism development policies in a place-based approach.

Keywords: tourism ecosystem · sustainable development · inner areas

1 Introduction

Tourism is considered a catalyst for the social and economic development of any destination area [1]. When considering rural and peripheral territories, it becomes evident that national development policies and local programs assign a structural role to tourism development in improving territorial competitiveness. In fact, tourism is positioned as a primary option for rehabilitating areas that have suffered from the crisis in rural economies and the growing abandonment of the countryside [2]. The significance of the tourism component in a territorial development strategy is derived from its ability to mobilize flows of people, capital, and goods and generate a positive impact on the areas of interest [3]. In many instances, rural tourism development is funded by public investments that involve the construction of significant infrastructure projects, which are referred to as "tourism attractors" and are designed to offer a range of recreational activities for potential tourists [4]. This approach is often viewed as a "standard model" for

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local development planning, despite the fact that there is still uncertainty surrounding the ability to accurately measure the potential benefits of such intervention policies [5]. As a result, a critical perspective has emerged regarding the planning of territorial development throughout all phases of the planning cycle, including ex ante evaluation, problems and needs assessment, logic nexus evaluation of actions and expected outcomes, evaluation and decision making regarding investments, ongoing evaluation, final evaluation, and ex post evaluation [6]. In addition to its overall development role, there are distinct structural differences between the two primary tourism models that exist worldwide: mainstream tourism and slow tourism [7]. Within the spectrum of tourism development, we specifically examine the role of "specialized tourism" [1] in the rural scenario as a key driver for policymaking in inland peripheral areas. It has often been promoted, increasingly as a counterpoint to mass, package-type tourism in destination areas [8], and to obtain alternative sources of income where the agricultural sector has declined [2]. Although specialized tourism is mainly based on sustainability and the enhancement of the values of places, developing new services aimed at a specific category of users, has in many cases not demonstrated effectiveness in generating a context-based growth.

This research focuses on the relevance of territorial values in inland rural areas as a precondition to design local low-investment territorial strategies for tourism enhancement as an alternative to the widespread approach based on huge public infrastructure investments. In order to base a critical perspective on the effectiveness of the current approach toward tourism development in inland rural areas, this paper introduces an ongoing evaluation of two selected projects' past beneficiaries of relevant public/private investment. The analysis of demographic data represents the main monitoring indicator of the growth to achieve the goal reported in the national guidelines "National Strategy for in land rural areas" (Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne, hereafter SNAI). Remarking the expected results of SNAI and the relative effectiveness of the investment in tourist carriers, two fundamental questions arise: is it really possible to imagine a future tourism-based repopulation of these areas? Does the growth of seasonal presences in relation to the public infrastructure investments effectively improve the quality of life of the permanent population compared with the preservation of the existing territorial values? To respond to these questions, an overview of selected consolidated intervention referring to mainstream design approaches to local inland rural areas development is proposed: intervention addressed towards a specific target of users in a completely abandoned town; and large scale recovery operation. Additionally, a critical point arose: strategies implementing public tourism development policies, mostly based on public investments in temporary devices/events, appear to be ineffective in contrasting structural territorial weaknesses such as depopulation of the permanently resident inhabited area.

The present analysis offers a critique of the use of public investments in tourism infrastructures as central components of development/regenerative policies aimed at promoting inland tourism. This critique stems from an examination of how the issue is framed and how the distinctive characteristics of these areas are considered when formulating policies for urban and territorial development. A critical evaluation of the cases reviewed in this study supports this argument.

Therefore, the objective of the research is to open-up a new path-line to identify local values in the phase of context evaluation of the planning cycle [9] in order to

support coherent actions in a long-term perspective. In our view, development programs favor targeted actions that can stimulate the endogenous forces of the local system in order to encourage sustainable development, mitigate the social and economic costs of abandonment, and improve the quality of life for both residents and visitors.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding sustainable tourism development in rural areas, operating on two levels. Firstly, as a contribution to policy-making, it draws attention to the conflicts that arise between the general trends in current design approaches, which are based on the public's capacity to invest in infrastructure. Secondly, in the academic debate, it proposes a preliminary pathway for integrating multidisciplinary components. This approach will benefit scholars who are focusing on rural sustainable development, tourism management, place-making, territorial analysis, and territorial values niches investigation. Through a territorial analysis that identifies abandoned or neglected places in local systems, a frame-vision [10] of the study area is returned. Specialized tourism is not considered a valid hypothesis for the enhancement of current marginal uses and practices. In this context, new tourism attractors oriented to generate exogenous tourism flows appear not to be compatible with the capacity of the local system to gain economic and social advantages. Thus, the research recommends focusing on local inhabitants' capacity to play a role in the process of tourism development and consequently to plan exploitation actions centered on their potentials. The results are a tourism model base on a small number of guests maximizing the income for those inhabitants who take care of them guiding those groups through territorial experiences.

In the next section the case study analysis is discussed. The discussion section refers to the main argument supporting the research thesis to balance tourism development on specific place based values recognition more than to generalized investment policy oriented to generate effective tourism attractors structure. The conclusions suggest main policies recommendations, and future possible scenarios of research based on enhancing weaknesses and strengths of the discussed results.

2 Greek Area in Calabria Region: A Laboratory for Sustainable Tourism Design

The Greek area in the Calabria region (Italy) is a territory that includes 13 municipalities according to the taxonomy proposed by the implementation of territorial governance and landscape protection policies "quadro territoriale regionale paesaggistico" (hereafter QTRP). Among these, Bova, Roccaforte del Greco and Roghudi are strictly related to each other and affected by severe depopulation. The ancient settlement of old Roghudi has been completely abandoned for more than 50 years. The area falls within the SNAI-72 pilot projects, where with the support of public funds equal to EUR 25,869,716.00, a massive infrastructure investment is planned with the general objective to "*Increase the number of inhabitants by 17.8% in the next decade 2018–2028, with an average annual rate of increase in the resident population equal to 1.5%, which should make it possible to bring the number of inhabitants from 9125 (as of 31 December 2016) to 10,750 with an increase of 1625 people*" [11]. As highlighted by the document, the strategy consists of a widespread intervention on a large scale and most of the funds will be destined to the

improvement of mobility as well as to the creation of tourist services such as widespread hotels and urban welfare.

Among the municipalities selected by the pilot strategy and the regional planning tool, the analysis focuses on the completely abandoned urban settlement of Roghudi vecchio and the referring local system.4.1. Abandonment: An Irreversible Trend.

The centers with less than a thousand inhabitants in the system of reference are Bova, Roghudi and Roccaforte del Greco, located at high altitudes (Table 1).

Table 1. Resident population of the minor centers included in the territorial system as selected case study area in the year 2020. Fonts: ISTAT.

Roghudi Nuovo	Bova	Roccaforte del Greco
952 inhabitants	402 inhabitants	387 inhabitants

These small towns have undergone a gradual and slow process of depopulation due to various factors presented by the analysis of the permanent population loss in the period 1971–2015. The most important changes took place in Bova and Roccaforte del Greco with the decrease, respectively, of 67.95% and 64.27% of inhabitants. The result of migration affected Roghudi Nuovo, which registers a population loss of 30.54%. Negative local trends and aging of population are worse conditions for imagining future scenarios, considering, moreover, negative generational change is underway, comprising a cycle of decline [12]. The irreversibility is also enhanced by the absence, at the national level, of demographic and economic growth margins. Indeed, according to Istat report [13], in 2048, there will be more deaths than births within the country.

Table 2. Roghudi demographic index in 2019. Fonts: ISTAT.

Old Age	Structural Dependence	Ex-Change Rate of Active Population	Mortality	Birth Rate
170.5	50.5	114.8	12.3	9.2

In 2019, in Roghudi Nuovo, the old age index, which expresses the ratio of the population over 65 to the population under 14, shows that there are 170 elderly people for every 100 young people. Even more critical is the comparison between births and deaths correlated by the structural dependency index which expresses dependents for every 100 working inhabitants, registering about one dependent for every two working users. Furthermore, the exchange rate data reveal the very elderly working age population (Table 2). The demographic structure represents a barrier for investments in local development. The exodus from inland rural areas began in the 1960s, in correspondence with the economic boom. The industrial revolution, technology innovation in the production of products and exchange of goods/services in global market [12] induced municipalities to redesign their urban layout, taking advantage of the coast, which is seen as a more

accessible place (Fig. 3. Condofuri, Bova, Roghudi and San Lorenzo move part of their urban scenario in other sites structuring, essentially compacting the development line (Fig. 1).

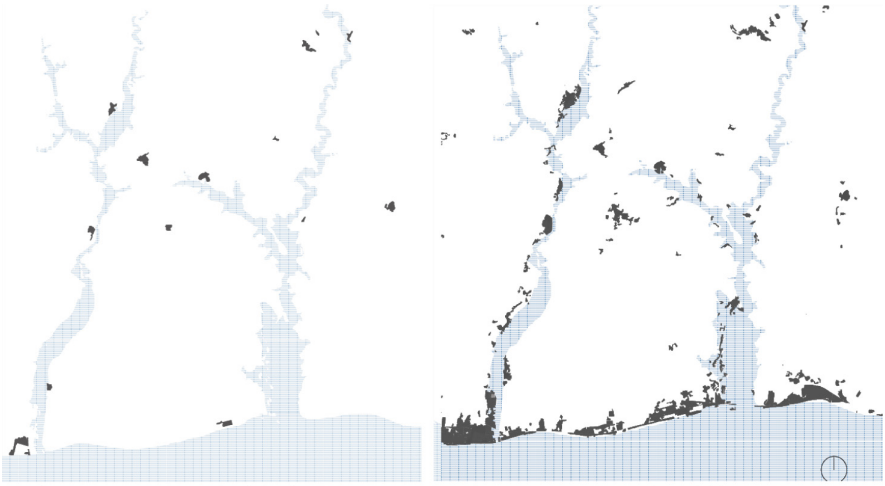

Fig. 1. Urban settlement evolution between 1954–2011. The black areas represent the residential settlement system.

Future scenario predicts for rural areas a non-replacement of aging population; hence, the negative trend is projected to continue into the next decades [12]. The influence is provided not only by economic reasons but also by other factors: local and external. Local factors can include complex landforms that make the development of activities hostile, while external factors such as changes on a global scale are equally decisive for settlement dynamics [14].

The Calabrian Greek area identified by the QTPR identifies a portion of territory historically inhabited by Greek-speaking populations that reaches its greatest concentration in the river Amendolea basin. The complex morphology of this area with accentuated differences in altitude and the presence of rivers represents one aspect of the identity of the landscape (Fig. 4). The QRTP, in identifying resources of regional importance, recognizes priority intervention policies. A first general map classifies land cover and protected areas, municipalities and national or regional parks in order to protect and preserve the autochthonous flora–fauna. Further lines of development are traced by the existing anthropological resources such as the characteristics of the built structure which is distinguished by the common disposition on the slopes and agropastoral activities. Roghudi ancient settlement and Roccaforte del Greco are situated in the boundaries of Aspromonte National Park and this is considered an attribute to identify in naturalistic tourism development [15].

Roghudi, Bova, and Roccaforte del Greco are small urban agglomerations that serve as nodes within a territorial system that shares common features, values, and services.

These nodes and the roads connecting them comprise a closed infrastructural ring encircling the basin of the Amendolea River. The diagram depicted in Fig. 2 illustrates the relationships between these urban agglomerations and their connection network. The hierarchy of the road network linking these nodes varies according to the morphology and characteristics of the roads, which influence travel speed. The axis between Roccaforte del Greco and Roghudi Vecchio, where the natural environment is wild, is associated with slow travel, and ordinary vehicles are no longer able to travel. Within the network, trekking circuits have developed along traditional sheep-farming itineraries, connecting isolated rural houses with the main nodes.

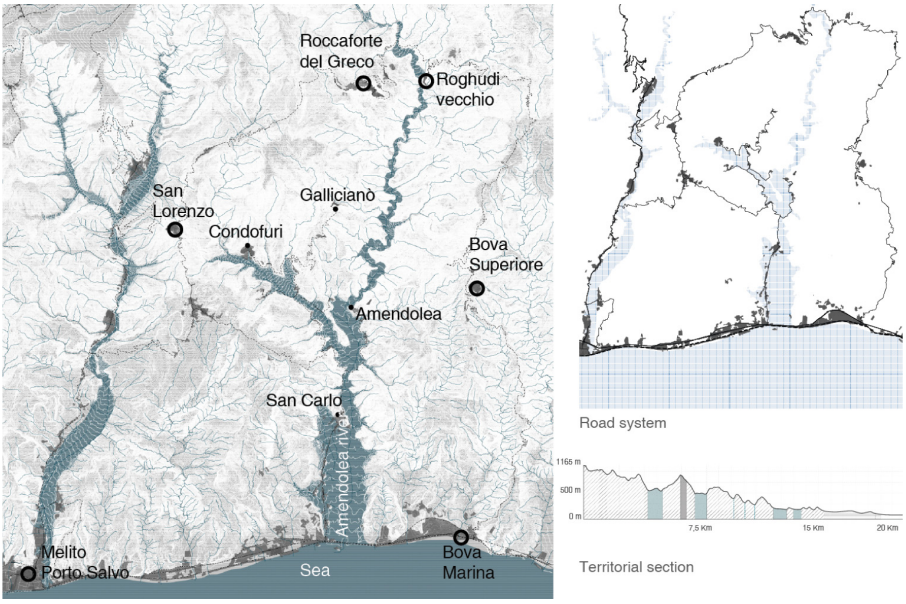

Fig. 2. Territorial map of the study area highlighting main orographically characters, the system of settlement and main infrastructural connections.

It has become apparent that the case of Roghudi cannot be classified within the traditional archetype of abandoned villages, but rather should be regarded as a unique component of a broader territorial system that provides an appropriate scale for designing a tourism development strategy.

Through travel within the study area, it was possible to produce a qualitative report on social practices by examining the uses, historical development, and current dynamics of the urban structure. As a result, territorial values (TV) are associated with specific locations on the map represented by points or lines, which are linked to a scenario of urban interaction.

The significance of TV depends on:

1. Physical attribute: hot spot intervention that is not expected in a completely abandonment place, in contrast with the surrounding assessment.

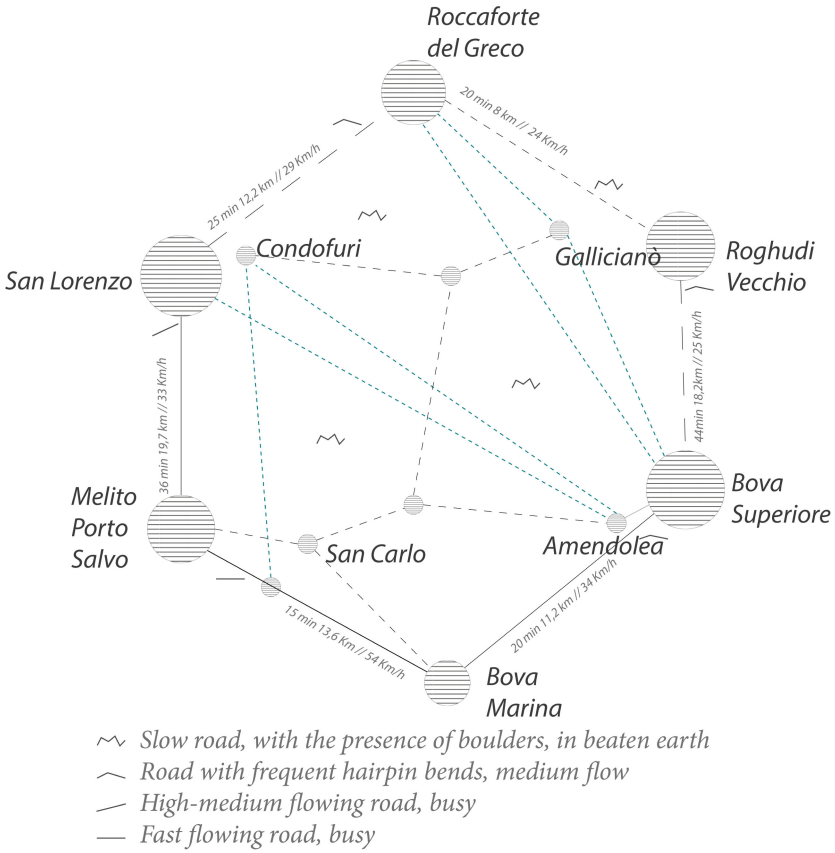

Fig. 3. Local area network.

2. Unexpected practices or activity related to specific places.

Along the Roccaforte del Greco–Roghudi Vecchio axis, flows of people who sporadically inhabit the public space have been observed. As illustrated in Fig. 6, the abandoned village is undergoing a naturalization process characterized by the proliferation of vegetation that grows to adapt to the morphology of the buildings. Meanwhile, the municipalities have provided facilities oriented towards the enhancement and preservation of public structures, such as the recently restored church or the solar panel lights above the old public lighting system that is no longer in use. Certain current activities define collective perception, such as recreational practices that involve interacting with the environment. The uninhabited town square becomes a suitable meeting place for spending community moments linked to events such as the local festival and family travel experiences. Along the route, there are informal niche tourism practices where local people with extensive knowledge of the area attend to tourists and offer itineraries to discover remote places and sample slow food. Inventories could offer new dimensions for promoting sustainable tourism in order to preserve cultural and landscape features

without requiring significant investment in infrastructure. As a result, the challenges facing rural communities could represent an opportunity for inhabitants to better organize their offering of products and services.



Fig. 4. A selection of images collected during the territorial visit.

The places of territorial identity define a map where two categories of cultural points can be identified in relation to the observed social practices: meeting points and leisure activities.

3 Discussions

The case of Roghudi highlights how tourism based on identity values can represent an alternative to large investments through systematic reorganization of territorial supply. Abandoned towns and internal area settlements with fewer than a thousand inhabitants do not meet the minimum conditions necessary to observe a change in demographic trends following investments in services targeting a specific user base in the tourism sector.

Current European policies focus on mitigating the abandonment of rural areas, while a policy of adaptation to this phenomenon could be adopted [16]. The objective focuses on the well-being of the permanent population by directing useful resources towards the

re-organization of territorial supply. Through the exploration of the territory, informal processes are observed that contribute to the subsistence economy of the place [17].

The nature of the phenomenon implies a lack of statistical data to detect the extent of the flows [18, 19], but their trace in the system allows the recognition of a territorial matrix defined by interdependence characteristics. These data are potential resources for intercepting tourist ecosystems [19–21] and contributing to the sustainable development of tourism. Current European and national policies overlook territorial values for the economic and social growth of rural areas, comparing this model to urban reality [16]. The hypotheses considered are those of a connection with the places that defines the dimensions of the tourist offer, which in contexts as the one considered is divided into small categories of services often organized through informal actions based on the skills and availability of residents. This cannot be classified through a traditional economic model, but rather is configured as a phenomenon to be monitored over time through public support programs linked to micro-entrepreneurship, specific professional training, and technical and scientific support to social groups engaged as actors in this process [22, 23].

Monitoring will be useful to verify those minimum requirements necessary to project this territorial organization into a formalized territorial development process through the tools of EU development policies [24].

4 Conclusions

Territorial system explores different forms of niche activities that informally involve local populations [25]. To guide future sustainable and effective developments, it is crucial to identify informal processes and collect data to construct a comprehensive knowledge framework. The problem of abandonment cannot be attributed solely to depopulation, which creates conditions of uninhabited municipalities, but is also linked to the socio-ecological realities characterizing the case study area. In planning for sustainable development of abandoned municipalities, it is recommended to extend the territorial analysis to a wider functional area to identify relevant relationships among nodes of the inland settlement network, rather than relying solely on a single pole as the only focus of the strategic design process. Thus, a polycentric structure should be adopted to formulate vision frameworks that seek appropriate solutions. Consequently, the common approach of identifying major infrastructural investments as tourism attractors/facilities to reverse abandonment trends may not be the suitable option in the decision-making process.

The argument in support of this statement is that the construction of large tourist attractions often requires huge financial investments and the creation of infrastructure that can have a negative impact on the environment and local communities. Moreover, these large-scale tourism projects may only attract seasonal tourists, without promoting sustainable long-term tourism development. On the other hand, it could be more effective to use a low-cost, medium-term approach to tourism development planning, with greater participation and involvement of the local community in the design and implementation of development initiatives. This way, there could be greater involvement of local resources and the implementation of sustainable and integrated tourism development strategies into the local reality. After an in-depth understanding of the context (empirical and quantitative), identifying hidden social processes becomes increasingly relevant,

and the hypothesis of pointing out the value of unofficial experiential tourism itineraries has emerged as the primary focus of the regeneration strategy.

Therefore, the generalized approach of considering tourism as the core driver for inland and abandoned areas' development oriented to the repopulation objective (as proposed recently in the SNAI) results in a weak scenario. Seasonal tourism generated through significant tourism infrastructural investments (attractions, accommodation facilities, specific services) is an exogenous factor that activates only partially the endogenous potential of local communities in the target areas.

It can be inferred that there will be a proactive approach to seeking to harmonize future initiatives and objectives with the 2030 urban agenda for urban sustainability. Overall, all the objectives of the 2030 Urban Agenda [26] are aimed at promoting sustainable urban growth through the promotion of sustainable practices and technologies, efficient resource management, the adoption of inclusive policies, and the promotion of collaboration among all urban sector stakeholders. Additionally, the topic of downscaling NUA [27–30] represents an operative research dimension to cover new knowledge demand in applied planning for tourism development. What is relevant to highlight are the following objectives, which assume an operational character to guide the developments of this research:

1. Objective 7: Sustainable and Resilient Cities—This objective aims to promote safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban cities and communities.
2. Objective 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities—This objective aims to make urban cities and communities more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by promoting sustainable mobility, waste management, efficient use of resources, and the adoption of innovative technologies.
3. Objective 13: Climate Action—This objective aims to promote action to address climate change and mitigate its effects in urban cities and communities through the adoption of low-carbon emission technologies and the promotion of renewable energies.
4. Objective 17: Partnerships for the Goals—This objective aims to promote collaboration among all urban sector stakeholders, including local governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector, to achieve the goals of the 2030 Urban Agenda.

However, the study's weakness lies in the partial capacity to analyze social niches capital according to the short investigation terms. The complexity of social relations and structures, even in depopulated and remote areas characterized by small numbers of inhabitants, is a time-consuming process based on the interaction between the researcher and the local community.

Another critical issue is related to the weaknesses of the spatial planning system operating for territorial development, which does not offer an effective reference framework to formulate a development proposal. The only spatial planning tools that include tourism enhancement as a driver for local development is the Calabrian Greek Area Strategy that mainly proposes a territorial classification according to landscape structures. It is weak in the proposal of exploitation options.

Future research on the case study area of the Roghudi polycentric system in Calabria (Italy) should include structured interactions with local groups, involving them in co-design practices [22]. Regarding the general issue of territorial development in inland

areas based on tourism, low-investment territorial strategies in the medium term represent an option to be deeply assessed according to the recommendation to better direct resources by actively involving the local population. The hypothesis is that intangible investment in forms of governance and incentives can lead to a better result in terms of cost-benefit [15].

The problem of abandonment cannot be considered only as the cause of depopulation-generating conditions of uninhabited municipalities, but a phenomenon linked to the socio-ecological realities characterizing the case study area. The first recommendation for improving the strategic approach in planning the sustainable development of abandoned municipality is not to consider a single pole as the only focus of the strategic design process but to extend the territorial analysis to a wider area functional to identify relevant relations among nodes of the inland settlement network.

Hence, the need to formulate vision frameworks seeking appropriate solutions has to be developed in a polycentric structure. As a consequence, the common approach that is based on identifying major infrastructural investment as tourism attractor/facility as a solution to invert abandonment trends will probably not be a suitable option in the decision-making process [6].

In order to plan for the growth of tourism, and economic and social capital in ways that utilize environmental capital in a sustainable way, after an in-depth understanding of the context (empirical and quantitative), the identification of hidden social processes became more and more relevant and the hypothesis to point out the value of unofficial experiential tourism itineraries emerged as the main focus of the regeneration strategy [31].

Hence, it can be argued that the widespread perception of tourism as the main catalyst for the development and repopulation of inland and abandoned areas, as recently suggested in the SNAI, is a flawed approach. The reason being that seasonal tourism, which is generated through large-scale investments in tourism infrastructure (such as attractions, accommodation facilities, and specialized services) [32–35], only partially activates the endogenous potential of the local communities residing in these regions [36]. Concerning the general issue of territorial development in inland areas based on tourism, the low-investment territorial strategies in the medium term represents an option to be deeply assessed according to the recommendation to better direct resources by actively involving the local population [37]. The hypothesis is that the intangible investment in forms of governance and incentives can lead to a better result in terms of cost–benefit.

The emerging approach in tourism development based on the concept of "tourism ecosystems" [38] represents a promising perspective to improve local approaches and applications under the NUA and 2030 agenda paradigms. The main academic position on optimizing the management of tourism development in rural areas is that rural tourism development should be sustainable and community-based [39, 40]. This entails careful planning, significant involvement of local communities, constant evaluation of impacts, and rigorous monitoring of tourism activities, in order to ensure that tourism development is environmentally, socially, and culturally sustainable and responsible.

Studies [41–46] indicate that rural communities can benefit from tourism through increased employment, access to services, and increased cultural awareness. However, these benefits can be threatened by uncontrolled tourism growth and a lack of participation of local communities in tourism planning and management.

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