

Religious Heritography and Sustainable Tourism in the Middle Lands: insights from the Italian Alps

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Keywords: *religious heritage, local communities, sustainable tourism*

Parole chiave: *patrimonio religioso, comunità locali, turismo sostenibile*

Mots-clés : *héritographie religieuse, communautés locales, tourisme durable*

1. Introduction

Heritography is a term that efficaciously combines heritage and geography. It helps to outline the dialogue starring local stakeholders as prominent actors in the process of enhancement of territorial identities and resources (Cerutti *et al.*, 2021). Culture refers to a particular person, group or society; it encompasses human values, languages, religion, food, arts, traditions, and any other human system of signs and meanings. When culture is subjected to change with the flow of time, the past attributed on a particular culture becomes a heritage (Sokonly, Vahtikari, 2018). Thus, the significance of heritage lies in shaping and containing the human cultural identity (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2018).

Within this framework, culture as heritage provides a physical representation and reality to the ephemeral concept of “identity” (Smith, 2006; Zhang, 2020). It is defined as the legacy of tangible and intangible heritage assets inherited from past generations (García, 2019), valued in the present in anticipation of the future (Dansero, Governa, 2005; Volpe, 2015). Many geographers have shown how it is strictly linked to a place, to a community, and to the territorial capital (Dematteis, Governa, 2003; Poli, 2015; Dematteis, Magnaghi, 2018; De Rubertis *et al.*, 2019; Ferrari, 2019; Messina, 2019). In this way, it emerges both the set of values and resources accumulated over time and the processes that generated them, or the hereditary and cultural mechanisms that produce and reproduce them (Dematteis, 2008). The *Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (known as *Faro Convention*) makes topical the debate on cultural heritage as a common good, including all the elements that constitute a shared source of memory, understanding, identity, cohesion and creativity. This broad definition opens up a multitude of possible intercultural and inter-institutional collaborations and innovative ways to promote the development of cultural places, communities

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The author acknowledges the financial support by University of Piemonte Orientale (FAR 2019) for the research and authorship of this article.

and different forms of heritage (Council of Europe, 2021). This approach is relevant both from the point of view of conservation and promotion policies, and from the broader ones of bottom-up governance and sustainable tourism (Fairclough *et al.*, 2014; de Freitas *et al.*, 2021). In present time, it helps focusing on those strengths and opportunities suitable to counteract the direct and side effects coming from the pandemic crisis.

Religious heritage represents a significant share of Europe's cultural, tangible and intangible heritage, a cornerstone of its history and identity and a meeting place for communities since ancient times (Raj, Griffin, 2015). Both the *European Cultural Heritage Strategy*¹ and the sector guidelines seek to address challenges facing heritage management and enhancement through a participatory and holistic approach, encouraging citizen engagement and good practices including sustainability.

Within this general framework, the aim of the paper is twofold. Firstly, it attempts to identify and describe the relationship between cultural religious heritage and local identity, paying attention to community engagement and tourism implications. Secondly, it purports to explore and show how religious and popular religiosity resources, scattered and hidden within the Alps territories, can find new enhancement approaches.

The paper is structured in different sections. The first one includes knowledge and insights coming from the literature review on cultural heritage, and more specifically on cultural religious heritage. Planning and management details about the *Commonlands* project can be found in the second section. The methodology is highlighted in the third part, together with methods and results. Discussions and conclusions are proposed in the last section of the paper.

2. *Cultural heritage, religiosity, and sustainable tourism: the role of the communities*

2.1. Heritography and cultural religious heritage — *Heritography* is a concept that arises from the intersection of two domains, heritage and geography, mutually complementary and capable of expressing the ambivalent relationship that links them (Cerutti *et al.*, 2021). It is a neologism deriving from a specific field of research dedicated to community participation within the *Commonlands* project. It synthesises two separate concepts that belong to distinct disciplinary fields from an analytical point of view, but not separable, and therefore usefully joined together to respond to knowledge and representation purposes. In this way, mere conservation, or protection, of cultural heritage flies into renewed places and situations where goods, heritages, and people are vivid expressions of identity. As result, a geography emerges that is charged with senses and meanings and attributes a fundamental role to the local communities in the resources' regeneration (Ietri, Mastropietro, 2021). The term *heritography* can acquire applicative value in being part of the process of constructing a cultural lexicon that accompanies the heritages' reading and representation (Graham *et al.*, 2016; Greiner *et al.*, 2019) as perceived by "local geographies" of which communities are a living part (Lew, 2014; Cerquetti,

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/strategy-21>

Romagnoli, 2022). Communities are the key to make the intersection of the two domains a dialogical encounter.

Cultural heritage, with tangible and intangible assets (Ahmad, 2006; Dansero *et al.*, 2014), provides communities with experiences that foster their perception of common past and traditions, create connections between local dimension and the supra-local territorial network, enhance resources and heritages, improving the quality of life and, not least, offering tourism opportunities (Gavinelli, Zanolin, 2019).

Cultural heritage is an integral element of territorial capital and, as such, it is influential in local socio-economic dynamics. It shapes cultural and psychological attitudes of local communities; and it enhances creativity of the local intellectual and artistic *milieu* (Camagni *et al.*, 2009).

Cultural heritage experiences an indissoluble relationship between the physical dimension of which it is made of, and the imagery it evokes. This is especially true of religious and devotional components and practices. Religious cultural heritage has a deep connection with the system of values, histories, territories, and people that have generated it. While reflecting on the relationship between the religious value and the monumental value of a place, religious heritage can act as a transmitter of the age-old values linked to the identity of a territory (Aulet, Vidal, 2018). At the same time, the pilgrimage routes and the devotional traditions and places have shaped landscapes and itineraries (Arena *et al.*, 2000; Galliano, 2003). The “epiphanies” of the sacred cannot do without the spatial dimension; the pages of atlases faithfully depict the distribution of religions on the earth’s surface, while landscapes and places take on forms, meanings and symbolic values linked to the practices of religion and religiosity (Papotti, 2007). The concrete traces left in the material world by the practices of faith are “geographical objects”, embedded in the territory as more or less relevant elements of the humanised landscape (Battisti, 2020) that can be brought within the broader scope of territorial practices (Cerreti, 1998).

A great variety of religious and sacred sites are representative of the different cultures and traditions of the world. People have long travelled to those sites they deem as sacred, special. Nowadays, there are millions of travellers worldwide for faith, or for experiences of sacred places and the spiritual culture of a region (Olsen, Trono, 2018; Piva *et al.*, 2019). Around Europe, several initiatives are dedicated to ensure the safeguarding and promotion of the religious heritage, by bringing together organizations and individuals in wide networks and participating in territorial sustainable development projects.

Enhancement is, in particular, the function that gives resources’ knowability and awareness, making them a real tool for social and cultural growth (Pollice, Rinaldi, 2012), so that the religious cultural heritage, or its single assets, become civilization testimonies and local development levers. Engagement policies and actions can’t be separated from an in-depth mapping and knowledge of religious assets, that are key-elements in helping first the communities, and then the tourists or travelers to acquire and sustain the knowledge of heritage and its importance. The research has focused on the widespread religious heritage among some small villages along the Western Italian Alpine arc, paying specific attention to the so-called popular religiosity and the related processes of participated promotion.

2.2. *Popular religiosity and tourism experiences* – Popular religiosity is the way common people live their religion. Some scientists (Kirby, 2014; De la Torre, Martín, 2016) report a certain amount of empirical data, indicating that popular religiosity cannot be easily dismissed as a marginal expression of Italian Catholicism. On the contrary, it still represents an important phenomenon, continuing in spite of the ongoing process of modernisation and secularization taking place in Italy. There is also a theological interest in popular religiosity started as far back as the 1970s, after a long period of suspicion and underestimation of popular religiosity from the official liturgy and teachings of the church (Berzano, 2014).

Since the last few years, many research projects have been focusing on empirical exploration and case studies related to the participation of local communities in processes of religious heritage and tourism enhancement, so the term religiosity seems to be the most appropriate.

In Italy, popular religious practices have a great cohesive and unifying power (Zaccaria, 2010). Popular religious people take part regularly in official Catholic religious practices, namely official liturgy, such as Sunday Mass. But it can be possible to list characteristic religious practices that express other particular ritualising aspects of popular religiosity (*ibidem*), as devotion directed to saints and the Virgin Mary, veneration of sacred images and relics, pilgrimages, processions, vows, rosary.

Although religion and religiosity are well-known factors for influencing behaviour in different social settings, research that explores the links between them and participation patterns of local communities and tourists is very limited. It is argued that the actual relationships between a tourist's religion and the strength of religious belief need to be understood in relation to the site visited, the tourist's perception of it and the meaning he or she attaches to it (Razaq, Griffin, 2015).

An interesting area of research has linked religion to the relationship between tourists (the guests) and the local community (the hosts) of the site. It is common to view religious artefacts or customs (e.g. monuments, ceremonies) as a resource to attract tourists (Collins-Kreiner, Wall, 2015; Olsen, 2013).

What can be stressed, is undoubtedly the raise of tourists who seek for popular religious experiences. It means to create and live a new form of religiosity tourism focused on popular cultures and traditions, both for involved communities and tourists. Slow tourism, sustainable tourism, emotional tourism, community-based tourism: they are all increasingly related to religious tourist proposals. It can be said that the religious tourist offer can satisfy the search for experiences based on local heritages, geographies and values of popular religiosity.

3. *Commonlands, a participated cultural project in the Alpine Middle Lands*

Commonlands, which is the English name of the Italian project *Comuniterràe*, is a cultural project started in 2016 in Piedmont Region, Northern Italy, by Ars.Uni.Vco Association and Val Grande National Park (VCO Province) with the participation of ten small alpine municipalities. Using a grass-roots ap-

proach, the project initially involved 135 residents which quickly grew to over 300 across all ages², guided by a programme facilitator. Highly motivated and active, they have given their contribution to define a common identity of the Middle Lands³ territory, acting as “innovative keepers” (Cerutti, 2019). Citizens became the authors of shared forms of narration functional firstly to re-appropriate the knowledge of their own territory, and then transform it into content and opportunities with which to promote it and think about sustainable development solutions.

Within the *Commonlands* frame, a general Community Map (fig. 1) has been realized together with ten single community maps (fig. 2) for each municipality taking part in the project⁴.

In parallel, the initiative included other experimental cultural initiatives planned, managed and realized with local communities. In order to collect and retrieve the memory of *Commonlands*, the initiative got on with a collection of interviews, images, videos, documents and other contents shared by the inhabitants, incorporated in a Digital Archive available on the project website.

The participants have also decided to point out further cultural goods directly *in situ* putting interactive QR-codes identification plaques on chapels, castle remains, ancient farmsteads, communal ovens and many other cultural heritage elements.



Mappa di Comunità delle Terre di Mezzo

Fig. 1 – General community map of the Middle Lands. Illustration by Marianna Carazzai. Source: comuniterrae.it, 2018.

² Currently, there are 434 inhabitants within the Park.

³ For a deeper understanding on the concept of Middle Lands and mountains, see Varotto, 2020. As concern the Apennines region, see Prezioso, 2021.

⁴ www.comuniterrae.it. On mapping process, see Meini *et al.*, 2017.



Mappa di Comunita di San Bernardino Verbano

Fig. 2 – The community map of the municipality of San Bernardino Verbano. Illustration by Marianna Carazzai.

Source: comuniterrae.it, 2018.

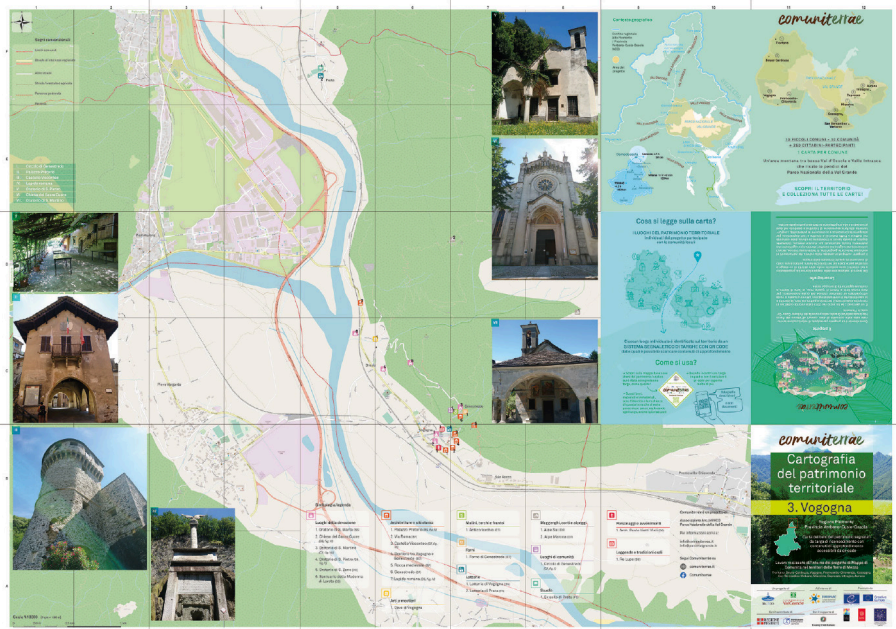


Fig. 3 – Cartography of territorial heritage of Vogogna municipality. Coordination, design and graphic by Paola Menzardi.

Source: Menzardi, 2021.

The geographical mapping of the area continued as an important element of the project, with a new phase allowing more technical aspects to be included. More precise GPS surveying of the area has been carried out to geo-refer elements and places of the territorial heritage; with the technical supervision of the *Touring Club Italiano* (TCI) new maps have been created (fig. 3). To ensure their availability as widely as possible, they were formatted for digital users, as well as printed and delivered to local tourism and hospitality venues. These maps are also a useful support to the so-called *Comunitours*, community walks that have been taking place since 2018.

In 2020, it has been started a specific awareness-raising and training path about detailed topics related to the *Middle Lands' Ecomuseum* that led to the creation of some thematic groups working on the opportunities of heritage enhancement and promotion.

Commonlands project was part of the activities of the *European Charter for Sustainable Tourism* and of the official agenda of the initiatives for the *European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018*. In 2019 it has received the *European Heritage Award/Europa Nostra Award 2019* in the category *Education, Training and Awareness-Raising*. In 2020, *Commonlands* won the grant and took part to the *European Heritage Days Stories*. In the same year, it was included in the catalogue of good practices of the *Cultural Heritage in Action Award*, and managed the Peer-Learning Visit program in May 2021.

4. Methodology, methods, and results

The research path and the procedures undertaken to collect and analyse data related to the enhancement of cultural religious heritage are based on a qualitative case study methodology applied to the *Commonlands* project. It allows to outline the main project results in terms of *heritography* and development processes related in the field of religion and religiosity. On this basis, the paper is an empirical study aiming at filtering the project's framework of methods and results to find out the range of religious heritage components. Using a metaphor, the research brings out a specific *wire* from the whole cultural heritage *skein*. As a train of thought, it points out the layer of tangible and intangible religious assets recognised by the inhabitants as fundamental local identity resources among those scattered and mapped within the project area.

Commonlands lies on a bottom-up governance approach, implemented with the method of Community Mapping; this process took place between 2016 and 2018, and the initiatives directly arising from it lasted until 2020. An overview of the activities developed during this period, the adopted methods and the results achieved in terms of identification and mapping of the Cultural Religious Heritage (CRH) is given in Tab. I.

As mentioned in the previous section, more technical cartographies have been realized (10 maps, one for each municipality) and the QR code plaques have been collocated (300 in total) by the same inhabitants along the itineraries of *Comunitour* and on the main cultural religious heritages. Maintaining the undertaken participatory and small group method, also the process of data collection for maps (GPS reference points survey) and for CRH's

QR code plaques have been managed by the inhabitants themselves. As results, the maps show many religious tangible components and the total of 82 plaques enable visitors and residents to discover more information about the Middle Lands' identity sites and landmarks related to religious and popular religiosity⁵.

Tab. I – Commonlands' cultural religious heritage: a matrix of methods, tools and results.

Phase	Activity	Methods and Tools	Results	CRH Results
First Phase	Introduction to knowledge of the project area	On-the-spot investigations and visits, Literature and documents' analysis, Direct project partners meeting	Primary knowledge of landscape and its resources	First general survey of resources and religious heritage
First Round of Meetings	Communities involvement, Presentation of the project facilitator	Meetings with majors, priests, associations, inhabitants, Outreach tools	Adhesion projects form for participants, Statement of objectives and sharing of the first steps	Inclusion of religion/religiosity topic
	Creation of work-groups	Public meetings open to all population of the project area	Membership form for groups, Grouping into 4 working groups	
	Depiction of the territories as perceived by the participants	Debating and Participatory Techniques	Schematic single maps	Religious/religiosity components as crucial factors for single/many inhabitant/s
	Delimitation of Middle Lands (ML) area	Mapping Techniques, Synthesis tools	First schematic maps for each community	CRH as key factor of collective identity perception
	Definition of the working lines	Brainstorming techniques, Systematising of working scheme (flipchart and post-its)	Main working lines defined: history, society/characters, traditional customs and traditions, festivals and rituals, religion, professions, orality, food and wine, agriculture, architecture, landscape, flora and fauna, current activities	Religious/religiosity components included in the working lines, directly and indirectly (A)

⁵ As you can see in the figure 2, many components are part of the religious heritage.

Phase	Activity	Methods and Tools	Results	CRH Results
Second Round of Meetings	Identification of identity elements of ML cultural heritage	Clustering techniques	Tables divided into area/theme/place for each working line	Religious/religiosity components included and prominent
	First cultural heritage components selection and representation	Cataloguing and Mapping techniques, Geographical tools	1:10000 scale maps (based on regional technical cartography) for each working group	Religious/religiosity components drawn and represented (B)
Third Round of Meetings	Standardization of representation	Mapping techniques, iconographic tools	Legend with symbolism and iconography	Religious/religiosity components symbolised
	Assessment and restitution of first mapping process' results	Mapping techniques, geographical tools	1:5000 scale maps for each working group	Religious/religiosity components more detailed (C)
	Reflection on the changes of the territory over time	Planning for real, Participatory scenarios discussion	Guide-scheme for changes analysis	
Fourth Round of Meetings	Redefining of ML as cultural territories	Debating and Participatory Techniques	ML characteristics' list (changed, at risk, enhanced, deteriorated resources and situation)	Religious heritage's list, resources that need to be protected and enhanced sustainably (D)
	Outlining of goals and methods for final Community Maps, selection of data and resources	Tools for weighing the criteria (5 real situations, 5 places, 5 criteria or values), Decision analysis tools	Cluster of resources grouped by 5 criteria or values (tourist, for the community, historical-artistic, economic, emotional)	
	Processing of selection data	PROMETHEE - Preference Ranking Organization Method for Enrichment Evaluation (software PROMETHEE-Gaia)	Ranking of the places and assets of each municipality in order of importance and significance expressed by the inhabitants, Distribution of alternatives according to preference flows	Religious tangible components often rank in the top three and are clearly preferred over all the others (E)

Phase	Activity	Methods and Tools	Results	CRH Results
Second Phase	Public meetings of 1 st phase outputs presentation, evaluation of process and results	Debating and Participatory Techniques, Follow-up group meetings	Engagement of other participants, Suggestions for future steps	
Third Phase	Preparatory activity for the realization of the ML Community Maps	Meetings of the illustrator with facilitator and participants, Visit to place and cultural sites	Database with final elements to be drawn on the Community Maps	Definitive selection of sites, cultural goods and resources related to religious/religiosity
	Creation of the definitive ML Community Maps	Artistic hand-drawn illustrations	1 Community Map + 10 Maps for each community (print version), interactive maps (on project website)	Cultural identity and religious heritage shown and drawn (F)
	Digital archive project design	Collection of images, photos, video, stories, etc. by private and family archives	Digital community archive (on project website) permanent and upgradable	Many old photos and stories related to religious/religiosity heritage (G)
	Communication activities	Social media marketing and web tools, Storytelling	Website (IT and EN languages) www.comuniterrae.it , Facebook page	CRH visibility and accessibility
	Organisation of community walks (<i>Comunitour</i>)	Planning and directly managing a series of trips, guided role	<i>Comunitour</i> tours' calendar (26 community walks in 2018 and 2019, 1450 participants)	Many <i>Comunitour</i> stages are religious/religiosity resources
	Selection of places and resources to affix QR code plaques, Installations of plaques (first part)	Participatory Techniques, Digital and graphic tools (mock-up)	Places-heritages' QR code design QR code plaques installed	CHR's QR code design QR code plaques installed

Source: Author's elaboration, 2022.

A fourth phase of *Commonlands* project is still in progress. Giving continuity to the consolidated approaches of *Commonlands* project, the running action research aims at strengthening the communities' involvement through a specific way of framing the ecomuseal planning activities, held both online and in-person. This has meant to share information and deep knowledge about this "special museum" by organising two rounds of meetings with experts at

respectively local and regional level (*Tell me the Ecomuseum*), some thematic meetings (*Thematic Inspirations*), and four thematic groups. Clear and important references to the cultural religious heritage have emerged, as it has been considered by the experts as a main asset, as well as part of thematic meetings' topics. In particular, "*Frescoes, churches and chapels*" is the theme of one of the proposed groups.

While a large part of tourism was restricted during the pandemic, the project continued with safe management of activities and with the adoption of planned measures to contain the pandemic such as limiting group sizes, social distancing, and wearing facemasks. With specific regards to the community walking tours, *Comunitour* proposals have continued in 2021. Every itinerary, that outlines paths and stories of the popular religiosity heritage, have represented a strategic opportunity to activate and nurture the local tourism system and also enrich it with specific experiences (activities with beekeepers, craft workshops, themed visits, theatrical performances, etc.). Among them, "*O pellegrin che passi/Oh pilgrim who passes*" is the *Comunitour* event proposed in 2021 to visit two small hamlets, coming across several chapels along the way, a Parish Church and two oratories. In the summer of 2022, the event *Walking among devotional frescos* took place in and around the village of Trontano. The local community told its own story, based on the material and immaterial cultural resources linked to its religious tradition: numerous frescoes, some oratories and even ancient community ovens attracted a good number of participants along narrow streets and countryside lanes.

As overall outcome, it emerges that the Middle Lands' religious heritages identified and mapped are very huge, and considered by the local population core identity's resources. They can be grouped into:

- immovable cultural religious heritage sites (cultural- historical heritage, religious architectural heritage, i.e. churches, chapels, wayside shrines, rural oratories);
- movable cultural religious heritage, stored in parishes, small museums, archives and libraries;
- intangible cultural religious heritage (oral traditions, legends and folk literature, customs and habits, events and festival, knowledge and practices concerning the popular religiosity, etc.).

Commonlands project has strongly contributed to highlight and share them, adopting a cultural community-based route in which the inhabitants have come together in a "collabor-active" and "narrative" community. They have together built a new way to interpret their life spaces, to share their memories and identities, to read their territories. Thus, it has emerged a dense, kaleidoscopic, and innovative representation of the Middle Lands' *heritography*.

5. *Discussions and Conclusions*

Cultural heritage is our bond with the past that come to life in the present. It shapes our thinking and identity, our environment and the places we live

in, and it builds bridges between people and communities. Sharing understanding and valuing cultural heritage can help to gain interest for youngsters and to reduce the impact of some negative socio-economic and environmental problems, such as depopulation and land abandonment (Pasolini, 2021). The Alpine arc has experienced these phenomena and dynamics (Dematteis, 2013; Cerutti, 2018; Ciaschi, Vincenti, 2019), facing their consequences and fighting their causes with many paths and projects aimed at preserving and enhancing the rural Alpine heritage.

The *Commonlands* project is an example of activation of available resources contributing to the safeguarding of the landscape, sites and local practices. While cultural heritage in the rural world is often considered as a main problem, due to the lack of funds for its conservation and protection, *Commonlands* shows how the integration of natural and cultural resources in a bottom-up development strategy can become a driving force for the present and future of the territories (Menzardi, 2021). The analysis carried out lead to understanding that activating and empowering local mountain communities to take responsibility for the preservation, valorisation, and management of their shared heritages is a fundamental lever for community cohesion, wellbeing and sustainable development.

Through the lenses of the *heritography*, that combines heritage and geography, the research in focus has specifically allowed a delving into the role of cultural religious heritages within the geographical space of the Val Grande National Park's Middle Lands. The *Commonlands* project has strongly contributed to highlight and share them, adopting a cultural community-based route in which the inhabitants create a collaborative, active and "narrative community". The territory and its identities as narrated and re-experienced by communities have become elected places of the real and shared elaboration of the relational dimension. This had positive consequences in terms of processes and networks of local stakeholders gathered around the idea of enhancing heritage, including cultural and religious heritage. Moreover, it also played a role in generating tourism impacts in relation to both supply and demand. Small hospitality facilities located in the *Commonlands* villages have developed proposals related to the *Comunitour* paths and more in general to the outdoor experiences, attracting thus new tourists (e.g. from the nearby Lake Maggiore area) or diversifying the traditional offer linked to the fruition of the Val Grande Park.

The methodology adopted and the findings revealed allow to outline three sets of considerations. The first is that the community mapping process offers an innovative and effective mechanism to re-discover and enhance the cultural religious heritage. Through joint discussions and group works, the participatory governance approach has involved communities in a bottom-up process of actively determining the place identity. This is about a collective identity in which, above all, the religious and religiosity are prominent components. Indeed, it is further arguable that the places of faith and popular devotion have been the first elements to be recognized, chosen, and mapped. During the selection steps, churches, chapels and rural oratories have been ranked among the top Middle Lands' cultural elements by the participants.

In terms of perception and sharing, they have hugely contributed to create a deep connection both between the inhabitants of the same village and of the 10 communities involved in the *Commonlands* project.

The second consideration is that new ways of mapping permit us to go beyond the boundaries of geography and territories. New interpretations of the places emerge, which are defined by their intangibilities. Tracing and placing the cultural assets are powerful instruments to communities, making the intangible visible, disclosing a co-designed narrative of the territory, of how it is felt to be able to appreciate it and then promote it. This process, by engaging communities in defining the meaning of a place, is deeply territorialized, conferring each place its spirit, determined by its resources and communities, relating heritage and tradition bearers to physical spaces. When it comes to the Middle Lands' religious heritage, the successful effort made by the project to make visible and represented the popular devotional traditions and stories can be highlighted.

Lastly, *Commonlands'* results give the possibility to underline the ability of popular religion to contribute to the promotion of territories and communities. Preservation of religious heritage is an important component in the sustainability of cultural values. Residents often take pride in their culture and religion and want to share their enthusiasm with outsiders. This is what happened, in particular, with the *Comunitours'* initiative, where the historical, cultural, and affective significance of a place of popular faith or folk tradition has become important for both the local community and to tourists. Local communities and worshipper have a mixed relationship with the tourists who visit their landscapes and resources. During the walking tours, tourists have recognized the Middle Lands' historic religious sites as opportunities for cultural and educational experiences, contributing to their enhancement and building a common vision of sustainable tourism. Thanks to the website, the maps, and the QR codes plaques, tourists are also free to live a self-exploration of the Middle Lands and their heritages scattered throughout villages and itineraries.

The Ecomuseum project strengthen these three statements because it maintains a bottom-up approach, involving local communities and authorities in the local cultural religious heritage's enhancement process; it attaches particular importance to the intangible heritage popular religious resources too; and it aims at guaranteeing projects of sustainable tourism development.

Although the protection and the conservation of pristine nature are among the primary objectives of national parks, stakeholders and local communities in the Alps are also vested with the responsibility to preserve the local cultural heritage as the basis for sustainable development. In the Middle Lands area, the *Commonlands* project bonds nature and culture, inhabitants and tourists, tangible and intangible resources, history and future. The religious sides and aspects part of its phases, narrations and results show nowadays that participating and promising ways of sustainable territorial development are possible through cultural and heritage enhancement.

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Religious Heritography and Sustainable Tourism in the Middle Lands: insights from the Italian Alps

Within the framework of the so-called *heritography*, which combines heritage and geography, the contribution aims to investigate the deep relationship between the local religious cultural heritage and the geographical space of the Middle Lands, as seen and perceived by local communities. Involved in the *Comuniterràe / Commonlands* project, 300 inhabitants of ten mountain communities of the Val Grande National Park in Piedmont (Italy), took action in the co-planning and management of cultural and tourist initiatives, enhancing the local tangible and intangible heritage. Rural, scattered and hidden religious resources find new ways to tell the value of Alpine religious components and popular religiosity, making their landscapes places where tourists can live authentic spiritual and emotional experiences shared by the communities themselves.

Heritography, religiosità e turismo sostenibile nelle Terre di Mezzo: approfondimenti dalle Alpi italiane

Nel quadro della cosiddetta *heritography*, il contributo si propone di indagare la relazione che intercorre tra il patrimonio culturale religioso locale e lo spazio geografico delle *Terre di Mezzo*, visto e percepito dalle comunità locali. Coinvolti nel progetto *Comuniterràe/Commonlands*, 300 abitanti di dieci comunità montane del Parco Nazionale della Val Grande (Italia) si sono attivati nella co-progettazione e gestione di iniziative culturali e turistiche. Le risorse diffuse trovano nuovi modi per raccontare il valore delle componenti religiose alpine e della religiosità popolare, rendendo i loro paesaggi luoghi in cui i turisti possano vivere esperienze spirituali ed emotive autentiche e partecipate dalle stesse comunità.

Héritographie religieuse et tourisme durable dans les Terres du Milieu : aperçus des Alpes italiennes

Dans le cadre de l'*héritographie*, l'article vise à explorer la relation entre le patrimoine culturel religieux local et l'espace géographique des Terres du Milieu, vu et perçu par les communautés locales. Impliqués dans le projet *Comuniterràe/Commonlands*, 300 habitants de dix communautés de montagne du Parc National de Val Grande (Italie), ont été activés dans la cocréation et la gestion d'initiatives culturelles et touristiques, valorisant le patrimoine local matériel et immatériel. Les ressources dispersées trouvent de nouvelles façons de dire la valeur des composantes religieuses alpines et de la religiosité populaire, faisant de leurs paysages des lieux où les touristes peuvent vivre des expériences spirituelles et émotionnelles.

