

Special Issue
Enhancement, Management,
and Sustainability of Tourism in Italian
Small Villages

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Ilaria Marotta

Salvatore Monaco

Marina Novelli



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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The Case-Study of “Non-Tourist” Guidebook of Ussita. A Participatory Bottom-Up Approach to Place Branding and Tourism Destination Management²

Inland Areas Between Discontinuities and Challenges for the Future. Is Tourism the Only Option for a Relaunch of Inland Areas?

In Italy, as well as in Europe, the depopulation of rural areas significantly affects the conditions and development prospects of places often defined as “fragile”. These places are commonly far from the main urban centers which offer essential services and are often left to their own devices, despite their wide extension. This kind of places covers almost 60% of the entire surface area of the Italian territory, amounting to 52% of the municipalities and 22% of the population. This is the Italy defined as “the most authentic” by the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (2020), whose main objective is to promote areas where people can reside, live in or return.

In this context, the National Strategy for Inland Areas³ (hereafter SNAI) has been set up, in 2014, to develop cohesion policies and strengthen citizenship rights all over the Country. SNAI takes into consideration services as an essential premise to avoid the abandonment of small centres, which possess numerous development opportunities, although difficult to exploit due to context conditions.

The deep socioeconomic changes occurred along the entire Twentieth Century strongly impacted the balance between local culture, identity, social cohesion, and productive power within inland areas. The abandonment of these places, in fact, caused a fracture in the relations that local communities created with their environment. A fracture that many inland territories had to face between both structural problems (i.e. natural disasters and changes in productive assets) and their specific surfacing phenomena, like a slow, but constant and silent physical, functional and relational estrangement between inhabitants and the environment, which slowed down to the point of breaking the social ties established until then.

This has resulted in a slow and steady disintegration of the ties that communities have with their surroundings. The effects of this process are negative both for the social fabric and for the area itself: the community becomes less cohesive, the environment less and less cared for, social ties weaken. Local traditions and culture are lost, with tangible consequences on the territory, leading to the abandonment of structures and spaces that were previously actively utilised.

Even if degradation and abandonment lead to a severe alteration of their wealth, many inland areas continue to show signs of vitality. These signals vary in quality and stability. In some areas they are discontinuous, fragile and unstable while in others they are steadier and more established, thanks in part to the presence of a resident population that continues to live in these areas on a permanent basis.

During the centuries, the inland areas have also accumulated a widespread heritage of products, environment, landscapes, culture, and civic spirit. Although the gradual abandonment of these places is jeopardizing the existence of such resources, in many cases they can still be recovered and enhanced. They actually could be an inspiration in responding to the crisis of today’s soci-

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3 In this paper, the authors will use the terms “inland”, “internal”, or “inner” areas. Such places, however, are not necessarily located in the internal parts of the Country. The Italian term, *aree interne* literally means “inner areas”, but such “internality” has to be considered a socioeconomic characteristic rather than a geographical one and represents these places’ exclusion from the global connections and traffic of people, goods, capitals, and information. SNAI defines “inland areas” as that majority part of the Italian territory characterized by significant distance from the supplying centers of essential services.

ety, which is at once economic, social, political, and ultimately also health-related. This strong point opens up the possibility of reconsidering in a positive perspective what was previously considered disadvantageous, evaluating it as a new development opportunity for these areas (Brown, Hall, 2000). Long therefore considered marginal, inland areas represent an interesting environment instead in which new opportunities for socioeconomic national development can be looked for and designed. Their actual strong constraints can be overcome through sustainable development choices, innovations in traditional activities and new strategies for their habitability. However, to return to living in marginal territories, it is necessary to assume a point of view able to put new processes at the centre and seize opportunities to reshape spaces and development cycles (Carrosio, 2019). Not only recovering and enhancing cultural resources, but also envisaging actions on socio-economic aspects, public health, employment and services is essential, too. These inhabitant-oriented interventions are indispensable to substantially regenerate these territories, acting on the factors of marginality that characterise them and rediscovering elements of centrality that have worked for centuries.

Over the past few decades, numerous practices have been activated, which have been able to enhance the potential of marginal areas thanks to the ability to know, understand, and narrate the multifaceted potential of places. These actions have primarily sought to reinsert these places into active and dynamic territorial contexts. In this way, inland areas have been progressively populated by future-oriented prospects, which, as Sabatini (2023) argues, compose a repertoire of images of regeneration. The community is often considered the protagonist in the innovation and rebirth processes of inland areas. Small, enterprising, solidarity-based and inclusive communities, in particular, have in many occasions emerged assuming such role (Euricse, 2022).

Nevertheless, during these last four decades, the inland areas relaunch is undergoing a contradiction in choosing the economic sector to bet on, which determines further issues related to the role of local communities. As a matter of fact, inland areas have been more and more frequently the subject of regeneration actions aimed at revitalising the local economy and reusing local heritage. Such place-based plans try to give new meanings to abandoned resources, on one hand, but are too often focused on tourism development, on the other. These recent policies for inland areas have mostly been aimed at commodifying their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, anchored to an elitist conception of development. Consequently, the inhabitants have often been marginalised and the resident community altogether excluded from the development design process (de Salvo, Pizzi, 2020). These territories have been affected by a steadily increasing, excessive museumization process, which represented an economic enhancement for only a few local actors. Several tourism operators had the occasion to take advantage of such situation but with infrequent benefits for places (D'Eramo, 2017).

This approach, which is the outcome of the affirmation of the heritagisation paradigm (Ciuffetti, 2019), supports and foresees forms of places regeneration policies exclusively based on tourism enhancement. The long-term adoption of this way to manage and interpret the landscape accompanied and strengthened its understanding as a mere "icon" (Ciuffetti, Vaquero, 2019) or "postcard". This highlighted how the presence of tourists does not automatically imply a places habitability enhancement. This way to conceive fragile places corresponds to excluding any care to the socioeconomic issues that determine their marginality. Moreover, it considers these territories as a mere reservoir of resources to be passively exploited, corresponding, moreover, to homologating methods that do not consider any uniqueness or specificity.

Betting on tourism as the main - if not the only - economic sector to ensure the inland areas subsistence trivialised the biodiversity of inland areas, extracting value only from what has been shallowly considered an "excellence" and neglecting the rest. This mental framework caused many political choices that, in recent years, interpreted and financed the regeneration of these territories exclusively by means of tourism.

The National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) itself, at first, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), later, considered tourism as one of the elements for activating sustainable

local development processes and reversing the depopulation trends that now structurally afflict these territories. For long years, the development of inland areas has been considered by Italian politicians and, sometimes, academics, as a necessarily tourism-driven process. Tourism, thus, has been described as Italy's "gold" or "petroleum" (Barbera *et al.*, 2022; D'Eramo, 2017; Settis, 2007) denoting the endurance of a "mining" conception of the inland areas economy. This implies framing them as mere passive deposits of environmental and cultural resources to be exploited, rather than active places that can contribute in designing their own future.

The challenge for these territories should be avoiding a tourism-centric future, then. The way to do so is engaging in deeper activities and strategies capable of filling the gaps in the social and cultural structure of these areas, providing a decent life for its residents, before the tourists (Barbera *et al.*, 2022).

While considering the risks of the tourism industry in rural settings, it is undeniable that it can have important positive effects for places. Some interesting case studies (Chen, Kong, 2021; Young, Markham, 2019; Wei, Zheng, 2023) reviewed recently outside of the Italian context, for example, show that rural tourism can have several benefits, such as: the economic returns from different subjects of tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and lifestyle immigrants by the efforts of commodifying real estate, creative tourism experience, and nature; the expansion of employment opportunities for women, and the readjustment of the social structure of the family in the demographic structure; an increased awareness of place in protecting ancient buildings and indigenous culture.

The conversion of local resources into tourism products and their subsequent exploitation can have both positive and negative effects at the same time. The very same case-study, above mentioned, confirms also that the tourism negative impact is undeniable, including among the effects of the rural tourism industry also the gentrification and the sense of deprivation for local communities.

Under this light, therefore, there is no need to avoid or condemn the tourism development itself, which could be a good way to give value to the local resources, given certain conditions. Tourism must not become a potential agent of place-destruction, but it should try to identify new symbolic values and everyday possible uses of the territory. Symbolic values and non-material heritage is exactly what traditional place marketing and development policies usually consume and exhaust, producing commodification of places, *touristification*, and an urban-citizens and *loisir*-centred local economy. It is widely accepted by many tourism experts, nowadays, that such policy and economy trends lead to eco-gentrification, overtourism (Seraphin *et al.*, 2020), desertification, and loss of local culture and traditions (Osti *et al.*, 2019, Xu *et al.*, 2021).

Therefore, the attempt should be directed at overturning visions and challenges for the inland areas future with policies in favour of accessible housing, the use and transmission of local knowledge, personal services, the strengthening of inhabitants economies, and practices oriented to the use of resources rather than their abandonment (Olori, 2021). The goal, therefore, should be to reverse the degenerative trends of these territories, activating local development processes that bring, in a virtuous way, benefits to the inhabitants and the territory. The new tourism model should be significantly linked to local communities, where tangible and intangible resources are valorised as possibilities for a unique endogenous local development. This perspective refuses the monopoly of tourism, fosters a community empowerment, allows local communities to recognise their resources as inalienable common goods and bases a constructive dimension of development. It is possible to define it as «a process of reinterpretation of the collective self, oriented to project it into a constructive dimension of development, contributing to a progressive mending of the social storyline» (Prosperi *et al.*, 2019,144).

Finally, for tourism to be able to draw a continuous and sustainable path of territorial development, communities in inland areas should integrate it into their usual sphere of daily life and involve it in strategies that primarily promote local identity. Cocco *et al.* (2020), in their field research, showed that in some inland areas social innovation processes were activated thanks

to the ability to mobilise cultural capital and build networks. In this regard, Matarazzo (2022, p. 60) argues that «tourism development should be pursued as one of the components of a broader social empowerment work, rooted within the identity physiognomy of the local community, which should be questioned and involved as the protagonist of a plural and lasting enhancement process ». Inland areas become places in which facing the upcoming socioeconomic crisis challenges is possible, and which are capable of innovating ways of living, traditions, and practices by drawing on the memories that are the "leaven of the future" (Nigro & Lupo, 2020). This is why inland areas need to be part of national and international networks of culture, participation, production and tourism. Networking could greatly reduce their isolation and overcome morphological limitations, revitalising material and immaterial resources, and giving to this place an active role in socioeconomic and territorial innovation circuits. These territories can become capable of promoting socioeconomic and cultural processes, which are at the origin of their own local development, regeneration, and innovation according to a place-based approach. This approach, moreover, is based on the idea that a proper knowledge and storytelling of places can reactivate lost connections and re-elaborate strategies for territorial management, control and governance. Furthermore, creating a places narrative based on local knowledge can reactivate the co-evolutionary relationship between human beings and the environment, preserving local identities. New paths are outlined that are significantly linked to local realities, projected towards new cultural, social, and economic dynamics, that can foster both the attractiveness of abandoned places and new permanence and stable communities.

Reversing the gaze on internal areas also means a storytelling twist. A new narrative through which the resident community tries to renew its attachment to the territory is required, giving a voice to those who are generally not considered in the development paths of inland territories. Places storytelling projects (i.e. a place marketing campaign to attract tourists) are normally decided and established far from the villages and local communities, as a result, usually, of top-down, standardised decision processes. The consequent communication products constantly demonstrate to have no real contact with local communities, their experiences, stories and peculiarities.

This is the aim of the *Non-Turismo* Travelbook Project ("anti-tourism" travelbook) of Ussita. Ussita is a small inland Italian municipality of 364 inhabitants in the province of Macerata in the Marche region.

Figure 1 - *Non-Tourist Guidebook of Ussita*



Source: Ph. Organizzazione culturale Sineglossa (2024)

This paper presents the “non-tourist” guidebook of Ussita as a case study focused on the establishment of new modes of territorial storytelling. This guidebook is framed here as a placetelling technique produced by participatory pathways that enabled the representation of the heritage, landscape and knowledge in which the community identifies. The purpose of the paper is to highlight how the non-tourist guide represented a possibility for the local community to observe, value and perceive its territory, its memories and its transformations.

The project has born among the numerous activities of the Ediciclo publisher and the Sineglossa cultural association of Ancona, both of which are particularly attentive to the promotion of a conscious tourism different from the mainstream and negatively impactful way to do tourism. The project was coordinated on site by C.A.S.A⁴, a social promotion association based in Frontignano, a small village near Ussita. Furthermore, the “non-tourist” guide concept matured in a particular phase in the history of the municipality of Ussita, when the processes of depopulation and long-term decline were compounded by the trauma of the 2016 earthquake, which definitively altered the fragile social and economic equilibrium of the towns on the Apennine ridge.

The Ussita guidebook, published in 2020, is the second volume in the #NONTOURISM series, the result of a participatory journey - of about two years - with the community, including meetings, stories, comparisons and guests-in-residence who dialogued with residents about the stories of the past, the challenges of the present and visions of post-earthquake rebirth.

The article presents the guidebook as a case study that makes clear how new modes of territorial narratives are developing as the outcome of participatory pathways that allow for the representation of the heritage, landscape, and knowledge with which the inhabitants identify themselves. In addition, an attempt will be made to highlight how the non-tourist guide has enabled the local community to observe, value and perceive its territory, its memories and its transformations.

1. Narration, Territorial Identity and Tourism. The Participatory Place Branding Approach Versus the Commodification of Places.

Territory results from a dynamic co-evolution between nature and culture (Beretta, 2022; Magnaghi, 2020; Noorgard, 1994), reflecting both tangible and intangible relationships and the meanings attributed to places characteristics by the local community. It encompasses daily life elements, actions, and functions, making it a place of everyday experiences that are physical, social, cultural, relational, and affective (Mazzette, 2017). Interpreted in its material, sociocultural, and symbolic dimensions, territory is shaped through processes of territorialization that produce unique values, practices, traditions, and knowledge, giving it a distinct identity. The concept of “genius loci”, or spirit of the place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Relph, 2009; Vecco, 2020) includes both tangible resources and the emotions, experiences, and atmospheres that represent collective identity. Identity construction is increasingly shaped by stories that evoke symbols, meanings, choices, and life experiences, resulting from an open and dynamic process. As long ago as 1989, Pocock emphasised the number of narrators and languages that contribute to the process of identity formation and how this offers different possibilities for knowledge of territories and the emotions that lead back to them.

Images, representations, and narratives play a fundamental role in the process of constructing territorial identity, because they solicit and stimulate the formation of opinions about the territory itself. They are the same narratives that allow the territory to be defined in the minds of its inhabitants and that determine attachment and a sense of belonging to the community. In fact, a significant part in the construction of identity concerns the representations produced by local communities, and in this case, it becomes a process of social construction from below. Attention to the role of narrative has been growing in recent decades as a result of what some social

4 The acronym means “house,” in Italian, and means “What happens if we inhabit”.

scientists (Czarniawska, 2004; Herman *et al.*, 2010) have termed “the narrative turn,” that is the growing interest in the narratives and stories of individuals and their role in the construction of relationships between the self, the other and the community.

Before the relational aspect, however, the practices that embodied the narrative turn regarded the economic competition dynamics, first. Even when considering the connection between places storytelling and their own identities as something ancestral, we can observe an increasing trend of rational and systemic places storytelling coming forward only from the 70s (Vuignier, 2016). Not coincidentally, this is the very same period of deindustrialisation we will recall later: looking for new opportunities of economic growth, nations, regions and cities started now to face the economic crisis occurring by that time, betting on the renovation of their own image and reputation (Oguztimur, Akturan, 2016).

Despite the several positive outcomes of this strategy, which fostered the relaunch of many different cities (i.e. New York, with the logo “I♥NY”), it took some decades to consider how it was commonly resulting in homogenisation, commodification, and touristification of places. With the passing of time, many practitioners and academics started to understand the huge role that tourism was playing as an easy-access economic reserve for places (Kavaratzis, 2007), but it took a while to realise that the actual resources are the territories themselves, with their intangible heritage, and not the tourism. While the place identity was being depicted as a sort of economic asset to be exploited in the global competition (Anholt, 2007), specific guidelines for communication of rural areas were being developed already (Dinis, 2004). And even if these suggestions were not automatically implying to “sell” places as any other asset (Ashworth, Voogd, 2013) a rushed reiteration of incorrect practices was taking place.

Such trend started in big cities but has become soon an unavoidable theme of debate, entrepreneurial activities, and public policies for inland areas, too. Ussita, which started to fall into a tangible socioeconomic crisis only by the end of 80s, suffered the negative demographic impact related to the economic structural changes that were happening (i.e. abandonment, aging and tourism crisis), only a decade later than the other mountainous Italian villages. This forced Ussita to develop its own communication strategies in a different context as compared to other mountainous villages.

This timing had different implications: as first, themes like the negative tourism effects on places had become a public domain matter, when the work on the guidebook started. Secondly, the strengthened ecological thinking and the emerging of interconnections and complexity in environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural themes in the occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic, let the inhabitants of Ussita to start and develop their work with a completely different mindset comparing to other towns in a similar condition of marginality. Thirdly, it should not be forgotten that the town of Ussita has been hit by the earthquake in 2016, which was a tragic event that forged the place resilience as well. Lastly, it must be kept in mind that Ussita began to experience the typical effects of the crisis in inland areas when business communication applied to territories was already an established reality.

All these preconditions projected Ussita towards a more holistic, integrate, participative, and sustainable way to design and maintain the narrative about its own territory. From our point of view, this associates the Ussita case study more to the Participatory Place Branding approach (Lambert, 2013; Zenker, Erfgen, 2014), according to which places are often seen as “empty spaces” to which any kind of storytelling can be associated, despite their actual peculiarities (Hudak, 2019). The Participatory Place Brand approach entails the preparation of a long-term, more balanced, and deeper place communications strategy. The whole communication process, from the design phase to the implementation and maintenance phases, is designed with the participation

of the largest number of stakeholders and inhabitants possible, which offers a wider range of sustainable development opportunities also in the contradictory tourism field.

Narrative turns out to be a fundamental tool for an adequate response to the knowledge needs of territories. The inhabitants central position in places storytelling can positively affect local development policies and can change the desires and hopes of those who live in them, guiding choices. In the construction of a place's identity, citizen participation has assumed an increasingly important role in recent years, particularly those forms of participation in which the individual acts on behalf of their community. Involving local communities in identity-building processes leads, as in the case of the non-tourist guide of Ussita, to giving value and recreating a sense of community living, but above all to feeling that they are the actual authors of processes of care and valorisation of their own territory. In this way, strategies with no real links to communities, for which political decision-makers alone are responsible, are avoided in favour of actions where the experiences and needs of the territories are brought into resonance. Participatory practices play an important role in creating links between inhabitants and places. Manzo and Perkins (2006) argued that the affective and emotional ties that members of a community have to the places they hold dear can more spontaneously induce them to act for their care, enhancement, and growth, and that «an understanding of place attachments and meanings can provide lessons about what mobilizes people» (p. 347).

Territorial identity, in this case, is not disclosed, but built on the narratives, needs and expectations of local communities, through constructions and reconstructions of ideas, daily experiences and memories. Experimenting with participatory strategies for local development also means co-producing new territorial values by transversally involving citizens and all the social, economic, and cultural realities that live and operate in the various territories to activate synergies through which to practice a new approach to territorial development based on proximity and civic responsibility.

Greater political emphasis on participatory forms of place communication in rural areas is certainly desirable. In a globalised context, local places and local dimensions are above all the scale at which the priorities of international agendas, oriented towards sustainability, participation, attention to cultural emergencies, can be socially implemented. Above all, the knowledge, values, experiences, narratives, memories, and actions of people that make the territory a space of both collective meaning and shared social action can shape its material transformations (Banini, 2017). The objective is to contribute to activating stable processes of dialogue and collaboration, to bring out priorities, needs, indications and proposals, imagining and practising shared solutions for the construction of territorial identity and development policies.

According to the idea that territory is the result of a communicative and relational process (Mela *et al.*, 2024), it turns into a collective narrative that describes the identity of the community and is shaped by it. The territory is generated through a ceaseless creative narrative, a reflection of the evolving relationships that communities have with their lands. This dynamic interaction gives rise to fresh identity markers rooted in presence rather than abandonment, fostering inclusive processes where diverse viewpoints and experiences blend together, inaugurating new ways for development strategies anchored in envisioned futures and collective planning.

By narrating their stories and referring to the memory of places, communities become protagonists of their history and their present, outlining the future of their territories. The community's narrative acquires an important role in the processes of territorial development, highlighting the complexity that characterises territorial identity where meanings and symbols are defined, negotiated, reshaped and redefined.

2. Ussita, the transformations of an internal area municipality: a brief presentation

The municipality of Ussita is included in the inland area category proposed by the National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) and is included as a peripheral area ⁵in the Alto Maceratese area with other sixteen municipalities.

Figure 2 - *The experience of community editing*



Source: Moira Spitoni (2024)

All the municipalities of this internal area underwent, over the years, the main processes of social, economic and cultural transformation like the other internal territories of the Apennines did. From the end of the 19th Century, indeed, a series of policies adopted by the Italian government favoured the industrialization process, making the urban context more attractive for an increasingly larger part of the Italian population, who abandoned the inland areas.

In addition, all of the inland areas considered in this study lay within the zone damaged by the 2016 earthquake. On October 26, 2016, there was a violent earthquake tremor with epicenter in Ussita that resulted in extensive structural damage. Many buildings, including houses, churches and other historic structures, were severely damaged or destroyed. Ussita's architectural heritage suffered significant losses. Much of the population was evacuated and many residents were forced to leave their homes. Essential services such as electricity, water and gas were disrupted as a result of the earthquake, further complicating the lives of residents and relief efforts.

⁵ The National Strategy for Inner Areas maps the country starting with the identification of service delivery centres, classifying the remaining municipalities into four bands: belt areas, intermediate areas, peripheral areas and ultra-peripheral areas.

The already fragile local economy was further affected. Business and tourism activities suffered severe losses due to the destruction of infrastructure and the decrease in visitors. The reconstruction process was long and complicated, requiring significant funds and resources to repair damage and rebuild infrastructure. These effects have had a lasting impact on the community of Ussita, affecting the daily lives of its residents, the tourist economy, and the future of the municipality itself.

Ussita and the nearby municipalities, therefore, recently fell in a deeper level of vulnerability, which worsened the structural marginalisation process that was already running.

Alongside growing political and cultural inattention, there has been a slow social and economic impoverishment in this territory that led over time to the appearance of what Varotto (2020) defines as monocultural economies. From the late 1970s, the process of profound economic change led to the abandonment of agriculture, woodland and pastoral economy, so that the Ussita economy turned towards tourism, but also to the hydroelectric sector, with the construction of a power plant. This attempt at change was made to respond to the general trend of abandonment of mountain territories and to rethink the socioeconomic development adopted so far. Tourism development became a solid trend, bringing wealth in the area. From the beginning of the 1980s, however, tourism began to undergo profound transformations that affected not only the tourist offer but also the needs and expectations of tourists (Corbisiero, 2022; Gemini, 2008). Ussita has not being extraneous to this and suffered a decline in the flow of tourists (Cutrini, Cerquetti, 2020).

In this phase, tourists are seeking out experiential tours, sustainable tourism practices that are not yet present or developed in the Ussita area. The perception of the territory's tourism potential was rising, putting an end to this problematic period just before the earthquake hit, not only in Ussita, but also in many other municipalities on the Marche Appennines (Cerquetti *et al.*, 2019). The seismic events had a clear influence on the future of these territories, which, however, realised how the theme of economic revitalisation could necessarily play a decisive role in post-earthquake reconstruction. In the regional planning documents, POR 2021-2027 (Regional Operational Plan) and PSR 2014-2022 (Rural Development Plan), investments are allocated in tourism programming and in the development of what are identified as the main "vocations", namely nature and landscape-culture.

In these last ten years, the areas affected by the earthquake are investing more and more in on integrated and sustainable development by leaning on their peculiar identities. Cultural and tourist operators, associations, inhabitants, and local authorities initiated social innovation processes through tourism proposals that bring together the environment, the cultural heritage and the local knowledge (Cocco *et al.*, 2020).

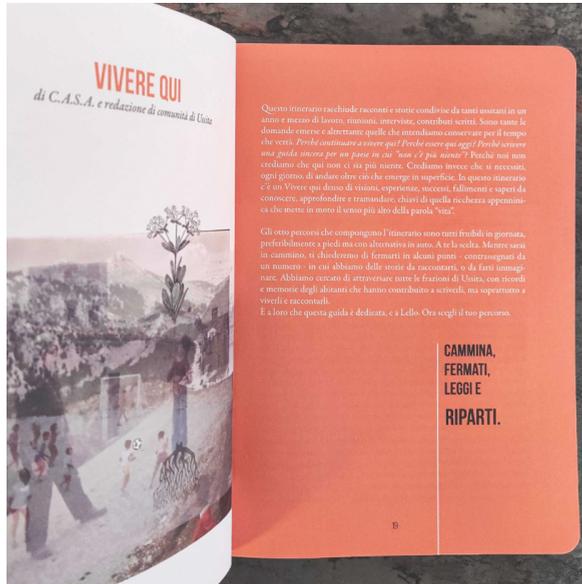
An expression of these forms of tourism is what is now being proposed by the C.A.S.A., the local association which leads the guide editing process: "a place born in the aftermath of the 2016/2017 earthquakes, open to conversations, temporary residences projects at high altitudes, networks and other kind of projects to enhance the territory. It was born from the desire to continue to be in a wounded and changing place, together with the communities of the Alto Nera and guests in residence that C.A.S.A. continuously welcomes, like artists, teachers, writers, designers, technicians, photographers, video makers, journalists, researchers, naturalists, sportsmen, walkers, students and active citizens. C.A.S.A. define itself as a "a mountain port"⁶: a crossroads of different cultures, energies, backgrounds, experiences, and languages. A space dedicated to dialogue under the banner of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. "One enters to feed himself and leaves to feed others"³.

6 From www.portodimontagna.it (last consultation 19th January 2024)

3. The Experience of the Non-Tourism Guide of Ussita

The Ussita non-tourism guide project was born as a result of the collaboration between the C.A.S.A. association and the cultural organisation Sineglossa of Ancona, within the activities of the publishing house Ediciclo.

Figure 3 - Inside the guidebook



Source: Organizzazione culturale Sineglossa (2024)

Figure 4 - Inside the guidebook



Source: Organizzazione culturale Sineglossa (2024)

The non-tourist guide of Ussita is an editorial project written by local communities through participatory paths, attempting to redefine the identity of their territory.

«A guidebook that is as mobile as the territory it narrates: from the movement of the earth shaken by the earthquake to a community on the move, guiding the traveller to discover itself through a “seismic” narrative, in which texts and images speak of old, new and imaginary at the same time»⁷.

Ussita is an area destroyed by a seismic event: such situations cause profound changes and fractures that can damage the social fabric and sense of community. In the case of Ussita, the writing process of the guide made it possible not to lose ties and orientation, rediscovering local identity through a collective narrative. The entire project has been as inclusive as possible, since it was immediately clear that excluding any inhabitants could exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities or create new ones.

Meeting the Ussita community made it possible to share and discuss what happened with the researchers and, starting from the history of individual places, to identify any possibility for the future. The non-tourist guide to Ussita was born from a community editing experience in which the narratives of the places have been shared and elaborated thanks to a series of meetings. During these assemblies, a collective memory effort has been made within a territory undergoing a strong transformation. A participatory process has been activated, involving the community in an exercise of identity self-representation and recognition of the values characterizing the place in which they live (Zaleckis *et al.*, 2023). Community drafting has enabled the community to re-acquire a heritage of common memory, attempting to outline new imaginaries for the future. Virtuous stories of women and men who have rethought the link with their territory, through a collective process that brings together environment, stories, and innovation. The procedure that led to the writing of the non-tourist guide was particularly interesting and innovative in its methods. In the non-tourist guide project, nothing is preordained, but the

«Travelbooks form and content is defined as it goes along, according to the spirit of the place. However, every guide cannot lack certain fundamental elements, which define its backbone: the genius loci, i.e. the historical, traditional, folkloristic, but also naturalistic elements that have contributed to creating the identity of the place; the “emergencies”, that is what appears on the surface, what is emerging, both positively and negatively; and finally, the visions, more or less utopian projections of what the territory will be like in fifty years’ time»⁸.

The main voice of the guide is the community in dialogue with writers, artists, sociologists, photographers and historians and accompanies the non-tourist on «itineraries and paths sewn on the stories of the past, the challenges of the present and visions of rebirth»⁹.

The visits of experts allowed many local cultural traits to be “emplotted” (Lambert, 2013) into a new tale enriched each time by a specific expertise. This allowed the community to structure reflections on its present and build visions and development opportunities for the future.

The very shape of the guidebook represents its originality. It does not look like a guidebook so much as a notebook, a travel diary. The guide is therefore positioned in the sphere of narratives favourable to a certain type of tourism, namely that of seeking an authentic experience with the territory. A tourism that prefers tranquillity, a slow, self-determined pace and where experientiality is configured as the outcome of the bond between tourists and inhabitants.

In this sense “non-tourism”

«Presupposes a sort of initiative from the non-tourists towards the community visited, with which they create profound interactions. It is not by chance that some parts of the guide are intentionally suspended and must be completed with experiences in the area. It is not coincidence that the guidebook says, “go there”, “ask about this or that”, “see if”»

(Member of the C.A.S.A. Association, 10 January 2024).

7 From <https://sineglossa.it/progetti/nonturismo> (last consultation 19th January 2024)

8 www.sineglossa.it/progetti/nonturismo (last consultation 9th January 2024)

9 <https://www.ediciclo.it/blog/dettaglio/nasce-una-nuova-collana-nonturismo> (last consultation 9th January 2024)

The importance of the tourist's relationship with the territory is highlighted: the tourist does not put the consumption first, but the relationship. "Non-tourism" is in fact a way of understanding the encounter between a community and those who come from outside: "non-tourists" should seek an intimate and authentic relationship with the territory. Non-tourism takes on the characteristics of slow tourism (Calzati, de Salvo, 2017; Clancy, 2017; Moscarelli, 2023; Sousa *et al.*, 2021) prompted on concerns about mass tourism development and its negative impact on local communities.

It is no coincidence that the Ussita guide predominantly supports forms of slow tourism. The narration and the enhancement of local identity promotes sustainability and conviviality and focuses on combating the loss of uniqueness of places (Woehler, 2004). Therefore, the guide values the *genius loci* and establishing relations with the local community serves to promote rhythms of life and modes of tourist consumption oriented towards a sustainable development of places. The guide embraces and proposes tourism experiences characterised by a new relationship with the use of time and space. The tourist-place relationship is no longer unidirectional (i.e. giving satisfaction only to the tourist) but becomes bidirectional when the tourist not only derives satisfaction from the consumption of the good, but simultaneously takes an active role in its protection and enhancement (Savoja, 2011).

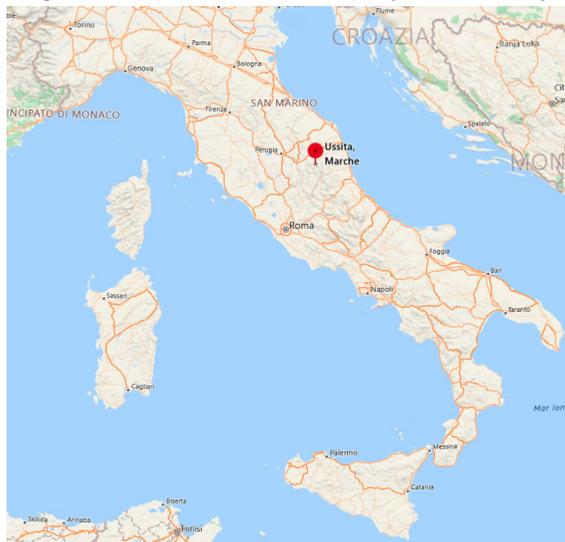
«The non-tourist does not ask what can I do, but asks how is it going?»
(Member of C.A.S.A, 10th January 2024).

The non-tourist accesses the territory through the stories of the inhabitants or people who have passed through or have decided to return to that territory; the concept of community in the guide broadens to include also those who have decided to resettle after having moved away.

«Community is who makes community»
(Member of C.A.S.A, 10th January 2024).

The non-tourist also momentarily becomes an active part of the community, and, in the guide-book, they are invited to explore the area and return because tourism experiences will be always different. Although non-tourism encourages a slow and prolonged relationship with the places, it is not yet configured as a new housing practice and retains its character of temporariness. In fact, it should rather be regarded as a new way of organizing the hospitality capacity, communicating, and creating a sense of attachment in those who stay, the local community.

Figure 5 - The position of the municipality of Ussita in Italy



Source: Bing maps

The tourist, through the narratives proposed, accesses a temporary citizenship of little-known places. The non-tourist guide of Ussita proposes a knowledge of the territory that belongs to those who experience it with a load of sensitivity and special emotions, and the non-tourist, through the guide, makes these emotions their own and enters into the community, becoming an active part of it.

«Visitors are asked not to look, but to place themselves in the same perspective as those who live in the area. A more complete degree of knowledge and thus understanding can be achieved only in this way. The non-tourist guide project is important because it shifts the centre of gravity of the narration of a place from its exterior to its interior»

(Researcher and collaborator of C.A.S.A and the Ussita non-tourist guide¹⁰, 11th January 2024).

What emerges is a narrative that Pollice *et al.* (2020) defined as community oriented. The community, repository of intangible resources, becomes itself a territorial attraction, renewing a sense of belonging to its territory through the narration of emotions and memories linked to the place itself. That's why the guide's subtitle is *Unpublished detours narrated by the inhabitants*. It is a way of understanding the encounter between a community and those from outside, where the community rediscovers its identity through a collective narrative. In this way, memory is secured:

«The guidebook is in its third reprint. We realised that many people are no longer here, by the time we began the project; they have been important with their stories, their anecdotes - which perhaps are not always true - handed down orally and each time enriched. Safeguarding memory is an urgent need»

(Member of C.A.S.A, 10th January 2024).

The experience of community editing made it possible to develop and strengthen an emotional attachment to places. These are narratives from the territory for the territory that affect the evolutionary dynamics in accordance with the principles of sustainability. The community narratives convey feelings, sensations, public and private memories. What emerges is a description of a country from an internal point of view: places and itineraries are proposed within the guide because they are important to those who live there.

«It is not the monuments or works of art themselves that are important, but those places and objects that have value for those who frequent them on a daily basis. This kind of approach has resulted in a guidebook that looks at the depths of a community and not at its surface, that proposes unusual and special routes. In this way, even the tourist who decides to live an experience that differs from the one proposed by mainstream guides has the opportunity to get closer to what we can define as the 'real' community, to discover the uniqueness and peculiarities of an area and, above all, to experience the same emotions as those who live there»

(Researcher, 11th January 2024).

This modality also made it possible to mitigate the difficulties of the earthquake, helping to accept them more easily. The earthquake influences the guidebooks narrative, since it deeply affected both the dwellers relationship with the environment and the environment itself.

«Telling the story of one's own country hit by the earthquake, reasoning about a before and an after, allows to re-elaborate the trauma. The tourist who arrives in the community is also able to better understand the sense of what happened and how this can continue to influence the future» (Researcher, 11th January 2024).

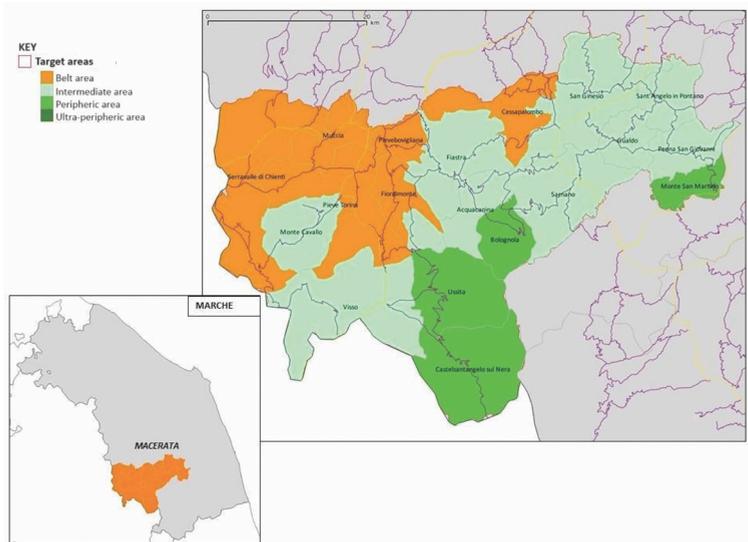
Another relevant aspect to be emphasised is that the guide was created primarily for the Ussitians, respecting completely the Participatory Place Branding criteria of giving local inhabitants the main role in designing the place storytelling (Hudak, 2019; Lambert, 2013; Zenker & Erfgen,

¹⁰ This interviewee is an academic who had been observing the Ussita case and the Central Apennine context for some years.

2014) this article presents a framework for applying digital storytelling (DST). The guide has been indispensable above all for the inhabitants to take back, through memory and emotions, their spaces, places, and stories

«that until that moment had been little considered even by themselves and that the earthquake risked cancelling forever, making a precious heritage irrecoverable»
 (Researcher, 11th January 2024).

Figure 6 - Alto Maceratese area



Source: Elaboration of the authors by www.agenziacoesione.gov.it

It is an emotional guide that attributes importance to emotions; that gives back to the communities of the inland areas roles and functions decided by themselves; that proposes the territory not as an object to be transformed through large investments - as in the previous case of the so-called "golden years of Ussita" (1960-1980) - but as a repository of the population's needs and desires. The experience of the guide contributes to the change of perspective through which inland areas are observed, countering the media infatuation for the rhetoric of mere tourist development steeped in *metrophilia* (Barbera *et al.*, 2022).

The guide is based on a new model that is capable to connect experiences and needs of communities by re-establishing new frames of meaning around which territorial and even tourism policies can be designed. Non-tourism is a project that renews the sense of place and lends it greater authenticity. It attempts to mitigate the ever-increasing risk of seeing typically city-oriented projections become actual economic and urban development policies in areas that are far from cities. The local community must help to dispel what has been called *borgomania* (*ibidem*), the recent return to the prominence of little towns tourism in Italy. This phenomenon implies the encouraging of a purely hedonistic touristification of city dwellers who experience these places only superficially. The non-tourism project tries to counter the drift towards homogeneity of places; through the contact with the community, the tourist is invited to abandon habitual tourist behaviour in order to establish a different relationship with the environment in which they are present. The Ussita guide itself represents a journey that starts from the experience of living there, a place which the community does not want to sacrifice in favour of a living imposed from outside and far from its identity. The non-tourism project experiences the territory as a relational space, a social construction where territorial identity is consolidated as a sense of belonging that binds the individual to their territory and gives meaning to the territory itself.

In this way, the self-narration to external subjects gives back to the communities their own power of agency and becomes a process of co-construction and co-evolution, through which communities attribute symbols and meanings to local resources and peculiarities, making their own identity emerge (Banini, Ilovan, 2021). The non-tourist guide of Ussita narrates the territory of an inland area that does not want to be simply made available to be used and exploited. The place storytelling served to mend the community's bonds, weakened also by the earthquake, to strengthen it internally. This restores dignity to its territory through innovative local development paths that change the perspective through which one can observe inland areas.

Conclusions

For two decades, inland areas have been the focus of renewed interest in sociological studies, as they are privileged places and sometimes precursors of dynamics and processes that highlight processes of territorialization and policies aimed at innovation, resistance and also the co-participation of communities in local development actions. Inland areas are the subject of numerous reflections ranging from the increasing demand for natural experiences, forms of slow tourism, the recovery of memory, traditions without neglecting the critical issues related to the abandoned heritage, the lack of services, and hydrogeological instability.

In the case study analyzed, the co-participation and co-design of the tourist image of the territory was an attempt to fill the void of marginality but also of emergency.

The non-tourist guide of Ussita in this context has tried to narrate the image of an inland area through the involvement of its own community that has restored its ties with its own territory, made fragile by the earthquake. The process of drafting the non-tourist guide has strengthened the community from within, but has also outlined actions for innovative tourist development, where the territory of Ussita emerges as a relational space and as a social construction, where processes of territorial identity and sense of belonging have consolidated.

The case of the non-tourist guide of Ussita can also be framed as a form of Participatory Place Branding. This tourist guide, in fact, represents a communicative initiative that influences the perception and external image of the territory - as all tourist guides do - but following a procedure different from the mainstream one. The territory narrated in this guide, in fact, is not that of an external observer who tries to capture for the reader a kind of "authenticity" but is the open and indefinite result of the work of a community, which represents only a passage of a broader process of elaboration of local identity.

Within this guide, in fact, the narrating voice is precisely that of the community, which tries to represent its own point of view to visitors and tries to welcome them already from the preliminary phase to the trip, that is, that of the story and the representation of the territory. In this case, it is the community itself that makes available to the traveller a vision, waiting for them to come and enjoy it, modify it and make it evolve together with the inhabitants.

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