

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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Village Tourism: From Vector for Local Sustainable Development to Victim of its Own Success

In the last few decades, tourism has played a significant role in shaping economies and societies across the globe. The rapid growth of tourism arrivals has fostered the development of many destinations, bringing with it an increase in employment opportunities and the potential enhancement of cultural heritage. At the same time, when destinations carrying capacity is surpassed—often as a result of urban-centric economic policies—the negative effects of mass tourism, touristification and overtourism emerge (Milano *et al.*, 2025), as the result of the disproportionate consumption of natural resources, overcrowding, gentrification, and the folklorization and trivialization of traditions as historically denounced by Urry (1990).

The decline of tourism during the pandemic provided an opportunity for reflection among stakeholders and policymakers, offering the chance to revise and possibly reverse the trends described above. It introduced the possibility of an alternative tourism model, one that is more responsible and driven by sustainability principles (Adey *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, with the growth of proximity travel stimulated by the pandemic related ban on international travel, village tourism has been gaining further momentum. Its potential to contribute to the revitalization of rural areas (Bramwell, 2009) and small towns (Corbisiero, 2020; Monaco & Marotta, 2022) as places, often characterized by low population density and a greater abundance of cultural and natural resources, have seen increasing recognition as viable alternative tourism destinations. This trend has been also recognised through initiatives such as the UN Tourism “Best Tourism Villages” program, which seeks to reward best tourism practices in rural areas worldwide, and other place-marketing strategies aimed at attracting residents and visitors to depopulated areas. In numerous European countries, village tourism is seen as a key rural development strategy, providing economic opportunities and helping to rejuvenate communities. For instance, the “1-euro house” project, was launched in 2008 in Italy by the municipality of Salemi (in Sicily), followed by several other villages all around the Country. This initiative seeks to encourage urban dwellers to move to small towns at risk of depopulation, offering government subsidies to renovate abandoned properties. While some of these initiatives have not entirely resolved the issue of touristification, overcrowding and overtourism that continues to affect many locations, they have succeeded in revitalizing certain historical and rural villages, promoting local economic development, and improving the well-being of their communities (Delon & Graziano, 2023).

The European Union has historically supported various initiatives to promote rural tourism as part of its broader rural development policies, particularly emphasizing the importance of enhancing the attractiveness of rural regions, improving infrastructure, and increasing the competitiveness of rural economies (Maliuta *et al.*, 2022). This focus allows rural and urban villages to present themselves as potential unique alternatives to the fast-paced mainstream tourism settings that dominate the industry. One of the most compelling arguments for village tourism as a driver of sustainable local development is its ability to foster economic diversification. By attracting tourists, villages can generate income through local businesses, including accommodations, restaurants, transportation, and artisanal products. The introduction of tourism also leads to the creation of jobs in areas such as hospitality, retail, and cultural services, thus helping to mitigate some of the economic challenges faced by rural areas. These economic benefits can, in turn, contribute to the social sustainability of rural communities, fostering a sense of pride and local identity while encouraging young people to remain in or return to their home regions.

1 Ilaria Marotta, University of Naples Federico II, mail: ilaria.marotta@unina.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-6091-4814;

Marina Novelli, Nottingham University Business School, mail: marina.novelli@nottingham.ac.uk, ORCID: 0000-0003-4629-4481;

Salvatore Monaco, University of Naples Federico II, mail: salvatore.monaco2@unina.it, ORCID: 0000-0002-4218-6267

Moreover, village tourism has the potential to incentivize the protection of natural resources, as communities recognize the social and economic value of preserving the landscapes and biodiversity that attract visitors. Tourism revenue is frequently reinvested in the restoration of historic sites, the conservation of natural areas, and the maintenance of traditional architecture, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits both the local economy and the environment. In fact, in a recent study by the European Committee of the Regions has partnered with UN Tourism² (2024) a comprehensive analysis of rural tourism and its impact on European regions is offered. The report highlights “the remarkable resilience displayed by rural tourism during and post-COVID-19. Despite global challenges, rural tourism witnessed a surge in popularity, particularly among local travelers. This resilience underscores its potential as a robust economic driver and showcases its ability to adapt to changing circumstances”. The potential of rural tourism to drive economic diversification and job creation in rural areas is once again identified as underscoring tourism’s contribution to preserving cultural heritage. “Rural tourism is seen as a bridge between tradition and modernity, fostering community participation and sustaining local services while preserving the unique identity of rural regions.” The study also identifies “the challenges faced by rural areas, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and declining local populations. Simultaneously, it recognizes these challenges as opportunities for growth.” Some of the challenges identified for rural areas are common to urban settings and while the promotion of village tourism is often characterized by a strong emphasis on local culture and a slower pace of life, its promotion is associated with its ability as a catalyst and vector for local sustainable development. Several European governments have recognized the importance of addressing the specific needs of rural and inner urban areas through initiatives like the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), that is part of the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) program, which was launched as a response to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic (Mileva & Lyutova, 2023). It is important to clarify that the development of village tourism does not come without risks and the potential to become a victim of its own success. Over-reliance on tourism as a primary engine of economic growth can result in significant social, environmental, and infrastructural challenges, which may ultimately undermine the essence of the intended sustainable development interventions. In particular, the capital accumulation practices typical of urbanized tourist destinations, combined with rapid or top-down territorial transformations, may pose a threat to the ecological and social balance of rural communities (Barbera *et al.*, 2022). For instance, the increased pressure on local infrastructure and services can compromise the quality of life for residents. As noted by Milano *et al.* (2025), in many popular destinations, the rapid expansion of tourism has placed an enormous strain on local resources, including transportation networks, waste management systems, and public services. Villages have often struggled to accommodate the influx of visitors, leading to overcrowding, heightened pollution, and the degradation of natural resources. This situation is especially problematic in regions with fragile ecosystems, such as mountain and coastal areas, where the unchecked growth of tourism can result in soil erosion, water contamination, and loss of biodiversity. Furthermore, the commercialization of local culture and traditions can diminish the authenticity that attracted visitors in the first place. What once may have been a vibrant local custom can be reduced to a mere spectacle designed to cater to the tastes of visitors. As a result, cultural expressions are diluted, and the unique identity of communities risks being lost in the process. Moreover, the growth of tourism can lead to a significant increase in the cost of goods and services, making it difficult for locals to continue living in their own communities. As house prices rise, often driven by the demand for second homes or short-term rentals, many long-term residents may be forced to relocate, contributing to further depopulation.

In light of these challenges, village tourism can only be a sustainable development tool if accompanied by inclusive policies that encourage integrated value chain development and stake-

² <https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/european-committee-regions-and-un-tourism-break-new-ground-study-rural-tourism-and-development> (2024)

holders' collaborations, protect common goods, preserve natural and cultural heritage, and promote gender balanced and decent work ecosystems. Such policies must seek to encourage socio-ecological transition from traditional economies into sustainable tourism, that minimizes the exploitation of resources, prevent the abandonment of primary activities such as agriculture, fishing, traditional trade and crafts, and benefits residents equitably, while safeguarding the region's long-term environmental and cultural sustainability (Novelli, 2024).

The idea of a "just transition" appears relevant in this context, as the world faces the need to address climate change and the socio-economic inequalities that accompany it (Rastegar, 2022). A just transition in village tourism involves ensuring that local communities, especially those that have been historically marginalized or disadvantaged, are not left behind in the pursuit of sustainable development. This means ensuring that local people have access to the economic opportunities generated by tourism, but also that their rights and way of life are respected. The just transition framework emphasizes fairness, inclusivity, and sustainability, all of which are essential for ensuring that tourism can continue to serve as a means of development without compromising the social and environmental integrity of rural areas (Monaco, 2024).

Given these complexities, the future of village tourism depends on the ability of local communities, policymakers, and the tourism industry to find ways to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the need to preserve the unique characteristics of rural areas.

This special issue aims to critically analyze the dual nature of village tourism, examining both its positive contributions to rural development and the potential risks it poses when not managed responsibly. It delves into the various dimensions of village tourism, including its economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts, and offers insights into the strategies that can be employed to mitigate the negative consequences of its rapid growth. Through this collection of papers, the issue seeks to highlight the ways in which small communities navigate the balance between embracing tourism as a development vehicle and protecting the distinctive qualities that make them desirable destinations.

One key theme across the contributions is the necessity for sustainable tourism practices that respect and enhance local cultures while minimizing the adverse impacts associated with mass tourism. Mario Coscarello and Antonella Perri's paper underscores the importance of niche tourism as a tool for fostering sustainable development in inland communities. Through case studies from Italy and Argentina, the authors show how tourism, when locally driven, can empower communities and leverage territorial capital to create authentic and sustainable tourism experiences. Their research emphasizes the need for local actors to be directly involved in tourism planning and decision-making processes, ensuring that the development of tourism is aligned with the community's values, priorities, and capacities. The authors underline that tourism, by focusing on smaller-scale, experiences, can contribute significantly to the economic and social well-being of local populations, as long as it is approached in a way that values the community's input and strengthens local identity.

In a similar vein, the paper by Mariaclaudia Cusumano and Marco Ingrassia takes a critical look at the impacts of UNESCO World Heritage designation on small tourism destinations. Their study focuses on the Aeolian Islands, an UNESCO site, and analyzes how the islands' growing popularity among international tourists has led to increased anthropogenic pressures, such as overuse of natural resources, environmental degradation, and social disruption. The authors argue that, while the UNESCO recognition has brought global visibility and tourism to the islands, it has also introduced the risk of overtourism, which threatens to undermine the very aspects that make these islands special—its cultural and natural heritage. The paper critiques the inadequacy of current management plans and calls for more robust strategies that ensure sustainable tourism, particularly in fragile environments. The authors emphasize the importance of implementing effective local governance mechanisms that include both public and private stakeholders, and stress that the preservation of the islands' cultural and natural resources must be integrated into all tourism planning efforts.

Paola de Salvo and Marco Pizzi bring a unique perspective to the discussion of sustainable tourism in rural areas with their exploration of “Non-tourism,” a project designed to reconnect local residents with visitors in a way that fosters mutual respect and cultural exchange. Their case study of Ussita, a small village in the Marche region devastated by earthquakes in 2016 and 2017, illustrates how tourism can be reframed as a tool for community empowerment and identity renewal. The “Non-tourism” project encourages visitors to engage with the community in ways that are not based on traditional tourist activities but instead focus on the local culture, heritage, and way of life. The authors argue that this approach counters the typical touristification of rural areas, which often leads to the displacement of local residents and the erosion of cultural identity. By promoting a more collaborative and participatory form of tourism, “non-tourism” offers a promising model for rural revitalization, one that balances economic growth with cultural sustainability and social cohesion.

Similarly, Fiammetta Fanizza and Fiorella Spallone’s paper examines the role of Italy’s NRRP and its impact on small rural communities through the “Bando Borghi,” a program designed to revitalize Italy’s historic villages. Their research, focusing on four villages in Puglia, highlights how the initiative has provided a unique opportunity to address the challenges faced by rural communities, including depopulation, economic stagnation, and environmental degradation. The authors argue that the success of these regeneration projects depends not only on financial investment but also on the capacity of local communities to engage with the planning process. By emphasizing the need for community-driven approaches to regeneration, Fanizza and Spallone call for a shift in focus from simple demographic growth to the creation of sustainable communities that can thrive in the long term. They suggest that the regeneration of these villages should be approached as a holistic process, integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions, with a strong emphasis on local identity, cultural heritage, and social innovation.

Giovanni Tocci’s contribution adds another layer of insight into the topic of rural regeneration, particularly in the context of the NRRP. His paper focuses on the post-COVID era, in which the demand for tourism in small villages has increased as people seek less crowded, more nature-oriented experiences. Tocci’s study identifies the specific challenges and opportunities of this new demand, particularly in the context of Italy’s southern and central regions, where many villages are at risk of depopulation and economic decline. Through his analysis of selected case studies, Tocci argues that the success of these regeneration efforts depends on the ability to integrate sustainability into the core of development projects, ensuring that tourism does not simply become a tool for economic growth but also contributes to the long-term resilience of rural communities. He stresses that the regeneration of small villages is framed not as a return to a nostalgic past but as an opportunity to build a more sustainable and resilient future.

The importance of integrating digital tools into rural tourism development is explored in the paper by Michaela Colangelo and Rita Salvatore, who investigate Airbnb’s Gastro-Experiences platform and its role in promoting rural tourism in Italy. Their research focuses on how this platform facilitates the promotion of local gastronomic traditions and creates new opportunities for rural communities to engage with global markets. Although Airbnb’s digital platform offers significant potential for the visibility and economic growth of rural tourism businesses, there are several challenges associated with this model, including the risk of rural gentrification and the need for improved digital infrastructure. For these reasons, the authors argue that Airbnb’s expansion into rural areas must be accompanied by a commitment to sustainability and social equity. They call for more collaboration between Airbnb, local stakeholders, and public institutions to ensure that these tourism models do not exacerbate existing inequalities or disrupt local ways of life but instead contribute to the long-term well-being of rural communities.

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