

Agriculture, ecomuseums and local identities in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italy)

*Alma Bianchetti, Andrea Guaran**

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1. Introduction

This work analyzes some cultural and landscape specificities of the Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG), a region situated in the north-eastern corner of Italy, and explores a series of interlinked concepts, aspects and phenomena that emanate from and characterize this geographical space, producing visual effects that result in a variety of distinctive landscapes (Prost, 1977).

Landscapes – especially those that at least partly preserve the signs of traditional agricultural practices (Reho, 1997) –, local communities and identities, and eco-museum systems are the central concepts around which our discussion develops. We here fully adopt the interpretation proposed by the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000), according to which ‘landscape’ means an area whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and human factors as perceived – and this is the most interesting aspect – by the people, mainly insiders but also outsiders (Priore, 2006). The Convention’s definition is cited explicitly because the ecomuseums of FVG region, whose roles and activities we propose to explore, have themselves fully embraced the import and scope of the Convention’s view on the functions of landscape, including those relating to the self-identification of local populations.

Our intention here – it must be emphasized – is not to advocate a nostalgic return to the social-landscape layout of the rural past, which embodied and reflected the systems of land use and the socioeconomic-cultural organization of the traditional countryside that continued to hold sway in FVG – and not just in its more remote or isolated areas – until at least the mid 1900s. Instead, our goal is to explore how the profound socio-cultural transformations of the past fifty years have also significantly or radically altered the rural-agricultural landscapes of FVG and – most crucially – how these intense alterations of landscape have in their turn loosened the ties of identity between people and the places where they live. Ecomuseums, in this regard, have a positive role in helping to recover memories, traditions, and practices that can restore to insiders a sense of

* Udine, University of Udine, Italy. The paper was conceived and written by both the authors.

local identity, spurring them to revitalize and build upon this to lay the foundations for a future local community that is sustainable, creative, resilient, cohesive, and autogenous, without being exclusionary.

In light of the above, this work seeks to answer three main questions relating to the recovery and enhancement of traditional and typical agro-food products on the part of ecomuseums. First, which are the groups targeted by the activities of these regional ecomuseums? Second, what is the impact of good educational practices (activities for public awareness) enacted by the regional ecomuseums on the insiders and/or outsiders? Finally, what are the strengths and critical aspects of the ecomuseums' actions?

2. *Conceptual reference framework*

The organization of land use and the resultant character of the landscape are decisive elements in forming the identity of a local population, which essentially captures the values and the affective and emotional perceptions that individuals attach to a particular physical setting. Understanding this emblematic function of place and its landscape ('mirror effect') makes it vital and imperative to disseminate a culture capable of properly construing the meanings of landscape. Analysing the mirror effect of landscape and its bi-uniqueness (Mondada, Panese and Söderström, 1992) from a broader perspective reveals some subtle nuances in the concept of local identity. Specifically, what we might term a *distinctive local identity* (or *local distinctiveness*) appears to be a conflation of perceptions-values attached to *place identity*, which arises in the individual sphere and is part of the personal identity conferred by living in a certain place (cf. the meaning of the expression «identity of place», in Banini, 2011, p. 11), and those attached to *identity of the place* which instead arises in the collective sphere and is based on common representations or images of a place shared by groups and communities.

It is worth noting that, up to a few decades ago, the rural world of FVG, with its traditional values of economy, material culture, and farming rituals, was a valid example of the intertwining between humanity and nature, between the organising actions of man and the opportunities provided by the natural environment, creating the conditions for relational solidity rooted in a sense of belonging. However, the very rapid transformations of more recent times have greatly weakened or severed this relationship, as also evinced by the new, simplified, and standardized landscape features that have increasingly come to characterise what was once simply called 'the countryside'. At the same time, there has been a change in the value systems of how local communities perceive themselves, the places they inhabit, and their landscapes (Fig. 1).

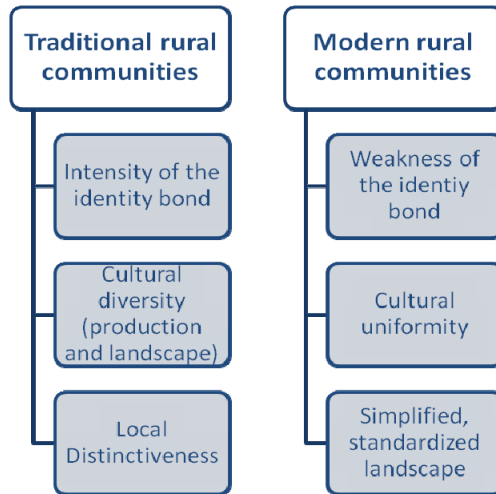


Fig. 1 - Rural communities and identities between past and present.

Because landscape is a decisive element and factor in the formation of cultural identity, it is an expression of cultural heritage: as such, we need to comprehend and sustain the complex and multifarious meanings embodied in landscape that make it simultaneously a ‘commons’ and a ‘heritage asset/resource’ embracing an inextricable web of cultural, social, and also economic values, to be enhanced preferably by a non-linear approach, i.e. that considers several variables (de Varine, 2011).

To arrive at this cognizant vision of landscape and an accordingly proper usage of land – in our case for agriculture – demands educational efforts and actions to foster collective awareness and disseminate active citizenship practices for governing and managing the area in a manner that is ecologically, historically, and culturally sustainable. In fact, knowledge implies perceiving things with fresh and more attentive eyes, re-examining values and meanings, and then taking appropriate action accordingly, as illustrated in Fig. 2.

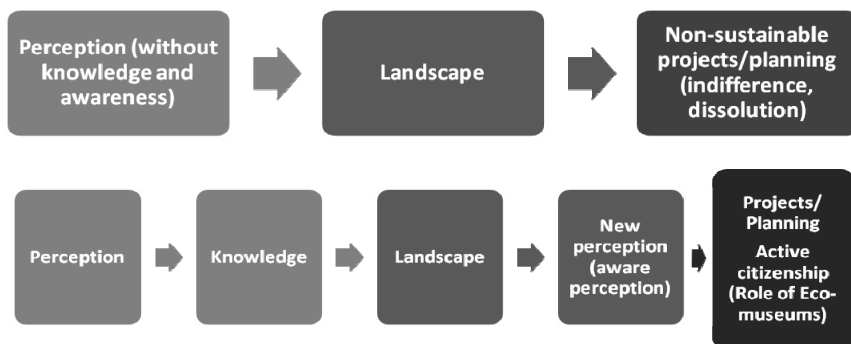


Fig. 2 - Knowledge, perception and action.

3. *Ecomuseums and the promotion of identity values*

Nowadays material and cultural traces often are deprived of their original reference framework and so can take on isolated or distorted meanings:

These remnants are not collected in a museum, but scattered around the rural or urban landscape. Each one by its very existence presents itself to our minds – whether we realise it or not – as a sign that is difficult to interpret. So we must every day confront these enigmas, to avoid leaving unanswered questions that would wound the self, whose often inexplicable contradictory behaviours are merely the reflection of such unresolved quandaries. What is at stake is not just the recovery of historical memory, but our present-day relation to the world (Papagno, 1994, pp. 5-6)¹.

These words underscore how recovering historical memory is an essential prerequisite for understanding our ‘relation to the world’ of today, and also in the future.

On this difficult path to recovering historical memory – without merely ‘freezing’ the past in a static exhibit – the ecomuseums of Europe instituted over the past few decades (with those of FVG at the forefront in Italy) have made interesting and useful contributions. Ecomuseums² are often among the most active entities in conserving and enhancing local heritage, as manifested in landscape, history, culture, and native productions, with the aim of strengthening or rebuilding the ties between communities and the physical settings they inhabit (Pravisano, 2011; Picco, 2011).

The eco-museum, as a community endeavour, can play a decisive role in mobilising the inhabitants of a place around its development. It becomes a sort of permanent and participatory process that presupposes everyone’s involvement. In fact the venture, which is not merely an economic one, is in the hands of ordinary people, of citizens working individually or in groups, that is to say, in the hands of the community. Because it is within the community that people develop, produce, consume, educate, and conserve or deplete resources and identities (de Varine, 2005, p. 18).

In fact, the overarching idea and aim of the ecomuseum can be understood as a «pact through which a community commits to taking care of a place» (Declaration of Trent, May 2004). The term ‘pact’ brings us back to the

¹ All the quotations translations are by the authors.

² The ecomuseums key idea is that the place itself becomes the museum, allowing the heritage to be appreciated, protected and enhanced in its original setting. This implies «recognising the essential value of the context and the whole» (Masè, 2005, p. 17; cf. also Maggi and Falletti, 2001; Masè, 2011). We have thus reached the point of feeling «the need to conceive museums as places where society is reflected and recognisable in its entirety, rather than by singling out some outstanding elements» (Renzetti, 2005, p. 27).

concept of commonality: of ideas, actions, and processes. Entering into a pact entails a collective engagement on the part of the community, defined as the assemblage of institutions, associations, and individual citizens. The object of the pact is the ‘place’, an intertwined system of physical-natural and human-built features, both material and intangible, that must be properly understood and interpreted to be adequately safeguarded and intelligently and providently enhanced (Fig. 3). An illustrative example of this is the ‘Pan di sorc’ project (Fig. 4).

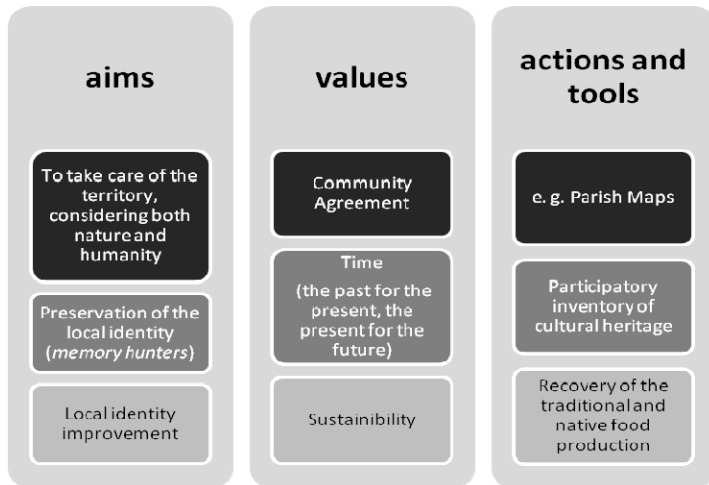


Fig. 3 - Ecomuseums: aims, values and practices.

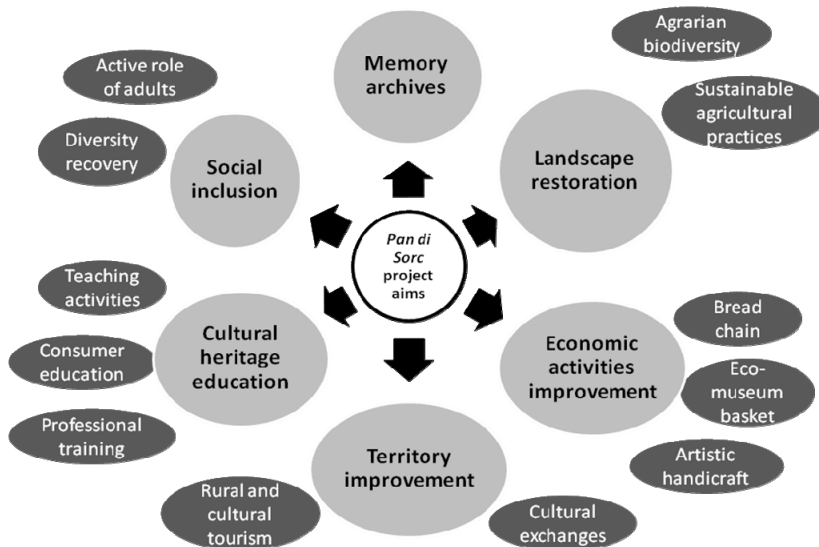


Fig 4 –‘Pan di sorc’ project: relationship network.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Ecomuseo delle acque del Gemonese (2013).

To accomplish these aims, one of the most innovative tools employed by ecomuseums is the *parish map*. This is a tool that enables the inhabitants of a place to set down the heritage (tangible and intangible), landscapes, and knowledge which they recognize as their own and wish to hand down to future generations.

The chief functions of parish maps can be summarised as: nurturing of local, personal, and collective sensibilities; protection of community heritage (specifically, here, the knowledge heritage); sustainable improvement of the community's heritage (e.g. through recovery of native food productions); and finally the deepening of identity roots (Marson, 2010).

It follows that the parish map, as an inherently collective and participatory process that engenders involvement, must also translate into a creative endeavour, this quality being essential for success in its primary aim of ensuring that the diversities of a place (its particular interplay between repetitive and distinctive elements) continue to exist, strengthening and rebuilding the bonds between people and places. The crucial issue is that a 'place' is not merely a physical area: it is a historical construct, *cultural heritage*, a distributed and relational cultural entity and must be safeguarded as such, bearing in mind that its features are not amenable to the same conservation methods employed for self-contained cultural assets. In the case of a painting, say, there are multiple alternatives along the continuum between placement in a museum and destruction. However, in the case of place the choice is stark: it either continues to live, or disappears. With the further difficulty that, since diversity also comprises subjectively unpleasant aspects, it will be an understandably delicate matter to establish which are the qualities that we aspire to preserve (Bianchetti, 2013, pp. 83-88; Tondolo, 2012).

In effect, 'making a map' does not consist in merely collating a heterogeneous local documentation. It is also a major collective sense-making endeavour centred around the interrelations between a place and its inhabitants (Magnaghi, 2010). By identifying and recognising itself through places, the community becomes aware of the problems and opportunities of its place, and so better equipped for effective active citizenship and contribution to public decision-making, giving rise to reciprocal synergies. What is more, the inherent implementability of the parish mapping process enables control to remain vigilant over time (Bianchetti, 2013).

At the same time, this tool/process also poses problems, among which we note those related to the rendering of results and to keeping the process active and alive, that is to say, making it permanent ('post-map process' problem). It also has certain limitations, in that the parish map – a subjective expression that is itself a representation of representations – usually involves only part of the community, and is therefore not a universal production, and is also often elicited and externally instigated rather than emerging spontaneously from a purely bottom-up process; it is strictly a manifestation of the point in time when it is produced.

4. The ecomuseums in Friuli Venezia Giulia

In FVG, the ecomuseums set up for safeguarding the local heritage have formed themselves into a network to better coordinate common goals and promote the visibility and specificities of each locality³. Currently, there are six officially recognised ecomuseums in the region (Fig. 5), of which four have been in operation for some years, while the other two are newly instituted.

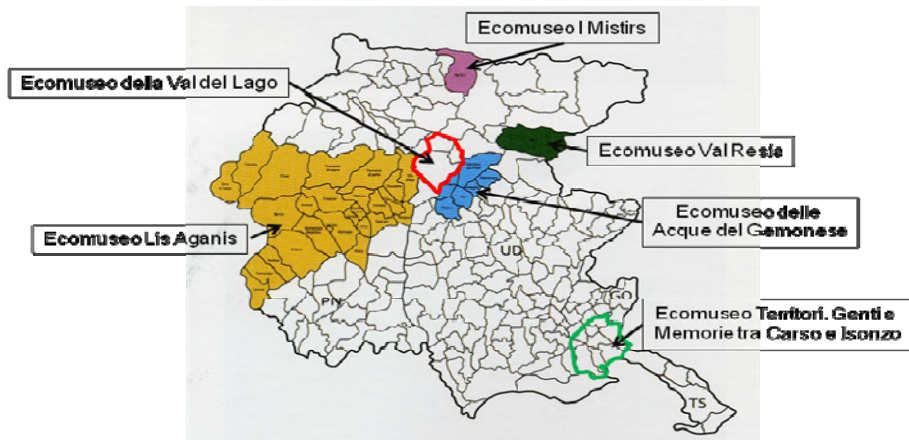


Fig. 5 – Ecomuseums of Friuli Venezia Giulia map.

Source: Author's elaboration from Tondolo (2011, p. 132).

Among the various activities of the ecomuseums in FVG, we here focus on those expressly aimed at recovering and enhancing traditional native agri-food productions that can create new opportunities for local economies by promoting attributes such as authenticity, high quality, and environmental sustainability (zero-mile and short food supply chains, organic crops, etc.). We investigated the agri-food related activities of the ecomuseums in FVG by conducting a direct survey. This consisted of a questionnaire, distributed to the four 'long-established' ecomuseums, asking about their initiatives targeting the agro-food heritage. Specifically, we asked them to specify: the role ascribed to recovering/enhancing local agro-food productions and the initiatives undertaken to this end; the products involved; the groups targeted by the initiatives; the results achieved; and a quantitative-qualitative assessment of the outcomes. The findings of this survey are reported in Tab. I.

³ Regional Law n. 10/2006 instituted ecomuseums in FVG.

Tab. I – Friuli Venezia Giulia Ecomuseums and typical agro-foods products.

Name (management board)	Enhancement of local agri-food production	Products	Target	Results	Evaluation
Lis Aganis – Ecomuseo delle Dolomiti Friulane (Association “Lis Aganis” Ecomuseum of the Friuli Dolomites – Pn)	Promotion of short food supply-chain projects. Creation of cultural itineraries linking agri-food products to local specificities and traditions.	Product basket: ‘pitina’ salami*, onion*, wines, beer, cheeses, honey, fruit, vegetables and edible plants.	Adults (guided tastings), children (targeted workshops); producers and restaurateurs (technical seminars).	Growing interest on the part of the general public and especially among businesses.	Strengths: fostering a sense of responsibility among local communities; increase in competent actors. Critical aspects: scarcity of products, especially the Slow Food ones; insufficient amount of land dedicated to them
Ecomuseo delle Acque del Gemonese (“Mulino Cocconi” Environmental Education Centre – Ud)	Attention to agricultural products and the corresponding rural landscape as a part of the cultural heritage of the communities. Many initiatives in support of producers for promotion of products.	<i>Pan di sorc</i> * (sweet spice bread made of short-cycle maize and rye); <i>turnaria latteria</i> cheese*	For <i>pan di sorc</i> , farmers, millers, bakers and restaurateurs, as well as the potential public of consumers. For cheese, dairy farmers, cheese-makers, restaurateurs and retailers. Courses on agro-food education.	Significant in terms of bread sales.	Strengths: significant increase in acreage devoted to traditional crops and in the number of farms and artisan and service firms engaged in various capacities in the <i>pan di sorc</i> project; growing interest on the part of schools and the world of research. Critical aspects: difficulties in order to involve the local administrations.
Ecomuseo Val Resia (Municipality of Resia – Ud)	Drafting of guidelines for developing and enhancing local agricultural products.	Garlic* Beans	Excursionists Visitors to the Prealpi Giulie Natural Park.	Establishment of small farms devoted to native productions and to organic crops. Growth in interest on the part of the public and the market.	Strengths: market interest. Critical aspects: production unable to meet the growing demand, also due to excessive fragmentation of farm lands.
Ecomuseo <i>I Mistirs</i> (Municipality of Paularo – Ud)	Secondary objective of supporting promotion of typical artisan trades.	Sweet <i>Cjarsons</i> (potato ravioli)	All targets	Increasing sales of local products during local events and festivals	Not specifically assessed, because extraneous to the primary aims. Strengths: sales of products during events and festivals. Critical points: difficulty involving business operators.

Source: Author’s analysis of questionnaires (2013).

5. Conclusions

It is interesting to look at the strengths and critical aspects reported by ecomuseums in their ability to attract participation and so assure the success for their initiatives generally speaking and not just those supporting native and traditional agro-food products. Although ecomuseums report growing interest – in terms of both quality and numeric participation – in their various initiatives, they continue to struggle to attract younger generations outside the educational offerings designed for school groups. This generation gap is especially apparent in the development of parish maps, which only attracted the involvement – though in strong numbers – of adult and elderly participants drawn exclusively from the native population (there was in fact no participation by members of the community who are new residents, Italians or immigrant foreigners). The same is true for cultural activities such as conferences and training courses, which elicit strong interest but only from small numbers of participants.

Conversely, the activities aimed at schools have been attracting very strong and growing numbers. This denotes an increasing sensibility among teachers to the proposed topic areas, which it is hoped will translate into a future awareness among pupils urging them toward an understanding of local heritage and the conscious construction of a *habitus* of citizenship.

The ecomuseums also report equally strong interest in some of their practical workshops (for example courses on organic agriculture and domestic vegetable gardens, including the ‘balcony vegetable garden’), which have attracted participants from a diversity of age groups.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the truly active participation elicited especially by the creation of the parish maps, despite this process being – as noted previously – instigated rather than spontaneously emergent.

Ecomuseums thus appear to be in need of a strategy that can help them more effectively carry out their mission, expanding their basin of users-actors so as to foster increasing awareness and utilise the resources and potential of adults and the elderly (knowledge, memories, wisdom, experience) for the benefit of younger generations. Memories of the past are in fact indispensable for properly understanding the present and envisioning the future. All this demands a far-reaching perspective with the direct and (most importantly) active involvement of young people, to achieve the mutual intergenerational support that ecomuseums need to avoid quickly exhausting their provocative and propulsive impetus in sustaining local communities and their heritage. The expert knowledge and wisdom of older residents must find some non-ephemeral form of receptivity so as to ‘pass the baton’ to the adults of tomorrow⁴. Examination of the ‘post-map process problem’ shows us that ecomuseums continue to have a central role

⁴ It is exemplary in this sense the experience of the project *Pan di sorc* that enabled the transfer of knowledge and practices almost forgotten between generations (see Tab. 4).

in envisioning/developing different and novel ways to avoid depleting the positive results being accumulated today and, it is hoped, to strengthen the ties between communities and the places they live in.

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Agricoltura, ecomusei e identità locali in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italia)

Il lavoro prende in esame le realtà ecomuseali presenti sul territorio della regione Friuli Venezia Giulia, analizzandone il ruolo significativo nell'azione di salvaguardia e promozione dei valori identitari locali, soprattutto nei contesti rurali. In particolare, ad essere approfonditi sono da un lato la mappa di comunità, fondamentale strumento per l'autoriconoscimento e per rafforzare il senso di appartenenza di una comunità, dall'altro le produzioni agricole tradizionali come opportunità di recupero identitario e allo stesso tempo occasione di attivazione di circuiti di economia sostenibile e di qualità.

Agriculture, écomusées et identités locales en Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italie)

La recherche examine le système et les caractères des écomusées de la région Frioul Vénétie Julienne, et en analyse le rôle précieux dans l'action de sauvegarde et de la mise en valeur des identités locales avec leurs propres différences spécifiques, surtout dans les milieux ruraux. En particulier, l'on a approfondi deux sujets, c'est-à-dire, d'une part, les *parish maps*, instrument fondamental pour l'auto-reconnaissance et pour renforcer le sentiment d'appartenance d'une communauté; et, d'autre part, les productions agricoles traditionnelles, qui représentent soit une opportunité pour récupérer les identités culturelles historiques soit une occasion pour le développement des filières liées à l'économie durable et de qualité.