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Enhancing Sustainable Tourism in Adriatic-Ionian Region through co-creation: the role of Universities and Public-Private Partnerships

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Sustainability and governance on the Romagnola Adriatic Coast. The case of slow sport tourism

1. *Tourist practices beyond postmodernism*

Over the last two decades, a new tourism "mode" has been developing in Italy: an evolution reflecting a social change which was substantially due to the great changes occurring within the economic and cultural context, to the extremely rapid progress in the logics of globalization, and to new IT technologies. The shift to a new system of tourism, having typical features that go hand in hand with the contemporary society, has now become manifest and fully mature, as the multiplication of the possible types of holiday shows, together with the proliferation of services provided and the emergence of new locations, which are different from the typical destinations within the tourism industry. These trends have radically changed the structure of tourism supply and demand, as well as the organization of several places, even the ones where mass tourism still remains quantitatively important, such as in the seaside resorts that this article analyses.

Within this new framework, the tourist is the key figure: a customer and active consumer that can develop his/her travelling culture also thanks to new technologies, which provide an enormous quantity of easily and instantaneously accessible information. The tourist can build up his/her own tourism experiences, juggling seemingly inexhaustible offers

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which, in turn, make choice opportunities inexhaustible. Thus, a holiday becomes an experience, and, through this experience, tourists carry out their own individuation processes and meet their need for representation and identification. In this light, tourism appears to be a vehicle expressing a person's subjectivity, recalling the more general individualization process described by U. Beck (2008). This process seems to characterize the actions of the individual of our times, being less and less dependent on the forms of "collective destiny" and increasingly aiming at the creation of their life paths based on a more risk but independent and personal plan, as if it was a creative reconstruction of manifold options, experiences and abilities. As a consequence, the new tourist has engendered a radical change in the supply system: tourist destinations must respond to fewer and fewer predictable choices in addition to offering diversified and complex holiday options, where tourists have not only the opportunity to act and be the protagonists of their own experiences, but also to become acquainted with some social resources and places different from what the tourism market usually offers. This process has recently led to overcoming the primacy of areas devoted to tourism and "consecrated" to holiday: the boundaries between what lies inside the tourism system and what lies outside are becoming increasingly blurred, for a tourist devises the image of a place through his/her own capacity to acquire information, navigating the copious materials available in the various locations, and talking to peers in the conversations involving more and more people on social networks (Savelli, 2012: 358). On one hand, this change clearly allows for many more places to compete and aspire to have their own tourism development than in the past. On the other hand, the areas with an institutional tourism vocation are also brought into play. In this respect, the places that are finding it harder to bring about the above-mentioned changes in perspective, are the tourist resorts that intensely developed during the period of mass society, becoming, in most cases, crowded destinations with a marked tourist-supply single-segment characterization.

Some areas on the Adriatic coast of Romagna are currently making an effort in this sense, which is emblematic. As highlighted

hereafter, once the so-called saturation phase was achieved, these areas started to reposition themselves in the market through their regeneration and upgrading. The aims were manifold: first, to avoid an otherwise inevitable decline and, secondly but most importantly, to be perceived as places that are not just seaside resorts, but also offer unique environmental, structural, cultural and social features, which had often been disregarded and overlooked by mass tourism flows in the past. This process shall clearly aim at new connotation, individualization and branding that go hand in hand with the natural attractions of the resorts – here seaside resorts – and bring out their excellence, uniqueness and local qualities, so that increasingly aware and attentive tourists are more likely to choose such resorts as "attraction" places (Kotler, Gertner, 2002). In the following paragraphs, this idea is developed and some findings are presented: they come from recent ethno-sociological research analysing today's changes in tourist trends and choices, and focussing on nine kilometres of the Romagna coast lying within the Municipality of Cervia and, specifically, the seaside resorts of Milano Marittima, Pinarella and Cervia itself (Francesconi, 2011; Francesconi, 2015). The selection of those areas results from an in-depth structural analysis, both morphological and organizational, focussing especially on the material elements defining their environmental identity, but also some immaterial elements representing, altogether, the real potential which would be at the basis of a tourism promotion in line with the current demand. With regard to this, local entrepreneurs have often implemented innovative strategies aiming to differentiate the supply while launching some common organizational processes to achieve balanced relationship systems in tourism. Moreover, since the area is still managed essentially by native business people paying great attention to their local identity and traditions, modern tourists perceive this as positive, because they continuously search for an ideal tourism representing peculiar and distinctive features of a specific culture. The local entrepreneurial sense of initiative is consequently aiming at a refined product-service system and sometimes struggles to achieve it; a system on the same wavelength as two main components that characterise the

coast of Cervia and remain some of the main driving factors: the beach and the sea (Francesconi, 2011). As mentioned above, these opportunities are closely connected to local features and to natural and cultural heritage, thus involving a precise marketing action on one hand, and the creation of a direct relationship with tourists on the other. Thanks to this, tourists would be well-informed and also "accompanied" when visiting these areas, which they already know, but whose peculiarities and unique features are often unknown.

From a purely morphological and structural point of view, the examination and mapping that were carried out showed that these places are rich in green and natural areas, pine-woods, salt pans, natural parks that are crossed by canals running to the sea, which make these places unique for their natural resources. Nature goes hand in hand with a considerable number of nationally and internationally renowned sports facilities and complexes, which were mainly built during the major development period of mass tourism, and with an equally noticeable number of boarding houses and hotels, and it is no coincidence that they devote some of their facilities and services to sport tourism. Starting from such evidences, the study focussed mainly on the analysis of tourism businesses building a strong bond between seaside tourism and sports. Such analysis was also corroborated by the fact that sport tourism has recently become a very important sector in the area of Cervia: it has garnered consensus and praise, thus remarkably increasing its turnover[10]. Furthermore, the added value that is provided or can further be provided by sport tourism is that all the potentials and conditions needed for such type of tourism already exist in the area, without needing to change or radically transform anything, but just reinventing and upgrading what is already there, following some innovative

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[10] Another aspect that should not be underestimated is that this trend is in line with what is happening at a national level. Sport tourism has been increasing in Italy for over a decade and currently accounts for 16% of the holiday market: Italians represent 55.6% of the demand. See: Osservatorio Nazionale del Turismo (Italian Tourism Observatory), *Customer Care Turisti 2013*, ISNART, (reference sample: 28.000 visitors in the country); Osservatorio Nazionale del turismo, *Indagine quantitativa sui comportamenti turistici degli italiani – Primo semestre 2013*, ISNART.

development logics. *It is evident that this type of tourism requires a thorough organization among the various areas, so as to cooperate and create offers where tourism promotion and services such as transports, tourism infrastructures, gastronomy and sports facilities must go hand in hand.* Thus, establishing entrepreneurial networks and collaborations is crucial, but this should be mutually not individualistically advantageous, relying on some basic principles that are not only to share profits for fairness, but also to manage together a common good, being able to offer a type of tourism that is increasingly responsible, both in terms of resources and development.

2. *Tourism governance and local sustainability*

All the points outlined briefly in the introduction lead to a reflection about the chance to strengthen the bond between seaside tourism and sport tourism aiming at a new development and upgrading of Romagna's coast, which is analysed in this article. Furthermore, these points are completely in line with the European Union Strategy and Action Plan for the Adriatic and Ionian Macro-region. This plan has among its four main goals the enhancement of tourist attractiveness through a sustainable development of coastal and maritime tourism, thus limiting its environmental impact by efficiently using the existing resources and creating an "Adriatic Community" where several specific types of tourism compose a unique mosaic, encompassing historical and cultural roots, as well as an integrated tourism product of mutual interest for the creation of a potential European Cultural Itinerary[11]. This macroregional strategy, where Italy plays a fully-fledged role, follows a multi-level

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[11] The creation of the Adriatic and Ionian Macro-region, that the European Parliament officially declared in 2014, aims at promoting innovative methods and guidelines for local cooperation between different regions and countries (Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia). Their common goal is to achieve a balanced and sustainable development helping to protect the environment, create social security and stability, tackle the problem of pollution, organize transport networks and energy connectivity. *Stakeholder Conference on The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*, 6-7 February 2014, Athens, Greece.

governance approach allowing for a well-balanced and rational management of powers, albeit with different stakeholders. Actually, these stakeholders cooperate, working in their own fields of expertise specifically, and such cooperation involves countries, regions, local areas and other organizations of the civil society[12].

On the basis of these observations and due to the manifest need to create relevant networks, thus repositioning Romagna's coastal resorts within the municipality of Cervia, a bond is needed between seaside tourism and sport tourism, with distinctive and unique traits. It is also clear that the opportunity to implement and institutionalise an active and inclusive tourism governance is not only crucial but also self-evident. Governance tourism indicates a series of stakeholders, procedures, regulatory frameworks and participatory processes making shared decisions in the area of leisure ('loisir') and tourism industry in a determined geographical area, as it was also defined by other studies (Turco, 2012: 140-141). In this perspective, tourism 'territoriality' would be built horizontally rather than authoritatively and would involve both private stakeholders – professionals, entrepreneurs and citizens, too – and public stakeholders operating in the area. Adopting such logic would inevitably lead to take the distance from the past time's "myth of growth", which only relied on an income-generating production system. Conversely, this would be closer to an idea of growth and "development" in a broader sense, encompassing local cultural, environmental and peculiar features of an area and improving the quality of tourists' holiday and experiences in the resorts (Calzati, 2011).

This is how a sustainable tourism would be created. In this system, the existing resources are used at their best and the concept of sustainability is not connected to a "niche product" but to any form of tourism, in any place, provided

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[12] It is clear that a complete homology among stakeholders would be a precondition for this type of governance: each stakeholder has some specific interests, which are legitimate and recognized by everyone, but negotiations should establish whether to pursue such interests or not. The negotiation process, however, is not a kind of zero-sum game (where one wins and the other loses) but it is a win-win process, where everyone can obtain something.

that there is a deeply-rooted local system managing and acting in its own context along with continuous efforts and long-term commitment by all stakeholders and local entities involved[13]. In our opinion, launching, fostering and promoting a sustainable development policy based on unique environmental, social and structural features of the area in the Municipality of Cervia may attract the attention of today's tourists, who are experienced, well-informed and have a number of needs, that can differ from one-another; but they are also very attentive and concerned about the massive exploitation of environmental and local resources that mass consumption has engendered. As a consequence, they are not inclined to contribute to an uncontrolled overcrowding and deterioration of destinations that, despite being traditional, can still be very attractive and would be further altered thereby (Nocifora, 2011: 19-46). In this perspective, the point of view expressed in this article distances itself from those who consider tourism industry and "conventional tourism" to be irretrievable, while supporting the idea that the adoption of good practices and of a universal idea of sustainability is applicable to no matter which tourism context. It is equally likely that another type of tourists arouses the greatest curiosity: tourists that nowadays, despite having thousands of possible choices, decide to "do less but better", responding to their desire to know thoroughly and genuinely the places where they stay or the cultures they meet, but respecting the environment and using responsibly the resources they can benefit from.

This conception of holiday and travelling has developed very recently and is generally called slow tourism: not quite a type of alternative tourism, but a different way of seeing and interpreting the "development of tourism". The idea of "slowness" applied to tourism, with its several possible facets (slow food, slow

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[13] In compliance with the original definition adopted in 1998 by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism can be defined as all those activities that are developed in a tourist area for an unlimited time, in a way which does not alter the environment, whether natural, social or artistic, and does not prevent or inhibit the development of other social and economic activities.

sport, slow city, etc.), is undoubtedly one of the trends that better combines growth opportunity with greater well-being and quality of life for tourists and for the reception communities. In this perspective, and as some results summarized in the third paragraph highlight, the aim of the survey was to study some associations and organizations that are based on the coast of Cervia and are currently approaching and promoting suitable slow sports activities that everyone can do during the holiday or at the weekend. The tourism supply stemming from this intertwines nature, sport and local attractions through a series of mutually integrated services and activities that tend to offer "unique" experiences with a strong sense of identity, which may help reposition the tourist resorts (Tarfanelli, 2010).

In order to better understand what value and potential the development of sport tourism – slow sport tourism in particular – might have, the case of an association was analysed in the research that this article is presenting briefly. This association is called *Trail Romagna* and is still considered one of the cutting-edge resources in the area, organising sports events and other small or large initiatives almost all over the year. Events and initiatives mainly deal with outdoor sport tourism and are closely related to the post-materialistic demand of tourists, who want to experience the uniqueness of natural environment and cultural peculiarities of a place, while complying with the indisputable principles of sustainability and respect for local resources.

Before getting into the details of this case-study, it would be useful to explain the methodologies chosen according to the specific features of the scope of observation and the knowledge goals that were set. The research mainly focussed on the implementation of mixed methods for the subsequent data integration to be easier and more efficient. The methods were chiefly visual and qualitative, in order to analyse various situations from different points of view and acquire different types of knowledge (Bryman, 2006). Operationally, the details taken from the analysis of documents provided by the association Trail Romagna, namely the press review from 2008 to 2014, were compared with the researcher's participant observation,

who carried out in-depth interviews with the founders and organizers, starting from some archive photographs to obtain a real narrative reconstruction, a life story of the association from its inception until today.

It is to be specified that the observation was carried out between 2013 and 2014: in the first phase, it was just a matter of participation, as the researcher took part in activities offered by the association, whereas in the second part of 2014, the researcher was included in the organization of two events held in the area of Milano Marittima as a member of staff. This purely qualitative technique was completed by the study of the contents found in all the documents provided, even the web contents, from 2008 to the first two months of 2015. Thanks to this, the whole development process of the association was reconstructed, starting from its nascent state (or "statu nascenti" as defined by Alberoni, 1968) until today. This part of the survey encouraged further analysis, which was carried out through several in-depth interviews with the founding members who are currently on the board of the association. The interaction researcher/organizers proved to be very fruitful, allowing for the cross-check of information collected first hand within the participant observation that was carried out, and the details given by the creators and promoters of the association. This interaction has continued and become more intense all over the research period until the direct involvement of the researcher in the organizational process of events held in 2014 and 2015. As it often happens with qualitative research carried out through participant observation, the research focussed on the opportunity to use other operational procedures for data collection, according to the current situation and to what was happening in the field of survey. Thus, before moving to a brief presentation of the analysis, it would be useful to describe the methodological integration of visual data briefly. From this point of view, a concept of visual sociology was at the basis: namely, seeing and watching something can provide "exclusive" information; not only further information, in a very operational sense, but also something that is paradigmatically different within the context of sociological knowledge (Faccioli, Losacco, 2010). Operationally, the research was conducted starting from

archive pictures, which encouraged and initiated a discussion and interaction between the researcher and Trail Romagna's representatives. This procedure comes within the strand of the so-called "visual sociology" that employs images: starting from already existing images of all the sports events and activities organized and offered by the association, a sort of catalyst-draft was elaborated for a diachronic story of the association and its local area to be outlined. The images were observed during the in-depth interviews and selected from the archives according to spontaneous choices made by interviewees. Actually, interviewees started talking about some images naturally and spontaneously and their account was very self-referential, interpretative and speculative. The information collected through the images, which is being processed, was completed with the informational material selected during the document analysis, the participant observation and the informal interviews carried out on site. As a consequence, the images are an integral part of the sociological story, since they translate concepts and interpretations given by interviewees into visual displays.

3. *The growth of slow sport tourism*

The entire study is included in an ethnographic story, which we refer to for additional information, but here is a summary of the main aspects that emerged during the research and to be considered for the purposes of this article (Francesconi, 2015). Undoubtedly, the most interesting aspect is that the association was born in 2008 and has been operating in the Municipality of Cervia even if it was originally founded in another area. Since then, it has increasingly invested in activities aimed at this geographical area, which is currently considered to be one of the core destinations for natural sport tourism and can offer more and more opportunities. It is to be specified that Trail Romagna's objectives are numerous and combine sports, nature, culture and sustainability, which the association has always been supporting since its very beginning as a result of its original aim: namely, to offer opportunities for trail running on trails that are almost or completely unknown to tourists and even to the local

community. The association immediately realised the importance of its founding principle and of what it offered in terms of sport tourism, as it is also shown by the observation of the first events and activities that were organized. However, tourism promotion is not the only purpose of the association: protecting these areas is also core to the association, which adopts environment-friendly and sustainable practices such as organizing events and activities only for a limited number of participants, thus being more easily manageable and controllable; promoting the use of water flasks and other eco-friendly materials, and encouraging those who take part in the events to reach the venues by public transport or bicycle. The aim of this approach is not to obtain great numbers and flows of tourists, but rather to retain tourists and participants, making them loyal as well as promoters, in turn, of the natural and specific cultural beauties of the places they have visited. Furthermore, the association's operations are not limited to the promotion and respect of natural areas but they also aim at rediscovering these places and regenerating them. As a matter of fact, many of the sports initiatives are held in some natural areas, or just go through them and stop in some specific locations: therefore, these areas need to be cleaned, regenerated and their safety must be improved. Local bodies and institutions in charge of the areas are involved in these activities and spurred to consider not only that some resources can be employed in a different way, but also the potential tourism and economic incoming flows resulting from that. Another interesting element within the association's approach is that it was the first to use some very creative and innovative strategies in planning its activities, which encompass different types of integrated opportunities, such as sports, arts and culture: cultural and urban trekking, "trekking concerts" – organised in partnership with Ravenna Festival – orienteering for youngsters and families to discover the pine wood and, finally, the so-called "by-bike-food" ("*cibi in bici*" in Italian), where the visit to some unique natural places is combined with tasting of local products that are typical of that specific area. Thus, Trail Romagna has gradually become an exemplary association that is able to meet the requirements of sports lovers, for outdoor sports in particular, and of all the

people who enjoy staying active and moving around nature, as it can offer very captivating and fulfilling experiences that are also culturally exciting.

This way of conceiving slow sport tourism and investing in it, in an area that has always been characterized by seaside tourism and more traditional proposals, has recently attracted the attention of several local businesses and entities, which are very attentive to the quality of the association's proposals and well aware of how many tourists have been attracted to this area in the last six years by the small or large events that the association organized. Moreover, they are also convinced that these initiatives support the repositioning of local destinations, making them renowned for being unique places that hold numberless powerful experiences. The network that Trail Romagna has been promoting and supporting for long could get wider and involve the main local institutions as well as some important local and national companies that are starting to realize that slow sport tourism can be an opportunity and become a key market for innovative and sustainable development.

In this regard, the association, together with several entrepreneurs operating in the tourism industry in this part of the coast, founded a voluntary group of companies in 2013 – *Slowsports Milano Marittima* – promoting the area as the ideal place for slow sport tourism and outdoor sports in natural settings. Given the events that were organized jointly by these collaborating entities and the opportunities to do regular physical exercise, it is clear that the tradition of seaside tourism was combined with authenticity and innovation. According to the aggregation philosophy, the word "slow" defines sports, artistic, cultural or wine and food initiatives as chances to enjoy, experience and fully realize the environmental and cultural identity of those places: beaches, pine wood, salt pans as well as the town centres. In 2014, Trail Romagna was able to "move" about 10,000 people and an unspecified number of people accompanying them. Nonetheless, the Slowsports network launched some events in 2013, and the events more than doubled in 2014. Similarly, people and entities taking part in them increased considerably, thus engendering a sort of snowball

snowball sampling effect. The example of Trails Romagna and Slowsports shows that a series of "typicalities" and a strong local identity can act as drivers for the planning, creation and promotion of sport tourism opportunities focussing on their quality, on the contents they convey, on original initiatives for outdoor activities that can even change the way in which seaside tourists spend their time and that might attract affiliated and traditional tourists. It is clear that, for this type of tourism to become rooted and further develop, a long-term project for its enhancement is necessary, as well as an integrated approach involving not only local businesses and entrepreneurs who manage hotels, catering and beach facilities but also other sectors and supply chains, which are connected by the quintessential and cross-cutting sector of local economy: the tourism industry. According to an active tourism governance, all these industries and supply chains should open up to the world of sports associations, to the world of culture and commerce, but also to the world of intangible resources that, taken together, can attract a new generation of sport tourists and help reposition the area, in consideration of its distinctive features, thus making it very attractive again at the national and international level, in the medium and long term.

Although the above-described tourist supply has not been fully perceived and coordinated yet, with a view to repositioning effectively the area that is here considered, it is possible to start achieving this strategic goal by understanding what strengths the area has and could be maximized, and what are its weaknesses, which should be curtailed and limited, as well as evaluating external opportunities that can be taken advantage of, and finally considering the major threats. In order to visualize the aspects emerged in this study, we used the SWOT analysis (internal *Strengths*, internal *Weaknesses*, external *Opportunities*, external *Threats*). In this case, factors that can hinder the choice of repositioning the area through sport tourism or variables that can enhance it are quite clear and well summarized (Table 1).

Some elements emerged, in particular "detractors" that still persist in the considered areas and undermine their potential in this sense and curbe its full development. It was shown that also

Table 1. SWOT analysis

Internal strengths	Internal weaknesses
a high number of sports to do;	entrepreneurs who do not choose networking and participatory logics;
a considerable number of sports facilities;	services not sufficiently aware of slow sport tourism;
beaches equipped with facilities for several disciplines;	problems with internal mobility and related services;
very important and renowned sports events;	difficulties in having several types of tourism coexist as they differ too much from one-another, being all considered as essential but hardly compatible with sports tourism;
unique natural environments;	institutions have difficulties in making strong decisions, as they might bring about conflicts;
a significant number of existing sport tourism networks;	
strategic geographical position for the market;	
destinations which are renowned for local residents' friendliness and hospitality;	
important historical and cultural traditions complementing slow sports tourism.	
External / opportunities	**External / threats**
important sports events can act as a leverage for promotion;	social and economic crisis in the country;
increase in the demand for active outdoor sport tourism;	strong external competition during the summer;
chance to identify different targets according to different sports that can be done;	"generalist" image of destinations;
extension of the bathing season;	local resorts are seen as mass-tourism destinations;
locations can offer more specialized products but are not able to offer such a wide-ranging supply;	lack of knowledge and research on the phenomenon of sport tourism.
opportunities for the repositioning of the area.	

these elements depend on the social and structural milieu of the resorts. They can relate to the management, to the society, and generally depend on issues that should be solved, even if they are complicated: the difficulty in making too different types of tourism coexist in the same area and be integrated, besides the fact that social entrepreneurship cannot/does not want to do without; the bewilderment of those stakeholders that – according to logics of evolutionary inertia – keep on thinking that they can be competitive just by adding some services to the standard ones, typical of seaside mass tourism; the difficulty of institutions in making strong decisions which, on one hand, would prevent an area from being defined as "generalist tourist area" and, on the other, would potentially lead to conflicts between local tourist entities; finally, the reluctance of some stakeholders that run tourist and sports businesses and organizations to take part in participatory processes and renounce locally and individualistically oriented logics (Francesconi, 2015).

However, conditions are met for this challenge to be overcome: certainly, seaside tourism, that is still very popular with families and loyal guests, pairs well with sport tourism. As highlighted above, this is mainly due to environmental and local features, to structural features that have been created over time and, finally, to the cultural ones. It is clear that for a full implementation of such a strategic project, it is necessary to analyse, consider and match it to the innovative cooperation procedures and tourism guidelines advocated by the Adriatic & Ionian Macro-region, which emphasises that local cohesion, environmental protection, sustainable economic and social development and use of existing resources are of paramount importance[14]. Thus, this part of the coast of Romagna may stop being considered as an area of "generalist tourisms", confined to traditional tourist practices that have become obsolete, and may acquire the potentials needed to become a common resource for people of different countries and cultures, thanks to a new shared strategy aimed at the integrated enhancement of local areas.

[14] Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, Declaration of intent AIC Forum, October 2014, <www.forumaic.org>.

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