HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE AS A DRIVER FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

This paper explores how historical and environmental heritage can serve as a catalyst for promoting sustainability, not only in environmental terms but as a multidimensional concept encompassing social, cultural and existential dimensions. Based on a theoretical interpretation of landscape as a cultural and symbolic construct, the paper reflects on a methodological framework for heritage-based territorial enhancement. Through three Italian case studies, it examines the interplay of community participation, institutional governance and technological solutions. The paper ultimately argues for a vision of heritage as a useful resource for future-oriented sustainability and shared hope, moving beyond its conventional understanding as an artifact to be viewed in mere nostalgic terms.

Key words: cultural heritage; sustainability; landscape; local communities; hope.

1. *Introduction*

In an age marked by ecological crises, social fragmentation and a growing sense of uncertainty about the future, the notion of *hope* can be also linked to tangible processes of cultural and environmental regeneration. Among these, the role of historical and environmental heritage emerges as both symbolically powerful and practically essential to achieve a better quality of life, healthier interaction within communities, along with more widespread awareness about environmental sustainability. This paper proposes that heritage – once understood as a living landscape infused with memory and identity and not merely as a collection of monuments or protected sites – can become a strategic driver towards these goals.

Drawing on European frameworks such as the *Council of Europe's Landscape Convention*[1] and the *Faro Convention*[2], as well as foundational theoretical contributions[3], this study refers to methodological approaches to heritage enhancement and illustrates them through selected case studies. The core argument is that by fostering community engagement, by facilitating inter-institutional collaboration, heritage can catalyse processes of local empowerment and territorial resilience.

2. *Landscape, memory, and sustainability*

In many European contexts, landscapes have been shaped over centuries through continuous interaction between human societies and their environments. Far from being natural settings, these landscapes – *paysage* in French, *paesaggio* in Italian – are historical and cultural constructs. Their components are not simply spaces, but rather places where culture and nature intertwine, creating a tangible heritage that serves as a repository of memories, values and traditions. As such, landscape may be understood as a physical and symbolic texture, anchoring processes of meaning-making and experiential engagement.

The concept of landscape has evolved from it being considered a passive visual entity to its full recognition as a historically and culturally constructed space.

As Rombai[4] emphasizes, landscapes are the result of centuries of interaction between human societies and their environment, embodying a stratified archive of human values, economic practices, symbolic structures

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[1] COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Landscape Convention*, European Treaty Series - No. 176, Florence, 2000. [https://rm.coe.int/16807b6bc7, Last accessed June 1st, 2025].

[2] COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, Council of Europe Treaty Series- No. 199, Faro, 2005. [https://rm.coe.int/1680083746, Last accessed, June 1st, 2025].

[3] Cfr. Y.F. TUAN, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1977; A. VALLEGA, Le *grammatiche della geografia,* Pàtron, Bologna 2004; R. SALVARANI, *Storia locale e valorizzazione del territorio. Dalla ricerca ai progetti,* Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2005; A. VALLEGA, *Fondamenti di geosemiotica,* Società Geografica Italiana, Roma 2008; UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the Protection at National Level of the Cultural and Natural Heritage,* 1972. [https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext, last accessed June 1st, 2025].

[4] L. ROMBAI, *Geografia storica dell'Italia: ambienti, territori, paesaggi*, Mondadori Education, Milano 2008, pp. 4-5 and 40-45.

and ecological relations. This can be aligned with UNESCO's[5] definition of cultural heritage as combined works of nature and peoples, representing the evolution of their societies and settlements over time.

In this context, the landscape ceases to be a simple background and becomes an active repository of cultural meaning. Drawing on Vallega's distinction between rationalist and humanistic interpretations of reality[6], the landscape can be understood through a humanistic lens as a "referent for symbolization". It functions as the foundational starting point for the creation of symbolic, cultural, emotional and identity-related meanings that emerge from the ongoing relationship between individuals and their surroundings. Thus, the landscape constitutes a physical and semiotic fabric through which both personal and collective identities are continuously shaped and renegotiated. Similarly, Tuan[7] introduces the experiential dimension, describing *place* as a centre of meaning made through affective and existential engagement. Experience transforms space into place by creating bonds that connect individuals to their environment on a personal and emotional level, generating sense of belonging, attachment and identity[8].

This conceptualization invites us to move beyond a strictly material or conservationist approach. It challenges the notion that heritage is static and external to contemporary life. Instead, it positions heritage within a dynamic, performative and relational dimension – what the *genius loci* captures: the spirit of the place shaped by human presence and interpreted through lived experience. The failure to recognize this often leads to the risk of heritage protection being implemented as a top-down imposition, disconnected from the actual life of communities[9]. When decisions are made without the participation or engagement of those who inhabit and interact with these areas daily, preservation efforts may lack legitimacy and effectiveness. A typical approach to safeguarding heritage involves, for instance, the establishment of protected areas, which can take various forms such as national and regional parks, natural reserves, cultural routes,

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[5] UNESCO, *op. cit.*
[6] A. VALLEGA, *op. cit.* 2004, pp. 226-228.
[7] Y.F. TUAN, *op. cit.* p. V.
[8] *Ibid.* p. 149.
[9] Cfr. J.P. LOZATO-GIOTART, *Geografia del turismo*, ed italiana a cura di F. Dallari, Hoepli, Milano 2008, pp. 163-173.

outdoor museums and ecomuseums[10]. While these frameworks aim to preserve environmental and cultural values, their success largely depends on the active involvement of local communities[11]. Without their engagement, such initiatives risk empty formalities, failing to resonate with or benefit the very people they are meant to serve.

Moreover, the linkage between heritage and sustainability must be conceived as multidimensional. Environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without social and cultural sustainability. When heritage preservation includes participatory governance, educational involvement and collective identities, it becomes a driver for territorial development, well-being and intergenerational hope.

3. *A five-step framework for heritage-based enhancement*

In translating the theoretical premises into practical strategies, a structured methodology is essential for guiding sustainable heritage management. Taking inspiration from the works of Rombai[12] and Salvarani[13], as well as from field-based applications, this paper tries to identify a five-steps framework for implementing heritage-based territorial enhancement.

A comprehensive heritage-based project begins with the acquisition of interdisciplinary knowledge about the area, encompassing its geographical, historical, archaeological, ecological and sociocultural dimensions. This foundational "first step" involves methods such as fieldwork, archival research, interviews, and social surveys, all aimed at uncovering the distinctive features of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place as perceived and lived by local communities.

However, gathering knowledge alone is not sufficient. Therefore, secondly, an alignment between institutional decision-making and community-led initiative must be assured to guarantee an effective heritage governance. Bridging this gap requires a deliberate effort to harmonize top-down policies with the values, expectations and lived experiences of local stakeholders.

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[10] L. Bagnoli, *Manuale di geografia del turismo. Dal Grand Tour al Covid,* UTET, Milano 2022, pp. 150-163.
[11] L. Rombai, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
[12] L. Rombai, *op. cit.*
[13] R. Salvarani, *op. cit.*

Third, integration of heritage initiatives within broader policy, financial and organizational frameworks should be considered. Without the coordination and support of local and supra-local authorities, including adequate regulatory and logistical planning, even the most visionary projects may struggle to take root.

Another essential consideration is ensuring access and usability. Heritage must not be preserved solely for its conservation value, but also for its capacity to engage people, both residents and visitors, in meaningful experiences.

Ultimately, heritage should be capable of generating added value. Through a continuous interaction between people and place, heritage can produce cultural, educational, emotional and economic benefits. In this way, it becomes not a frozen relic of the past, but a dynamic, living asset that contributes to the vitality and resilience of local communities.

4. *Some examples…*

To better understand the practical implications of the methodological model outlined above, this section presents three case studies from different regions of Italy. These examples may suggest how the success – or failure – of heritage-based strategies depends on the degree to which key methodological principles are respected. Each case highlights different dynamics of community involvement, institutional coordination and cultural interpretation, offering insight into what enables or hinders the transformative potential of heritage in real-world contexts.

4.1. Queen Camilla's Trail: community-led heritage revitalization

Located in the Amaseno Valley of southern Lazio, the *Queen Camilla's Trail*[14] exemplifies a bottom-up initiative in which heritage preservation is driven by civic engagement. Developed by the local association *A piedi liberi*[15], with scientific support from Roma Tre University, this 185-kilometer trail connects 13 towns and villages, weaving together natural landscapes and cultural landmarks into a coherent narrative.

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[14] https://www.camminoreginacamilla.it/, last accessed June 1st, 2025.
[15] http://www.apiediliberi.it/, last accessed June 1st, 2025.

The project began with a thorough and interdisciplinary investigation into the historical geography of the area. This involved the systematic collection of historical maps and archival documents, alongside interviews and oral testimonies that helped uncover elements of local memory often overlooked in formal records. Fieldwork further contributed to the re-identification of forgotten trail sections, abandoned rural buildings, and landscape features whose meanings had faded over time[16].

The initiative succeeded in bringing together a wide range of local actors. Associations, municipal administrations and individual citizens collaborated closely to develop the trail, ensuring that its design reflected shared values and priorities. The limited, yet necessary, funding and bureaucratic processes were accurately acquired and managed to ensure feasibility and stability for the implemented *cammino*.

The mapping and re-identification of historical places and routes bring them back into the living space of the community as valuable heritage, instead of long-lost and abandoned territorial clutter, making them accessible and active "places to live".

By attracting visitors and resources, and by becoming an element for local pride, the trail drives enhancement of local economy and establishes new opportunities for education, public awareness and engagement on natural and cultural heritage. It demonstrates how a heritage project, when developed from the ground up and rooted in community memory, can serve as a tool for sustainable development and territorial revalorization.

4.2. Polvese island: institutional governance and territorial stewardship

A good example of institutionally-driven heritage management can be found on Polvese, the largest of Lake Trasimeno's islands in Umbria. Here, a top-down governance model has proven particularly effective, demonstrating how public institutions (in this case the Province of Perugia and the Umbria Region) can actively generate social and cultural value from a distinct geographical asset.

In recognition of its environmental and cultural value, the island has been declared a *Parco Scientifico-Didattico* (science and educational park), in 1995,

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[16] S. CARALLO, *La valle del fiume Amaseno. Fonti geostoriche per la conoscenza del territorio e per la sua valorizzazione*, IF Press, Roma 2025.

a designation aimed at promoting environmental education, experimental teaching and scientific-naturalistic research[17]. As part of this initiative, the island's educational and eco-touristic activities are coordinated by the *Aula Verde – Centro di Esperienza Ambientale* (CEA) (green lab – environmental education centre), managed by Plestina Ambiente e Territorio. In 1998, the CEA was proposed, by the Province of Perugia, and formally accredited, by the Umbria Region, within the INFEA[18] network of environmental education centres[19]. This institutional framework supports the island's dual identity recognition, as both a site of cultural heritage (featuring elements such as a medieval castle and ancient churches) and a set of ecologically significant habitats (protected under the Nature 2000 network). In line with this vision, the Province of Perugia has also initiated a series of restoration projects efforts targeting several structures on the island as part of the Rural Development Program for Umbria 2014-2020[20].

Today different "layers of value" coexist on Polvese, offering visitors the opportunity to explore a rich historical landscape while engaging with the biodiversity of the local ecosystem. The island, today, is easily accessible and actively used for a wide range of initiatives: from citizen science and ecological monitoring to school field trips and cultural events. The participatory dimension of these activities fosters a sense of shared responsibility, transforming the island into a living laboratory of sustainability and heritage stewardship.

Ultimately, Polvese island exemplifies how institutional ownership, when exercised with foresight and inclusiveness, can produce significant added value not only for the specific site, but for the broader regional context.

4.3. The Ponziano archipelago: balancing heritage and

Another significant case study can be found in the Ponziano archipelago, a group of small islands off central Italy's western coast. This area

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[17] L. GREGORI, S. BENNATI, *Isola Polvese (Lago Trasimeno-Umbria): un percorso didattico*, in *Bollettino A.I.C.*, n. 129-130-131, 2007, pp. 234.

[18] INFormazione Educazione Ambientale.

[19] https://polvese.it/, last accessed June 1st, 2025.

[20] G. GIANCIPOLI, *Il Paesaggio del Trasimeno: da e verso Polvese*, in *Paesaggi in Umbria. Atti del Convegno III Giornata Nazionale del Paesaggio*, a cura di G. Giancipoli, Morlacchi Editore, Perugia 2019, p. 125.

holds immense potential due to the coexistence of rich natural environments and a valuable cultural heritage. The largest island, Ponza, along with Palmarola and Zannone, widely known for its crystal-clear waters and diverse marine ecosystems, hosts important historical sites, including ancient Roman ruins, medieval churches and traditional stone dwellings carved into the rock[21].

However, the preservation of these assets faces considerable challenges. The archipelago's heavy reliance on highly seasonal mass-tourism has created tensions within local communities and complicated relations with external administrations. The widespread embrace of tourism as the primary economic driver has led to environmental pressures and social strains, undermining long-term territorial sustainability[22]. This model has contributed to a demographic shift, with younger residents often considering migration in search of better future prospects elsewhere, weakening the local social fabric.

Ideally, the Ponziane could follow international guidelines such as those proposed by UNEP-UNWTO[23], which emphasize that preserving cultural and environmental heritage should extend beyond nostalgia or generic landscape protection. Instead, it should be viewed as a strategic foundation for ensuring that future generations enjoy healthy, sustainable, and culturally vibrant lives. Safeguarding these fragile ecosystems and traditional ways of life offers new opportunities for wellbeing through balanced development.

Some efforts to promote sustainable tourism on the islands can be identified, aiming to encourage visitors towards a deeper engagement with both natural and historical sites, in respect of the local ecosystems and heritage practices that have shaped the area for centuries. Unfortunately, such initiatives usually remain underdeveloped and economically weaker, compared to more intensive, less sustainable forms of tourism that dominate the local economy.

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[21] Cfr. G.M. De Rossi (a cura di), *Le Isole Pontine attraverso i tempi,* Guidotti Editore, Roma 1986.

[22] Cfr. A. GALLIA, *Le risorse idriche nell'isola di Ponza. Usi, saperi, dinamiche territoriali e geostoriche*, Carocci, Roma 2019, pp. 97-98.

[23] WTO, *Making Tourism More Sustainable: A Guide for Policy Makers*, 2005 [https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284408214, last accessed June 1st, 2025]; cfr. C. NOTARSTEFANO, *European sustainable tourism context, concepts and guidelines for action* in *Turismo e turismi tra politica e innovazioni* a cura di A.M. Sala, S. Grandi, F. Dallari, Pàtron, Bologna 2008.

To address these issues, a research group is actively involved in the Italian national research project "Islands4Future," coordinated by Roma Tre University[24]. This project seeks to raise awareness among younger generations about the archipelago's cultural and environmental heritage. Through educational programmes in local high schools, Islands4Future fosters a renewed sense of pride and belonging, in the attempt of encouraging youth to envision and contribute to a more sustainable and hopeful future for the Ponziane.

5. *From preservation to regeneration*

The comparative analysis of the three case studies reveals important insights into the dynamics of heritage-driven sustainability. While each initiative operates within distinct governance, geographical and socio-economic contexts, their juxtaposition highlights three key dimensions of effective heritage enhancement.

First, participation and identity emerge as foundational. In the Queen Camilla's Trail, the role of local communities was not ancillary but constitutive of the process. Knowledge production and territorial re-appropriation were rooted in the everyday experiences and memories of inhabitants. This participatory model contrasts with the more top-down structure in Polvese island, where institutional coordination provided order and resources but relied on external engagement to infuse vitality. In the Ponziano Archipelago, the lack of a consistent participatory framework contributes to fragmentation and weak identity reinforcement, especially among younger generations.

Second, the alignment of actors and agendas is critical. Successful heritage enhancement requires synergistic cooperation between policymakers, civil society, academic institutions and economic stakeholders. This is particularly evident in the Trail and island cases, where alignment enabled integrated planning and durable outcomes. The Archipelago's difficulties illustrate how divergence (between seasonal economic exploitation and long-term ecological-cultural goals) can hinder sustainable strategies.

Third, creation of recognised values is essential. Heritage should not be reduced to economic returns, particularly through exploitative tourism.

[24] https://is4future.uniroma3.it/progetto/, last accessed June 1st, 2025.

Rather, it must be framed, in addition, as a multidimensional resource: a source of education, cultural capital, emotional attachment and civic empowerment. In all three cases, when heritage is treated as a lived and shared space, it fosters a sense of service and intergenerational responsibility: a condition for sustainability "grounded in hope".

These reflections suggest that heritage policy must evolve from a paradigm of sole preservation to one of regeneration. This implies dynamic processes in which communities participate in constructing the meaning and function of heritage, supported by institutions and enriched by technology. Such regeneration is not nostalgic but forward-looking: it transforms the past into a foundation for a sustainable and meaningful future.

Promoting sustainability through historical and environmental heritage requires more than protective legislation or conservation strategies. It demands a holistic and participatory approach, one that integrates knowledge, governance, identity and innovation.

The five-step methodological framework discussed in this paper provides a replicable tool for enhancing heritage areas through interdisciplinary, inclusive and future-oriented actions.

Ultimately, heritage must be reimagined as a relational infrastructure for hope: a means of linking past and future, community and environment, memory and innovation. In doing so, it offers, beyond preservation of what is valuable, a formula to cultivate new visions of coexistence, resilience and shared meaning.