

Cultural resources at the service of marginal territories

Strategies for the digital representation of cross-border heritage of Maritime Alps

The research project investigates strategies for the preservation and reactivation of the cultural heritage of the French-Italian Maritime Alps, in coherence with cross-border requirements, for the revival of local values and cultural landscapes.

Territories such as the aforementioned, placed in proximity or straddling borders, play a peculiar role both because of their marginal location and, as a consequence of the former, because of the cultural contamination that can influence them. Borders, whether natural or politically defined, have the power to draw different territorial contexts and relate to them a sense of belonging, which is socially recognised as local identity. This latter is particularly strong in mountain territories and has been built and preserved both due to the ancient nature of the settlements and because of their isolation, which reduces the power of external influences from larger urban centres of the plain.

According to the geographer C. Raffestin, as reported by Antonio De Rossi (1998), the Alpine border must not be interpreted solely as a boundary; rather, it should be considered an open and relational space. He posits that the Alps are destined to become a privileged area precisely because they are border lands and therefore contact lands.

The area is also experiencing a process of abandonment, and its irregular morphology hampers its habitability and exacerbates its marginality. In modern times, mountains are conceptualised as high-altitude lands for recreational consumption, with the popularity of seasonal tourist activities influencing this perception.

Their native inhabitants are leaving while immigrants and temporary inhabitants are finding new opportunities in the mountains, which is a positive indicator that may also pose a threat to the preservation of local traditions and heritage, unless specific coordinated policies are implemented to safeguard the overall environment. It is of the utmost importance to recognise the value of traditions and utilize this resource as a means of enhancing the territory and guaranteeing the presence of human capital. Specifically, traditions are part of a set of heritage resources, which also includes economies, local architectural constructions, and the natural landscape. These are a set of specific material and immaterial resources of the Alps that require protection, but which should also be regarded as endogenous resources for the planning of the future of this territory.

The objective of this research is to develop strategies to prevent the dispersion and degradation of Alpin's cultural assets, transcending the limitations of the border and acknowledging the homogeneity of the territory and its shared history. This research goal is aligned with international initiatives to promote cross-border territorial cooperation between Italy and France, such as the Interreg programme, which outlines guidelines to support the resilience of the territory to be implemented between 2021 and 2027. The development strategies promoted by the European Union prioritise the development of projects that observe the principles of both thematic and geographic concentration, with guidelines oriented to shared goals.

One of the principal strategies that the research project considers is the potential of the collection of shared and accessible digital data of cultural heritage through geographic information systems. The

primary concern pertains to the capillarity of shared intangible heritage along the two frontiers of the Alps, encompassing traditions, knowledge, languages, and other such elements. However, the main challenge remains how to effectively produce georeferenced data of this collective, non-material, and intangible asset. Indeed, ascertaining where a value is born and spread is an important notion to get to preserve the overall asset.

The research is structured into three main cores, which classify partial but important objectives that need to be pursued. The initial research core is dedicated to the refinement and deepening of the multifaceted image of the Maritime Alps, encompassing their morphological, architectural, economic, cultural, and social characteristics. In this first phase, it is important to balance bibliographic and cartographic research with fieldwork to identify the values inherent in the local tradition.

A second core of the research concerns the assessment of existing tools and practices. This includes an examination of the Italian current instruments, determining their compatibility with French ones, and the identification of experiences that could be regarded as good practice. The collection of these experiences is facilitated by a range of sources, including publications, databases, interactive catalogues, and WebGIS.

A third final core concerns the construction of unitary strategies and policies for the preservation and reactivation of the Maritime Alps heritage, in order to address the marginality trends that currently affect it.

The Maritime Alps represent a significant case study for the design of new prospects for the mapping of intangible heritage. However, problematising these aspects is an essential starting point for the dissemination of this awareness to the many border territories that collectively constitute the articulated mosaic of Europe.

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