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COLABORAN:



UNIÓN EUROPEA
Fondo Europeo Agrícola de Desarrollo Rural



JUNTA DE ANDALUCÍA
CONSEJERÍA DE AGRICULTURA, PESCA Y DESARROLLO RURAL
CONSEJERÍA DE MEDIO AMBIENTE Y ORDENACIÓN DEL TERRITORIO



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Campus Universitario de Cartuja

Colegio Máximo, s.n., 18071, Granada

www.editorial.ugr.es

ISBN: 978-84-338-6338-6 – Depósito Legal: Gr./ 1187-2018

Edita: Editorial Universidad de Granada

Campus Universitario de Cartuja. Granada

GRANADA, 2018

Slow tourism in the ETNA Meso Region: discovering the rural space with the Circumetnea railway

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Abstract:

For several decades, economic restructuring and the agricultural crisis have reduced the economic opportunities of rural communities. One of the most effective strategies to combat rural decline is tourism. Tourism has the ability to generate income and create jobs directly, as well as induce other kinds of economic activity. The aim of the research is to propose innovative, sustainable and relational types of tourist use that increases opportunities for tourists to penetrate peripheral places to visit and to create experiences of exchange between tourists and local communities, thus recognizing those communities' cultural, social and spiritual dimensions.

The proposal for a geo-itinerary becomes more relevant when it involves more peripheral territories rather than the most important economic centers. It is also true that the connections between tourists and transport activities are equally consolidated, since it is true that the same configuration of tourism, interpreted as an escape from the usual places, evokes transport and its essential use.

The opportunity to integrate different types of sustainable and already existing transport, therefore, makes the hypothesis even more feasible, having to focus primarily on the relationship between the means of transport and the territory.

In accordance with the Europe2020 strategy and its approach to emphasizing and promoting growth through a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy of the EU's territories, our case study, the Etna Meso Region (EMR), outlines a common path between urban and rural development.

SLOW TOURISM in the ETNA Meso Region

discovering the rural space with the Circumetnea railway



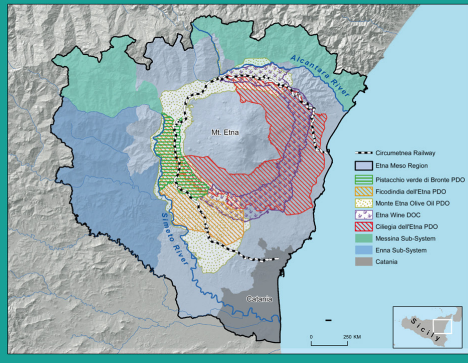
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Introduction

For several decades, economic restructuring and the agricultural crisis have reduced the economic opportunities of rural communities. One of the most effective strategies to combat rural decline is tourism. Tourism has the ability to generate income and create jobs directly, as well as induce other kinds of economic activity (Wilson S. et al., 2001). The aim of the research is to propose innovative, sustainable and relational types of tourism that increases opportunities for tourists to penetrate peripheral places to visit and to create experiences of exchange between tourists and local communities, thus recognizing those communities' cultural, social and spiritual dimensions (Battilani, Lammì et al., 2015). The proposal for a geo-literary theme is more relevant when it involves more peripheral territories rather than the most important economic centers. It is also true that the connections between tourists and transport activities are equally consolidated, since it is true that the same configuration of tourism, interpreted as an escape from the usual places, evokes transport and its essential use (Borruso et al., 2008). The opportunity to integrate different types of sustainable and already existing transport, therefore, makes the hypothesis even more feasible, having a bearing primarily on the relationship between the means of transport and the territory. In accordance with the Europe2020 strategy and its approach to emphasizing and promoting growth through a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy of the EU's territories, our case study, the Etna Meso Region (EMR), outlines a common path between urban and rural development.

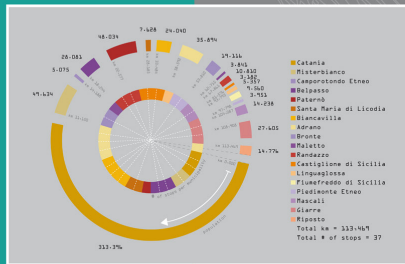
The Etna Meso Region

The administrative boundaries of the EMR are inscribed in the EU Classification of Territorial Units for Statistics (from French: Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques - NUTS) Sicily region and they partially overlap the territory of three NUTS3 areas, the provinces of Catania, Messina and Enna. The Local Administrative Units (LAU2) contained within the EMR consist of more than 60 municipalities distributed in the NUTS3 Catania (41 municipalities), the NUTS3 Messina (14 municipalities) and in the NUTS3 Enna (4 municipalities). The area is mainly influenced by two large cities: Catania and Messina; in addition, we also consider the town of Enna as a third urban pole. Our proposal for a tourist route based on sustainable mobility connects the city of Catania and the countryside of 14 municipalities through two rail infrastructures, the Circumetnea railway and the Catania city underground, allowing the observation of the Etna landscape and of its slopes, a cultivated landscape containing an extraordinary number of PDO regions, as well as the possibility of connecting all of the over 60 municipalities of the EMR, thus benefiting from a potential environmental, cultural and economic heritage of extraordinary beauty.



The FCE

The Circumetnea Railway (Ferrovie Circumetnee, FCE) was begun on 23 May 1889 and completed in 1896 with the construction of the last section that connected the municipalities of Giara and Riposto; it has a total length of 133 km. Despite considering it a great work, it was not part of the great railway infrastructures of the nineteenth century that had the purpose of connecting the North and the South. Rather, it was considered fundamental to allow the mobility of both goods and people, serving some internal areas of the foothills and coastal areas. The Circumetnea Railway is the only narrow-gauge railway left in Sicily; it has almost completely lost the function of freight transport and has not taken on characteristics of a tourist attraction. The only exception is represented by the recent establishment of the "Treno dei Vini dell'Etna" (Train of the Etna Wines), a cultural path that offers the opportunity to explore the territory of Etna and, at the same time, to taste the wines of some wineries located in Linguaglossa, Castiglione di Sicilia and Randazzo. Since the special Decree of the President of the Republic in 1953, the Circumetnea Railway has been managed through a "Government Management" governed by an ad hoc Commissioner, who is from time to time directly appointed by decree by the Ministry of Transport. There are 18 municipalities crossed by the railway line: Adrano, Belpasso, Biancavilla, Bronte, Camporotondo Etneo, Castiglione di Sicilia, Catania, Fiumefreddo, Giara, Linguaglossa, Maitino, Mascali, Matricebusca, Paternò, Piedimonte, Randazzo, Riposto and Santa Maria di Licodia.



In 1999, the section of the Circumetnea Railway in Catania was replaced by the metropolitan underground line. As of March 2018, it consists of a single line between the "Meseina" stop on the outskirts of the city and the "Biscione" stop in the city center.

Socio-economic and environmental superstructures

Although this area of Sicily experienced a slow and gradual peripheralization process, there are a large number of economic activities that make Etna and its surrounding area one of the most relevant places on the island. Indeed, from an environmental point of view, the EMR overlaps the EU Mediterranean Bio-Geographic Region Sicily East-North. Inside the area there are three Regional Natural Parks: the Etna Regional Park, the Nebrodi Regional Park and the Alcantara Regional Fluvial Park. In the same area, there are three Protected Areas: "Foro Livinche del Simeò", "Fiume Fiumefreddo" and "Oasi del Simeò". We also find a large number of sites that belong to the Natura 2000 Network: in 2013 UNESCO granted Mount Etna World Heritage status. The EMR also contains a large number of PDO products within its territory, specifically "Pasticcio verde di Bronte PDO", "Olio Monte Etna PDO", "Focaccia dell'Etna PDO", "Ciliegia dell'Etna PDO", "Arancia rossa di Sicilia PGI" and the wine "Etna DOC". All of these features, and anything else we have deliberately omitted to describe, have been subject to the attention of a large number of political superstructures that in the past decades have alternated and superimposed, and sometimes conflict. In particular we recognize some important local authorities in the EMR: they are "Etnea", "Terre dell'Etna e dell'Alcantara", "Polibartani", "Nebrodi Plus" and "Rocca di Careere". We are also waiting the new LAGA 2014-2020 season in order to understand if the number of LAGAs involved in the EMR is going to grow in the future.

Conclusions

The growth of agricultural tourism derives from the long European tradition that supports the multifunctional diversification of agricultural enterprises. The second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) increases the improvement of the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors, strengthening the links between primary activity and the environment, improving the quality of life in rural areas, boosting cooperation and innovation, and encouraging diversification of the economy in rural communities. This diversification increasingly involves tourism which, in turn, is diversified to better exploit the unique characteristics of the rural culture than to offer tranquility and traditional culture. The combination of environment, agricultural specialties and culture is quite attractive to the tourism industry. The Etna Meso Region has an infrastructure, the Ferrovie Circumetnee, which allows visitors to visit

valuable tourist sites; the integration between this type of slow mobility, which is well suited to enjoy the heritage and cultural heritage, and the metro network of the urban center of Catania can facilitate the movement of tourists to the small towns and villages of the region. In this relationship, the medium sized city of Catania functions as a hub because of its superior infrastructure and connections (airport, port, bus and railway stations) that place it in a nodal position in eastern Sicily. Considering and marketing Catania and its hinterland as the Etna Meso Region (EMR), to be exploited in a sustainable form, would create, on one hand the possibility of development for otherwise marginal territories and, on the other, it would enhance the tourist image of the city itself.



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