

Article

# Community-Based Processes for Revitalizing Heritage: Questioning Justice in the Experimental Practice of Ecomuseums

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**Abstract:** Heritage is not only what societies inherit from the past: it is also an opportunity for practicing the principles of sustainability in the making of the future. A community-based approach is pivotal for generating long lasting processes aimed at revitalizing heritage. This assertion has been widely stated in several norms and conventions, such as the 2000 European Landscape Convention and the 2005 European Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. Some practices aimed at revitalizing heritage with a community-based approach can be ascribed to the organizational form of the so-called ecomuseums, born in France in the 1970s and today spread worldwide. Ecomuseums soon became a tool for organizing community-based processes aimed at protecting and enhancing heritage in its various facets while promoting local development. However, not every existing ecomuseum is also able to grasp the opportunity of including disadvantaged persons and guaranteeing the right to heritage for all. This paper discusses the innovative elements and criticalities of ecomuseums, questioning how could they target heritage's enhancement as well as justice simultaneously. This paper gains evidence from an ongoing action-research process and provides policy recommendations for EU southern regions that are now starting to experiment with the practice of ecomuseums, such as Sicily (IT).

**Keywords:** participatory processes; landscape; policy design

## 1. Introduction

If one takes a walk along the rural side of Sicily, the landscape is astonishing. Dry stone walls delimitate fields where a great variety of trees stand, may they be pistachios, oranges, lemons, almonds, etc., depending on the side of the island. On the southeast side, the traveller would meet Volcano Etna, the tallest active volcano in Europe, the source of black lava stone. Generations after generations of skilful workers have learned how to use such black stone for creating the terraces on the Volcano's slopes to be used for agricultural purposes (Figure 1). Stones are also the bones of a great variety of architectures, may they be the houses inside the farms, rural and urban churches, etc. Humans have animated and still animate such architectures; nature nurtures and sustains human and non-human lives. This postcard from Sicily is a peculiar one, but each corner of the world has its own one. It is not a matter of where the postcard comes from: it is a matter of recognizing and valuing the *genius loci* of each place [1–3].

Such heritage is what societies have inherited from the past: it is a mirror of the co-evolutionary journey of humans and non-humans on planet Earth, in an intertwined relation between nature and culture [4]. Heritage—may it be material or immaterial, ancient or recent—reflects such a journey, in its various facets and dynamics. Moving from the assumption that heritage can be preserved and valued simultaneously and cannot be frozen, it has to be actively protected and enhanced, accordingly

with issues that change as societies change. Many authors have argued that heritage is not only the legacy of the past: it is also an opportunity for the making of the future [5–7]. However, this assertion requires attention. A responsible use/reuse of heritage calls for the application of one of the main principles of sustainability: preserving natural–cultural resources for all citizens and transmitting them to generations that yet have to come. In order to fulfil this principle, a community-based approach is required; that is to say: The path for sustainability cannot be exogenously provoked, but local communities are called to find their own way [8,9].



**Figure 1.** Drywalls in Sicily. In 2018, the “art of drystone walling, knowledge and techniques” has been inscribed on the UN Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Source of the picture: [unescosicilia.it/](http://unescosicilia.it/).

However, what does a community-based approach actually mean? How is it related with the practice of heritage’s enhancement? Why and how should the discourse upon social and ecological justice be incorporated with the discourse upon community-based heritage’s enhancement? Are there any experiments that blend such components? In the light of these questions, this paper aimed to explore the relation between community-based approaches to heritage’s enhancement and the concept of justice, discussing ecomuseums as practical examples that may be able to clarify such a blend.

The practices of ecomuseums, born in France in the 1970s and which today have spread worldwide, seem to provide answers to these questions, although some clarifications are required. After reviewing the current state of the literature and the normative framework’s evolution—analysing concepts such as democratization, inclusion and participation which are related with the broad framework of cultural landscapes—some insights on ecomuseums are provided, together with an argument on their significance in the EU lagging regions, such as Sicily (IT), where territorial inequalities emerge. With this premises, the paper presents and discusses some key examples of ecomuseums in Sicily, with a focus on an ongoing process in the Simeto Area. The methodological approach combines case-study [10–12] and action research [13–15]. The author discusses what a community-based character for heritage’s enhancement is, and why talking of justice matters in this domain. In conclusion, the paper traces some lessons in terms of policy recommendations for the making of ecomuseums in Sicily as a field of experimentation. Lessons can be extended to other contexts, under the condition of interpreting heritage’s enhancement as an endogenous path for sustainable development, claiming the need of more just heritage’s valorisation as part of the broad framework of just sustainability [16], in a desperate call for a change of direction in the humans and non-humans’ co-journey on this Earth.

### 1.1. Heritage as a Global Concern and a Local Opportunity

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights [17] recognizes that “everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community” (Art. 27). This assertion calls for opening up the access to heritage for all, with heritage being the expression of such culture. However, there are diverging positions on the opportunity of linking heritage’s safeguarding with the concept of human rights [18–20], as such an approach could result in a disconnection of heritage’s enhancement with context-based conditions. On one side, the Universal Declaration is an anchor for identifying the access to culture as a right. On the other, it is necessary to dig into the criticalities of each place in order to understand the obstacles to such a right, related with the specific conditions of inequalities, injustices and questions of power [21]. Albeit acknowledging the key role of the Declaration for humankind, it is necessary to consider the double-edged sword of the universal perspective that is at the base of UN and UNESCO policies: in some cases, this may generate a bureaucratic and technocratic authority that inhibits various situated forms of culture [22,23].

That being said, it is clear that the UNESCO—with its limitations but also with its key international role—has provided a specific normative framework for preserving the natural–cultural heritage of societies, creating a new cooperative nexus across the globe [24]. It is the case of various UNESCO initiatives, such as the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, ratified in Italy in 1958. Not only is the Hague Convention concerned with preventing destruction; in peacetime, it also stimulates the creation of inventories, plans and the designation of institutional responsibilities.

Over the years, the UNESCO’s debate evolved thanks to various meetings and roundtables across the globe, such as the one held in Santiago de Chile, May 1972, organized jointly with the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The roundtable declares museums as *integral* spaces that could (and should) hold a “decisive role in the education of the community”, which is strongly related with the ideas behind ecomuseums.

In the same year (in November), the 1972 UNESCO Convention appeared [25], concerning the protection of the world cultural heritage (monuments, groups of building, etc.) and natural heritage (geological and physiographical formations, natural features, etc.): on one side, the 1972 Convention was far from considering the needs and specificities of local communities in the act of safeguarding heritage; on the other, it introduced important tools such as the World Heritage (WH) List and the WH Fund. WH policies have contributed not only to protection but also to local development [26], although some are sceptical regarding their long lasting impacts on places (concerning the lack of coordination among local actors, the lack of real employment’s opportunity for inhabitants, the failure of poverty reduction through heritage-led development, mass tourism, etc.) [27].

Despite the successes and criticalities which emerged after several decades of the 1972 Conventions’ implementation [28], the overall idea beyond the WH institution has made clear the importance of protecting heritage from destructive forces of uncontrolled growth eroding resources at the global scale [29]. Then, the pivotal year “1992” arrived: The UN Conference on Environment and Development issues, and the well known Rio Declaration. Simultaneously, UNESCO had a turning point. A new category appeared in the global debate on heritage: it was “cultural landscape”, i.e., the combined works of nature and humans, expressing a “long and intimate relationship between people and their natural environment”. This opened up a new phase of the debate that called for the exploration of the community–heritage nexus: From now on, it is clear that heritage’s enhancement cannot be decided only through a top-down approach, as the one initially proposed through the WH approach.

As a matter of fact, with the Millennium turn, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) [30] questions such an approach. Introducing a shift from a material to an immaterial dimension, it expanded the concept of heritage to all those “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (Art. 2). The ICH arises after the 1992 Rio Declaration

and the principles of sustainability are now a common ground in the international arena. The 2003 ICH Convention assimilates them, putting the focus not only on the transgenerational character of heritage and the environment, but also on cultural diversity and human creativity, expressed through the specificities of each community in relation with each historical/geographical context. In this sense, the ICH Convention puts the focus on the local more than the global dimension, stressing the necessity of guaranteeing heritage in its various manifestations in every different corner of the world. As local communities are called to recognise and actively enhance heritage on one side, they are also called to construct specific trajectories for local development on the other, especially in those contexts where there is a lack of socio-economic opportunities, despite an abundance of various forms of heritage.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the 2000 European Landscape Convention [31], ratified in Florence, clarifies a concept: Landscape can be interpreted as a merge of different aspects of heritage (natural and cultural) and cannot exist disjunct from a community that identifies these aspects. By means of the Florence Convention, the concept of landscape acquires a different meaning comparing with the UNESCO definition, since all (cultural) landscapes are taken into account, not just extraordinary ones. Defining landscape as the “result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors (. . . ) as perceived by people”, the 2000 EU Convention stresses three key elements, recurrent in planning literature [32]: The centrality of the act of recognition, practiced by local communities; the constant tension between conservation and transformation; the social–ecological blend.

It was then with the 2005 European Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, known also as Faro Convention [33], that the concept of cultural heritage fully incorporated the aforementioned key elements with a specific focus on its realm of application. It defines cultural heritage as “a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time”. The Convention also defines a heritage community as “people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations” (Art. 2). In these definitions, the Faro Convention incorporates the inputs of the Landscape Convention. Other elements emerge, such as: The right to cultural heritage as the right to participate in cultural life (following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights); individual and collective responsibility towards cultural heritage; human development and quality of life—echoing Sen and Nussbaum’s work [34]—as goals of the conservation/sustainable use of cultural heritage; the relation of cultural heritage with peace, cultural diversity, democracy and sustainable development; the necessity of building synergies and partnerships between public, institutional and private actors.

The nexus between heritage, landscape and rights is not only related with the global level: As we said, each context has specificities. In the Italian scenario, the 1948 Constitution starkly states that the Republic “safeguards landscape together with historical and artistic heritage of the Nation” (Article 9) among Fundamental principles. As Settis [35] recently pointed out, this principle has to be interpreted organically with the entire constitutional architecture; therefore, landscape and heritage are connected with the right to education, the right to health, the right to fulfil human development.

This normative framework—at the global, European and National levels—shows the existence of the right to heritage. Is it then possible to introduce the concept of just heritage?

### 1.2. Linking the Discourse upon Heritage with the One upon Justice: Defining Just Heritage

When Agyeman et al. introduced the concept of *just sustainability* [16], they clearly explained the relation between sustainable societies and just societies, between environmental quality and human equality, arguing that there is no meaningful sustainability with a huge gap between the levels of wealth and levels of poverty. In the same line, it is possible to argue that there cannot be meaningful heritage’s revitalization under the wealth/poverty gap: heritage, such as sustainability, can be framed as a matter of justice. This is confirmed by Siebrandt et al. [36] who reported what follows.

Increasingly, scholars and practitioners acknowledge that cultural heritage is about power and politics, legitimacy and identity, property and ownership, dissonance and contestation, and economics and development. This reconceptualisation puts people, rather than materials, at the centre of cultural heritage practice and makes efforts to protect heritage more likely to face questions about how associated benefits and burdens are distributed, who makes decisions, and what the appropriate responses are to violations of law or ethical standards. In other words, heritage scholars and practitioners began exploring the relationship of heritage and social justice. (p. 6)

There is not only one way for conceptualizing justice. In this article, justice is interpreted intertwining three dimensions. First, according to Schlosberg [37], one can refer to ecological justice in terms of the “distribution, recognition (of resources and hazards), capabilities and participation (related with) both the human and nonhuman realms” (p. 6). Second, if one looks through the lens of the right to the city [38,39], space is framed as a mirror for understanding social relations; with this premise, the concept of spatial justice emerges [40–42] and it can be related to the institutional assets which may guarantee (or not) rights [43]. Third, according to Johnston and Marwood [44], one can ask who has access to heritage, under which conditions, and what actions can be conducted at local levels in order to guarantee that none is left aside: to them, this is defined as action heritage for social justice. Ecology, space and action are the three variables which are here considered in defining the concept of just heritage. This concept can be intended as the right to access to (and take care of) natural–cultural heritage in a situated context, through the responsible action of individuals, groups and institutions, considering distributions and maldistributions, recognitions and misrecognitions, creating the right capabilities for meaningful participation. The following paragraphs present the practical example of ecomuseums and its relations with the concept of just heritage.

### 1.3. The Experimental Practice of Ecomuseums

Ecomuseums are organizational structures for community-based processes situated in a specific territory: They may be formalized through voluntary pacts between organized groups of inhabitants and local institutions, with the goal of protecting and enhancing heritage, in its various facets [30], while promoting local development [45–48].

Ecomuseums are relational processes which project themselves into the landscape (as intended by the EU Landscape Convention [31]), where actors are able to collectively identify their common heritage (as intended by the EU Faro Convention [33]).

The idea of ecomuseums arose in the 1970s in France thanks to the museologists Georges-Henri Rivi re and Hugues de Varine. The underlying idea behind ecomuseums was opening up and democratizing the preservation and valorisation of heritage. Ecomuseums started as an International Council of Museums’ (ICOMs’) experiment and soon became a worldwide phenomenon that counts today hundreds of vibrant experiences on the planet [49–52]. The prefix *eco-* refers to the Greek word *oikos* (home): on one side, it expresses the idea that ecomuseums tell the story of a common home; on the other, it recalls that ecomuseums are connected with specific environmental and ecological assets. As a matter of fact, the word ecomuseum was first publicly introduced in Dijon during the IX ICOM General Conference in 1971; on that occasion, Robert Poujade (Dijon’s mayor and French Minister of the Environment)—on the basis of de Varine and Rivi re’s words—confirmed that the emerging concept of an ecomuseum was to be intended as a means for connecting humans with their living environment [46]. Along the years, ecomuseums emerged as a means for promoting a democratic dialogue about the past and above all, the future.

They appeared in an historical phase when the ICOM’s debate was focused on rethinking the museal institution [53], producing a double effect. On one strand, some museums began to implement different strategies for social inclusion, incorporating in their mission the fight against marginalization, racial discrimination, gender issues, poverty, etc. [54], up to the most recent coalitions of museums actively working with the lens of environmental and climate justice [55]. In this first strand, museums

include inside their walls issues that were previously outside the boundaries of traditional exhibitions. On the second strand, ecomuseums themselves appeared, with the same ethic tension of the first one but with a different organizational structure. As a matter of fact, in contrast with new museology, ecomuseology offers “a holistic and integrated approach for local-level, community driven” heritage safeguarding [28]. In other words, recalling Montanari [56], the practice of the ecomuseum revised the concept of the museum in terms of:

linking people, their heritage expressions and places; in the shift of the museums’ focus from collection to community, by moving their subject matter based on academic disciplines to an interdisciplinary view of material and immaterial assets; in the experimentation and enhancement of participation practices, reinforcing the involvement of the population at different levels of the museums’ work; finally, in the generation of a wide variety of community-based initiatives through the interaction with different physical, social and cultural contexts and/or the coalescence with other models (p. 370)

The phenomenon of ecomuseums has a direct link with the search for sustainability [57,58], ecomuseums being possible tools for integrating heritage’s valorisations with the UN SDGs. Specifically, there are intersections—at least—with quality education, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, peace, justice and strong institutions [59], although even the connections with the whole picture of SDGs could be easy to demonstrate.

Finally, it was necessary to point out that the ecomuseum is made of community-based processes concerned with raising people’s awareness. In the most fortunate cases, this may lead to an improvement of the quality of democracy and decision making related with territorial transformation and management, which is at the base of the concept of cultural landscapes.

#### 1.4. Are there Intersections between the Practices of Ecomuseums and the Concept of Just Heritage?

As stated in Section 1.2, ecological justice [37], spatial justice [40–43], and action heritage for social justice [44] are three variables that we are considering in defining the concept of *just heritage*. Do the practices of ecomuseums fit this concept?

In the search for points of intersection, we did not consider all the existing practices that have assumed the “label: ecomuseum”: many of them could be just empty labels [28]. As Stefano and Davis pointed out, “it is important to draw attention to their different aims, methods and modes of operation that are—in most ideal form—based on the need and decision of local community members” [28]. This was confirmed by a variety of experiences and cases [60–63], which all converge on some recurring characteristics, that are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of the recurring characteristics of well experimented ecomuseums.

Characteristics	Questions for Investigating the Characteristics
Residents’ identification/benefits	Does the ecomuseum encompass a “geographical” territory that is determined by shared characteristics, identified by residents? Does the local community manage the ecomuseum? Does the ecomuseum bring benefits to local communities—e.g., a sense of pride, regeneration, or economic income?
Community participation	Does the ecomuseum allow for public participation in a democratic manner? How? Is there an emphasis on process rather than on product?
Local organization operations	Does the ecomuseum encourage collaboration with local craftspeople, artists, writers, actors and musicians? Is there joint ownership and management between local people and “experts”? Is it a fragmented “museum” with a hub and “antennae” of buildings and sites?

Based on this interpretation, here we consider the windows of opportunity that may be opened through a specific way of framing the ecomuseal approach.

First, the practice of ecomuseums is a way for focusing on the underlying relations between humans and nature. The use of the prefix *eco* is related with human/social ecology, where *eco* recalls the

Greek word *oikos*. Ecomuseums may be based on a collective narrative and an act of care: ecology, in this respect, is intended as a political discourse upon nature–human relations [4] reflected in landscapes [2]. In this sense, the ecomuseum discourse fits into the *ecological* justice concept, if all beings, in both the human and nonhuman realms, are intended as part of the common ground where the ecomuseum has its roots with a meaningful stake into its experimentation.

Second, ecomuseums are context-based, space-related practices. The way space is organized and managed matters, and it reflects social relations. In addition, ecomuseums can be an opportunity for strengthening individual–groups–institutions relations, through a voluntary pact. This opens some areas of experimentation in order to understand the implication of the spatial justice framework, with the space at the core of the discourse [41] and institutions as key actors [43]. In this sense, ecomuseums may be an arena for experimenting with not only redistributive efforts, but also institutional agency in the pursuit of justice.

Third, ecomuseums may be educational and transformative processes that start from the collective reconstruction of memory—including tensions, conflicts, contradictions and questions of power—and may evolve in emancipatory paths for liberating the most oppressed individuals of society [64]. This requires interpreting “heritage as action, as socially active research” [44].

Then, intersections between ecomuseums and the concept of just heritage can be found if ecology, relations, space, institutional agency and emancipation matter in their practice.

## 2. Methods, Context and Materials

### 2.1. Methodological Approach

The methodological approach is as a hybrid between action research [13–15] and case study method [10–12]. The practical engagement in an ongoing action research process in the Simeto River area (Sicily, Italy) required the exploration of some case studies, intended as examples that were used to foster that process. The question concerned with the relation between the concept of just heritage and the practice of an ecomuseum arose while experiencing the process.

It is important to clarify that the methodological approach is not deductive: The author is proposing a linkage between specific, context-based practices with the more general theoretical, cultural and normative debate at the global scale.

A set of case-studies at the international level were explored through a platform called Drop., Drop is the metaphor used by Gerard Corsane at the 2016 ICOM General Conference: “Drop by drop becomes a river”. Drop is a networking tool aimed at fostering international cooperation among ecomuseums [65]. Desk analysis, archival documents and interviews with key actors of the network were conducted. This preliminary verification confirmed that there was a linkage between the concept of just heritage and the practice of ecomuseums. Then, the boundaries of analysis were restricted to the Sicilian Region, where in 2014, the Regional Law L.R. 16/14—named Institutions of ecomuseums of Sicily—was issued. The formally recognized ecomuseums—according with L.R. 16/14—were investigated. Above all, the lessons learned from the direct engagement of the author in an action research process—which started a decade ago—are presented and discussed in order to identify the preconditions and characteristics of the just heritage ethos “on the move”. The following sections present the results of the analysis conducted inside the boundaries of the Sicilian Region and of the in-depth involvement in the action–research process in the Simeto River area. The action research process is the core of the analysis and it provides some insights in order to practically understand the intersections between the process of socially constructing an ecomuseum and the tensions toward a just heritage ethos.

### 2.2. The Sicilian Scenario

Sicily (southern Italy) is a region that possesses a huge basket of heritage resources, some of them formally recognized as UNESCO heritage (7 sites are listed as material heritage plus 2 geoparks; 4 goods

are listed as immaterial heritage). Beyond UNESCO sites, Sicily is historically known for the richness of its landscapes—as witnessed in the words of Goethe, in the paintings of Houel, etc.—mostly related with rural environments, but today the abandonment of the agricultural lands and the depopulation of the most internal areas (those areas that are far from metropolitan poles) is exposing them to pauperization due to a lack of care. At the same time, Sicily is a region that would benefit from any action aimed at fostering local development, due to some socio-economic criticalities such as the current alarming rates of unemployment: in 2019, Sicily stands at the 12th position in the European rank (out of 280 EU regions), with a unemployment rate equal to 21.5%. Even worse, Sicily stands at the 7th position, in the same rank, in terms of youth unemployment (15–24 years old), with a percentage equal to 53.6 (EUROSTAT). In such a scenario, the spread of ecomuseums could be a means for: (a) preserving and enhancing heritage (both in terms of material and immaterial heritage) with the direct involvement of local communities; (b) triggering processes of local development.

Despite this, in Sicily the process of the generation of ecomuseums had a delay compared with the international and national contexts. In 2007, a national meeting—titled “Towards a National Coordination of Ecomuseums: A process to be shared”—in the framework of the conference “Ecomuseum Days. Towards a new cultural concept for territorial sustainable development” was held in Catania, eastern Sicily. During that meeting, an important national document was issued: The so-called Chart of Catania [52]. It clearly states that:

the Ecomuseum is a participatory practice aimed at enhancing the material and immaterial cultural heritage, developed by an organized subject, expression of a local community, in the perspective of sustainable development. The precondition is participation, intended as a democratic, community-based decision-making process. In the light of the experience gained, the figure of a coordinator (or a coordination group) is considered strategic, in order to stimulate participation in decision-making processes and in the planning of ecomuseum activities. The coordinator or the coordination group would be responsible for planning and organizing the activities of the ecomuseum, operating as link between the local areas and the framework of guidelines defined by each Italian Region.

The chart confirms what has been said and experienced for years: The key-role of communities in the making of ecomuseums for the aim of safeguarding and enhancing heritage. After having hosted the meeting that produced the *Chart of Catania* in 2007, the Sicilian Region promulgated three key acts:

- In 2014, the aforementioned Regional Law L.R. 16/14, named Institutions of Ecomuseums of Sicily;
- In 2017, the guidelines issued with DD 241/2017 (Regional Department of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity), named Guidelines for the identification of the criteria and minimum requirements for the recognition of the status of ecomuseum as well as for the assignment of the contributions, with reference to the Regional Law L.R. 16/14 and subsequent amendments;
- In 2020, the administrative order DA n.04/GAB/2020 (Regional Department of Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity); it recognizes 11 ecomuseums in Sicily, while other 6 ecomuseums remain under evaluation.

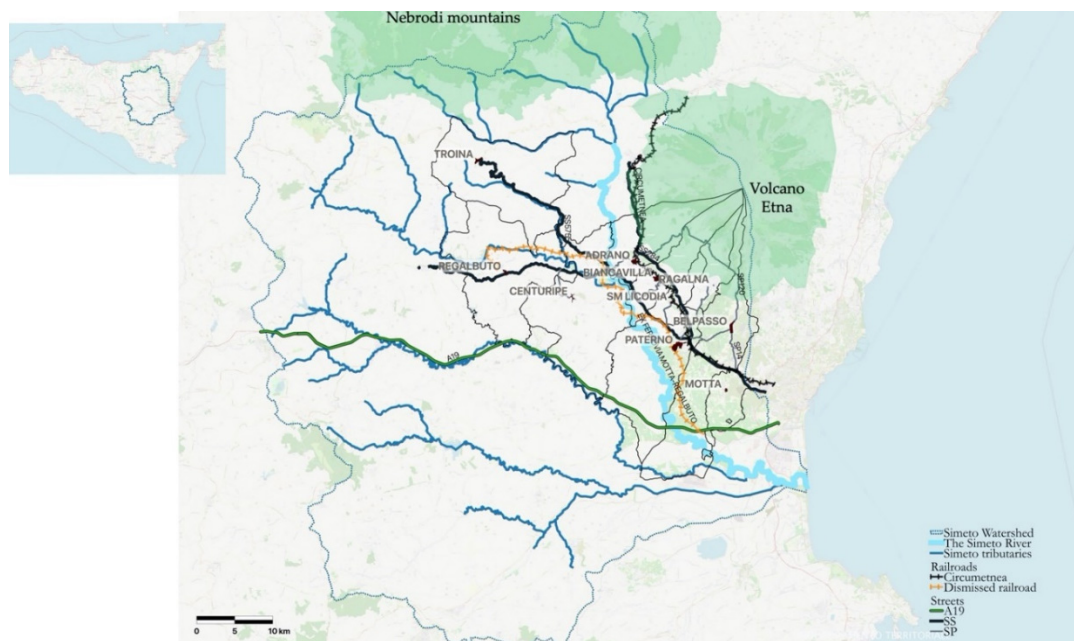
The Sicilian Region is also supposed to create a network, but to date it only recognizes the status of ecomuseums to applicants. Such recognition is necessary in order to have access to regional funds, not yet allocated but established by law. In order to be listed as an ecomuseum, the norm defined nine criteria. Among them, there is the existence of a participatory process and of a community agreement that bind various local actors toward the common goal of heritage preservation, activated since at least three years.

### 2.3. The Simeto Area

The Simeto River runs for 113 km in eastern Sicily, in the widest watershed of the Island (4029 km<sup>2</sup>), from the Nebrodi Mountains to the Catania’s coastal area, nurtured with the waters that



come from Mount Etna, the tallest active Volcano in Europe (see Figure 2). Here, 10 municipalities (1079 km<sup>2</sup>—180,000 inhabitants approximately), along the middle stretch of the river (the so-called valley), formed the Simeto River Agreement, a voluntary effort of shared territorial governance aimed at preserving and valuing the natural–cultural heritage of the Valley and promoting the local development [66,67]. The agreement was pushed by a coalition of community-based organizations called the Participatory Presidium, together with some researchers from the University of Catania, engaged in a long-term community–university partnership that started more than a decade ago.



**Figure 2.** A map of the Simeto River Area. Source: GIS elaboration on OpenStreetMap.

In 2002, the Sicilian Region issued a Waste Management Plan which would have required the construction of 4 up to 5 mega-incinerators, one of those to be located inside a beautiful Special Area of Conservation close to the Simeto River. The local community—creating alliances between various municipalities—opposed this plan through a social mobilization inspired by environmental justice principles, and by a concern about suspected mafia infiltration in Sicilian waste business [68,69]. The mobilization was successful, so the plan was withdrawn but the local community decided not to stop after the protests: The associations kept organizing and asked some researchers from the University of Catania to start a partnership aimed at creating forms for local development inspired by an ethos of social-ecological justice, as an alternative to the model of development that the mega-incinerators represented. The partnership conducted a first community mapping experiment in order to focus not only on issues, but mostly on shared values, memories, identities and visions, in order to draft a first bottom-up strategic plan [15,70,71]. Then, various steps followed. The main results are presented in next paragraphs.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. The Journey toward the Ecomuseum of the Simeto River

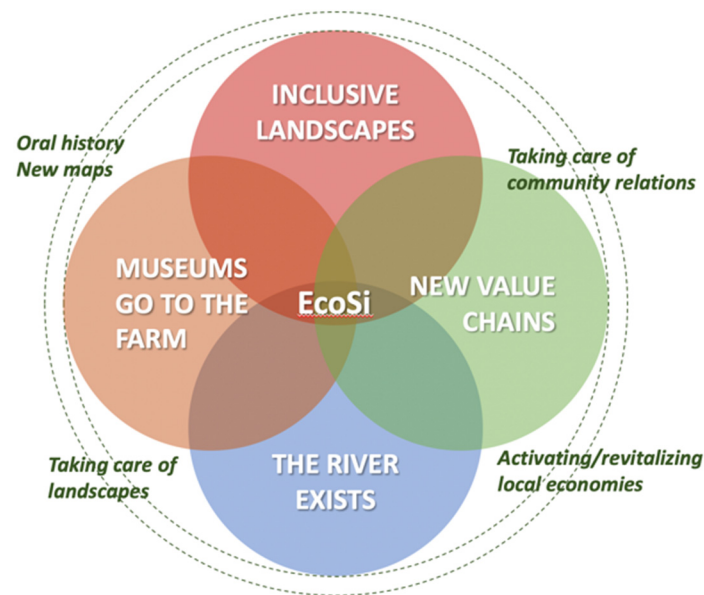
After the community mapping initiative—which is a step that many ecomuseums have in common—the partnership has gone through a decade-long process. Here, the main steps and results are chronologically reported and summarized in brief.

- 2010–2013: The university–community partnership continued the mapping process, organized several participatory workshops (at least one meeting per month), engaged in some

community-based projects [72,73] and prepared a first Memorandum of Understandings for engaging local institutions into the bottom-up process.

- 2013–2015: based on the first Memorandum of Understandings, the university–community partnership—plus a group of elected officials of the Municipalities along the Simeto River—applied for the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), a Ministerial program under the framework of the EU Italian Territorial Cohesion Policy. The valley was selected as an experimental area of national significance for the participatory process put in place. The strategy—which was approved in 2018 and is now moving into the implementation phase—will provide about EUR 32 million for strengthening services such as education, health care and mobility, and sustaining some projects for local development. According with the SNAI criteria, three municipalities of the valley (Adrano, Biancavilla and Centuripe) will be the direct beneficiaries of economic resources, but other seven municipalities (Belpasso, Motta S. Anastasia, Paternò, Ragalna, Regalbuto, S. M. di Licodia and Troina) are part of the strategic area [74–77].
- 2015–today: in February, 2015, the Participatory Presidium was born as an umbrella organization grouping about 60 community-based organizations. In May 2015, ten municipalities, the University of Catania and the Participatory Presidium signed the Simeto River Agreement [66,67]. The agreement experimented with a first triennium of shared governance and beyond the SNAI, several other projects were funded thanks to the synergies that the Agreement created. Among them, there was an EU Life project on adaptation to climate change, focused on processes of community learning for resilience (the municipalities of Paternò, S. M. di Licodia and Ragalna were the main beneficiaries).
- 2015–today: each year, the Community Planning and Ecological Design Summer School (CoPED) takes place in the valley, with students and scholars from the University of Memphis and University of Massachusetts, Boston, together with the University of Catania, generating new ideas, projects and enthusiasm [78,79]. In 2020, CoPED was aimed at framing the Simeto process under the concept of an Ecomuseum of the Simeto River Valley. COVID-19 disrupted 2020 CoPED, but the Presidium and the University of Catania have kept working toward the ecomuseum idea.
- 2016–today: In addition, in the framework of the Simeto River Agreement, a biodistrict was established. The biodistrict is an organizational structure aimed at enhancing the local food system with a focus on agro-ecology. The objective was to foster the idea of food citizenship [80] pushing for the consumption of local, quality food, networking local farms, restaurants, lodging, schools and hospitals' cafeterias, municipalities, ethical purchasing groups, families, etc.

From January 2020, the Participatory Presidium created a specific working group called “Ecomuseum Team” that cooperated with students and scholars from the University of Catania and the University of Memphis, first generating ideas and the program for a pilot year of experimentation under the concept of an ecomuseum. In June 2020, after six months of online meetings, online mapping, case study research and mutual learning, a first community meeting called “Per un Ecomuseo del Simeto” took place. During that meeting, further steps were planned from September 2020 to June 2021. Specifically, as the Simeto River Agreement was going to start a new triennium, the ecomuseal pact was going to be included inside the formalized Simeto River Agreement with Municipalities. Additionally, four pilot projects were set up as practical activities of the ecomuseum (see Figure 3): “Inclusive Landscapes”; “Museums go to the farm”; “New value chains”; “The River exists”. They are integrated projects with four interrelated thematic foci. These projects have been discussed during the first community meeting, 26 June 2020, held in a farm in Santa Maria di Licodia (Figure 4). The next paragraph describes the first one as the exemplification of how the practice of ecomuseum in the Simeto area is related with the concept of just heritage.



**Figure 3.** A graph which represents the interconnected thematic foci of the ecomuseum of the Simeto River (EcoSi). Source: Author’s elaboration based on the Ecomuseum Team’s report.



**Figure 4.** A picture from the first community meeting “Per un Ecomuseo del Simeto”, held on 26 June 2020, in a farm called “Fattoria Sociale L’Agorà”, Santa Maria di Licodia. Source: Participatory Presidium’s archive.

### 3.2. Focus on the Project “Inclusive Landscapes”

Inside the framework of the ecomuseum of the Simeto River, this project tried to address the issue of justice related with the specific spatial conditions of the Valley. The project moved from the assumption that social inclusion was not always an easy path, especially in inner areas. As a matter of fact, inner areas are places where spatial inequalities emerge due to the distance from metropolitan cities and a lack of public services [81,82]. As a consequence, here, territorial morphology and isolation may exacerbate the picture of social exclusion.

The “Inclusive Landscapes” project aims to address the issue of revitalizing heritage by creating, at the same time, opportunities of social inclusion for the whole community, taking care of the most fragile persons. If the ecomuseum is a community-based project, it is important that no one is excluded and left behind: The process is for everyone, including low-income people, homeless, migrants, people with disabilities, other marginalized persons, the elderly, children, etc. Therefore, the goal is to actively

involve, in the Ecomuseum process, those people which are usually excluded from civic life and from the opportunities of democratic participation.

The inclusion of all social groups represents both a matter of justice and a practical way to increase the effectiveness of the ecomuseum as a community-based process. The concept of the community itself encompasses complexity, diversities and fragilities. In the search for creating a sense of community, the question of inclusion is a key one: who is part of a community? Or, in other words: “who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power”, recalling Flyvbjerg [11]?

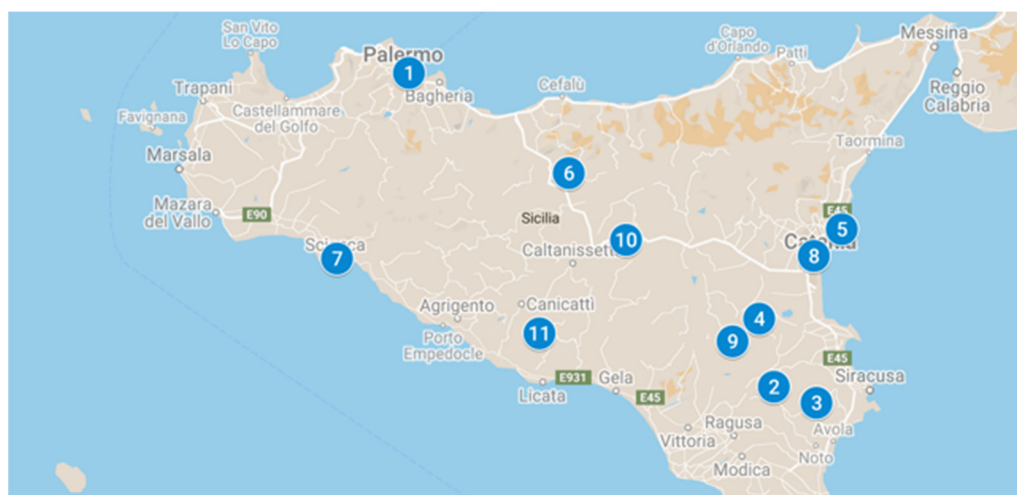
That being said, some practical actions have already been envisioned to start their experimental phase. Specifically:

- To map, identify and involve the fragile people living in the Simeto area, with a focus on the various specific needs;
- To map, identify and involve associations that, in various forms, are already committed to address social inclusion;
- To design specific activities in order to involve fragile people with an active role, such as: The collection of memories, pictures, drawings and stories in order to organize a “diverse exposition” of the valley; “diverse guided tours” of the valley (having unconventional guides aside with formal touristic guides); training courses for rediscovering and transmitting the peculiar arts and crafts of the valley linking children and the elderly, etc.

### 3.3. Census of Other Sicilian Ecomuseums

The Sicilian ecomuseums that have formally recognized through DA n.04/GAB/2020 are 11. They were investigated through on-desk analysis, archival documents, and interviews.

Figure 5 reports their localization in Sicily. In some cases (five), they were immediately identified in a specific location (likely, the hub of the ecomuseum); in other cases (six), the geolocalisation process required a deeper investigation and the final location choice was determined for approximation. Table 2 reports their names, location and the type of promoters/coordinators.



**Figure 5.** Localization of the 11 ecomuseums that have been formally recognized by the Sicilian Region. Source: Author's elaboration based on DA n.04/GAB/2020.

**Table 2.** List of recognized ecomuseums and the type of coordinator.

ID, Name and Location	Coordinator
1. Mare Memoria Viva (PA)	Association
2. I luoghi del lavoro contadino—Iblei (SR)	Association
3. Sistema Rete Museale Iblei (SR)	Association
4. Parco Cava Grotta del Drago (CT)	Association
5. Cielo e Terra—Acireale (CT)	Foundation
6. Madonie—Castellana Sicula (PA)	Municipalities' union
7. Cinque sensi—Sciacca (AG)	Association
8. Riviera Dei Ciclopi—Acicastello (CT)	Municipality
9. Valle del Loddiero—Militello Val di Catania (CT)	Association
10. Rocca di Cerere Geopark (EN)	Consortium
11. I sentieri della memoria—Campobello di Licata (AG)	Association

According to interviews conducted with key actors of the ecomuseal debate in Sicily—including key actors of the aforementioned ecomuseums—the main issues that emerge are the following ones:

- Not all the listed ecomuseums have already started activities on the ground; some of them are just projects on paper;
- Not all the listed ecomuseums have put in place community-based processes aimed at a wide participation of the residents; only some of them have started such a process;
- Not all the listed ecomuseums benefit from a wide involvement of a variety of local actors;
- The issue of spatial justice is not the primary concern of the listed ecomuseums: only some of them have implemented actions aimed at social inclusion.

#### 4. Discussion

Some limitations exist with the process of institutionalization of ecomuseums in Sicily. The 11 ecomuseums, that have been formally recognized according to DA n.04/GAB/2020 open some questions. In relation to the recurring characteristics of well experimented ecomuseums [60–63]—as summarized in Table 1—it is possible to elaborate the following statements. First, in terms of “Residents’ identification/benefits”: The existence of a community-based association as the promoter/coordinator of many ecomuseums does not automatically guarantee an authentic community-based character. Questions remain open in terms of characterizing the local association as a community-based one: who are the main components of the association, how permeable is it to the wider contribution of residents, what is the effort in terms of community engagement; how much do residents recognize the role of the association as the catalyst of ecomuseum processes? Second, in terms of “community participation”: The practices for enhancing democratic participation are mostly absent, with some exceptions. At this stage, after at least three years of operation (as required by law), this lack opens other questions, such as: what other tools have been used in order to guarantee a wide participation in the process? Third, in terms of “local organization operation”, the mix of experts’ knowledge with local knowledge has not been easy to trace but in some cases a record of public meetings and workshops has been intended as a form of exchange between residents and experts. The involvement of craftspeople, artists and experts is differentiated; the aim of reinforcing the voice of local communities does not always apply.

Moreover, referring to cultural landscapes, an additional point must be discussed. The Regional Law L.R. 16/14 is based on the 2007 Chart of Catania, which clearly states: “Ecomuseum is a participatory practice aimed at enhancing the material and immaterial cultural heritage, developed by an organized subject, expression of a local community, in the perspective of sustainable development. The precondition is participation”. Based on this definition, there is a clear linkage between the concept of cultural landscapes and the need for community-based participation. A question remains open in terms of its practical implication in some of the 11 recognized ecomuseums.

Finally, in the 11 listed ecomuseums, activities that may be ascribed in the framework of just heritage are mostly absent, with some exceptions.

In contrast, the Simeto process tells a different story. The Participatory Presidium is acting as a community-based coordinator of an ecomuseal process *de facto*: it is a practice-based, context-based process [46–52,56], beyond any label [28]. In terms of “Residents’ identification/benefits”: The existence and long-lasting life of the “Participatory Presidium” shows a sense of pride and belonging to a geographical territory—the Simeto Valley—collectively identified. This is also producing many benefits in terms of economic regeneration, thanks to the EU and National programs that are in the process of being implemented in the area. In terms of “community participation”, the Community Mapping process [15,70,71]—that many ecomuseums have in common [51,52]—is a means for allowing public participation in a democratic manner. In terms of “local organization operation”, the existence of initiatives such as the Biodistrict and the project “new value chain” would encourage the collaboration between experts and citizens in enhancing the local economy. Finally, the tension toward justice and the practical commitment to its pursuing is testified by a decade-long process. The process started with an environmental justice [37] issue—the fight against the incinerator [68]—and is evolving for facing social-ecological justice concerns [66]. Moreover, the Simeto cultural landscape has been clearly identified thanks to the Community Mapping process. Finally, the just heritage ethos is incorporated in the project “Inclusive Landscapes”.

In the light of these findings, it is possible to propose some policy recommendations. At the local level—where ecomuseums are generated—it is necessary to reinforce their community-based character, opening up the range of involved actors, implementing processes, practices and tools for the democratic participation of residents: The community mapping may be one of the possible means, it could vary in forms depending on the context; other tools can be experimented as long as the goal remains publicly engaged. At the regional level, the recognition of ecomuseums is already a first step toward the spread of this practice in the region, as it may encourage local communities to generate these practices in a clear normative framework, but recognition has to acknowledge the context-based, practice-based characters of ecomuseums. In this respect, it is necessary to clearly identify the characteristics and features of the community-based component [60–63] otherwise—again with the words of Stefano and Davis [28]—the label “ecomuseum” could have been used in vain.

In addition, on one side, it is necessary to foster the networking of these practices as it happens in other Italian regions such as Piedmont and Apulia; on the other side, it is vital to provide the necessary economic resources in order to sustain those genuine processes of participation in community-based ecomuseums. Finally, the connection between the practice of ecomuseums and the concept of just heritage should be incorporated in Regional policies, for example programming the EU Social Funds Plus (ESF+) for 2021–2027—which are aimed at fostering education, employment and social inclusion—accordingly.

## 5. Conclusions

The presented paper has explored and discussed the relation between heritage’s enhancement and the concept of justice, under the framework of the right to heritage for all, in light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [17]. I argue that a community-based approach is pivotal for generating long-lasting processes aimed at revitalizing heritage [5–9], including the key-aspect of cultural landscapes [30–33], if the approach lays under the concept of just heritage.

At the intersection amongst just sustainability [16], social-ecological justice [37], spatial justice [38–43] and action-heritage for justice [44], just heritage can be defined as the right to have access to (and take care of) cultural landscapes in a situated context. Individuals, groups and institutions have agency in the pursue of just heritage, each of them with specific rules, responsibilities, and capabilities [34].

As a practical example, I investigated the relation between the concept of *just heritage* and the experiences of ecomuseums [45–52], which first appeared in France in the 1970s and promptly spread worldwide, within a phase of renovation inside the International Council of Museums [53–56].

The practices of ecomuseums do not only fit the concept of sustainability [57–60]; they also have a tendency toward social inclusion and justice, but under specific conditions. As Stefano and Davis [28] pointed out, in some cases, ecomuseums may be no more than empty labels.

Many scholars identify recurring characteristics for evaluating well experimented ecomuseums. Here, I used the work of Sutter et al., Liu and Lee, Corsane et al., Hsu et al. [60–63] for raising some questions aimed at exploring ecomuseums in the field, with a methodology that blends action-research [13–15] and case-study research [10–12]. The context of analysis is Sicily, an EU southern region where local development is lagging behind. The region has issued a law, L. R. 16/14 Institution of Ecomuseums of Sicily, but the formal process would require further investigation. I focused on the ongoing decade-long process in the Simeto Valley that—beyond any formal label—has been presented as an example of community-based, context-based and practice-based ecomuseum, with a tension toward the just heritage concept.

In conclusion, if we frame ecomuseums as processes for practicing the just heritage ethos in the field, there may be opportunities for pursuing the right to heritage for all: spaces for emancipation of the most fragile persons [64] and democratic arenas for strengthening a pact between citizens and institutions [43], especially at the local level which is the level of proximity.

This may be relevant in those contexts where development is lagging behind, such as in the case of the Sicilian Region. Besides, this is relevant everywhere, in times that call for reimagining the possibilities for sustainable development through joint capacities (of citizens, experts and institutions) to overcome a long lasting environmental and democratic crisis [83] that deserves new and creative practices on the move.

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