

## **Transhumance routes as tourist destinations: a concrete opportunity for inner areas or a romantic suggestion?**

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### **Abstract**

The ancient practice of transhumance has generated on a large part of the Mediterranean territories a heritage of an intangible type (linked to the historical, cultural and socio-anthropological value), and of a material type, consisting of the infrastructures used for centuries to move herds, characterised by intrinsic landscape and environmental qualities. In recent years, a renewed attention is emerging towards transhumance and the routes used for this purpose. In various European contexts a growing number of initiatives linked to the promotion of transhumance and to the enhancement of its routes are being implemented, both thanks to the bottom-up contribution of local associations and to top-down policies and projects.

The research collects the ongoing experiences related to transhumance from the Italian, French and Spanish context, with the purpose of providing a contribution to answering the following questions: can transhumance be converted into a tourist experience with positive effects on the territory? How can the ancient transhumance routes be reconverted into infrastructures for slow tourism, enhancing the identity culture linked to it?

Keywords: transhumance, slow tourism, experiential tourism, inner areas

### **1. Transhumance, sheep tracks and tourism: three concepts that sometimes overlap**

#### **1.1 Transhumance**

In recent years, interest in transhumance as a phenomenon with cultural, ecological and territorial development value has been steadily increasing. This is due, on the one hand, to the growing visibility deriving from the UNESCO recognition (Belligiano et al., 2021) given in 2019 to the practice of transhumance (on a candidature promoted firstly by Italy, Austria and Greece, and then extended in 2023 to Albania, Andorra, Croatia, France, Luxembourg, Romania and Spain), and, on the other hand, to the flourishing of various initiatives aimed at

promoting the cultural, social and folkloristic aspects linked to transhumance, promoted both at an institutional level and bottom-up. The most recent recognition of pastoralism, of which transhumance is one of the highest expressions, came with the declaration of 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists by the United Nations.

According to recent studies (Nori, 2022) about one-fifth of agricultural land in Europe is devoted to extensive livestock breeding, covering several tens of million hectares, most of it concentrated in the Mediterranean area. Pastoralism has always been linked to mobility as a survival strategy for centuries, embracing different forms such as nomadism, transhumance, migration and pasture rotation (Fernandez-Gimenez & Le Febre, 2006). Transhumance is practised in areas that feature complementary pastures or forage resources located at different altitudes (Bunce et al., 2004; Santillo Frizell, 2010). It can be distinguished into two types: vertical, consisting of short displacement from the pastures in the mountains to those on the plains; and horizontal, connecting different climatic areas hundreds of kilometres apart through journeys that take days or weeks. As Braudel (1985) described, the latter is the one that 'moved torrents of animals and shepherds between the Southern Alps and the Crau, between Abruzzo and the *Tavoliere delle Puglie*, between northern Castile and the southern pastures of Extremadura and Don Quixote's La Mancha'.

In recent decades pastoralism mobility has decreased dramatically and livestock farmers are becoming sedentary, adapting their practice to new circumstances, or, in some cases leaving the herding sector (Fernandez-Gimenez & Le Febre, 2006). As a result, in spite of the many recognised values of transhumance, its diffusion as a necessary practice for animal welfare has been declining since decades. The reasons are mainly two: the general spread of intensive livestock farming, and the replacement of transhumance on foot by journeys made first by train and, since the 1950s, by truck (Bieber 2010; Toulze 2022).

Nevertheless, nowadays in some areas transhumance is still practised. Among those the most known is the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region in southern France; in this area, around 600,000 head of cattle spend their summertimes in the mountains (Figure 1), while 90,000 move to the coastal departments during winter each year (Maison de la Transhumance, 2022).



Fig. 1. Summer sheep transhumance in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, France, in 2021. Source: *Transhumance de la Provence aux Alpes*, Maison de la Transhumance

## 1.2 Transhumance routes

Transhumance usually followed established itineraries along green routes where animals could feed themselves during the travel. These long grassy roads, found in most of the Mediterranean countries, often present similar features. They can be articulated in networks of paths hierarchically structured into principal (111 metres wide *tratturi* in central southern Italy; 75 metres wide *cañadas* in Spain; between 50 and 100 metres wide *drailles* and *carraires* in the south of France), and secondary ones (*tratturelli* and *bracci* in Italy; *cordeles*, *veredas* and *coladas* in Spain). Transhumance routes also acquire local denominations in different regions of the same country, as it happens in Spain where they can be called *azagadores*, *cabañeras*, *camins ramaders*, *ligallos* or *ardibideek* (Villalvilla Asenjo, 2000). The transhumance routes are dotted with rural architectural elements offering resting zones, shelter and services to animals and shepherds, such as drinking troughs (Figure 2), bridges to count the animals, bakeries, small churches, shearing houses (Figure 3), etc.



Fig. 2. Left: A drinking trough near the Real Cañada Soriana, in the province of Castilla y Leon, Spain. Photo by the author. Right: A drinking trough along the *tratturello* Corato - Fontanadogna, Corato, Italy. Source: Document for the Enhancement of the *Tratturi* of Apulia Region. Photo by Roberta de Iulio.



Fig. 3. An old shearing house (*palacio de esquileo*), near Sepúlveda, close to the Cañada Real Segoviana, in Spain, transformed into a wedding venue. Photo by the author.

These roads are characterised by specific vegetative features, since transhumance has contributed to the creation of valuable sylvopastoral landscapes and natural habitats (Gómez Sal & Lorente, 2004). Moreover, in different countries all over the Mediterranean area, drove roads are marked with stone elements that allow them to be recognised (Figure 4). These are called *cippi* in Italy and *mojones* in Spain.



Fig. 4. Left: *cippo* along the *tratturo* Melfi-Castellaneta, near Poggiorsini, Italy. Photo by the author. Centre: stone element marking a *draille* on Mont Lozère, France. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Right: *mojón* marking the boundary of the *Cañada Real* in Puerta de Alcalá, in the Madrid city centre, Spain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Over the centuries, the combination of natural and anthropic elements linked to the practice of transhumance has generated a clearly identifiable landscape that, when well preserved, is widely recognisable. The extent of the transhumance routes varies in different geographical contexts. The country with the most extensive transhumance routes network is Spain, where they count up to 125,000 linear kilometres with a total extension of 420,000 hectares (Burgos, 2007), equal to about 1% of the national territory. In Italy, the officially recognised sheep-track network stretches along 5 regions in the centre-south of the country measuring a total of more than 3,000 km. Along the Alpine arc, despite transhumance has been practised for thousands of years and is still consistent, the routes used for this purpose have not been systematically identified and mapped, nor subjected to specific protection regimes until recent time. In France, the ancient transhumance routes, which originally overlaid the ridges of hilly regions, since the 19th century have been gradually replaced by other routes through the valleys (Fabre, 1997). Land ownership is another key feature of transhumance routes. While in central-southern Italy and Spain the sheep track areas are still state-owned and their management is a regional responsibility (a legacy of the complex management system of the *Dogana della Mena delle Pecore* on the one hand, and the *Consejo de la Mesta* on the other), in other geographical areas the land is often privately owned. In France, the picture of the ownership of the transhumance routes is quite varied: some are private areas, others are owned by municipalities, state or pastoral syndicates. For instance, in Languedoc most of the *drailles* belong to private landowners but shepherds were guaranteed to use them free of charge; on the other hand, the *drailles* between the Crau and the Alps were public lands, but for their use shepherds had to pay taxes to the municipalities, which took charge of their maintenance (Biber, 2010). Currently, collective pastoral organisations have a key role in pasture maintenance, managing a total of about 600,000 hectares in the French massifs (Toulze, 2022).

Another key aspect that distinguishes transhumance networks is their state of preservation. Over the decades the transhumance routes have also seen an unavoidable decline that has led to their abandonment, or, in worst cases, to privatisation, urbanisation and heavy infrastructure. In some cases the public property of transhumance routes has been a major incentive for public administrations to build infrastructure of all kinds on them (roads, railways, electrical conduits,

sewage collectors, telephone poles, etc), without having to resort to expropriations (Villalvilla Asenjo, 2000). Reconstructing the current extent of the transhumance networks and classifying their state of conservation is a fundamental task that local governments are facing in order to enable their protection and enhancement.

### **1.3 Slow, experiential and rural tourism**

In recent years several bottom-up initiatives and public policies are exploring the touristic development of transhumance and its heritage. Transhumance has been practised mainly in inner and rural areas, nowadays often corresponding to marginal regions affected by shrinkage, depopulation, ageing and unemployment. Tourism is recognized as a strategic sector for the economic development of inner areas (Espon, 2017) although it can not be seen as the only solution to problems affecting them (Pelc & Koderman, 2018). Moreover, as several studies on the risks of overtourism show (Dodds & Butler, 2019), tourism also has negative impacts, especially on fragile territories.

The type of tourism usually linked to transhumance belongs to three categories: slow, experiential and rural tourism. These three types of tourism present specific features although they slightly overlap.

As analysed by Pileri and Moscarelli (2021) in their literature review on slow tourism, three different meanings are associated to it: 1) a way of travelling in opposition to mass tourism; 2) a low-carbon impact tourism, i.e. using alternatives to air and car travel; 3) an experience seeking authenticity of the territory. This third interpretation of slow tourism overlaps with that of experiential tourism, defined as a type of tourism that calls for active participation, involvement, and even immersion (Edgell & Swanson, 2019). Experiential tourism has been defined as a type of tourism that 'encourages visitors to actively participate in the experience and promotes activities that draw people outdoors, and into cultures and communities' (Smith, 2006 :3). Experiential tourists seek memorable experiences made possible by the people they meet, places they visit, activities participated and memories created.

Lastly, the third type of tourism considered is rural tourism, defined by the UNWTO as 'a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing'.

The initiatives that are being implemented aim on the one hand to promote transhumance as an activity that fully embodies the definition of experiential tourism, and, on the other hand, to adapt transhumance routes as ideal infrastructures for slow and rural tourism (Meini et al., 2018; Belliggiano et al., 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the growing tourist appeal that the pastoral world, and transhumance-related activities in particular, exerts (Ruiz Morales et al., 2024), at the point that a new niche tourism - defined 'pastoral tourism' (Sauer et al., 2022) has been identified. Experimental projects aiming at promoting new initiatives that combine transhumance and experiential tourism have been developed also in collaboration with universities and research centres (Pilla et al., 2022).

The aim of this paper is to provide a contribution to answering the following questions: can transhumance be converted into a tourist experience with positive effects on the territory? How can the ancient transhumance routes be reconverted into infrastructures for slow tourism, enhancing the identity culture linked to it?

## 2. Transhumance promotion events in Italy, France and Spain

In order to approach the first research question, a survey on the transhumance-related initiatives was conducted. The study area has been limited to Italy, France and Spain, since, as Braudel (1985) states, these three countries are transhumance regions par excellence. Moreover, among Mediterranean countries, they present similar socio-cultural and economic features, as well as a similar development level of the tourism sector<sup>1</sup>.

A total of 237 transhumance-related initiatives that take place periodically in Italy, France and Spain were listed. These include transhumance festivals, livestock fairs, and any type of public event that directly involve transhumant sheep, goats or cattle. The identified initiatives are mainly of a socio-cultural kind and do not pretend to be a reliable indicator of the real rate of persistence of the practice of transhumance. In addition to transhumance events, also a few traditional transhumances with a real or potential impact on tourism were analysed.

The survey was carried out through web searches and documentary sources where available in literature. Particularly useful were the websites of associations working to safeguard transhumance (*Trashumancia y Naturaleza* in Spain, *Maison de la Transhumance* in France), and the tourism promotion websites of certain regions (Catalonia in Spain, Trentino in Italy). In addition, online searches were carried out using "transhumance" and the name of each of the regions of the three countries under study as keywords. Itinerant initiatives taking place over several days and touching different cities were counted as a single event, while all locations touched by the initiative were reported in the map (Figure 5).

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<sup>1</sup> However, the three countries record different levels of development in the slow tourism sector. In France, the association '*Agir pour un tourisme responsable*' has been operating since 2004, issuing a label that indicates the sustainability of tourist packages proposed by travel agencies. In Spain, the popularity of the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago has given great impetus to the affirmation of slow tourism in recent decades. In Italy, this type of tourism has been consolidating in recent years, thanks also to institutional initiatives, such as the recognition of 2016 as the national year of slow tourism by the Ministry of Culture.



Figure 5. Location of the 237 transhumance-related initiatives taking place in Italy, France and Spain. Icons in grey indicate initiatives that are no longer active. Digital version of the map available at: [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1Ig0t5Vm\\_sBhYdCR7HkUMhBHbtDt55P0&usp=sharing](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/1/edit?mid=1Ig0t5Vm_sBhYdCR7HkUMhBHbtDt55P0&usp=sharing)

Transhumance-related initiatives were classified according to the following categories (Table 1): 1) Transhumance festivals: folkloristic events celebrating the local culture linked to pastoralism, usually organised by associations with the collaboration of local authorities. Often these initiatives are organised to enliven the passage of transhumants through urban centres, with a programme of activities revolving around it. In other cases, the events are organised by municipalities or local associations with the main purpose of promoting local culture, folklore and enogastronomy, with animals having a secondary role. The activities that usually animate transhumance festivals are tastings (cheese, wine, seasonal products), music and dance performances, craft markets, conferences, workshops, exhibitions, historical re-enactments, exhibitions of ancient crafts, etc. 2) Traditional transhumances organised by livestock farms, which, although not involving celebratory or collateral events, exert a certain media and touristic appeal; press articles, documentaries or film productions have been dedicated to them. 3) Participatory transhumances, understood as experiences in which external actors and tourists can participate (for free or upon payment of a fee). This opportunity is provided by intermediaries (travel agencies or associations), or directly by the livestock farms that conduct the transhumance. Their tasks include promoting the initiative, collecting adhesions, and offering all the necessary services to allow participants to follow the transhumance (food, accommodation, transfers, possible excursions, etc.). 4) Livestock fairs including collateral activities appealing to a general public. 5) Animal parades in city centres to assert the value of pastoralism and transhumance. 6) Other activities of a different kind.

Initiatives that could be classified in two or more categories were placed in the most related category. In the analysis of the initiatives the focus was placed on those of greater relevance

from a tourism point of view, and in particular those falling under category 3) Participatory transhumance and experiences open to the public.

24 of the 237 analysed initiatives -or 10%- are not currently active; these are 17 transhumance festivals, five traditional transhumances and two activities of other type.

Event	Italy	France	Spain
1) Transhumance festivals or similar	74 (12 of which no longer active)	54 (2 of which no longer active)	43 (3 of which no longer active)
2) Traditional transhumance with media coverage	12 (3 of which no longer active)	1	7 (2 of which no longer active)
3) Participatory transhumance, experiences open to the public	2	2	4 (1 of which no longer active)
4) Livestock fairs	7	7	16
5) Claiming parades	0	1 (along Champs Elysées in Paris, organised only in 2022)	1
6) Other	1 (Transhumance Walk on Horseback)	1 (Transhu Pic-Nic)	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>71</b>

Table 1. Transhumance-related initiatives in Italy, France and Spain.

Given the vastness and heterogeneity of the data found, it was decided not to include in this study cultural initiatives linked to transhumance that do not directly involve animals (conferences, round tables, exhibitions, film festivals, etc.).

## 2.1 Italy

55 of the 97 transhumance-related initiatives identified in Italy take place in the Alpine areas of the north of the country (Fig. 6). These initiatives are linked to the practice of mountain pasture (*alpeggio* or *monticazione*), i.e. vertical transhumance, and mainly involve cattle herds. An important exception is that of Val Senales which takes place between Italy and Austria and involves more than 4,000 sheep. In the conducted survey, only those involving urban centres, mainly small mountain villages, were listed, while public events of *alpeggio* taking place at mountain pastures were not included. According to a study by Corti (2004), in 2003 *alpeggio* events were already quantified at 212, with an estimated 12,000 participants.

The transhumance along the Alpine arc acquires different names depending on the regions: in Trentino Alto Adige and Veneto is called *desmontegada*, while in Valle d'Aosta is known as *désarpa*. It is celebrated with festivals and public events that amplify the appeal that the passage of the cattle herds, usually decorated with garlands of flowers, already constitutes in itself.



Figure 6. Transhumance-related initiatives taking place in the north of Italy

The initiative with the greatest national resonance is called *Transumando* (Fig. 7) and takes place in Bressanvido (Veneto). It is the longest vertical transhumance in Italy, involving 600 head of cattle over a distance of 80 kilometres. Since the first edition of the Bressanvido transhumance festival in 1998 to date, the transit of the herds has turned into a multifaceted itinerant event including concerts, conferences, shows and workshops. The 2023 edition of *Transumando* took place over 10 days and included, in addition to the traditional transhumance festival, the Festival of Agriculture and the Festival of the cheese producers from the province of Vicenza; according to the organisers the event was attended by over 20,000 participants.



Fig. 7 - *Transumando*, Bressanvido. Source: <https://www.transumandobressanvido.it/>

Another noteworthy initiative in the Alpine area is the Transhumance of the *Bergamini*, organised by the association *Pastoralismo Alpino*, an initiative that proposes a series of events and activities along the itinerary of cattle transhumance between Bergamo and Brescia, lasting ten days. The first edition took place in 2019 and each year a different route is planned, touching different towns.

In the central Italian regions, only nine transhumance-related initiatives have been identified, three of which are no longer active. Among the noteworthy initiatives is the Transhumance March between Falasche (Anzio) and Jenne, in Lazio. This is a re-enactment of the ancient sheep transhumance, now in its 31st edition in 2023. The march is carried out on horseback along a route that lasts five days and crosses 16 municipalities, connecting two natural parks (Simbruini and Castelli Romani).

In southern Italy and the islands, a total of 34 transhumance-related initiatives were identified (Fig. 8). While in Abruzzo and partly in Molise transhumance concerns essentially sheep, in the other regions, particularly in Campania, Basilicata and Calabria, it is mainly the movement of herds of *podolica* cows that keeps the practice and celebration of transhumance alive.

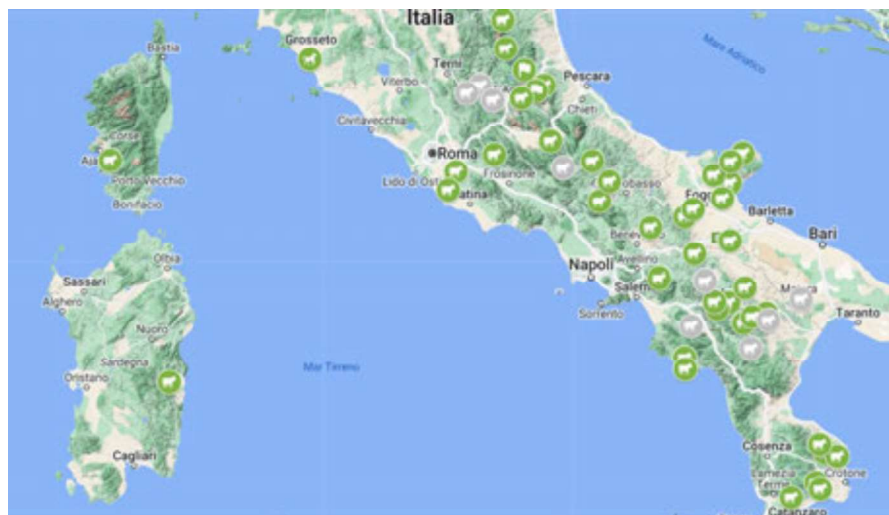


Figure 8. Transhumance-related initiatives taking place in the central-southern Italy

One of the most interesting initiatives in Abruzzo is the transhumance organised by a livestock farm in Anversa degli Abruzzi (*La porta dei parchi*), which offers tourist packages that include the possibility of following the seasonal transhumance of its flock of sheep, as well as accommodation at its agritourism facility. The experience includes two days of transhumance for a total of 39 km in a high-value landscape and a total stay of four days and three nights. In 2023 the complete package had a cost of 390 euro per person.

The other initiative that allows visitors to participate in a transhumance journey is defined by the organisers as the first example of a long-distance 'participatory transhumance' in Italy and features a herd of *podolica* cows. It takes place between Oppido Lucano and Tito, in the Basilicata region, along a route of about 50 km covered in two days. The initiative is promoted by the livestock farm that conducts the transhumance (*Masseria Santorsa*) and is organised in collaboration with the association *Fuorisentiero*. The participation fee for the 2023 edition was 30 euro for both days and included the shuttle service and an overnight stay at a refuge, or alternatively in a camping tent. The initiative was first carried out in November 2021 and takes place twice a year.

In southern Italy other major initiatives feature livestock farms that persevere in the practice of transhumance, which over the years has become an event that generates curiosity and interest among citizens. Particularly noteworthy is the longest horizontal transhumance in Italy, taking place between Frosolone (Molise) and San Marco in Lamis (Apulia). The transhumance is led by Carmelina Colantuono and involves 300 *podolica* cows walking 180 km in four days, twice a year. The passage of the herd is in itself a major attraction, to the point that it has caught the attention of the international press.

A similar experience is organised by the Moscariello family, who from Montella (Campania) lead their herd of *podolica* cows to Lake Capacciotti (Cerignola, Apulia), 130 km far away. Again, there are no festivals celebrating transhumance, but its practice is in itself an element

of fascination, such that it was the subject of a recent film production (*Sulla via dei padri*, by Bruno Palma).

A slightly different case is represented in the Apulia region by the transhumance of flocks of the *Gentile di Puglia* breed of sheep from the Carrino livestock farm between Borgo San Giusto (Lucera) and the village of Santa Luciella, in the Dauni Mountains, along the *tratturello* Foggia - Camporeale. The itinerary includes the crossing of the historical centre of the city of Troia by 700 sheep (Fig. 9), generating an attraction that since 2018 (the year of the first transhumance festival in Troia) to date has been enriched by other activities, such as representations of scenes of rural life and demonstrations of dairy art.



Fig 9. The transhumance crossing the city of Troia, Foggia. Photo by Luigi Geraci

## 2.2 France

In France (Fig. 10), transhumance historically mainly affected the southern regions of the country. Of the 66 identified initiatives, almost half (30) take place in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region. Almost all the initiatives identified in this area concern sheep transhumance (56 out of 66), an activity that still has a relevant economic value due to cheese production (Toulze 2022).

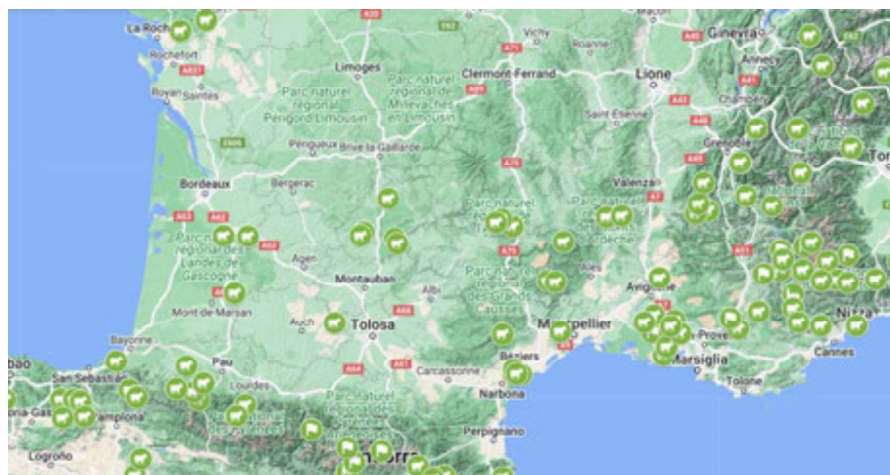


Figure 10. Transhumance-related initiatives taking place in France

France is the country where the *fête de la transhumance* format was first implemented in the 1970s, that from the 1990s onwards was quickly replicated in different locations in the south of the country (Garnier & Labouesse, 2015). The origin of transhumance festivals as we know them today arises from the desire to recreate the festive moment of flocks crossing urban centres that in the past marked two key moments in social life: the summer and winter solstice (Duclos, 2016).

An important boost to the spreading of initiatives supporting transhumant pastoralism, especially in Provence, has been given by *La Maison de la Transhumance*, a centre for the interpretation of Mediterranean pastoral cultures whose objective is to defend the practice of transhumance and to spread its knowledge. In the PACA region, known for important events such as the festival of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and the fair of Saint-Martin de Crau, 11 new initiatives have been created since 2020, demonstrating the growing interest in the topic and the effectiveness of the communication strategies carried out in recent years.

Despite the numerous initiatives in the PACA region, none of them was identified as belonging to the category of participatory transhumances. The research then focuses on the Rocamadour-Luzech transhumance in Occitania and the *Route de la Transhumance* between the Pyrenees and New Aquitaine.

The first was a transhumance started in 2009 and organised by the Luzech / Labastide-du-Vert landowners' association, the *Transhumance en Quercy* breeders' association, the local government of the *Département de Lot* and volunteers. The main motivation behind this transhumance was to reduce the fire risk, which became a priority following a major fire in the area in 1998. The route is about 70 km crossing natural parks and mediaeval villages. The distance is covered in five stages (each 12 to 16 km) by 400 animals including sheep, donkeys and horses. Six towns are crossed by the herd, and convivial moments are organised at each stop. The transhumance is widely promoted online at the institutional websites of local authorities and through social networks. According to reports on local sites, in 2023 more than 500 people participated in the first day of the transhumance (Fig. 11), and 130 people attended

the dinner at the end of an intermediate stage. Joining the transhumance is free of charge and participants are guaranteed logistics all over the journey. On the institutional website of the organisers, eighteen accommodation facilities of different types are featured, offering 550 beds overall.



Fig. 11. A break moment during transhumance Rocamadour-Luzech near a pond. Participants are outnumbering animals. Source: <https://transhumance.lot.fr/le-programme>

*La Route de la Transhumance* is a 280-kilometre route that engages 600 sheep during three weeks, from Lac d'Estaing, in the High Pyrenees, to Aillas, in the Gironde département. The initiative has been organised by the association *La Route de la Transhumance* since 2001 with the collaboration of the municipalities reached by the route, which actively contribute to the organisation by covering the costs of security and communication. Transhumance is promoted locally with printed material, and globally through a website active since 2014. Participation in the transhumance is free of charge but participants are asked to become members of the association by paying a membership fee of 20 euros, which is used to meet organisational costs. No data was found on the number of participants in the transhumance or any of its stages.

### 2.3 Spain

In Spain (Fig. 12), transhumance-related initiatives are present all over the country, counting 71 total events, with a higher concentration in Navarra (11 in an area covering 10,391 km<sup>2</sup>), Catalonia (19 in an area covering 32,108 km<sup>2</sup>), Castilla y Leon (16 in an area covering 94,225 km<sup>2</sup>). The identified initiatives mainly concern sheep transhumance (42); fewer are cattle transhumance (22), often linked to taurine breeding in the Pyrenean area and in Navarre; in seven cases transhumance engages both sheep and cattle. The Spanish transhumance-related initiatives are quite heterogeneous: alongside the transhumance festivals following the format found in Italy and France (called *artzai eguna* in the Basque Country), there are other types of

events such as shearing festivals (*fiestas de esquila*), religious festivals (*romerías* or short pilgrimages), and horseback excursions accompanying transhumant herds (especially in Navarre and Castile and Leon). In addition, in Catalonia most common events are livestock fairs (13 out of the 19 initiatives identified in this region). Over the years these events have been converted into attractions with gastronomic stands and various types of activities, such that they are included among the tourist attractions on local promotional sites.

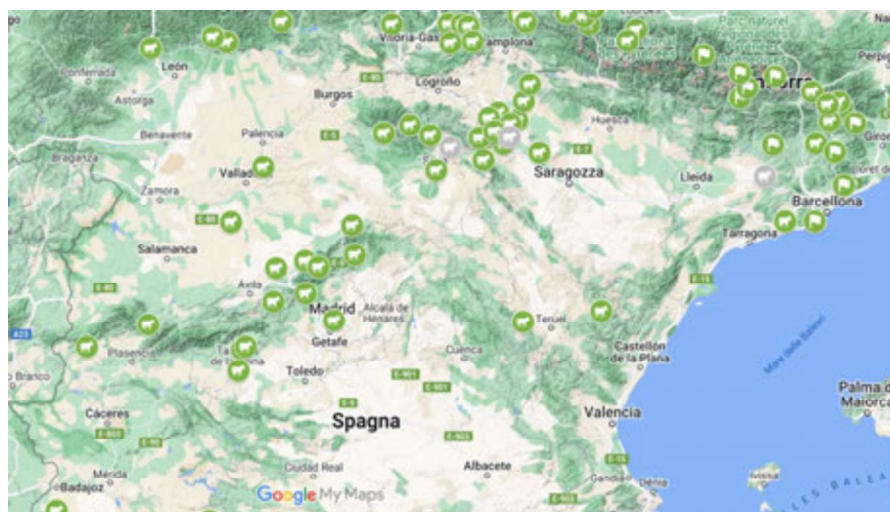


Figure 12. Transhumance-related initiatives taking place in Spain

Spanish public opinion is strongly catalysed by the great transhumance festival that takes place every year in the centre of Madrid in October (Figure 13). This event is organised since 1994, first by the association *Concejo de la Mesta*, then, since 1997, by the association *Trashumancia y Naturaleza*, whose aim is to promote the importance of transhumance, protect the sheep tracks, and claim for the adoption of a national strategy to safeguards extensive pastoralism. Shepherds and animals from all over the country (1,200 Merino sheep and 200 goats) take part in the event, creating an unusual and impressive sight. The parade, which reaches its climax in the re-enactment of the moment of the payment of the traditional fee (*maravedies*) to the municipality, is preceded by a series of initiatives at the Environmental Education Centre in the Casa de Campo park, where the flocks temporarily stay. Collateral activities include promenades with the flocks particularly conceived for children, cheese-making and poetry workshops, photo exhibitions, among others. At the time of its creation, the transhumance festival in Madrid wasn't meant to be a tourist attraction at all. However, over the years, growing media attention contributed to turn it into a unique tourist attraction, featured on the city's tourist promotion page as one of the most awaited events. No data has been found on the number of participants in the festival in recent years, but according to media reports thousands of people pour into the streets of the Spanish capital every year, including both residents and tourists.



Fig. 13 Fiesta de la Trashumancia 2018, Plaza de Cibeles, Madrid, Spain. Photo by the author.

Among the most important events that take place every year in Spain there is the *Sanmiguelada*, the sheep transhumance in the Bardenas Reales natural park in Navarre, which crosses the historical centre of Carcastillo. The transhumance, which has been repeated annually since the Middle Ages, has recently been joined by complementary activities to broaden the attractiveness of the event to a wider public, such as gastronomic tastings, a market of traditional products and demonstrations of ancient crafts. Every year thousands of people witness the passage of the flocks in El Paso, from where 15,000 sheep transit to their winter pastures. However, the number of transhumant sheep has been declining significantly in recent years, partly due to climate change that is altering the seasonal and rainfall cycles.

Among those identified in Spain, the most interesting initiative concerns a sheep transhumance from Castilla La Mancha to the city of Soria (39,000 inhabitants), in the *Mancomunidad de Tierras Altas*, along the *Cañada Real Soriana Occidental*. This initiative, called *¡Somos Trashumantes!*, allowed tourists to follow a transhumant flock of more than 1,000 sheep during three days of walking, for a total distance of 30 km, in early July. The flock passes through the small town of Oncala, a village that once played a key role in the *Mesta* territorial system, hosting a Museum of Transhumance. Nowadays the village is almost uninhabited (70 inhabitants). In addition to sheep transit, activities such as counting, shearing demonstrations and the preparation of typical dishes (*migas del pastor*) were organised. The logistics of the initiative was entrusted to a local travel agency specialised in ecotourism. Places available to participate in the full experience were limited to 16; the participation fee was 179 euros, including two nights in a bivouac (alternatively, two nights in a hotel raise the fee up to 335 euros). The format adopted by *¡Somos Trashumantes!* embodies a model that supports the

practice of transhumance while providing an innovative tourism experience. However, since the tourism offer proposed is totally anchored to the practice of transhumance, unforeseen events that compromise its feasibility may occur. In 2023 the event did not take place because the flock of shepherd Eduardo del Rincón was stranded in Ciudad Real due to health restrictions imposed by the spread of the sheep pox virus, while for 2024 edition, no data was found.

#### **2.4 Considerations on events promoting transhumance in Italy, France and Spain**

The analysis of the initiatives identified in the three countries reveals different ways of understanding transhumance and different ways of developing the tourism potential linked to it. The types of event identified, in fact, range from events that turn into tourist events even though they originate from needs linked to the practice of transhumance (Troia, Rocamadour, the *Sanmiguelada*), to events that originate almost exclusively for the purposes of attracting tourists, evoking transhumance through folkloristic expressions, but in fact not including it in any way.

In general, the most widespread format is that of transhumance festivals, lasting just one day, or at most two to three days, almost always coinciding with weekends. The programming of the events almost always includes activities of a different kind that extend beyond the moment of the passage of the animals, where foreseen. Although transhumances are phenomena that by definition are on the move and involve different territories, the initiatives identified are almost always organised by a single municipality.

Despite a certain level of uncertainty due to the difficulties experienced at tracking the date of creation of all the initiatives, it is found that a considerable number of events among those analysed (48 out of 237, i.e. 20% of the total) were organised after 2019, i.e. after UNESCO recognition. This denotes a renewed interest in the topic, for which a new perspective in terms of tourism has been developed in recent years. In some regions of northern Italy, a boost to the organisation of events promoting transhumance and pastoral culture is due to regional political will, implemented by Lombardy Regional Law no. 14 of 2022, followed by Piedmont Regional Law no. 12 of 2024, which provide, among other things, for the institution of a regional transhumance day and allocate an *ad hoc* budget for this purpose.

While new transhumance festivals are flourishing, however, there is also a decrease in the number of traditional transhumances still active. Of the 19 listed in the survey, six have ceased to be practised in recent years. Although the road to the tourist enhancement of transhumance has now been opened up with diverse experiences, the involvement of shepherds and stakeholders from the livestock sector should remain a precondition, especially since there are very few people left working in this sector. As the case of transhumance in Soria shows, in order to develop the tourism potential of transhumance, it is necessary to support those who practise it in their struggle to maintain their activity alive. In this scenario, the key role of actors such as the *Maison de la Transhumance* and *Trashumancia y Naturaleza*, which not only promote the dissemination of the culture of transhumance, but also offer practical, logistic and legal support to livestock farmers, must be recognised and encouraged.

Due to its uniqueness and rareness, transhumance offers concrete opportunities to develop out-of-ordinary tourist experiences. Following a thousand animals for several days, walking at their

pace, experiencing life as a shepherd is undoubtedly a travel concept that meets the increasing demand for total escape from everyday life. While ensuring unique experiences for external participants, participatory transhumances also provide a complementary economic income for livestock farms.

The economic impact of the tourist attractiveness of transhumance is difficult to estimate due to the scarcity of data and monitoring of events. As a sample, the case of the Rocamadour-Luzech transhumance was in-depth analysed. Data on the accommodations available in Rocamadour via the booking.com website on the transhumance week and the following one were collected. The analysis showed that there is no consistent variation in occupancy rates in the hotels of the city between the two periods. As a result, it can be deduced that, in this kind of context, transhumance attracts either proximity tourists, who do not need to spend nights away from home, and/or tourists who prefer accommodation types not included on booking.com, such as collective dormitories. The feeling is that, with a few exceptions (Saint-Rémy en Provence, Madrid), at the moment the transhumance-related events are mainly attractors for proximity tourism, since they are seen as opportunities to live the unique experience of the incursion of the pastoral world into cities.

### **3. Slow tourism along the transhumance routes**

Another development perspective linked to transhumance concerns the possibility of transforming the transhumance routes into walking or cycling itineraries. Their reuse for tourism purposes is a target that most local governments have set themselves. As an example, in Spain, the introduction of new uses along the sheep-track network, compatible with and complementary to transhumance, such as transit on foot or by other non-motorised means, is reported in the national legislation (*Ley de Vías Pecuarias*, 1992).

In order to approach the subject, three emblematic cases have been analysed as follows.

#### **3.1 La Routo, France-Italy**

The Routo is a cross-border hiking route consisting of 33 stages between Borgo San Dalmazzo, in the Stura Valley, Italy, and Arles, in the Crau Plain, in Provence, France, for a total of 540 km (Figure 10). The French part of the route (400 km) is part of the circuit of the national *Grandes Randonnées* trail network. The itinerary runs along routes that are still used for the summer transhumance, so that the tourist use of the route coexists with the original use for sheep farming.



Figure 10. The itinerary of the *Routo*. Source: <https://larouto.eu/it/>

The itinerary crosses several protected areas, pastoral landscapes, and historic towns until reaching the city centre of Arles. The French section of the route was completed in September 2022, the Italian one in October 2023. For the promotion of the itinerary a web page was launched, as well as a complete guidebook available for online and physical purchase.

*La Routo* is the result of almost twenty years of synergies between the *Maison de la Transhumance* and the *Ecomuseo della Pastorizia* di Pontebernardo (Fabre 2016).

The case of *La Routo* represents a model of comprehensive enhancement that involves not only the route itself, but also the intangible aspects linked to it. This makes it a cultural project with social and economic impact, rather than a simple trekking route. In fact, in addition to the physical itinerary, the project reconstructs a chain of productive and economic activities related to pastoralism. Under the umbrella of *La Routo* a line of hiking clothing made with local wool was developed, dairy products from local farms are sold along the itinerary, livestock fairs and transhumance events are networked, cultural events (exhibitions, art installations, lectures, festivals and documentary screenings) are organised, restaurants proposing traditional pastoral dishes at km0 are reunited under the *Routo* label.

Although it is difficult to assess the impact on the territory of *La Routo* since no data was found on the subject, the total length of the itinerary and its cross-border nature suggest that travellers would spend more than one day along the route. Therefore, they need to stay overnight, get refreshments and make purchases during their journey, thus generating an impact on the local economy.

### 3.2 The *Vias Pecuaris* network of the Community of Madrid, Spain

The case of the Community of Madrid concerns the network of transhumance routes that fall within the regional territory. The Community of Madrid has a total of 4,104 km of transhumance routes (*vías pecuarias*), amounting to a total of more than 13,000 hectares, corresponding to the 1.64% of total regional area (De los Ríos Carmenado & Hernández Aguado). Approximately one third of these were included in the *Descubre tus cañadas* project, an initiative started in 1998 which aims to create 74 new hiking itineraries accessible on foot, by bicycle or on horseback along the *cañadas* and secondary transhumance routes of the region. The itineraries, grouped in 17 geographical areas, are between 5 and 35 km long, each walkable in a single day, counting a total extension of 1,150 km. The routes vary in contexts crossed, lengths and altitude, meeting the preferences of different types of users, from experts to kids. A free downloadable guidebook has been published for each geographical area, as well as gpx tracks are available for free use. Along the routes, project signage, consisting in the traditional element of the *mojón* with the graphic symbol developed for the project, has been installed. In 2005, a complementary project to *Descubre tus cañadas* was launched by the Community of Madrid: the *TRASHUMAD* project (González, J. A. M., 2011). Its main objective was to promote the regional transhumance routes among citizens to encourage their use as hiking and cycling itineraries.

Unlike *La Routo*, the *Descubre tus cañadas* project does not seem to have undertaken an ambitious multi-level and multi-sectoral strategy for the enhancement of the tangible and intangible transhumance heritage, since its focus is mainly on the accessibility and promotion of the routes as hiking trails. However, in a context such as Madrid, a metropolitan area inhabited by approximately 5,000,000 people, the importance of this purpose should not be underestimated. Equipping transhumance routes as public infrastructures for slow mobility embodies a concrete opportunity for a vast multitude of citizens to reconnect with the natural environment and with local history. This is all the more valuable in a context in which the demand for natural spaces at a short distance from the city is such that it has led to the overcrowding of the natural areas near the city. As an example, since 2021 the regional park of *La Pedriza*, north of Madrid, is no longer accessible to the public on holidays to reduce anthropic pressure on it.

So far, no data were found concerning the economic impact of the reconditioning of the Madrilenian sheep-track network as hiking and cycling routes. However, since these are usually one-day itineraries, accessible within 1-1,5 hours from the city centre, there are reasons to believe that typical users are proximity tourists. Thus, the economic impact is deemed to be limited, especially in those cases where routes do not cross towns or villages.

### 3.3 Tourism development along the sheep-tracks of Molise, Italy

In Italy, an important project is currently underway for the tourist development of the sheep-tracks in the Molise region, and in particular for the enhancement of six *tratturi*, two *bracci* and two *tratturelli* for a total of 325 km, distributed in 36 sections. The project also involves 59 municipalities, most of which are suffering from a marked depopulation process. The project, known by the acronym CIS (*Contratto Interistituzionale di Sviluppo*), is financed with

state funds with a total budget of more than 129,000,000 euro. Besides making the paths accessible and equipped, and connecting them with 77 historic villages, the project aims at creating ecological corridors for biodiversity along the routes by planting 40,500 new trees and maintaining 850 hectares of existing forest. The masterplan is currently being developed by an interdisciplinary group, being the planning part in charge of Stefano Boeri Architects.

The case of Molise cannot be fully analysed, as it is still at the planning stage. What stands out, however, is the ambitious scope of the project, its top-down genesis and the (so far) lack of involvement of local stakeholders, excepting municipalities.

### **3.4 Considerations on slow tourism routes along transhumance routes**

The three examples illustrate very different approaches in tackling the enhancement of sheep-track networks as a tourist destination. The experience of *La Routo* shows how the continuous action over time of local actors, combined with strategic vision and synergies, can materialise complex projects, in which tourist use is one of the components of the economic and socio-cultural activation of the territory. In this case, the result was reached through a long process of stakeholder involvement at different levels and scales, from single pastures to cross-border vision.

The cases of the Community of Madrid and Molise share some features, since they both are top-down projects, and they both concern the enhancement of several transhumance routes in their regional territory, rather than a single itinerary. However, the two projects differ in several aspects. First of all, the potential users they aspire to catch: while in the case of Madrid users easily come from its extended metropolitan area, in the case of Molise potential proximity users are limited to the 300,000 inhabitants of the towns touched by the project; this implies that the aspired users are supposed to be mainly tourists coming from abroad. Another key aspect is time: while in the Madrid region the first actions for the enhancement of the sheep-track heritage were started as early as 1998, and the gestation process of *La Routo* lasted 20 years, for the CIS Molise project the timeframe for the design and implementation of the planned actions is extremely compressed, from 2023 to 2026. The economic resources are another aspect that makes the difference with the other cases: although the fundings used for the Spanish initiative are not known, and those of *La Routo* are only partially identified (Interreg V-A France-Italy ALCOTRA 2014 - 2020, among others), it is highly probable that they did not benefit from such a high budget as that of CIS Molise. Lastly, another key aspect is the involvement of stakeholders and the engagement of the local population, which in the case of Molise seems to be one of the most challenging aspects.

## **4. Conclusions**

The growing attention to transhumance, proved by the proliferation of celebratory events and the spread of tourism development projects centred on the recovery of its routes, is an incentive to strengthen the tourism potential of the inner areas. However, the search for visibility and the ambitions of tourism development linked to a subject that has become topical, sometimes seem

to be pushing more towards promotional and celebratory activities than towards the preservation of the practice of transhumance and its heritage.

The experiences analysed show that territories are rapidly acquiring awareness of the potential of transhumance as an economic driver linked to tourism. Transhumance and its routes, however, constitute a heritage that may prove to be strategic in the development of inner areas, not only in terms of tourism, but also ecologically, economically and culturally activating. A territory in which transhumance is a living and tangible practice, with visible repercussions all year round, is able to propose a cultural, landscape and gastronomic offer that goes beyond the single event or the trekking path. These features make it more attractive in the eyes of users seeking quality tourism, and produces positive repercussions on local dynamics. Moreover, the historical and cultural uniqueness of transhumance routes, together with the multiple expressions of its economic value, are key aspects that distinguish a transhumance route from many other existing slow tourism routes.

As stated by Curci & Gaeta (2019), the challenge for the future of transhumance lies in restoring a territorial scene that allows pastoralism to positively accompany the presence of tourism without being reduced to mere folklore. In this direction, the growing multifunctionality of transhumance farms may constitute a drive towards responsible tourism and the green economy (Bindi et al., 2022).

Lastly, the interest and enthusiasm of a growing number of people towards transhumance is such that there is reason to believe that it could be converted into a trending niche, a 'transhumance tourism' that would lead travellers to discover events and routes on the theme around different contexts. This pushes the tourism development of transhumance to a next level: networking different regions and geographical areas that are united by this practice.

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