

## Alto Medio Sannio inner area between marginality, latent place knowledge and territorial heritage

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### Abstract

The paper examines some results from the ongoing PRIN (Research Project of Significant National Interest) "RE-PLACE. Reframing the Place-Based Approach through Cultural Ecosystem Services of "inner areas," aimed at strengthening local communities' role in building "place knowledge". Among the three Italian inner areas addressed in the PRIN (Alta Marmilla and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai in Sardinia, Alto Medio Sannio in Molise, Madonie in Sicily), it focuses on the case study of Alto Medio Sannio, also assessing the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of tools used to date to overcome gaps and poor integration of these contexts. Particular attention is given to a current topic in these areas: the transhumance routes ("tratturi"), considered here as generating elements of a rich territorial heritage to be valorized and reproduced through autonomous local development practices.

### Keywords

Inner areas, autonomous local development, territorial heritage, tratturi

### Introduction

This contribution regards a reflection on the planning of the so-called inner areas, in which depopulation, emigration, social and productive rarefaction, abandonment of the land, are distinctive phenomena. Shaping a new role for inner areas requires forms of community and the arising of new subjectivities that rely on forms of direct democracy (Magnaghi, 2020), reconstructing the places of living and promoting the synergic connection between local economies (Bruni, Zamagni, 2015).

In particular, we analyse the first results of the ongoing PRIN (Research Project of Significant National Interest) "RE-PLACE. REframing PLace-based Approach through the Cultural Ecosystem services of inner areas"<sup>1</sup>. It aims to strengthen the role of local communities in building "place knowledge" and territorial heritage also through the innovative lens of Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES), which represent non-material and/or socio-ecological benefits that people gain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, aesthetic experiences, and cultural and educational values (Chan *et al.*, 2012; Andersson *et al.*, 2015).

The project investigates three Italian inner areas (Alta Marmilla and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai in Sardinia, Alto Medio Sannio in Molise, Madonie in Sicily) and promotes a multi-scalar approach, based on a co-evolutionary perspective on the interplay between human settlement and the environment. It is oriented to understand and maximise the resilience of marginalised territories, to build alliances and collaborative processes and to promote place-making developed by communities.

In detail, the contribution focuses on the case study of Alto Medio Sannio inner area, made up of 33 small municipalities (many of which with less than 1,000 inhabitants) between the Molise provinces of Isernia and Campobasso, some of which border the Abruzzo region. The research path is designed to support the expression of the autonomous local development practices based on the continuous reproduction of territorial heritage. It

<sup>1</sup> The PRIN "RE-PLACE", funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, is coordinated by the Research Unit of the University of Cagliari (PI prof. Anna Maria Colavitti), and involves the Research Units of the University of Palermo (Associated PI prof. Annalisa Giampino) and of the University of Molise (Associated PI prof. Luciano De Bonis) to which all the authors are affiliated.

is intended to capture the critical issues of some ongoing experiences in the area which are aimed at reducing the fragility of marginalised contexts, also identifying the ineffectiveness of the tools that until today have perpetuated the gap and the poor integration of these contexts.

First of all (see section 1), we position our research within the EU “place-based” approach, which in the Italian context is fully articulated through the SNAI (National Strategy for Inner Areas). However, our approach diverges significantly from the EU and national frameworks by embracing a self-organising paradigm. This paradigm is rooted in some key findings from resilience studies within ecological and socio-ecological disciplines, as well as the fundamental concept of territorial heritage, a cornerstone of the Italian territorialist school.

Then (see sections 2 and 3), in alignment with the objectives of the PRIN “RE-PLACE”, we identify the key components of the territorial heritage within the study area, combining the non-sectoral nature of the territorialist approach to heritage with the notion of Cultural Ecosystem Service. Emphasising the critical role of CES in environmental planning, we additionally outline the envisaged participatory mapping activities in the area, designed to progressively and self-organisingly shape appropriate actions for the preservation and enhancement of territorial heritage.

Finally (see section 4), we dedicate particular attention to a very popular and current topic in these areas: the “tratturi system” (territorial system of sheep tracks), ancient transhumance routes which today are considered important elements of the heritage to be valorised. These elements, from a multifunctional perspective, are considered by us to be latent resources for self-sustainable development that takes into account the benefits that ecosystems provide to the inhabitants of the area.

### **1. Inner Areas between marginality, fragility and resilience**

The Territorial Agenda 2030 (Aa.Vv., 2020) emphasises the importance of the “place-based” concept (De Bonis, 2021). However, unlike the term territorial cohesion, it does not offer a clear or explicit definition. It is reasonable and logical to infer (De Bonis, 2021) that the interpretation of “place-based” frequently mentioned in the Territorial Agenda aligns with the framework developed by Barca (2009) for the EU and thoroughly taken up in the EU’s place-based approach (Barca *et al.*, 2012). This approach highlights the critical role of a place’s social, cultural, and institutional characteristics while also acknowledging the need for external political interventions. The latter aim to address underutilized endogenous potential and social exclusion caused by the unwillingness or incapacity of local elites. In essence, it incorporates top-down measures as a vital component of territorial cohesion policies (De Bonis, 2021), in order to overcome internal barriers that obstruct territorial development and innovation processes (Barca, 2009).

The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI in Italian), established in 2013 at the conclusion of Barca’s tenure as Italy’s Minister for Territorial Cohesion, is inherently a direct extension of the EU’s place-based approach, which Barca himself pioneered in 2009. As a result, it also incorporates the use of top-down initiatives. Moreover, its primary objective is to recognise the vulnerability of places and communities while enhancing the delivery of essential citizenship services to address depopulation effectively (Lucatelli *et al.*, 2022).

Beyond an “indirect” limitation – which aligns with the same “deficiency” Ugo Giusti (1938) identified in the INEA research on the depopulation of Italian mountain areas – namely the attempt to address the anorexia of peripheral regions without simultaneously tackling the bulimia of central areas (Giacchè, 2019:41) – we believe that a more “direct” evaluation of the Strategy is needed. Specifically, this pertains to the effectiveness of the partially top-down, place-based approach of the SNAI to areas considered as “fragile” (De Bonis, 2021).

It is clear, however, that in order to conduct a more direct assessment, we first need a reference definition of “fragility”. The latter is often regarded as the opposite of resilience, in turn a term which, although belonging to a relatively defined semantic field, assumes markedly different meanings depending on the context in which it is applied. In an ecological or socio-ecological context, resilience, as defined by Holling (1973), refers to the ability of a system to persist by absorbing changes and disturbances while maintaining consistent relationships between populations or state variables.

With specific reference to socio-ecological systems, resilience refers to the system's ability to absorb disturbances, adapt, and reorganise while undergoing change, ensuring it retains its core functions, structure, identity, and feedback mechanisms (Walker *et al.*, 2004).

Considering that we are discussing territorial systems, which we align with socio-ecological systems (SES) (De Bonis 2023a; De Bonis, Ottaviano 2024a), precisely to specific subsets of social systems where certain interdependent relationships among humans are mediated through interactions with non-human entities (Anderies *et al.*, 2004), we regard the previously mentioned definitions of resilience as equally applicable to territorial SES. Highlighting that the potential fragility (lack of resilience) of the latter, as with all SES, can be particularly critical due to their state of “perpetual dynamism” and “continuous adaptation” (Gunderson, Holling, 2002), driven by the complex interactions between the human species and the environment that define them (De Bonis, 2021). With specific reference to such a criticality, it is also worth highlighting that Gunderson (2000) associates resilience with an emergent property of ecosystems, stemming from their self-organising behaviours over time.

In other words, the more territorial SES exhibit self-organisation, the more they behave in a “non-fragile” way. We can consequently posit that the effectiveness and relevance of policies concerning these systems can be assessed by their ability to promote and enhance the emergence of self-organising properties within such systems (De Bonis, 2021).

Without hastily concluding that the SNAI is entirely ineffective in reducing the fragility of the territorial systems it targets – which is one of its primary goals – it can nonetheless also be asserted that its risk of ineffectiveness increases significantly when its inherent top-down component becomes dominant (De Bonis, 2021).

In contrast, such a risk tends to disappear within the territorialist approach, due to its focus on the concept of territorial heritage. This heritage is understood as the result of long-term co-evolutionary processes involving a wide range of social actors and their interactions with the environment (Magnaghi, 2017). It includes not only the particularly significant portion of resources that constitute it, and also embraces the socio-cultural environment, the *milieu* (Dematteis, Governa, 2005), as well as productive knowledge, the arts, and more (Magnaghi, 1998).

## 2. Territorial heritage and CES

The process of reconstituting virtuous co-evolutionary relationships between communities and environments is necessarily linked to a more general reconsideration of the way of understanding the relationality between the human and non-human components of socio-ecological systems.

The recent trend towards forms of “ecologically oriented” economy brings with it utilitarian and extractivist visions of non-human biological and biophysical elements, which materialise in market approaches (pure or in some way assimilable to them) to the relationship between human societies and ecological systems (De Bonis, Ottaviano, 2024b).

Among the objectives of the “RE-PLACE” research project is the identification of elements of territorial heritage through tools other than those that guide market approaches in order to be able to use them as a key to critically reading the actions and governance planned for these territories within the National Strategy for Internal Areas. The ultimate aim is to outline new approaches to a new shared knowledge of Inner Areas, capable of enabling processes of territorial reproduction of systems.

The “RE-PLACE” project, through a range of territorial and ethnographic analysis methods, analyses the different “knowledges of place” and territorial heritage as a key factor for local development of the subjects (local communities, inhabitants, local associations, public actors, etc.), allowing to explore territorial heritage as a key factor for local development from different points of view.

The non-sectoral nature that is the foundation of the territorialist approach to heritage can also be profitably integrated by the notion of Cultural Ecosystem Service.

As a paradigmatic class of service, Cultural Ecosystem Services have emerged as a concept around which researchers and policy makers can understand ecosystems in terms of their life-enriching and life-affirming

contributions to human well-being, and represent a salient example of how culture is more generally accepted as an important “variable” in the work of environmental managers and planners (Satterfield *et al.*, 2013 in Fish *et al.* 2016). The idea that the ecosystem approach can improve and innovate traditional methods of planning collective services is gaining consensus in the scientific debate. The introduction of new performance criteria in terms of ecological-environmental, social and cultural supply would allow us to evaluate the multiple benefits that ecosystem components and urban biodiversity can bring to local communities (Colavitti *et al.* 2024).

CES can be a source of “deep attachment” in communities (Chan *et al.* 2012) and access points for public engagement and concern in environmental issues, thus helping to build broader public support for ecosystem protection (Daniel *et al.*, 2012 in Fish *et al.* 2016) and, potentially, to support those processes of reconstitution of co-evolutionary relationships between communities and environments based on virtuous forms of relationality. Moreover, recognising the intrinsic link between territorial heritage and the concept of cultural landscape as provided by UNESCO<sup>2</sup>, but overcoming the UNESCO exclusive focus on the “outstanding universal value” (De Bonis *et al.* 2024), it can be considered that, among the benefits that ecosystems generate for human societies, their cultural value cannot be ignored, even in the dimension of «ecosystems’ contributions to the non-material benefits (e.g. capabilities and experiences) that arise from human-ecosystems relationships» (Chan *et al.*, 2012:9).

Although their value in the assessment of ecosystem services is generally less recognised, it should be noted that while «locally degraded provisioning and regulating services may be substituted by socio-economic means (e.g. drinking water from a polluted well can be replaced by bottled water), [...] the cultural values of an ecosystem or a landscape are irreplaceable» (Plieninger *et al.*, 2013:118).

Some authors (Plieninger *et al.*, 2013) argue that definitions of most categories of cultural services are vague, and it is therefore difficult to rigorously establish significant relationships between ecosystem structures and functions and the satisfaction of human needs and wants (Daniel *et al.*, 2012 in Plieninger *et al.*, 2013), having to also consider that cultural services do not represent purely ecological phenomena, but rather are the outcome of complex and dynamic relationships between ecosystems and humans in landscapes over long time spans (Fagerholm *et al.*, 2012 in Plieninger *et al.*, 2013).

According to Plieninger (2013), a greater awareness of cultural ecosystem services can be relevant for nature conservation and sustainable land management – and therefore to support those territorial reproductive processes based on virtuous co-evolutionary relationships between local communities and the environment, the importance of which we have underlined – because they are directly experienced and intuitively appreciated by people, unlike what often happens with regulation and support services (Daniel *et al.*, 2012; Schaich *et al.*, 2010), and because they are generally enjoyed in “packages”, thus potentially helping to overcome the tendency to design in relation to single ecosystem services.

The “RE-PLACE” project aims to fill some of the gaps identified in the literature through a participatory mapping of the entire range of cultural ecosystem services perceived by local populations in the inner areas under study<sup>3</sup>. The challenge is to understand whether CES can be integrated into the planning processes of inner areas through the active involvement of settled communities that have developed an “adaptive resilience” (Davoudi, 2012) towards a context of progressive abandonment and who with their daily practices reinvent these spaces through a co-evolutionary nature-culture process.

The “RE-PLACE” project then aims to investigate, analyse and map informal local development practices promoted by inhabitants. The ongoing results derive from a combination of mapping exercises, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, also analysed with statistical and GIS-based techniques. On the one hand, we are advancing the detailed definition of the investigation tools for the Alto Medio Sannio area, on the other we are

<sup>2</sup> Particularly the “continuing landscape” where evolutionary processes remain ongoing, while simultaneously displaying significant material evidence of their historical development over time (UNESCO, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Mapping CES requires connecting local communities’ perceptions of place. This goal can be achieved by collecting data from interviews and mapping conducted on representative samples of the settled community. CES mapping has been extensively studied in recent years. However, methodologies for spatial analysis of CES are still weak due to problems related to data quality and evaluation, which make it difficult to accurately determine their catchment area (Colavitti *et al.* 2024).

experimenting with the investigation tools refined on the basis of prior experiences. Notably, in the workshops in Sorgono (Sardinia, Gennargentu-Mandrolisai area), where in March 2025 the entire RE-PLACE research group convened with the local communities. By posing targeted questions rooted in the CES framework a community map was created, where each participant identified the places he considered most significant.

Similarly, through some questions that are starting to be submitted to the communities of Alto Medio Sannio, the aim is to build over time a patrimonial base to understand which actions can be activated for the self-sustainable development of the territory.

### 3. Alto Medio Sannio, the hinge of biodiversity



**Figure 1** - The Verrino Valley afrom a viewpoint in Agnone. Ph. Francesca Giangrande, 2024.

Alto Medio Sannio is the largest inner area in Molise. It extends in the central-northern sector of the Molise Region, south of the provinces of Chieti and L'Aquila and is made up of 33 municipalities<sup>4</sup> belonging to the two provinces of Campobasso and Isernia, with Agnone as the lead municipality of the area. The Alto Medio Sannio area has a total population of 28,835 inhabitants (2023) with a population density of 30.62 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. The most populous municipalities are Agnone (4,679 inhab.), Frosolone (2,830 inhab.) and Trivento (4,360 inhab.), while the smallest one – not only of the area but of the whole Molise – is Castelverrino with only 98 inhabitants. The area is affected by significant demographic problems: population data by Istat indicate that between 1994 and 2023, the area has overall lost 28.1% of its resident population, presenting an average annual decrease rate of

<sup>4</sup> For the province of Campobasso, the municipalities of Castelbottaccio, Duronia, Lucito, Molise, Montefalcone nel Sannio, Montemitro, Roccavivara, Salcito, San Biase, Sant'Angelo Limosano, Torella del Sannio, Trivento are included; for the province of Isernia the municipalities of Agnone, Bagnoli del Trigno, Belmonte del Sannio, Capracotta, Carovilli, Castel del Giudice, Castelverrino, Chiauci, Civitanova del Sannio, Frosolone, Macchiagodena, Pescocolanciano, Pescopennataro, Pietrabbondante, Poggio Sannita, Roccasicura, San Pietro Avellana, Sant'Angelo del Pesco, Sant'Elena Sannita, Sessano del Molise, Vastogirardi are included. In the programming cycle 2021-2027, compared to the cycle 2014-2020, the composition of the area has changed as it has seen the municipalities of Civitacampomariano, Limosano, Montagano, Petrella Tifernina, San Felice del Molise leave and those of Molise, Montemitro, Sant'Angelo Limosano, San Biase, Torella del Sannio join.

1.1%. During the period above, the municipalities that recorded a greater average annual loss are San Biase (with -58.7% in 29 years) and Castelbottaccio (with -56.3%). People aged over 80 represent 11.4% of the total residents of the Area, while those under 14 represent 9.3%. The high presence of the population over 80 clearly photographs the incidence of aging within the area.

The lowest percentage is in Pescolanciano (8.6%) while the highest is in Castelbottaccio (23.2%). Demographic data also confirm that the Municipalities of Agnone, Frosolone and Trivento, in addition to having the largest number of residents, have an economic and social dynamism that makes them the major centers providing district services.

Alto Medio Sannio is a naturalistic and historical “hinge” territory between the Sannio Collinare (hilly) and the Abruzzo Apennines with great potential for territorial development offered by a landscape rich in biodiversity and the presence of historical values. It goes from 300 m of sinuous panoramas drawn by the Trigno river up to the 1,730 m of Monte Campo. As part of an historical-cultural heritage, the area features several remains of the Samnite territorial civilisation, first of all the Italic site of Pietrabbondante. Furthermore, there is a rich museum heritage, almost a single still visible trace of what has crossed the territory for years, and the cultural events are also numerous. Certainly, to date, a weakness that emerges from the analysis is that there is a poor recognition and valorisation of the aforementioned territorial heritage. This area also presents geomorphological and hydrogeological degradation despite having good agricultural potential demonstrated by current production.

It is a fact that this territory has undergone, like most of the Italian inner areas, a process of marginalisation that has lasted more than a century with all the consequences that this entails (delayed development, reduction in the use of the very rich natural-cultural heritage, reduction in job opportunities, de-anthropisation, partial reduction of cultural identity). The depopulation of young people and families and the consequent process of population aging, associated with low population density, determines a strong impact on the fixed costs for the provision of services and infrastructures. The Alto Medio Sannio Area Strategy (fund FESR and FSE+ programming cycle of 2014-2020) focused on welfare interventions; however, it emerges that this policy have little effect on reducing fragility if it does not take into account some specific local experiences - current or latent - of heritage valorisation, which demonstrate the virtual capacity to create favourable conditions for the generation of CES and self-organising processes of more intimate and strong interconnection between local communities and territorial resources (Ottaviano, De Bonis, 2023), for a process of land care, which however lack a systemic vision. What could this vision be?

#### 4. The system of sheep tracks (“tratturi”)



**Figure 2** - Shepherd on the Lucera-Castel di Sangro sheep track in the municipality of Pescolanciano. Ph. Francesca Giangrande, 2024.

As regards the deepening of this contribution with respect to the whole of the territorial heritage and the CES, a relevant sub-theme that is emerging from the mapping is that of the system sheep tracks (“tratturi”), recognised and perceived by the people who live in the cultural landscape of the Alto Medio Sannio as territorial elements that can potentially provide intangible cultural benefits. The network of so-called “tratturi” constituted the link for the summer-winter movement of flocks that moved from mountain pastures to those in the plains and vice versa, making the economy of the Abruzzo-Molise Apennines interdependent and complementary with that of the Apulian plain.

Plausibly, transhumance was the generator, or one of the main co-generators of the territorial, and therefore also landscape, structure of Mediterranean Europe (De Bonis, 2023b). The civilisation of transhumance allowed the development of agriculture, trade and craftsmanship, which flourished in the area. In Agnone, for example, the copper tradition was carried on for centuries, linked above all to the presence of the rivers, which lasted from the Middle Ages until 1970, the year in which the San Quirico Ramera (artisanal copper company) was closed. In 1400 there was a coppersmith for every three houses, dense workshops that reached 171 in 1700, and as many as 8 foundries that employed over 500 people. Today the only remaining trace of this activity is the Ramera Gerbasi in Agnone, where the seventh generation works the copper; a symptom that craftsmanship is little appreciated among young people who, for various reasons, no longer dedicate themselves to this profession. The survival of Ramera Gerbasi is paradoxically linked to the digital world, since they have a strong connection to the foreign import-export market. A similar fate has befallen agriculture, where it is even more difficult to innovate; this sector still has a high relevance but has difficulty in reconverting and raising the quality of products and/or innovating in well-defined sectors (including supply chain sectors).

Forestry is also at risk from modern and contemporary development processes in inner areas. In general, a co-evolutionary approach between human settlement and environment, aimed at understanding and maximising the resilience of inner and marginalised territories, has diminished and weakened. Let’s observe this phenomenon from a particular point of view: the system of “tratturi”.

In environmental and naturalistic terms, the system of sheep tracks is inserted within two other elements of the landscape of significant importance such as agricultural crops and woods. For centuries, the transhumance routes have represented the only infrastructures for communication and economic and social exchange between populations, so much so that some more recent inhabited centres still show their dependence on the course of the sheep tracks. This ecosystem is a unique and rare example of the strong bond between traditions, people and territory (Cicoira, 2016). The infrastructures of the transhumance landscapes do not coincide with the wider set of transhumance landscapes, to which they primarily belong; in addition to the infrastructural elements, landscapes also include further elements of the built environment – like taverns, fountains, churches (Meini *et al.*, 2018), but also small urban agglomerations, watering holes, boundary markers and milestones built along the network (Di Martino *et al.*, 2006) – and above all they are constituted by the agro-forestry and settlement structures co-generated by the transhumant practice, well beyond the lands directly occupied by it (De Bonis, 2023b). The castles in Molise, for example, are arranged orthogonally to the path of the tratturi, with major centres supported along the ridge path of the reliefs emerging between the two main watercourses (Trigno and Biferno) and with the smaller centres (of promontory) arranged in clusters, in a geologically and morphologically suitable position but reachable from the first (Cerasoli, Cordoni, 1998 in De Bonis, 2023b). This is a settlement structure that can simultaneously take into account the constraints imposed by the need to easily reach the tratturi on the one hand, and the need to place the settlements in sufficiently safe areas on the other (Cerasoli, Cordoni, 1998 in De Bonis, 2023b).

Summarizing the history of the evolution of the tratturi, it has to be said that the Romans were the first to institutionalise transhumance (Meini *et al.*, 2018 in De Bonis 2023b), by imposing the payment of a certain fee to the tax authorities. But the phenomenon of transhumance, and the territorial civilisation connected to it, has much more distant origins; according to Salmon (1967 in De Bonis 2023b) the *calles* that crossed Roman Sannio were not only used in pre-Roman times by the Samnites and the Sabellian peoples of central Italy, who in the winter months drove their animals (especially sheep) long distances towards the pastures of the plains, but they also date back to the Iron Age if not the Bronze Age, as archaeology has demonstrated. It is highly probable that the basis of the tratturi development was a model of seasonal nomadism of human groups which, already in the prehistoric phase, they had exploited those characteristics to activate a “hunting nomadism”, which

would later transform into pastoral nomadism, due to the progressive climate warming that determined the vegetation transformation of valley and mountain environments starting from 15,000 years ago (Minelli, 2015 in De Bonis 2023b). On the other hand, it is certain that, after the acquisition of large portions of *ager publicus* by the Romans following the Samnite, Pyrrhic and Punic wars, pastoral activities in Samnium increased in comparison to agricultural ones. At the “price” however of having to pay from then on for the use of pastures that were previously freely available (De Bonis, 2023b). The Normans, after the early medieval pause caused by the barbarian invasions, contributed to the flourishing rebirth of pastoral activity, generally recreating political unity and re-establishing the necessary conditions of security (Meini *et al.*, 2018 in De Bonis 2023b). The Angevin rulers established the so-called Dogana della Mena delle pecore, with significant contextual expansions of the pastures, with the aim of stabilising and increasing the tax revenue that derived from it (Musto, 1964:10 in De Bonis, 2023b). The institutionalization process reached its peak with Alfonso V of Aragon, until 1806 when the Dogana was suppressed with the law promulgated by G. Buonaparte of dissolution of all the constraints and easements of the Tavoliere (De Bonis, 2023b).

The pasture was then closely linked to the culture of transhumance and denigrated specially in the era of the affirmation of private property, as reported by the historical scholar Mattia Iorillo (2025)<sup>5</sup> that stated that the construction of a strongly negative imaginary of the transhumant world was imposed with the spirit of the Enlightenment, which has produced the demonisation of civic uses, of common lands and obviously of those tratturi, which with their spatial transversality were natural enemies of private property, of field closures and agricultural rationality. Thus, although transhumance continued in other forms even after the Second World War, the breaking of the routes of the “sheep kingdom” decreed a marginalisation of territories ancestrally suited to that type of exploitation. First with the Bourbons, with the Fascism (with the battle for grain and the construction of a “very rural” Molise) then, until the modernisation processes a secular world, cultural and natural together, was broken. And also, as Potito d’Arcangelo noted, the “cosmovision” of the transhumant shepherd modeled on the “phasic movement of natural cycles and movements along the sheep tracks”, in return, it gave it “the ability to leave a mark, to transform places profoundly”. Herein lies, once again, the most emblematic and real character of the tratturo throughout the modern age and on the borders of contemporaneity. Its contextual nature, of evolution and transformation in an environmental continuity made up of human and animal relationships. Those that practically disappeared at the dawn of the twentieth century, leaving the great void of Molise (Iorillo, 2025).

The Alto Medio Sannio area is crossed by the Celano-Foggia, Castel di Sangro-Lucera, Sant’Andrea-Biferno-Ateleta “tratturi”, and by the Pescolanciano-Sprondasino-Castel del Giudice “tratturello”. As described in the Wide Area Environmental Landscape Plan of Alto Molise, the landscape is characterised by roads, fortifications, villages, hill areas whose environmental characteristics are determined by different groups of houses and agricultural agglomerations, by the land division, by the compromised hydrogeological situation and by the network determined by the torrential channels, and from the intensive use of cultural and natural resources of the territory concentrated in the municipalities of Agnone, Belmonte del Sannio, Poggio Sannita, Castelverrino.

Since, as previously mentioned, one of the objectives of the “RE-PLACE” project is the analysis of the ways in which SNAI has been implemented in the study areas, also with specific reference to its relations with planning and governance, an in-depth study was carried out regarding actions and tools that have as their object the sub-theme of the “tratturi” system. We have therefore taken into consideration a current area planning tool that is considered complementary and synergic to the Alto Medio Sannio Area Strategy, *i.e.* the project “Sviluppo turistico lungo i tratturi - recupero e valorizzazione del percorso tratturale; incentivazione e potenziamento dell’offerta turistica” (Tourism development along the sheep tracks - recovery and enhancement of the sheep track; promotion and enhancement of the tourist offer) foreseen in the “Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo” (Institutional Development Contract) and financed by the Development and Cohesion Fund 2014-2020, which is included among the context measures of the Area Strategy for the programming period 2014-2020. Analysing this tool allows us to corroborate the idea that the Strategy has limitations in capturing the regenerative practices of self-government of inner areas, still focusing too much on single-sector interventions imposed from above that do not take into account the landscape evolution of Molise.

In this context, in March 2024 the Masterplan for the recovery of the Molise sheep tracks was presented by the Stefano Boeri Architetti studio, involving 59 municipalities (Campodipietra is the lead municipality) and the Land

5 <https://www.iltascabile.com/letterature/vie-erba-vuoto/>

Reclamation Consortium “Sud Bacino Moro-Sangro-Sinello e Trigno” with the aim of recovering, protecting and enhancing the tratturi and the events related to them, with specific actions aimed at the tourist development of the territory through the historical-cultural and artistic recovery of the villages crossed by the “tratturi”. As stated in the intervention planning document of “Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo”, the intention is to launch joint actions aimed at safeguarding the landscape and the “tratturi” heritage, focusing attention on dedicated tourist-cultural itineraries, with particular attention to minor destinations and the recovery of public assets attributable both to the “minor heritage” – typical local traditional buildings (villages, farmhouses, refuges, etc.) and artefacts related to local network systems (shepherd’s houses, watering holes, crossings, etc.) – that to the “valuable cultural heritage” – historical-artistic emergencies (monasteries, castles, villas), all divided into two axes of intervention; axis 1 – tratturi; axis 2 – villages.

The Alto Medio Sannio area, as delimited by SNAI, is not mentioned in the Institutional Development Contract but is addressed by the project with interventions of both axis 1 and axis 2. For axis 1, a variety of interventions are planned, from marking the tratturi path by installing adequate trail signs and new wooden fences, to the restoration of equipped rest areas, to the reconversion of cultivations to tratturi soil (meadow), to clearing, deforestation, reclamation, restoration of rows, to the creation of horse/cycle paths equipped with various aids such as adapted tandems and electric wheelchairs (*buggy bike*), to the arrangement of the former loan quarry of the Chiauci dam, to the restoration of connecting roads with the villages, to the interactive tourist signage and signage equipped with QR-Codes for sites of interest etc. Interestingly, for the municipality of Civitanova del Sannio the project envisages allowing the maintenance of the tratturi by entrusting it to farmers who have located their agricultural-livestock businesses in the same areas crossed by the “tratturo”, practicing grazing of their animals aimed at promoting the cleaning of the tratturi area. While for the maintenance of the structures (equipped rest areas, tourist boards, wooden bridges, etc.) that have been located mainly in the vicinity of homes, the use of the so-called “Administrative Barter” is proposed, which provides for interventions entrusted on a project basis to citizens who request to compensate the tax burden with their own performance through interventions of urban decorum, recovery and reuse, with purposes of general interest, of unusable areas and real estate.

Another intervention that we consider relevant is in the Fonte le Frassi district where there is a village of 8 wooden houses built in 2002 following the earthquake and currently used by a single family unit that occupies one of the structures. With small restoration and adaptation interventions, the project foresees a tourist accommodation function or the creation of small points of sale of local products and a possible support point for demonstrations and events along the “tratturi” axis. For axis 2, the architectural redevelopment and urban recovery of some villages and hamlets is planned, promoting the existing historical-cultural and environmental-landscape heritage, the restoration of the Transhumance house of Frosolone to create a refreshment point and museum, the creation of an artistic path that uses the exhibition of elements of traditional copper art of Agnone etc., the redevelopment of a building in Pietrabbondante to be used as a Multipurpose/Cultural Centre, the redevelopment of the San Basilio staircase and the recovery for recreational and cultural purposes of the municipal building, former ERP (public residential construction) building in Salcito, the redevelopment of the former ECA (Municipal Welfare Agency) building in the historic centre of Lucito for rural tourism accommodation purposes, the recovery of the properties available to the municipality of Trivento for hospitality purposes and the adaptation of their accessibility, the adaptation of the former school of Poggio Sannita to Casa della Salute (House of Health), and so on.

Of considerable interest is the securing of a municipal building in Montagano for the creation of a socio-cultural center for which attention will be paid by the operators and the Municipality in continuous and interactive reference with the responsible subject, to integrate and improve the offer in relation to the relationships already in place with national and foreign tour operators, and to the forms of collaboration and cooperation with the help of various subjects, such as schools and universities, including institutional ones such as the Superintendency, the Molise Region, etc. The intervention of the Masterplan appears impressive to us, it involves 236 km of “tratturi”, 38 km of “tratturelli” and 39 km of “bracci” (secondary routes), it includes the creation of 7 starting and finishing gates (Castel del Giudice, San Pietro Avellana, Montalto, Rionero Sannitico, Sepino, Gambatesa, Santa Croce di Magliano), to then be divided into 36 intermediate stages.

The ambition of the Masterplan is to equate the tratturo to an ecological corridor, as a result of a rigorous application of topographic rules that give it a specific configuration and geometry, recognisable in the pattern of ancient and modern signs of the landscape. Therefore, this proposal, although it is the first of such a global

nature that concerns the tratturi, seems to ignore the current state of the tratturi system and does not question enough the self-reproducibility of the system, imposing from above a series of specific interventions that do not involve local agents, with the exception of the municipalities. In February 2024, there was an autonomous initiative by scholars and citizens to meet in Sepino to create a civic committee that would work alongside the institutional control room, but the proposal for discussion remains evanescent to date, considering that the project is still in the embryonic stage.

It is implied that slow tourism acts as a driving force for increasing employment and against demographic impoverishment but, as Nunzio Marcelli, a breeder-entrepreneur who practices transhumance, claims in an interview (14 March 2024)<sup>6</sup>, there is concern that it will turn into the usual opportunity to announce a title, and that the funds will then be used without contextualisation, which happens when the planners insert a single component that leads to the decontextualisation and nullification of a useful opportunity to bring these territories back to playing a leading role in sustainable development. On the other hand, there is an interesting phrase repeated several times within the “Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo” programming document that would suggest an attention to the theme of coevolution, that is that the “path of the ancient tratturo” can therefore offer visitors unique landscapes, colours and atmospheres, in which the “evident man-nature binomial becomes evidence of the measured use of the territory and its resources”. Another interesting aspect is present among the objectives of the Masterplan, namely the definition of guidelines for the management of the “tratturi”, with new methods

of public-private co-management with the relaunch of the role of the agricultural operator as a central figure for the maintenance of the characteristics of the “tratturo” over time. The Masterplan documents do not specify how this objective can be achieved.

### Conclusions



Figure 3 - Evidence of tratturo Celano-Foggia in Alto Medio Sannio. Ph. Francesca Giangrande, 2024.

There is no doubt that signs of innovation are emerging in Italy; a multi-scalar, co-evolutionary approach between human settlement and environment, aimed at understanding and maximising the resilience of internal and marginalised territories, at building alliances and collaborative processes and at promoting place-making developed with communities, animates practices and processes initiated at different scales and in different

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.amolivenews.it/2024/03/14/progetto-cis-tratturi-molisani-nunzio-marcelli-opportunita-imperdibile-per-rendere-attrattivo-il-territorio/#google\\_vignette](https://www.amolivenews.it/2024/03/14/progetto-cis-tratturi-molisani-nunzio-marcelli-opportunita-imperdibile-per-rendere-attrattivo-il-territorio/#google_vignette)

territorial contexts, not only within the SNAI (De Vita *et al.*, 2021). The approach of the “RE-PLACE” project implies the need to support the (re)discovery of ancient and new forms of local knowledge which allow the continuous adaptation to the mutability of environmental contexts and whose loss undermines the effectiveness of interventions implemented in more recent times. It also encourages the establishment of new relations between human societies and non-human environmental elements that allow the continuous generation of innovative local knowledge (De Bonis, Ottaviano, 2024a). The matching between the growth of “place awareness” of local communities and the identity characteristics of the heritage make possible to produce “territorial added value” (Magnaghi, Dematteis 2018) based on visions, strategies and tools and on new forms of self-government of territorial commons, namely place-specific values and resources, sedimented over time.

In this contribution we have analysed the critical issues of the SNAI and the EU place-based approach, suggesting to pay particular attention to the interpretation of territories as socio-ecological systems, and consequently to the importance of the concept of fragility/resilience and of self-organising properties in “marginal” territorial SES. We have also put forward a hypothesis for triggering a multifunctional regeneration process of the transhumance landscapes (De Bonis, 2023b) in the inner area studied in the PRIN “RE-PLACE”, in particular through the valorisation of the heritage system of the tratturi, considered not in isolation but as a whole, and according to more collaborative and cooperative trajectories than those currently dominant. In recent decades, globalisation and socio-economic forces have affected not only production dynamics but also the co-evolutionary relationship between communities and territories, leading to important changes in the ways of working, consuming and socialising. The weakening of relationships, which had consolidated the process of community place attachment and the formation of civic consciousness and sense, influences citizenship practices and the production of places. It is therefore essential to restart, especially in areas that suffer the marginalising effects of the aforementioned globalising dynamics, processes of retro-innovative re-establishment of self-organising relationships between human and non-human entities of territorial SES, intrinsically and simultaneously conservative and regenerative of territorial heritages.

With reference to the Molise case study of the PRIN “RE-PLACE”, and in particular to one of its most relevant heritage elements, it can be concluded that if there must exist a system of sheep tracks, made up of paths, stops, mown meadows, natural areas, villages, pastoralism, agriculture, civic uses, which also have a value (at different intensity) such as CES, that is, as a producer of biodiversity, bearer of aesthetic values, sense of place, cultural heritage values, recreation and ecotourism, spiritual values, educational values, places of social relations, places of inspiration, cultural heritage values for communities, should be recognised by the local communities themselves, according to a true place-based approach, restoring the autonomous initiative of all local and translocal subjects who wish to participate in the self-government of sustainable development.

Lastly, the “RE-PLACE” project attempts to build new languages, the result of the dialogue between expert knowledge and contextual knowledge, for which experts should be able to get involved in the construction of “co-knowledge”. The evaluation approach of the CES is not objective, but rather related to that of a “socially constructed value practice” (Ernstson, Sorlin 2012). We believe that knowledge of CES is relevant and allows us to have a sufficiently clear picture to set up a truly sustainable and fair policy that aims at restoring eco-social balance. The growing reference to the local dimension of well-being has opened the horizon of the subjective investigation of its perception and its construction (Magnaghi, 2020). Starting from participant observation and design interaction with social practices, it is possible to develop an adequate evaluation tool that has as its objective the maintenance and regeneration of territorial SES.

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## Author contributions

Although this work as a whole arises from the close collaboration between the authors, the writing of § 3,4 is by Francesca Giangrande, the writing of 1 is by Luciano De Bonis, the writing of 2 is by Giovanni Ottaviano.

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