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An innovative approach to the protection of cultural heritage: The case of cultural routes in Chios Island, Greece

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the role of cultural routes in the protection and promotion of cultural heritage context in rural areas is examined within the frame of sustainable and spatial development. The main objective is the development of an integrated strategic plan for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, through the implementation of an innovative methodological approach for the organization and management of cultural routes, incorporating standardized processes with information technology. The proposed methodology is applied on two routes of natural and cultural importance in Chios Island. A Geographic Information System is used as a decision support tool. Spatial data consisted of digitized maps of the study areas, whereas attribute data consisted of in situ observations, featuring the current state of the sites, data from a previous study on the paths and procedures according to ISO 9001. Furthermore, Legal and Spatial Frameworks set the terms and directions on cultural and environmental protection and potential development factors. The comparison between the two elaborated thematic maps (current state and previous study) highlighted the problems related to the preservation state of the study areas: a small percentage of the proposed interventions in 1999 were implemented, whilst the routes have been left abandoned ever since. Additionally, the regions accept severe pressures and risks by growing urbanization tendencies. Final proposals for the protection and promotion of the study areas followed two levels of analysis: the routes and their environment, including conservation interventions and protection zones, as well as the organization of alternative tourism activities. As a result of the proposed study, it is shown that integrated planning through standardized procedures for the management of cultural routes as unified cultural systems, can contribute to the sustainable protection and promotion of cultural heritage in rural areas, offering economic development, social cohesion and cultural as well as the protection of natural resources.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, a number of new perspectives and considerations have been developed by international bodies and institutions of the European Union (EU), thus bringing new standards in the field of cultural heritage. The context of cultural property has expanded beyond individual monuments. At the same time, particular attention is driven to the diversity among basic characteristics of cultural heritage. As a direct consequence, new typologies in the field of cultural heritage are recognized (Thomas-Penette and Berti, 2010), highlighting the significance of the cultural and geographical context within which the cultural object is developed. To this end, the concept of Cultural Routes has been recognized as uniform systems of cultural assets. This newly developed

concept has led to the emergence of new theoretical approaches for the protection of cultural heritage which, at a European level, were based on the recognition of common cultural heritage and the adoption of common guidelines and obligations between the Member States. These new theoretical approaches have also raised new requirements in the field of cultural heritage protection, such as: (a) the need for new mechanisms to describe and protect relations directly linked to the cultural and historical site (Suarze-Inclan, 2005), (b) the need for exchange of knowledge, technologies, policies, processes and practices, (c) the need for comprehensive and continuous recording and monitoring of cultural heritage with the existence of databases on a national and multinational level, and (d) the requirement for new technological tools.

The recognition of cultural routes does not conflict nor does it overlap with other types of cultural elements that may be located within the area of the route, such as monuments, historic and natural sites, etc. On the contrary, they comprise of a unified system, which enhances their significance (CIIC ICOMOS, 2008) and has greater value than the sum of its components. It is every cultural aspect in the area of a route that

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generates the very content of a cultural route. These material and immaterial cultural aspects and values are uniquely combined with the purpose of the route's existence and historical use (Suarze-Inclan, 2005).

As a cultural route is formed and developed in a specific environment, through the interaction of natural and cultural elements and factors, it is expected to be subject to alterations over time. In recent years, there is a risk of losing its cultural identity due to social and economic factors, rapid modernization and the development of mass tourism (Zhou, 2005).

In the sense of a wider set of cultural properties and given the cultural diversity that characterizes the cultural routes, their study and management requires a more interdisciplinary approach regarding the political, economic, social, cultural, technological or artistic framework in which the routes were developed and used. Under this cause, organizations, authorities and institutions have developed rules and programs and organized scientific meetings for the recognition, management and development of cultural routes, at a regional or international level, such as the Council of Europe and ICOMOS.

ICOMOS has produced the Charter on Cultural Routes, which includes the definition and the concept of cultural routes, their classification and the theoretical framework on their preservation, conservation, protection, use and management (CIIC ICOMOS, 2008). To this end, it is essential to consider the route's specific characteristics, such as its scope, geographical characteristics and value as a whole. Therefore, a system of coordinated activities and a special legal framework is needed, followed by analysis procedures of the current state of preservation, in order to develop a strategic plan for the route's protection. Such a plan though should include methods to prevent negative impacts due

to urbanization or signs of neglect in the areas where the route is located. The main objective of the strategic plan should be the preservation of the route's significance and historical value (CIIC ICOMOS, 2008).

Moreover, the program of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe is considered an important tool for the development and promotion of alternative forms of tourism with cultural and sustainable context. For the reinforcement of this program the European Institute of Cultural Routes has been created. The Institute records all the relevant data to the routes and features related bibliographical libraries. The Institute also aims at educating scientists, researchers, students and members of administrative units, regarding cultural routes, studying and analyzing European programs of such causes, organizing events and reinforcing the necessary connection among culture, tourism and the environment. The European Cultural Routes Institute operates under the auspices of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes, which supports the recognition of cultural routes in Europe as tourism destinations, aiming at the sustainable development of the area where they are located (Thomas-Penette, 2011).

On the other hand, only recently, a growing interest in cultural routes as parts of alternative and sustainable tourism originates from their potential impact on economic growth. This holds especially in rural areas, due to their capacity in connecting different cultural assets with places of environmental significance, recreation areas etc., within the formation of cultural networks (Majdoub, 2010). In such a case, the protection and preservation of the essence, the authenticity and integrity of the route's historical value are essential, since those are the elements that attract tourists (CIIC ICOMOS, 2008). Furthermore, from the perspective of cultural routes as tourism destinations, the important

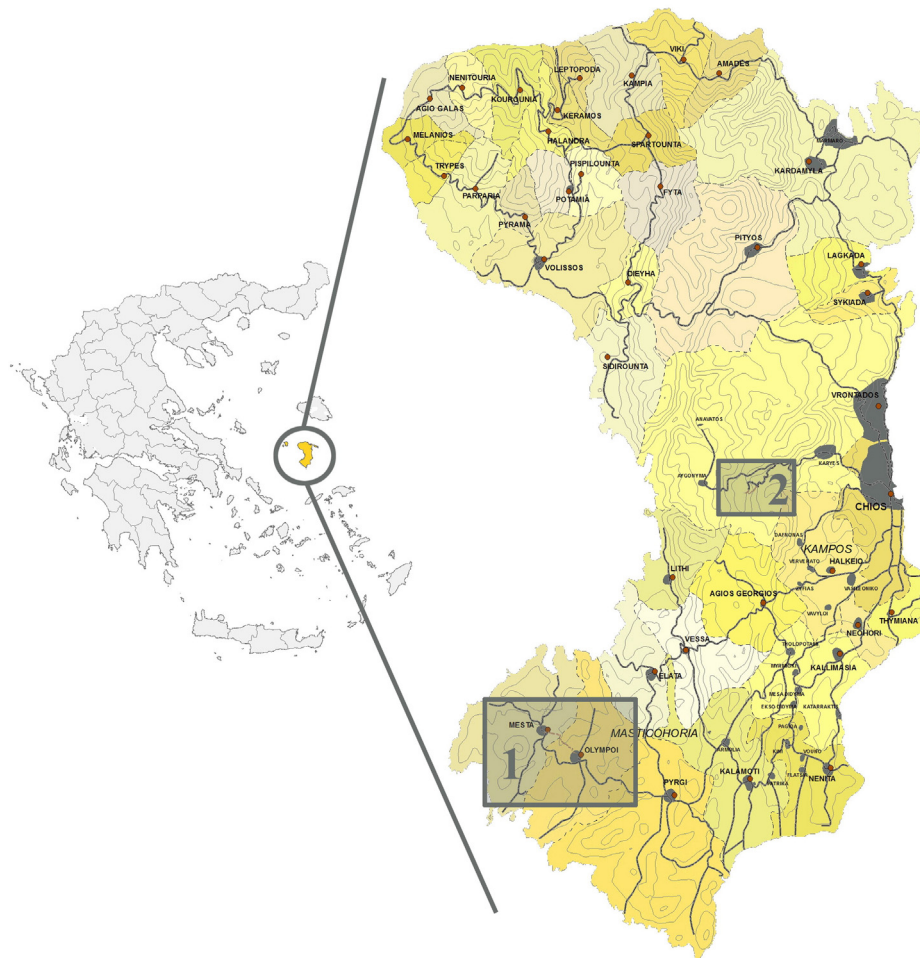


Fig. 1. The two routes under investigation within the geographic context of Chios Island.

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