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Original article

How visitors value traditional built environment? Evidence from a contingent valuation survey

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ABSTRACT

The region of Mani, in Peloponnese, Greece, is a popular tourism destination known for its history and the beauty of its austere, stone-made built environment. In order to examine tourists' preferences and attitudes towards the local architectural heritage a Contingent Valuation survey was conducted. Practically all respondents believe that the local architecture should be preserved and they vote for a development plan aiming at protecting and promoting local architecture. Furthermore, almost half of the visitors would be willing to voluntarily contribute, on average, a lump sum amount of about €75 to maintain the traditional character of Mani. The findings of the survey outline that the traditional architecture is valuable not only in aesthetic, scientific, symbolic, historic or cultural but also in economic terms. The latter could be used in cost-benefit analysis of historic sites by policy and decision makers, and development practitioners wishing to protect the traditional built environment.

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1. Introduction

The necessity of the protection and preservation of cultural heritage is documented through a rich variety of Charters, Conventions and relative legislation. Yet, despite of any kind intention, significant heritage of the past is left to decay and ruin. The gap between theory and practice indicates the existence of some inhibitory interference. It can be easily observed that almost always, and especially under periods of economic recession, the economic dimension of the problem of conservation plays important role. Very often, the absence of funding has been sufficient enough for the confutation of a legally consolidated conservation policy, in relation to cultural heritage. On the other side, the ability of a cultural good (a monument, a site, etc.) to attract visitors is sufficient to obtain the necessary resources for its preservation. Yet, even when some funding is provided its allocation raises many issues, since the entire cultural heritage conservation cannot be covered; what is going to be protected and at which extend, what are the priorities and who decides them, etc. The issue becomes even more complicated, given that heritage protection claims resources from the same public financing aimed at covering other important social needs as well, i.e. health, education,

etc. At the bottom line, the issue of cultural heritage conservation is, mainly, an economic issue. In this frame, the documentation of the economic value of cultural heritage emerges to be of utmost importance. Conservation of cultural heritage has to prove evidence of being a profitable investment in market terms. Nevertheless, the aesthetic, scientific, symbolic, historic or cultural values of heritage are proved insufficient to secure financial sources when monetary terms lay on the other side of the balance [1]. Hence, all these values embodied in cultural heritage need to be translated into monetary values, in order for a cost–benefit analysis to be feasible. Evaluation of cultural goods is the object of systematic research in the field of cultural economics.

Navrud and Ready [2], Provins et al. [3] and EENC [4] give an elaborate review on the necessity to evaluate cultural heritage. Built cultural heritage, in specific, has been largely valued during the last decades [5–10]. Navrud and Ready [2] summarize some main points deriving from the literature review of case studies regarding cultural heritage. A main conclusion is that comparison of studies is difficult due to the variety of the goods and the kind of values estimated. In this frame, conduction of relative research in more and diverse cultural heritage goods can contribute valuably at the general ongoing discussion on estimation of heritage conservation.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned remarks, this paper presents the results of a CV study for the evaluation of the preservation of the architectural heritage in the region of Mani, Greece. More specifically, the study is addressed to visitors of the area and

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aims at estimating the value of the traditional settlements of Mani. In the rest of the paper:

- we provide background information about the study area;
- we present the theoretical and methodological framework that underpins this study;
- we analyze and discuss the results obtained from the CV survey;
- we finally, summarize the main conclusions drawn from the research.

2. Research aim

The economic value of cultural heritage is not univocal, and, further, does not necessarily reflect the true value of a good nor can the market warrant a socially, or even culturally, fair estimation. Yet, for reasons described above, cultural heritage valuation is *a sine qua non* when it comes to decision-making; otherwise, in raw market terms, cultural goods are assigned a zero price [1,11–14].

This research aims at uncovering how the society values architectural heritage using a broad sample of Greek and foreign people visiting the region of Mani, in Peloponnese, Greece. There are several methods for the valuation of cultural goods. This survey uses the contingent valuation (CV) method because it is perhaps the most suitable one for cultural goods considering its applications in the field (e.g. [1,15–24]). One of the main reasons is its ability to capture the total (i.e. use and non-use) economic value of a good (e.g. [25–27]).

3. Theoretical and methodological considerations

3.1. The region of Mani

The region of Mani is a mountainous area with a rich variety of cultural landmarks, traditional settlements and natural beauties, etc., and a very important history (Fig. 1). The region of Mani remained free during the Ottoman Empire and the local population

played a key-role in the Greek revolution, in 1821. As Saitas [28] mentions, in the period of 1821–1830, there were almost 200 settlements at the Mani peninsula, 7 castles, 800 fortresses and towers and 6000–10,000 warriors out of a total population of 32,000–35,000. Mani lost most of its population in the decades of 1950s to 1970s. Today, Mani is a relatively vivid region of 20,000 inhabitants [29] and of a variety of economic activities. Tourism, especially in some areas, is a healthy form of activity, mainly, during the summer period.

The local architectural heritage consists of a variety of monuments, scattered buildings and rural villages. Existence of primitive, monolithic forms of structures shows evidence of habitation during ancient times. These forms influenced the later evolution patterns of newer forms of settlements and local physiognomy, which is being fixed during the 18th and 19th centuries. The main characteristic of the traditional built environment is the use of local stone and wood as basic building materials. Morphologically, the buildings of Mani are austere with few perimetric openings and inclined roofs. Houses are, mainly, one or two-storied. The very unique local architectural element is the “tower-houses”, constructed as house-fortresses for safety reasons. Usually, these type of houses belonged to rich captains or *beys* [28].

Many of Mani’s settlements were designated as “traditional settlements” by law in 1978 [30]. The settlement of Vatheia, in specific, is entirely preserved in its initial form (Fig. 2). It is one of the six settlements, in Greece, that were included in the “Program for the Utilization of the Traditional Settlements by the National Tourism Organization (NTO)”, in the 1970s, which aimed at the protection and preservation of the architectural heritage of these settlements. Yet, the aim of the program regarded, mainly, the tourism development of the areas and did not, in all cases, have the expected results.

Local building tradition changed from the decade of 1950s, when modern-day materials and construction techniques replaced the traditional ones. Yet, many old buildings have been rehabilitated and re-used today, e.g. many of the tower-houses have been turned into hotels of very high aesthetic quality.

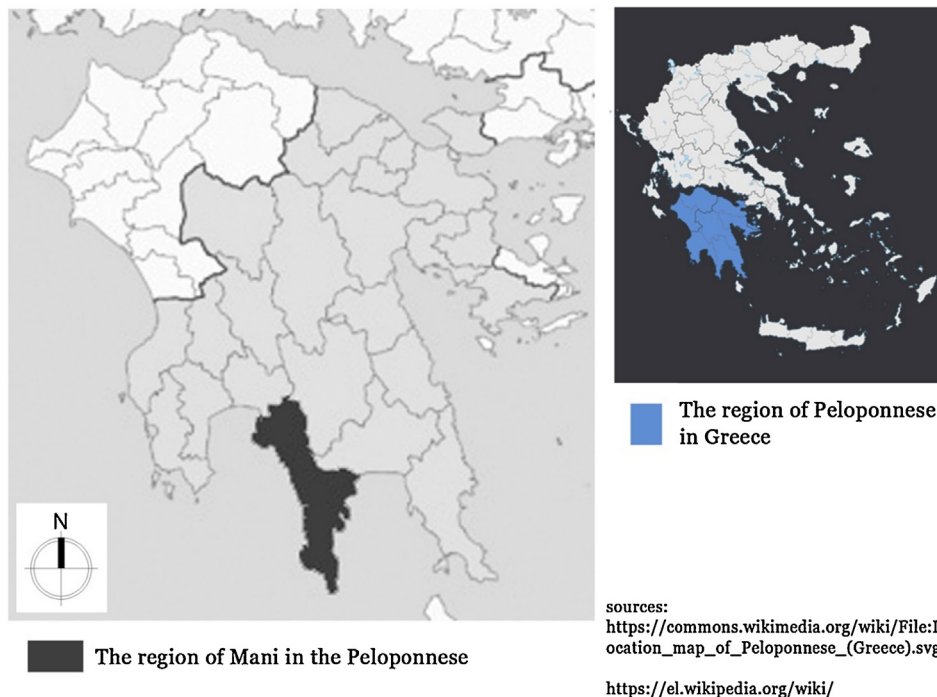


Fig. 1. Map of the region of Mani.

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