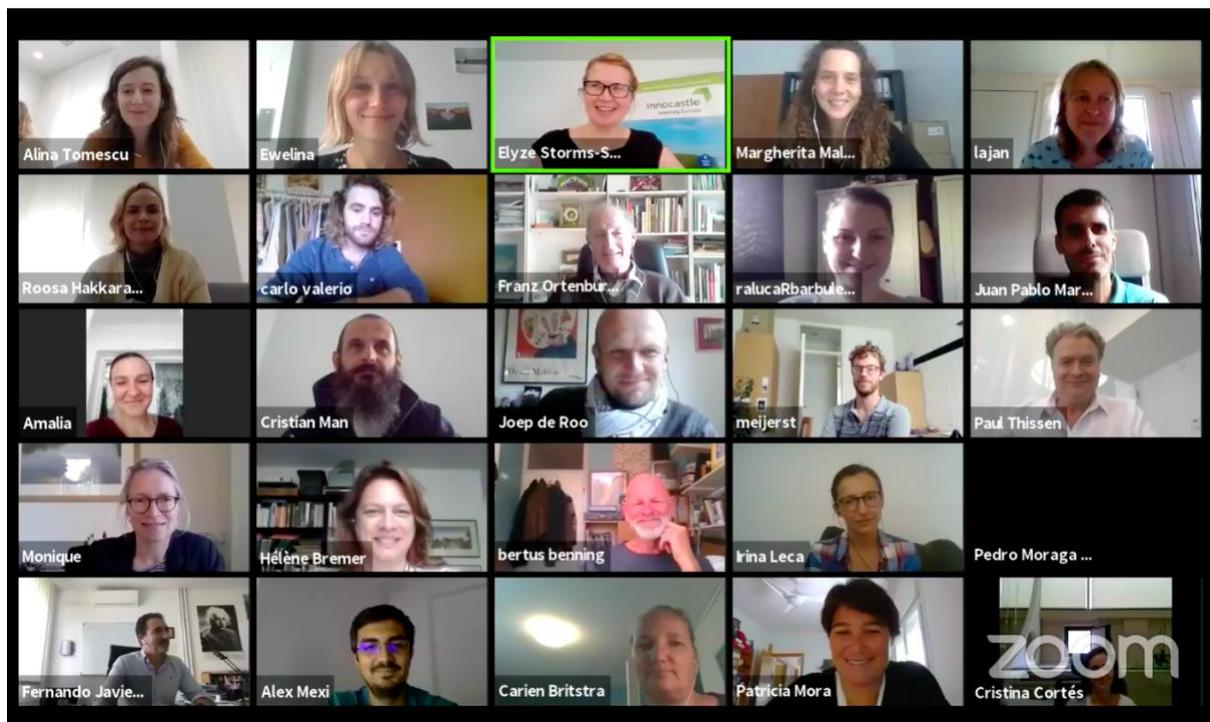


PGI05215 - INNOCASTLE

Title Innocastle Mid Term Conference Report - Guidelines and inspirational examples for adapting heritage policies in times of COVID-19



The mid-term conference of Innocastle was organized on the 24th of September 2020 as a webinar. Followed by a lively discussion, over 100 online participants from all over Europe and beyond participated with their questions and ideas. During the conference, partners and stakeholders of the European project Innocastle discussed the impact of COVID-19 for the heritage sector, specifically for rural estates. The conference was moderated by Elyze Storms-Smeets on behalf of the Province of Gelderland, the Netherlands.

[All presentations and videos are accessible in the Innocastle library.](#)

[The full conference is still available via Facebook Live.](#)

Welcome from Peter Drenth, deputy of the province of Gelderland, the Netherlands



Peter Drenth, the deputy of the province of Gelderland, opened the conference by reflecting on how the province as a regional government looks at Innocastle and what is the importance of working in a European project for the province.

The deputy highlighted the importance of working together to ensure sustainable conservation and economic stability of estates, manors and castles. He also mentioned the *Reuversweerd* living lab as an excellent example of a multifunctional learning platform where students participate in the transformation process. Reinventing the economic base, restoring old parts of the estates for a more sustainable usage, and getting more people interested and involved will be of high importance for estates across Europe.

Official launch of the Baseline Survey

Youtube presentation



An important project publication, the baseline survey was launched at the Innocastle Mid Term conference. The survey forms a basis of comparison between the four partner regions (Gelderland in the Netherlands, West Flanders in Belgium, Badajoz in Spain and Center Development Region in Romania). It identifies five shared characteristics of rural estates across Europe and proposes 13 policy recommendations. *The full document can be accessed [here](#).*

Country house survival

[Youtube presentation and slides](#)



Key-note speaker, **dr. Ben Cowell**, director general of Historic Houses Association from the UK, looked at various ways of adaptation by country house owners in difficult times, in the past and now. Cowell also reflected on the so-called Gower's report, a document formulated by the British government on the survival of British country houses and estates after the Second World War. The COVID-19 crisis has marked another point in history: can country houses survive?

During the presentation, the economic consequences on the UK tourism and hospitality sector were discussed. Normally, the 320 members of Historic Houses (privately owned country houses) that are open to the public would welcome over 26.8 million visitors. Now only about 50 or 60 are open. The country house business that was hit the worst was weddings. As a consequence of the pandemic, 267 million pounds have been lost and thousands of jobs have been lost or are at risk.

Safe reopening of most houses has taken place over the summer, and ways for visitors to enjoy sites on COVID-19- secure ways were introduced during the presentation. Virtual tours, drive-in cinemas, food markets and staycations were shown as innovative examples of adapting to the pandemic.

During the live Q&A followed by the presentation Cowell gave more tips that could help estate owners today. The recommendations of the 1950s report are just as relevant today: governments should try to keep the sites in private ownership, and support owners with tax reductions and incentives and offer subsidies and grants for emergency repairs.

Subsequently, the five Innocastle partners pitched five relevant topics: 1. digitisation of heritage (Province of Badajoz); 2. democratisation of heritage (National Trust); 3: the value of green heritage (Province of Gelderland/ Gelders Genootschap); 4: potential for staycations (Ghent University College); 5: rebuilding rural communities (National Institute for Heritage).

Pitch 1: Digitisation of heritage



Fernando Álvarez from the University of Extremadura (Spain) presented how information communication technologies can benefit the promotion of cultural heritage.

Limus European project was introduced as an example of how ICT's can best be used at heritage sites. The project implemented a smartphone application that could be used as a guide when visiting heritage sites.

Pitch 2: Democratisation of heritage

YouTube presentation



Catherine Leonard for the National Trust (United Kingdom) talked about how COVID-19 could be seen as an opportunity to involve more people, enhance greater knowledge sharing and promote diversity and inclusivity in the heritage field.

Thanks to all of us communicating through digital platforms, it is now easier to reach and build more intimate relationships with a wider audience. Due to the travelling restrictions, the focus of rural estates has also turned to attracting locals and people living around the castles and estates. Serving the interests of local communities and involving volunteers can be seen as important takeaways from the crisis. Because of many other activities being on hold, many people who could not otherwise be reached are now getting involved. For example, young and urban volunteers want to be involved in conserving estates around nature, for example.

Pitch 3: The value of green heritage

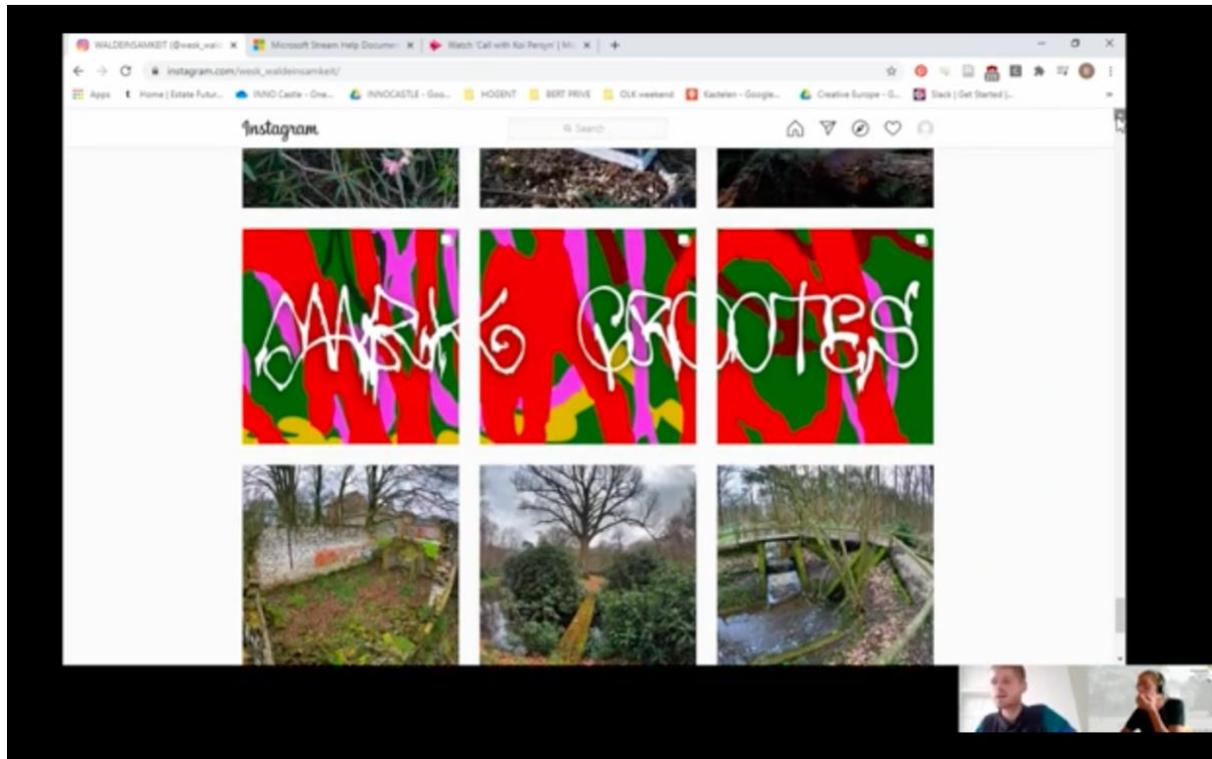
Youtube presentation and [slides](#)



Elyze Storms-Smeets from Gelders Genootschap in the Netherlands shared experiences of governments and estates owners in visiting outdoors, green heritage and nature. In the province of Gelderland, there are over 500 rural estates from which many are open to the public. The pitch explored ways to enjoy the outdoors (green heritage/ nature) as healthy and safe places while preserving the natural and heritage qualities. Guidelines included (1) spreading the visitors through better communication and route planning, (2) use of ‘covid-circles’, (3) preventing damage, noise pollution and waste disposal, (4) and thinking of temporary funding possibilities to manage these sites.

Pitch 4: Re-thinking productive estates

Youtube presentation



Koi Persyn, an art curator of a project *Waldeinsamkeit*^{[P]_{SEP}} from Belgium introduced the participants to the ideas behind the project that stemmed from German romanticism and the beauty of staying alone in the forest. Together with 8 international artists, the project group lived in solar residences and worked in different parts of the garden. Originally planned as a sculpture garden, rapid changes in the group working methodology had to be made.

The project was a great opportunity for artists to take risks and explore working in new, open-air conditions. The project resulted in an open public presentation day with tours to over 200 visitors, where works of the artists were shown to local and also visitors from other Belgian cities. The public open day gave rise to a second chapter of the project, which evolved to the new exhibition *Gallery Weekend* as a counter reaction to the commercial circuit of Brussels.

Pitch 5: Rebuilding rural communities

Presentation



The screenshot shows a presentation slide with the following content:

- Innocastle Interreg Europe** logo and the European Union flag with the text "European Union European Regional Development Fund".
- Large green graphic element on the left side.
- Text: **Rebuilding Rural Communities**
- Contact information: **Irina Leca**, National Institute of Heritage, Romania, Irina.leca@patrimoni.ro
- Footer: 24 Sept. 2020, Innocastle Midterm Conference
- A small video inset in the top right corner shows Irina Leca speaking.

Irina Leca from the National Institute of Heritage in Romania talked about the increasing number of grassroots heritage projects to rebuild rural communities. In Romania, over 16 000 rural heritage sites are faced with a lot of challenges such as difficulties in finding volunteers, communities lacking resources and knowledge on heritage protection. However, many people are returning to rural areas and want to be involved in grassroots initiatives, and benefits of heritage are slowly making their way into public policies.

Three initiatives engaging rural communities were introduced: (1) Ambulance of Monuments on emergency conservation of heritage sites, (2) Castle Hotel Daniel on private investment and catalyst for cultural tourism in the area, (3) and Adopt a House in Rosia Montana, an NGO initiative for a mining cultural landscape. These projects have helped to keep rural heritage resilient and communities cohesive during these times.

Questions from the audience

How could regional authorities lower barriers for private owners?

– Joep De Roo, Eurodite

Local authorities in the UK have a big role in business activity, in particular the licensing of events or planning permissions. The government of England has just published a white paper, a policy proposal for planning, where more room would be given to local authorities on planning decisions. This can be both a threat and an opportunity particularly for private owners of old houses, also when considering climate change. We have all these old houses that are complicated places, with natural processes in relation to the heating of those buildings. For example, we are going to need to address the use of fossil fuel energy. Therefore, there should be a bit more relaxation of the controls that are sometimes applied to local businesses.

– Ben Cowell, director general of Historic Houses Association

Example: digital Day of the Castle

- Heidi van Limburg Stirum, Dutch Castle Foundation

*Because of the lockdown in Spring the Dutch Castle Foundation had to adapt. Instead of organising visits, performances and meetings on site, they created an online version of the Day of the Castle, where people could read all the stories online. For more information:
<https://digitaal.dagvanhetkasteel.nl/>*

Professor Fernando Álvarez, having seen the Dutch example of online content to see and visit heritage sites, could you tell a little more about digital possibilities, such as apps when visiting a country house?

– Elyze Storms-Smeets, province of Gelderland

The idea is that the smartphone is a huge gateway to gather information from around you without having to interact. Today it is a very useful tool, as everyone is carrying that computer in their pocket. You can effortlessly obtain multimedia information, in any environment where you have wireless communication capability. The only problem we are experiencing now, is that to be able to provide that information in a museum, they do not have a Wi-Fi connection. However, if you have Wi-Fi you can transmit almost any information and you can use any physical signal to establish that communication channel and provide rich information to the visitors.

– Fernando Álvarez, University of Extremadura

Many estate owners are very dependent on elderly volunteers. How can country houses and estates survive without all the volunteers now during COVID-19 to keep their shops open, to keep their gardens nice? How can we help owners to make it easier and what way?

– Rosmarijn Boenders, province Gelderland

We have not been able to organize that many activities this year. Many of them have been cancelled, but luckily we were still open to the public and used volunteers to guide our visitors while following COVID-19-measures. Bigger problem of organizing events was on restrictions from the authorities, because volunteers still wanted to come. It depends a lot on where the activities take place.

– Tibor Teleki, owner of Teleki Castle, Romania

Closing speech by Paul Thissen



Paul Thissen from the province of Gelderland gave a closing speech on the impacts of COVID-19 on the Innocastle project. Despite the negative consequences of the pandemic, COVID-19 has also worked as a catalyst for modernising ticket sales at the province. Historically, estates across Europe have been through much worse than what we now experience. Partners should keep sharing solutions on common concerns such as preservation, sustainability and economic reinforcement of estates. At the Province of Gelderland, focus is on climate adaptation to prevent fragmentation of estates and estate zones, and they are happy to share knowledge and expertise on how to adapt to ever-changing climate.

Other good practices shared during the webinar

[Digital Day of The Castle](#)

[ARCHE Summer School](#)

[Everyone needs nature \(National Trust\)](#)

Further information and contact details

The mid-term conference has been organised by the Province of Gelderland, Gelders Genootschap and Eurodite in collaboration with all the Innocastle partners. All partners, relevant stakeholders and all other interested parties are warmly welcome to send comments, feedback and inquiries to Elyze Storms-Smeets e.storms@geldersgenootschap.nl or Alina Tomescu tomescu@eurodite.eu.