



# **Sustainable tourism: an opportunity for regions to benefit from their cultural and natural heritage**

A policy brief from the Policy Learning Platform  
on environment and resource efficiency

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## Summary

The policy brief provides a definition of cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism and explores the links between them. It demonstrates that cultural and natural heritage is a significant asset for local communities and makes an overview of European Union policies and initiatives in the field. It also showcases how Interreg Europe projects fit into the picture by responding to challenges at the intersection of cultural and natural heritage and tourism.

### Defining cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values (ICOMOS, 2002). Cultural identity can be **tangible** such as the built environment, natural environment and artefacts or **intangible** such as habits, traditions, oral history, etc.<sup>1</sup>

**Natural capital** embraces natural resources, land and ecosystems and is also essential for delivering ecosystem services that underpin our economy. EU-wide Natura 2000 network of protected territories offers plenty of opportunities for ecotourism and outdoor recreational activities.

**Sustainable tourism** can be defined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNWTO, 2005). Additionally, World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) emphasizes that 'sustainable tourism provides more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues'.

### Linking cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism

During past years there has been a shift in the heritage discourse from a conservation-oriented approach to a value-oriented approach, meaning the **acknowledgement of the value of cultural and natural heritage for various spheres of life**. The London Declaration of the EC Conference on Sustainable Europe's Cultural Heritage (2004) stated, among other things, that 'cultural heritage has a considerable impact in many areas of economic and regional development, **sustainable tourism**, job creation, improving skills through technological innovation, environment, social identity, education and construction'. (European Commission, 2004). Consequently, cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism are closely linked. Cultural and natural heritage has a positive impact on sustainable tourism while tourism can be sustainable only if it includes more intimate interaction with the local culture and the local environment.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cultureindevelopment.nl/cultural\\_heritage/what\\_is\\_cultural\\_heritage](http://www.cultureindevelopment.nl/cultural_heritage/what_is_cultural_heritage)

ICOMOS, International Cultural Tourism Charter. Principles And Guidelines For Managing Tourism At Places Of Cultural And Heritage Significance. ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee. 2002.





There is a number of additional links which could be made between cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism:

- Cultural and natural heritage is a potential source of interest and attraction for tourists but tourist activities could create additional pressures, in particular environmental pressure but also identity pressure on the local communities in case of high number of tourists. Moreover, there could be negative impacts mainly through uncontrolled visitation and related land use changes, disturbances of species, invasive alien species, waste or pollution (IEEP, 2009).
- The tourism potential of cultural and natural assets may facilitate the preservation and restoration efforts, if performed in a sustainable and responsible way. For example, eco-tourism can support biodiversity conservation providing revenues for the management of Natura 2000 sites.
- Natural heritage (i.e. Natura 2000 sites) has an enormous potential to attract tourists in a number of activities such as hiking, biking, fishing, swimming, camping, horse riding, hunting, bird- and nature-watching (IEEP, 2009).<sup>2</sup>
- Nature and culture tourism often go hand in hand as tourists who value one often value the other and also because they are often closely situated. For instance, of the 365 World Heritage Sites in the EU, almost 20% are located in, or directly on the border of a Natura 2000 site. A further 142 sites (or 42%) are within walking distance (2 km or less away).<sup>3</sup>

### What is happening at EU level?

Cultural heritage is one of the priorities in the [EU Work Plan for Culture \(2015-2018\)](#) in line with the [European Agenda for Culture](#) which is the strategic framework for the cultural policies of the EU. Priority topics to be implemented on Member State level include participatory governance of cultural heritage; skills, training and knowledge transfer. The work plan calls for the identification of ways to create a European tourism offer based on cultural heritage assets. Further to that, spotlight is given on exploring how digitisation of cultural content and digital services can foster the expansion of trans-European tourism networks.

In the tourism sector, EU competences are to 'complement, support and coordinate the action of the Member States'. The [Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism](#) is the main EU strategic document on sustainable tourism. The Agenda highlights that 'creating the right balance between the welfare of tourists, the needs of the natural and cultural environment and the development and competitiveness of destinations and businesses requires an integrated and holistic policy approach'. Other policy instruments on sustainable tourism include the **EU Ecolabel** and the **EMAS registration**. The [EU Ecolabel](#) is a voluntary tool available to tourism accommodation services willing to build upon and promote their environmental performance. Specific EU Ecolabel criteria have been developed for tourist accommodation and campsite services. [Eco-management and Audit Scheme \(EMAS\)](#) registration allows actors in the tourism sector to improve their environmental

<sup>2</sup> IEEP, 2009, Assessing Socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000: A toolkit for practitioners

<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/pdf/Nature-and-Culture-leaflet-web.pdf>



performance and promote the quality of their services. [EMAS best environmental management practice](#) document can guide them in this process. **European Tourism Indicators System for sustainable destination management (ETIS)** has been developed to help measure the performance of tourist destinations in relation to sustainability.<sup>4</sup>

### The question of funding

The policy brief on protection and sustainable management of cultural heritage, developed by the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform, Environment and Resource Efficiency in November 2016 highlights a number of European programmes and funding opportunities such as [European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage and the European Heritage Label](#)<sup>5</sup>. Other significant support funding mechanisms and initiatives for culture and cultural heritage include [Creative Europe](#) (EUR 1,460,000,000 for support of cultural and creative sectors including cultural heritage)<sup>6</sup>; [2018, European Year of Cultural Heritage's](#)<sup>7</sup>; Additional funding sources which address issues around cultural heritage include: European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF); Connecting Europe Facility; COSME; 'Europe for Citizens' Programme; and Horizon 2020. In fact, numerous Interreg programmes have selected "culture heritage" and "sustainable tourism development" as key investment priorities.<sup>8</sup>

Altogether, the 2014-2020 Growth and Jobs programmes support investments in sustainable use and protection of nature that at the same time have many spill-over effects on tourism and other sectors. In addition, the **LIFE fund** thematic priorities on resource efficiency, green and circular economy are also suitable for the nexus between natural heritage and sustainable tourism. The Natural Capital Financing Facility (NCFF), supports natural capital investments that can generate revenues and save costs, among which investments in eco-tourism.<sup>9</sup>

Within the **COSME programme** EASME supports the promotion and development of transnational thematic tourism products linked to cultural and creative industries.<sup>10</sup> Around 6.1 million EUR have been earmarked for 2018.

### How to bring cultural and natural heritage and sustainable tourism together: challenges at regional level

The exploitation of cultural and natural heritage for tourism development and recreation is increasing rapidly. This can be both an advantage in terms of boosting

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators\\_fr](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators_fr)

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/heritage-label/frequently-asked-questions\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/heritage-label/frequently-asked-questions_en)

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/heritage-label\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/heritage-label_en)

<sup>7</sup> [https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/about\\_en](https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/about_en)

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/cultural-creative-industries/eu-funding\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/cultural-creative-industries/eu-funding_en)

<sup>9</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/funding/financial\\_instruments/documents/ncff\\_leaflet.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/funding/financial_instruments/documents/ncff_leaflet.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/easme/en/cos-tourcci-2017-3-03-supporting-promotion-and-development-transnational-thematic-tourism-products>



potential for local economic development, job creation and branding, and a challenge in ensuring proper conservation of this fragile heritage.

#### *Balance between economic benefits and pressure*

One of the main challenges for developing sustainable tourism around cultural and natural heritage assets is striking the right balance between engaging into profitable activities and at the same time not damaging the assets at stake. Finding this balance requires high level of awareness among citizens and policy makers of the vulnerability of the assets and the careful approach which goes with it.

#### *Pressures caused by tourism*

Tourism is often associated with different environmental and social pressures at the tourist destinations. These include the production of waste, environmental impact caused by transport, etc. Careful management at local and regional level are needed to prevent and manage these pressures including minimisation of resource use, proper waste management, introduction of sustainable forms of transport, etc. Social improvements may include the improvement of the quality of tourism-related jobs, safety of local communities, etc.

#### *Conservation*

Cultural heritage is a valuable regional asset which is often in need of proper conservation, preservation and restoration. There is know-how which exists around conservation and which needs to be available to regional authorities. Conservation requires skilled professionals who are able to evaluate the state of the cultural heritage and are able to deploy state-of-the-art techniques.

#### *Awareness and long-term thinking*

There is limited awareness of the negative impacts of intensive tourism and inadequate promotion and awareness of innovative offers including cultural heritage tourism, as well as accessibility of those offers. The issue requires targeted efforts on behalf of cultural and natural heritage specialists as well as regional and local authorities. Better awareness would also lead to longer term strategic thinking and anchoring of cultural and natural heritage tourism in regional development strategies.

#### *Digitalisation*

There is no sufficient ICT uptake in the area of cultural and natural heritage. The fact that most natural, cultural and historical heritage has not been digitalised yet hampers the access of the general public and tourists.

### **Regional solutions developed through interregional cooperation**

Interreg Europe provides support for conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage, recognising that regional actors are well-placed to undertake this work and benefit from the exchange of experience with other areas facing similar challenges.

Different aspects of cultural and natural heritage and their link to sustainable tourism are addressed in the projects supported by Interreg Europe Programme. Deploying natural and cultural heritage assets for the development and promotion of innovative



and responsible tourism strategies, including intangible and industrial heritage, is a key theme for [CHRISTA](#). [Cult-RinG](#) puts forward cultural routes as tools to unlock tourism potential and to promote EU's shared and diverse cultural identities. [Green Pilgrimage](#) focuses on ancient pilgrim routes which are seeing a rise in visitors' numbers. [EPICAH](#) also addresses tourism development and natural and cultural heritage protection in cross-border areas emphasising on the development of sustainable, homogeneous and consistent tools for heritage preservation to be used across the border. Combining the traditional forms of exhibiting heritage with ICT-based solutions is especially relevant for tourism as it raises citizens' interest in heritage and increases the visits to museums and heritage sites. [CD-ETA](#) aims to improve the adoption of digital approaches in the natural and cultural heritage sector.

There are positive examples from Interreg Europe projects in promoting sustainable tourism around cultural and natural heritage. Funded projects demonstrate the value of cooperation at regional level and a database of good practices has been put together. Examples of regional solutions from Interreg Europe projects are presented below:



### *Policy learning guidelines on Industrial Heritage Tourism*

Industrial heritage includes remains from Europe's industrial past such as abandoned factories and warehouses but also machines, means of transport and infrastructure, as well as workers settlements. It is a valuable evidence of European development in the past centuries. Industrial heritage is often found in regions in decline and if restored and valued it could be a significant source of tourism-related revenues.

The policy learning [guidelines on industrial heritage tourism](#) developed within CHRISTA project include topics such as: research, evaluation and protection of the industrial heritage; conservation and conversion of industrial heritage; creating a 'state-of-the-art' cultural tourism site. The guidelines can be very useful to regional or local authorities and tour operators who would like to restore, convert and present industrial heritage in line with modern practices.



### *Guide on cross-border cultural heritage tourism - Two countries: one destination*

In this guide the European region of the Atlantic Axis (Galicia-North of Portugal) presents the rich tourism resources of the Euro-region and the regions' capacity to value them through a common brand: "Two countries one destination". The [guide](#), which is one of the good practices analysed by EPICAH partners, is part of the strategy designed by Atlantic Axis and its members to present the Euro-region as a common tourist destination and make the border a tourist product itself. The guide covers the topic of religious tourism around the Way of Saint James' both on the Spanish and Portuguese sides of the border. It also addresses the issue of ethnographic and castle tourism and eno-tourism. It makes an overview of the natural heritage in the two regions. EPICAH's idea is to extend this philosophy of Two Countries, One Destination to other EU borders.

The guide is targeted at international and local tourists and tour operators. It does not contain policy insights but can be an inspiration for border regions willing to demonstrate and valorise their cultural heritage in a common manner. The innovativeness of the guide comes from the fact that the regions present a common offer, market it jointly and in this way attempt to create a demand for tourism around borders. The guide was widely disseminated. Some 65.000 copies have been printed out of which 40.000 copies were distributed with press media and other 20,000 in the tourist offices in 36 cities of the Euro-region and in a Tourism Fair that was organised to boost tourism in regional cities.



### *Promoting region's vegetable heritage through "Gîtes de France" tourist accommodations*



[Espaces naturels régionaux \(ENRx\)](#), a partner in IMPACT project, is a public authority responsible for supporting regional natural parks by providing expertise and innovative solutions. ENRx has been collaborating with Gîtes de France accommodation network in promoting sustainable tourism in the territories of Regional Natural Parks. An example of this cooperation is the project "[Jardins Vitrines](#)" ("Showcase gardens") which aims to promote the preservation and enhancement of local vegetable varieties by creating showcase gardens near tourist accommodations. The purpose is to demonstrate regional vegetable heritage by planting seeds from older vegetable varieties. In 2017, 20 Gîtes de France operators are engaged in the initiative. They received a kit of seeds of 12 regional vegetables varieties by the Regional Center of Genetic Resources and presented these vegetables to their customers. ENRx and Gites de France wished to extend the network outside the territories of regional natural parks: in 2018, 28 members will cultivate and cook regional vegetables for tourists. 2018 should see the establishment of common signing posts for these vegetable gardens as well as the publication of a collection of recipes.



*Applying ICT solutions in museums - SEE for Me: The "intelligent audio-guide" project*

The project "[See for Me](#)", supported by ERDF and implemented in Florence (Italy), addressed the problem of creating a smart audio guide that adapts to the actions and interests of museum visitors, understanding both the context of the visit and what the visitor is looking at. The smart audio guide, deployable on the most common smartphones in use, perceives the context and is able to interact with users: it performs automatic recognition of artworks, to enable a semi-automatic interaction with the wearer. User-friendliness, interaction and high level of applicability are key features of the audio guide, that also indicate potential for transferring the practice to other museums motivated to improve the experience of their visitors. The system has been tested at the Bargello National Museum of Florence including successful usability test through SUS questionnaires.

All of the above practices contribute to better valuing, treasuring and, hence, preserving cultural and natural heritage while stimulating their use for a more sustainable and fulfilling tourism.





## The Way Forward

- There is a number of economically disadvantaged regions in Europe with valuable cultural and natural heritage which can become a source of economic development. As cultural and natural heritage is a potential source for regional economic development for these regions their value should be revealed, promoted and treasured. Such is the case of EPICAH whereby two border regions embark on a joint promotion of their cultural and natural heritage to create more economic opportunities for local people.
- Cultural and natural heritage is vulnerable to potential pressures from tourism and therefore needs to be protected and preserved using best available knowledge in order to remain a source of attraction and economic benefits for the future. To balance protection of natural and cultural heritage and tourism is not an easy task. However, in many European regions much experience has been gained in, for example, visitor management and techniques as well as processes that minimise the impact of tourism on heritage assets.
- In order to promote sustainable tourism linked to cultural and natural heritage, regions and touroperators need to create innovative and original niche offers and unique visitor experience. Hands-on tools such as CHRISTA's guide on industrial heritage and EPICAH's guide on cross-border tourism are necessary, the latter covering a number of niche markets such as enotourism, spa tourism, equestrian tourism, etc.
- Trends in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) such as growing broadband and mobile connectivity, the access to online data, etc. determine also the future of the environmental and cultural assets management. Regions and cities need to take advantage of the opportunities that digitalisation provides for better access to heritage assets and engagement of audiences. Tools like the "See for Me" interactive guide adds to the personalisation of visitors' experience.
- Sustainable tourism development requires working with bottom-up approach and, an active participation of all relevant stakeholders including businesses from the tourism sector. Strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building is also essential. Exchange of successful models, initiatives such as "Showcase gardens", tools and approaches is key to that. All Interreg Europe projects in cultural and natural heritage cater for this objective.
- Regional and local authorities can explore and strengthen the links between natural and cultural heritage to generate economic benefits and employment opportunities in key sectors such as sustainable tourism. This is in line with the [Action Plan for nature, people and the economy](#), that also calls for identifying and disseminating good practice case studies for integrated management of natural and cultural heritage in Natura 2000.



## Sources of further information

- [European Agenda for Culture](#)
- [Work Plan for Culture \(2015-2018\)](#)
- [ICOMOS, International Cultural Tourism Charter. Principles And Guidelines For Managing Tourism At Places Of Cultural And Heritage Significance](#). ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee. 2002.
- [UNWTO, “Making tourism more sustainable - A guide for Policy Makers”, 2005](#)
- [Tourism Sustainability Group, Action for More Sustainable European Tourism, 2007](#)
- [JRC, Best Environmental Management Practice in the Tourism Sector, 2013](#)
- [EC, The Guide on EU Funding for the Tourism Sector, 2014-2020](#)
- [IEEP, Assessing Socio-economic benefits of Natura 2000: A toolkit for practitioners, 2009](#)
- [The N2K Group, Scoping Study on the Review of Links and Complementary between Natura 2000 and Cultural Sites](#)

## Relevant initiatives and networks

- [European Heritage Awards](#) celebrates and promotes best practices related to heritage conservation, management, research, education and communication. In this way, it contributes to a stronger public recognition of cultural heritage as a strategic resource for Europe’s society and economy.<sup>11</sup>
- [European Heritage Alliance 3.3](#) is an informal platform of 44 European and international networks active in the wider field of heritage. It brings together civil society, historic cities and villages, educational institutions, museums and similar organisations.<sup>12</sup>
- [European Creative Industries Alliance \(ECIA\)](#) is an integrated policy initiative that combines policy learning with 8 concrete actions on innovation vouchers, better access to finance and cluster excellence & cooperation. It is an open platform that brings together policy-makers and business support practitioners from 28 partner organisations and 12 countries.
- [European Cultural Tourism Network](#) is pan-European network of destinations, authorities, NGOs and research institutes for sustainable cultural tourism development and promotion across Europe.
- [EUROPARC Federation](#) is a network for Europe’s natural and cultural heritage that works to improve the management of Protected Areas in Europe through international cooperation, exchange of ideas and experience, and by influencing

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.europeanheritageawards.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://europeanheritagealliance.eu/>



policy. The network set up the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas.

- [Virtual Tourism Observatory](#) aims to support policy makers and businesses develop better strategies for a more competitive European tourism sector. The VTO provides access to a broad collection of information, data and analysis on current trends in the tourism sector.
- [The International Ecotourism Society](#) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting eco-tourism. It provides guidelines and standards, training, technical assistance, and educational resources.<sup>13</sup>

Image credit: Photo by Pixabay from [Pexels](#)

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ecotourism.org/ties-overview>

*#SustainableTourism #CulturalHeritage  
#NaturalHeritage #Cooperation  
#PolicyLearning #InterregEurope*



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