



Tourism in Transition? Post-COVID tourist flows in Vesuvius National Park

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ABSTRACT

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National parks represent an interesting observation point to deepen the theme of ecotourism and raise wider considerations on the development policies of these areas. They could be defined as the most evident symbol of protected natural areas, that are not only important tourist attractions but also the expression of a complex and multifaceted system in which biodiversity, history, art, and local traditions are mixed to characterize the territories.

The arguments presented in this paper are based on empirical evidence of a survey carried out in the Vesuvius National Park (VNP) in Italy involving 1,500 tourists. Through the comparison of data collected there before and after the pandemic, the research aims to understand if in the Vesuvian area a transition towards ecotourism is in progress, as is already happening in other parts of the world.

To achieve this purpose, the research provided for two analyzes. On the one hand, it identified the profile of tourists to understand if in post-pandemic times travelers have different characteristics from those who had been intercepted before COVID-19. Secondly, the study compared changes in the impact of tourist flows, using a synthetic tourism sustainability index.

According to the results of the study, it is possible to identify different aspects that make up the users' profile, develop a sustainability index and assess the local impact of tourist flows and, finally, reflect on socio-economic development processes.

KEYWORDS

Ecotourism
National Park
Vesuvius
Post-COVID tourism

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Introduction

Various moments of economic, social and health crisis have followed one another throughout history. However, the crisis caused by COVID-19 has surely represented a novelty. The pandemic has affected the whole world at the same time, causing long-term damage of a different nature than past crises. Not only did the world literally stop with the national lockdowns gradually imposed in all local areas, but the pandemic has severely impacted multiple economic sectors leading to losses in earnings and a consequent decline in employment (OECD, 2020). Similarly, people's social lives and psychological well-being have been undermined (e.g. Arthi and Parman, 2021; Zacher and Rudolph, 2021). Globally, citizens have had to deal with an unprecedented and shocking situation. COVID-19 could thus be defined as the main worldwide fracture in the history of humanity, so much so that the history of humanity can be divided between pre-COVID and post-COVID (Hanafi, 2020; Paura, 2020) with new habits, consumption patterns, and behaviors in the post-COVID world (Habersaat *et al.*, 2020; Yu *et al.*, 2021). In this revolutionized landscape, some scholars (Iaquinto, 2020) have emphasized that the ease and speed human mobility and the transfer of goods characterizing contemporary society has contributed to the spread of contagion. Tourists, often crowded into confined spaces (such as cruise ships, planes, or buses, but also museums, exhibitions, and hostels) have indeed been among the main "vectors" of the spread of the virus, globally amplifying the risk of transmission. Recognizing this role played by tourism, almost all governments required transport companies, tour operators, travel agencies and tourism companies around the world to stop operating during the most acute phase of virus transmission (e.g. Niewiadomski, 2020; Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020).

Despite the fact that citizens around the world have understood the responsibilities and potential risks of mobility, the pandemic has clearly shown that tourism is a social need. As soon as it was once again possible, in fact, many people decided to return to engaging in tourism (UNWTO, 2020). It is evident that tourism has undergone an inevitable reconfiguration in the post-COVID era. In other words, the fear of contagion has helped to stimulate new coping strategies among people and the adoption of more cautious travel behaviors. Despite the potential risks, therefore, people have found alternative ways to "make tourism safe" (Monaco, 2021). They have started to organize their tourism activities with a focus on how to experience them in the safest way possible. Examples of characteristics that people

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find reassuring include low tourist density, the chance to be outdoors and in contact with nature (e.g. DNA, 2020; Interface Tourism, 2020; Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020), and experiences that take them away from big cities and crowded destinations (e.g. Casado-Aranda, Sánchez-Fernández and Bastidas-Manzano, 2021; Koh, 2020). As an unforeseen effect, the shift towards safer tourism has also contributed to behavioral change among tourists in the direction of more sustainable practices. Protected natural areas are one of the main categories of places capable of offering this kind of peace of mind. These protected areas are delimited geographical spaces dedicated to achieving the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and the promotion of cultural values. They range from national parks and wilderness areas to community-level protected areas and nature reserves identified as hosting importance flora, fauna, or geological or other special features that are reserved and managed for conservation purposes (Worboys, 2015). National parks could be defined as the most evident symbol of protected natural areas, as they are the expression of a complex and multifaceted system in which biodiversity, history, art, and local traditions come together to characterize the area in question. The intersection of tourism, protected areas and sustainability is also a key site for analyzing local development processes, and indeed local development is a central focus of this article. More specifically, the paper focuses on the Italian case of the Vesuvius National Park. Vesuvius is one of the best-known of all Italian national parks, since it hosts an active volcano. Through a comparison of data collected in this area before and after the pandemic, the research presented here has a twofold objective. First, it aims to identify the profile of users and understand if post-pandemic tourists display different characteristics and interests from those who participated in the study before COVID-19. Second, through the use of a synthetic tourism sustainability index, the study aims to understand if the tourism practiced in the Vesuvius National Park is currently transitioning towards ecotourism. Ecotourism can be defined as responsible travel to natural areas that preserves the environment and cultural heritage and improves the well-being of local people (e.g. Duffy, 2006; Stojković, Đurđić and Anđelković, 2015). This kind of tourism represents a key contemporary issue in that it simultaneously speaks to the interests arising from environmental, economic and social concerns. Indeed, ecotourism promotes a marked commitment to safeguarding nature and a sense of social responsibility based on the principle of balancing tourism, conservation and culture (Cobbinah, 2015).

1. The Research

The socio-geographical context

There are 24 national parks in Italy, covering a total area of over 1 million and 600 thousand hectares, fully one fifth of the country's overall territory. Vesuvius National Park (VNP) is one of the most famous and frequently visited national parks in Italy. It

is located in Campania, one of the country's main southern regions. VNP occupies an area of 84.82 km² and encompasses a highly anthropized landscape that includes 13 municipalities (Romano *et al.*, 2018).

VNP was established in 1995 to preserve and protect the plant and animal species it hosts, but also to valorize and raise public awareness about extensive areas that are significant for their geological and cultural characteristics. Beyond its naturalistic value, VNP also has an immense cultural and social heritage that deserves to be preserved and protected. The area is home to several archaeological sites of international importance (such as Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Boscoreale) attracting a considerable number of tourists annually (Pompeii Archaeological Park: almost 3,000,000; Herculaneum Archaeological Park: 520,000; and the Vesuvius Great Cone: 700,000). In addition, there are a number of museums, historical sites, villas and farms, and other institutionalized cultural sites located in the 13 municipalities that offer a gateway for visitors to learn more about this place and its identity (Corbisiero *et al.*, 2021).

The establishment of VNP was deemed necessary in view of the fact that, in the late 1980s, the area was in such a severe state of environmental degradation that it was declared an "area at high risk of environmental crisis" via Law 349/1996 due to urbanization pressure, illegal building and the theft of resources (Sibilio, 2001).

1.1. Research objectives and instruments

In order to answer the research questions, a sociological study was prepared by the research group OUT (Research Center on Tourism at the University of Naples Federico II), in collaboration with the Vesuvius Park Authority. For several years now, OUT has been engaged in analyzing tourist flows at VNP. Between 2018 and 2019, several sets of field data were collected through a structured questionnaire aimed at understanding tourists' travel habits and their experiences at the park. The data collected via the first 1,000 questionnaires were also used to build a synthetic index of tourism sustainability (Marotta, Corbisiero and Delle Cave, 2021).

After the national lockdown imposed in Italy in the first months of 2020, researchers returned to the field to collect new data to be compared to previous ones. Between 2020 and 2021, 500 additional questionnaires were administered.

Overall, the questionnaire consists of 4 sections, each dedicated to a specific dimension of analysis. "Section 1" was aimed at delineating the profile of tourists by examining the following aspects: description of their travel experience, their degree of economic buying power to access tourist services, the reasons behind their trip, their level of knowledge about the Vesuvian area, type of travel companion(s), type of accommodation chosen, and how they planned their travel to VNP. "Section 2", labeled "Journey to Vesuvius National Park", was designed to examine the following aspects: level of awareness among tourists regarding the fact that they were inside a national park, their knowledge of the archaeological, museum and artistic sites in the area, length of stay (in days) inside the park, previous tourist

experiences at other national parks and/or volcanic areas, and a subjective evaluation of their tourist experience. "Section 3", focused on "Expectations and experience sharing", aimed to explore the park's attractive and receptive capacity with a view to improving its performance in terms of efficiency. This section investigated: information and communication flows regarding park activities, road signs relating to the park, possibilities for expanding the attractive capacity, the improvement of existing nature trails and the potential for establishing new ones, and the creation of cycle and pedestrian paths. The final section, focused on the socio-demographic features of VNP tourists, included questions designed to collect socio-demographic data such as gender, age, geographical area of origin, educational level, and employment.

The study adopted different methods to collect data about the various indicators, translated in the questionnaire into questions involving specific subjects. In general, however, participants were mainly asked to respond to dichotomous questions (yes / no) or position themselves along a Likert scale involving a list of statements semantically linked to the attitudes under investigation along with five response options (not at all, a little, somewhat, a lot, completely).

1.2. Population and sample method

As it was not possible to compile a list of subjects to be involved in the study, the sampling method used was non-probabilistic. Tourists were approached at the main tourist points in Vesuvius National Park. Participants had to be at least 18 years old. During the first phase of data collection, the answers were collected in situ through face-to-face administration so as to be able to support tourists in filling out the questionnaire and clarify any doubts they might have.

In the post-COVID period, however, the fear of contagion has led many people to avoid personal contact with other as much as possible (e.g. Qian and Jiang, 2020). As a result, the research group decided to computerize the questionnaire and make it self-fillable by tourists at the time of their choosing so as to also involve participants less inclined to engage in social interaction. To this end, the online questionnaire was associated with a QR-Code printed on a bookmark made specifically for the study. Researchers distributed these bookmarks to tourists visiting the VNP. In addition, the digitized version of the questionnaire was disseminated online through the main communication channels of OUT (including social networks, websites, and mailing lists) as well as existing Vesuvius National Park communication channels (the park posted the link for the survey on its official website and social networks). In both cases, before the start of the questionnaire, respondents were provided with the terms and conditions of the survey, the references of the study's scientific referees, and all the relevant information about data processing for scientific purposes. Study participants were also informed that filling out the questionnaire was anonymous and that they could stop filling it out at any time.

In total, the research involved a sample of 1,500 respondents with an overall

average age of 36 years.

To construct the index, the results of the questionnaire addressed to tourists (the averages of the scores measuring their satisfaction with park services) and data from secondary sources were used. All variables were scaled so that their scores ranged between 1 and 0. The final results were formulated considering the average of all the computed scaled scores.

2. Findings

2.1. The profile of tourists

To provide a complete and exhaustive overview of the profile of the tourists taking part in the study, both socio-demographic characteristics (section 4 of the questionnaire) and their tourist profile (section 1) were taken into account.

Table 1. Respondents' socio-demographic variables (data expressed in %)

	Pre-COVID (1,000 participants)	Post-COVID (500 participants)
Gender	Women (56%) Men (44%)	Women (45%) Men (55%)
Average age	Approximately 38 years old	Approximately 35 years old
Origin	Italy (30%) Other European Country (46%) Outside Europe (24%)	Italy (79%) Other European Country (16%) Outside Europe (5%)
Education	Secondary School completion (4%) High school completion (22%) Undergraduate university degree (42%) Postgraduate degree (31%)	Secondary School completion (5%) High school completion (43%) Undergraduate university degree (39%) Postgraduate degree (13%)
Income	Below 1,000 € per month (12%) Up to 3,000 € per month (53%) Over 3,000 € per month (35%)	Below 1,000 € per month (35%) Up to 3,000 € per month (49%) Over 3,000 € per month (16%)

As can be seen from Table 1 summarizing the most significant differences between the responses collected in the pre-COVID and post-COVID periods, before the pandemic the sample consisted mainly of women (56%). The male-female proportion was reversed in the post-pandemic wave, with 55% of respondents being men. The average age of respondents decreased slightly. Study participants in the pre-COVID period averaged 38 years of age. In the post-COVID period, visitors reported their age as being an average of 35 years old. In both cases, the majority of visitors therefore belonged to the Millennial generation. In the second survey, however, a larger proportion of visitors belonged to the younger generation (such as Gen Zers). The literature on the subject (e.g. Bulut *et al.*, 2017; Dabija, Bejan and Dinu, 2019; Kamenidou *et al.*, 2019; Monaco, 2018) has pointed out that, from Millennials onwards, successive generations have granted significantly more attention to sustainability and the environment. In particular,

members of the younger generations appear more sensitive to the environment and more likely to practice forms of responsible or alternative tourism to mass tourism (e.g. Corbisiero, Monaco and Ruspini, 2022; Fayos-Solà and Cooper, 2019; Robinson and Schänzel, 2019).

One interesting finding from this study concerns the geographical origin of tourists. While the pre-COVID surveys consistently found that a preponderance of VNP visitors came from abroad, the post-COVID field survey data shows the opposite trend: 79% were Italian and just over 20% came from abroad. This data is in line with the most recent literature on post-COVID tourism, according to which domestic tourism is undergoing a season of renewed popularity (e.g. Corbisiero, 2020; Corbisiero and La Rocca, 2020; Dinev, 2020; WTTC, 2020). As reported by UNTWO (2021), domestic tourism showed positive signs in many markets since 2020 as people tended to travel more closely home, not only as a direct consequence of the imposition of restrictions on tourist flows but also for the lower inclination of people to travel abroad in both 2020 and 2021.

It is thus safe to argue that the pandemic gave new impetus to domestic tourism in the months immediately following the lockdown in the Vesuvian area as well, a period in which most Italians considered the rediscovery of their own country to be a fascinating alternative, especially for reasons of personal safety (Corbisiero and Monaco, 2021). Domestic tourism also characterized the decades after the Second World War when, prior to the establishment of the European Union, there was no single currency and transoceanic travel was not within the reach of many people. At that time, it was common for tourists' only option to be holidays spent at holiday resorts not too far from their country of residence (Berrino, 2011). In the current moment, however, domestic tourism appears to be a deliberate and rational choice. A further interesting finding is related to income levels. Tourists were asked to indicate their income range from among several choices, and both before and after COVID about half of tourists declared that they earned a monthly income of between 1,000 and 3,000 euros. In the post-COVID period, however, the number of people stating they earned less than 1,000 euros per month has grown substantially. This figure may reflect both the fact that younger people without incomes were involved in the study, and the fact that the economic crisis accompanying the pandemic has changed people's income levels. Many people have been made redundant while many others are earning less due to the cessation of their professional activities (e.g. Borio, 2020; Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020). As a result, the level of tourists' spending potential visibly decreased in the period immediately following the first lockdown in Italy.

2.2. A new tourist gaze?

To more clearly define the characteristics of VNP visitors and identify any changes in relation to the pre-pandemic period, the research team conducted a further comparison of study participants' interests, behaviors and motivations. More

specifically, answers to the questions “Why did you choose to visit Vesuvius National Park?” offer useful insights to further investigate this aspect. In the pre-COVID wave, most of the participants indicated their three main reasons for visiting VPN as “to immerse [myself] in the local culture” (83%), “to explore typical local products” such as wines and food (82%), and “to participate in local customs, traditions and folklore” (75%).

The tourists who took part in the survey before the pandemic implicitly indicated a desire to be involved in a form of experiential tourism, taking part in activities involving all the senses and forging connections with the local area on a physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual level (e.g. Meacci and Liberatore, 2018). This is a form of tourism that, akin to the concept of slow tourism and distinct from mass tourism, is practiced by conscious travelers who choose destinations on the basis of the intimate and engaging experiences they offer. As a result, travelers in the pre-COVID period sought a deep connection not only with the local area but also with local people, seeking personal contact and reciprocal sharing.

In the post-COVID wave, stemming in part from the fear of engaging in contact with potentially infected people, participants’ answers about their motivations were quite different. The study participants mainly stated that they chose VNP as a destination so as to “enjoy outdoor experiences” (65%), “be in contact with nature” (63%) and “enjoy the cultural and natural beauties of the area” (60%).

Vesuvius National Park’s cultural and archaeological heritage continues to be an important tourist attraction, therefore, but it is mentioned less frequently than in the first waves of the survey. The research thus highlighted that tourism flows after the pandemic do continue to be fueled by archaeological areas and cultural hubs, but tourists are now more interested in opportunities to spend time outdoors and away from crowds, in green areas where the presence of nature has a specific weight. This change of perspective has certainly been influenced by the advent of COVID. The group of tourists involved in the research chose carefully and consciously to visit this area so as to be able to satisfy both the desire to travel and the urge to be in contact with nature.

In summary, in the post-COVID period VNP tourists travel to engage with environmental heritage but also to feel safer. They seek fun and emotional engagement while promoting the social, cultural and economic growth of the local population as well as the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental conservation. This finding is further confirmed by both the fact that almost all the participants stated they were aware that the area is a protected natural area (91%), but also that 60% of them reported having visited other natural parks around the world before the pandemic.

3. The sustainability index of Vesuvius National Park

To render the comparison between pre-COVID and post-COVID tourist flows clearer and more complete, a sustainability index of Vesuvius National Park was

constructed and calculated on the basis of the following aspects: a) Valorization of environmental and cultural resources, 2) Integration, and 3) Economic functionality. As reported in Table 2, each of these aspects comprises a group of variables, taking into account both research data collected in the field and other information derived from secondary sources. These aspects are modeled after the European system of tourism indicators for sustainable destination management (European Union, 2013). This system is a tool employed to measure and monitor the level of tourism sustainability in touristic destinations by considering the structural factors of the local area, travelers' evaluations of their experiences and tourist behavior. The focus on environmental and cultural resources is useful for understanding the characteristics of the destination hosting the tourism in question. By questioning tourists directly, the index also allows to understand travelers' relative commitment to adopting sustainable tourism behaviors, behaviors that can be defined as respectful of the environment but also of the material and immaterial elements found in the area (e.g. McLoughlin, Hanrahan and Duddy, 2020). The valorization of environmental and cultural resources refers to efforts to make the best use of local resources. This is a key element of local development, helping to preserve vital ecological processes and contributing to the conservation of natural heritage and biodiversity.

The idea of integration has to do with respect for the social and cultural authenticity of host communities. Promoting integration involves preserving local cultural heritage in terms of architectural, landscape and human resources and safeguarding their traditional values. And finally, economic functionality refers to the relative ability to guarantee feasible and long-lasting economic functionality, economic benefits such as stable employment, income-earning opportunities and social services for host communities that are equally distributed among all stakeholders.

The sustainable index of Vesuvius National Park was calculated as an average score with respect to the following variables.

Table 2. Elements of the sustainability index and related variables

Valorization of environmental and cultural resources	Accession to the European charter for sustainable tourism
	Endowment of cultural heritage resources: Archaeological, architectural and museum/landscape assets
	Tourist intensity index (number of tourists visiting "Gran Cono" as compared to the resident population)
Integration	Average tourists' score on "Hospitality / receptivity" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Health and safety measures taken" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Welcoming and communication" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Sustainability" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Accessibility" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Expenses" variables
	Average tourists' score on "Urban security measures" variables

Economic functionality	Number of businesses in relation to the resident population
	Number of beds in hotel facilities in relation to surface area
	Number of beds in non-hotel facilities in relation to surface area
	Daily bus transport capacity in relation to surface area
	Availability of parking spaces for private cars in relation to surface area
	Average economic spending per tourist in the park area
	Average stay index (Average length of stay)

The first calculation of a sustainability index for Vesuvius National Park resulted in an index of 0.53. Surprisingly, although the data on post-pandemic period tourism behavior in the Vesuvian area showed travelers were more interested in discovering nature, the sustainability index calculated from the second survey does not differ much from the first. In fact, the average score recorded for the second wave of research is 0.56. Compared to the previous index, the average tourists' score in the second period was added as part of the variable "health and safety measures taken".

The deviation of 0.03 indicates a very small step forward in terms of sustainability, as the difference between the two surveys cannot be considered significant in statistical terms.

4. Discussion

The research data paint a more complex portrait of post-pandemic tourism in the Vesuvius national area than might seem to be the case. While the results may appear contradictory at times, they actually provide a detailed snapshot of the current situation. Examining only the data collected on the preferences and behavior of tourists, it is safe to argue that the sudden advent of COVID-19 has granted natural areas renewed appeal. In fact, the tourists participating in the research in VNP stated that their tourist gaze is oriented towards nature more and more emphatically than in the past. The new forms of vulnerability, fears and needs surfacing in this period have surely stimulated travelers to attribute a new meaning to nature: no longer simply a backdrop for tourist activities, nature has acquired such significant value as to become the central focus of the tourist experience for many travelers drawn by the feeling of safety and security it can offer.

However, not all tourists reported consistently engaging in eco-friendly behaviors: although the study did find a change in tourist preferences, this shift was only partially followed by a change in habits.

In other words, even if the gaze of post-COVID tourists in VNP appears to be directed towards natural and environmental resources, they do not always demonstrate an awareness of how best to respect and protect such resources. Adopting a critical perspective, it is safe to argue that the changes traced in VNP's post-COVID tourist profile only concern certain aspects of ecotourism. Most of the study participants stated that they chose to visit the area after the pandemic to be outdoors and experience beautiful, natural spaces and places, but above all to avoid being constrained by the restrictions of social distancing imposed on enclosed spaces until recently. As the field research finds, in fact, the transition to ecotourism is only partial

in that visitors do not seem to seek out a protected natural area as an expression of a sustainable lifestyle and behavior. In all likelihood, the new tourism choices could be related more directly to the effects of the pandemic (e.g. seeking more open and less restricted spaces) than to an increased level of environmental awareness.

In addition, the more complete analysis conducted using the sustainability index – a tool that also considers other elements such as secondary data and travelers' evaluation of the tourism options available – delves into additional aspects that help understand why a real transition towards eco-sustainable tourism has not yet taken place. More specifically, the minimum deviation between the first sustainability index and the index calculated in the post-COVID period also reflects the fact that the area's infrastructural characteristics remained all but unchanged one year later. By critically analyzing the scenario described above, it is safe to argue that the tourism practiced in VNP does not appear to align substantially with the main principles of sustainable tourism, principles that emphasize both tourists' practices and the management of the site. That is, sustainable tourism would involve tourists travelling to natural areas in an environmentally responsible way, enjoying and appreciating nature and promoting its conservation while, at the same time, the site's tourism infrastructure and management is arranged so as to protect the local area and not degrade its resources.

In considering this point, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aimed at promoting an ecotourism that valorizes the cultural, natural, environmental and social heritage of local areas represents a key contextual element. The policy strategies for tourism, nature and biodiversity conservation outlined in the framework can lead to the implementation of a tourism sector with potential positive impacts on local communities and industry alike. The Vesuvius National Park site has the potential to stand out from other tourist destinations by leveraging the resources it possesses to attract a niche of tourists looking to escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life and spend time in nature where they can relax and regenerate but, at the same time, finding all the comforts associated with the city such as accommodation, restaurants and other attractions of various kinds. In other words, similarly to conventional tourism, ecotourism also generates economic, environmental and social impacts, and these must be socio-economically sustainable and environmentally appropriate. The constant monitoring of economic, social and environmental spheres is thus essential to its dynamics. The only way to ensure a "just transition" to ecotourism, one that effectively contributes to fostering more sustainable opportunities for citizens and visitors as well as to preserving and valorizing material, cultural and environmental resources, would be to manage the site in a way that takes all these aspects into account simultaneously.

5. Concluding remarks

Given the renewed interest tourists have shown in protected natural areas such as VNP and considering that the development of a green consciousness among travelers is still only partial, it is important to involve key area stakeholders in identifying the

most appropriate strategies to implement while also directly promoting ecotourism in a way that would also foster more ecologically responsible approaches among travelers.

Failing to do so might result in a short-medium term increase in tourist flows but with travelers not aware of what constitute eco-sustainable and resource-friendly behaviors. If left unchecked or improperly managed, the presence of tourists can pose a risk to wildlife and the landscape, straining resources and causing local environments to suffer. Moreover, «the development of a Just Transition approach [in the tourism sector] can guide policymakers in identifying potential impacts and finding ways to minimize unfavorable outcomes» (Hughes and Rescalvo, 2021, p. 11).

To foster the growth of ecotourism, participation is a key element to be encouraged (Wondirad and Ewnetu, 2019). Indeed, the role of local communities is becoming increasingly important in tourism planning in Europe (e.g. Brokaj, 2014; Krauss, 2016; Nechifor, 2014; Wanner, Seier and Proebstl-Haider, 2020). Participation represents a way of involving the local population more closely and giving rise to endogenous destination management that takes into account the needs of the community, in consultation with different levels of government. The involvement of residents is central given that they are the ones most affected by the impacts of tourism – both positive and negative – and whose lives are inevitably transformed. The International Centre for Responsible Tourism's slogan – “Making better places for people to live in, and better places to visit” – clearly expressed this need to involve residents in the decisions that affect their lives as well, including the very definition of what responsible tourism should be.

To offer tourists a beautiful, sustainable and successful experience, the destination must first and foremost be a good place to live. Understood in this way, tourism does not end at the local level but rather spans an unlimited number of levels, up to and including the global one. Supra-local public space thus comprises not only the destination in a general sense, but also what lies outside the “socio-cultural bubble” in which tourists spend their vacations. These spaces must be able to communicate with each other and activate synergies in order to offer the best experience to travelers but also and especially the local population, allowing local communities to live in harmony with tourism.

To pursue this vision, strategies must be based on collaborative management (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.*, 2000). Such an approach seeks to overcome the management limitation stemming from the failure to involve citizens in the decision-making process and recognize different needs and requirements, thus fueling conflict between protection policies and citizens' interests. Collaborative management also makes sense because local people tend to take better care of the “natural thing” in question when they are able to act independently, developing their own initiatives and maintaining some measure of control over resources (IUCN, 1996). Useful tools for moving in this direction include the use of inter-institutional working tables as well as participative platforms (potentially online) through which all stakeholders can contribute to the decision-making process. The substantial participation of all

stakeholders and an approach in which all (public and private) actor share in making choices has the potential to align well with management goals and the principles of sustainability and innovation.

In the specific case of VNP, successful initiatives developed in the past in other National Parks in southern Italy (Perna, 2002) might be replicated to achieve an effective balance of economic, social and environmental sustainability and take into account the varying perspectives of tourists, inhabitants and public bodies.

Studying the perceptions, attitudes and opinions inhabitants and local actors in the various VPN municipalities have of the policies, projects or practices adopted to govern and manage tourist flows could help identify strategies and how they might best be implemented, based on common criteria of effectiveness and efficiency.

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