

# The Role of “Slow Territories” in the Development of Sustainable Tourism

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## Abstract

The paper intends to propose an analysis of the so called “slow territories”, sometimes little known contexts that present a significant set of both tangible and intangible resources often characterized by levels of excellence, by investigating in particular their role in the development of sustainable tourism. In recent years, the international tourism market highlights important chances, both as regard the demand and supply sides, and an increasing attention and sensitivity to sustainability understood in its social, environmental and economic dimension. The emergence of a substantial segment of demand more aware and attentive to the sustainable dimension of the holiday is connected to the growth of the cultural level of tourists: in this framework the increasing awareness of environmental issues, the respect and desire to learn about the traditions of local cultures are becoming key criteria in the choice of tourist destinations. These trends have led to the emergence of a new type of tourist, who aims to live a territory and to interact with the local community, in a relationship of mutual exchange, which translate into a new experiential dimension of the holiday. In this perspective the “slow territories” represent not only a model of local development, but also a growth trajectory that combines economic growth, social cohesion, entrepreneurial innovation and environmental protection, with a view to sustainability.

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**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism; slow territories; experiential tourism; local development models

## Introduction

The tourism sector is in the middle of important changes that affect both demand and tourist offer. Several studies highlights the changes in the consumption patterns (Andereck, 2009; Bramwell, Henry, Jackson, Prat,

Richards & van der Straaten, 1996; Caruana, Glozer, Crane & McCabe 2014; Chafe, 2005; Weaver & Lawton 2007).

If until the 1980s the tourist was mostly similar to a mass consumer, in recent decades has emerged a growing demand of customization of the holiday. Increasingly, the tourist is configured as a traveller who seeks a travel experiences based on the so-called “three elle”: leisure, landscape and learning (Plog, 1974; Donohoe & Needham, 2006). In particular tourist shows a growing sensitivity to the experiential aspects of leisure time, focusing on both the discovery of the intrinsic characteristics of an area and the development of relationships with the indigenous reality. Tourists seeking not a tourist experience of generic type, but more complex and profound experiences, enabling them to appreciate both the elements of the identity and the specificities of a given territory (Chafe, 2005; Franch, Sambri, Martini, Pegan & Rizzi, 2008).

Several factors explain the changes in tourism demand. First, psychological and emotional aspects, together with social and cultural factors are nowadays able to affect the tourist orientation. In addition, the progressive disintermediation of the traditional distribution channels determines the spread of multi-channel supply and co-production driven by the demand. In this framework, the tourist's choices are often influenced by community based mechanisms, which implies the ability for the tourist operators to exploit new social components of the tourist experience (Wearing, Cynn, Ponting & McDonald, 2002). The rise of alternatives for the tourist open new markets and new destinations, inaccessible until a few years ago both from a commercial and geographical point of view (Franch, Sambri, Martini, Pegan & Rizzi, 2008; Goossens, 2001; Han, Hsu & Lee, 2009).

The evolution that affect the tourism sector highlights the need for the tourist industry to increase the quality of the tourist product, playing particular attention to the customization of the travel experience (Pencarelli, Splendiani, 2008).

The tourist expresses a wide and complex vision of the tourism product, against whom has different level of expectations (functional, social, cultural, psychological ones) (Tamma, 2002; Franch, 2002; Pechlaner, Weiermair, 2000; Cherubini, 2008). The quality of the tourist offer perceived by the tourist is not based on objective characteristics of the product and on the judgment resulting from experience, which appears to be the result of the interaction between tourists and the bidding system. The satisfaction of this set of expectations is the result of an experiential process: the perception of quality depends on the greater or lesser propensity to take advantage of the tourism product and the gap between expectations and experience. The quality of tourism services provided influences the overall satisfaction of

tourists and consequently the experience lived within a given territory (Chafe, 2005; Frey & George, 2010). In other words, the tourist, within the chosen destination, lives an overall experience that led him to make a judgment on the set of both all the material and intangible factors with which it comes into contact; this create a continuous interaction relationship with the territory and tour operators. Hence the need for the tourist industry to have a correct identification of the drivers affecting the customer satisfaction and to monitor the evolution of the customer preferences.

In this framework, a tourist destination is competitive only if it can generate a unique experience, higher than that offered by other territories. Its competitiveness is defined by the degree of imitability and reproducibility of the attractions available. This explains the relevance of certain categories of resources (natural, artistic, architectural, anthropological and cultural ones), which can be not be available elsewhere. The development of tourist destinations is closely linked to their environment, the cultural and social interactions, together with the wellbeing of local populations. These characteristics make tourism the driving force for the protection and development of the tourist destinations.

This differentiation capacity of a territory comes to depend on a plurality of factors, widely investigated in the literature (Buhalis, 2000; Valdani & Ancarani, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). The territory, in fact, is not statically expressed only in terms of infrastructure resources, but it represents a place where geographical and physical elements are linked to all other factors (social, economic, institutional, etc.). In addition, the complex network of relationships and interactions between the different entities that compose the territory determine the evolution of the territory itself.

In this perspective the territory could be seen as a viable system (Golinelli, 2002), in a tangle of dynamics involving different stakeholders with a variety of interests, sometimes difficult to reconcile. It follows that the development potentials of a territory are strongly linked to the way in which the interaction between actors, resources and activities concretely manifests (Barile, Saviano, Polese, & Di Nauta, 2013).

The set of tangible and intangible resources configures the quality of the assets in which an area is proposed, and hence its competitiveness tends to depend. The attractiveness and potential for development of a territory are derived primarily from the way in which these resources are linked and integrated into a unified and coherent vision. From this interaction it arises what is called the “vocation” of a territory, a concept complex to define, which is the result of the evolution of both tangible and intangible assets: cultural heritage, natural resources, institutional structures, socio-economics development of the territory.

The development strategy of a territory is based on the ability of all actors involved to confer value to available resources, that are the pivot on which to rotate its vocation. In the medium-long term, the vocation can become the basis for the productive specialization of the territory, resulting in a strong rooting and territorial identity. In other words, the specificity of a place that make up the territorial vocation has its basis in the strong sense of identity of the local community.

In this sense, the vocation is the starting point for the definition of a territorial development strategy based on the peculiarities which may be more attractive. Consequently, the government body in charge to guide the long-term strategy of a territory has the primary task to enhance the wealth of resources. This is to increase the attractiveness of a territory and, consequently, its competitiveness which tend to be dependent on several factors: environmental and structural factors, intangible resources such as social capital, trust and innovativeness, the policies adopted by the institutions and by individual operators, the same behaviors of the actors involved (Buhalis, 2000; Poon, 1993). The competitiveness of a territory also derives from its ability from one hand to outline a development strategy able to enhance and enrich the heritage of both tangible and intangible resources; on the other hand to promote the competitiveness of all actors who are part of it. In the light of these considerations, it is evident that the exploitation of a territory steps through the implementation of a coherent project bidding with its vocation and with the opportunities that exist within it.

### **Peculiarities and Prospects for Development of “Slow Territories”**

The sedimentation of resources and specific expertise in a particular territorial reality characterize the so-called “slow territories” or, in some cases, minor territories (Mutti, 1998; Lancerini, 2005; Folorunso & Ojo, 2013). The meaning “slow” or “minor” should not be referred to a situation of delay or backward of the territory, or to merely rural provincial areas; the concept refers to a specific development approach away from the traditional model of Fordist growth, oriented primarily to the quality of the territory and its lifestyle. Slow territories are low geographic density areas, with a significant rural setting, where important heritage of tangible and intangible resources are presents (art, food and wine, landscape, etc.). These contexts are often not well known, but contain a significant heritage of excellences, also in the production side. Their common feature is the high landscape quality that, combined with the local history and traditions, configure these areas as cultural districts (Dickinson, Lumsdon & Slow, 2011; Caffyn, 2012).

The distinctive features of the landscape, which is one of the elements qualifying “slow” areas, are linked to a non-quantitative growth

development strategy, but looking for hospitable spaces away from the spectacular architectural design (Lanzani, 2005). In the model of development of “slow territories”, the landscape becomes the glue for the actions of the different players of the territory (both public and private) and for sectoral policies.

The “slow territories” are not therefore just a model of local development, but a growth trajectory that combines economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection (CST, 2009, Pink, 2008). Some authors refer, in this regard, to the idea of soft economy in which the development strategy of the territory is based on knowledge, identity, history, creativity, able to combine social cohesion and economic competitiveness.

In this perspective, the territory is the central competitive factor, since it is the area that develop and consolidate identity and collective interests. In this virtuous growth circuit, the main actors are the industrial manufacturing base of territorially-based quality, linked to the land agriculture, the third sector, tourism (Parra, 2010). The “slow” areas are as capable of mixing rural and urban aspects traits, developing original growth trajectories in multi-sector perspective that makes these territories with more development engines (Michael, 2000; Miele, 2008; Lumsdon & McGrath 2011).

In this perspective, the territory become the key competitive factor, since it consolidates the local identity and promotes collective interest. The “slow” areas are as capable of mixing rural and urban aspects traits, developing original growth trajectories in a multi-sector perspective (Rizzo, 2016).

The polyvalent nature of this development implicates new approaches to the measurement of its various aspects. In particular, it assumes importance the search of a method of multidimensional evaluation of the development, that allows to gather the different factors that competes to the formation of the comfort and the quality of the life (Sen, 1999; Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009).

Innovative relationships between agricultural and industrial realities, new processes of exploitation of local products, cultural heritage and landscape are the distinctive features of these territories, which are grafted on a strong traditional identity, based on reciprocity, trust, attachment to the roots (Fukuyama, 1995). It is precisely because of these characteristics that the territory can become a promoter of quality districts, based on the exploitation of local roots, the landscape, the communities.

Some strands of studies recognize in these traits typical feature of the industrial districts (Visconti, 1996): the presence of a population of small and medium-sized enterprises among which are established cooperative relations,

the geographical boundaries, the existence of homogeneous values and a strong territorial identities.

In recent years, the “slow territories” have initiated an intense process of construction or reconstruction of a local identity, which gives renewed value to the share capital, fiduciary relationships, traditions, lifestyle, sustainability. These contexts have become witnesses of an active land policy, understood as the construction of local areas with a high quality of life, relying on the recovery and enhancement of the individual features, attention to the environment, the ability of cultural resources, crafts, landscaping to narrate the history and local tradition.

### **Slow Territories and Sustainability**

At the centre of the development policies of the “slow territories”, especially in recent years, there is not only competitiveness, but increasingly the habitability and sustainable development (Giaoutzi & Nijkap, 1993; Evans, Joas, Sundback & Theobald, 2006; Roberts & Simpson, 1999).

The idea of physiological evolution of the territory, consistent with the concept of sustainability, refers to the definition of sustainable development offer in the 1987 Brundtland Report: the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional changes are harmonized so as to take into account both the present necessities and that of future generations.

Sustainability is therefore a concept that encompasses three components: economic growth, dynamic balance of the environment, social cohesion and inclusion. Each of these components is divided into a number of specific conditions that take on a different significance in relation to the particular model of sustainable development that a given territory intends to follow (the United Nations Environment Programme).

With regard to the environmental component, the management of a territory and the use of the resources available go in the direction to simultaneously optimize current results and enrichment or at least the maintenance over time of the wealth of resources available. In terms of environmental sustainability, several instruments are nowadays consolidated: the local Agenda 21, reporting and environmental accounting, environmental appraisal systems, urban planning at different levels. In this sense, and with particular reference to the “slow” territories, the concept of sustainable development is to be superposed on the sustainable landscape: it refers to the ability to preserve the quality of natural and environmental resources, as a pillar of a new concept of well-being and lifestyle. In essence, the management of a territory increasingly aims to enrich (or at least maintain over time) the wealth of available resources. This means that their use must

be done in ways that favor the replicability over time or at least limit the depletion of the resources.

In a wider perspective, the land management aims to achieve a number of conditions (Caroli, 2006): a proper balance in the satisfaction of the interests of different stakeholders; the participation of all stakeholders to the benefits arising from the social-economic development of the territory , the extension of opportunities for access to factors of economic growth, social and cultural development for all people living in the territory; the gradual reduction of both economic and social differences between the sub-areas that comprise the territory. In this framework, the economic and industrial policy choices made by the governing bodies play a fundamental influence on the degree of environmental and social sustainability, as a driver of the economic growth of a territory (Lancerini, 2005).

The conditions for the sustainable development of a territory pass through the synergistic integration of three dimensions: economic, social and environmental development. The synergistic balance between the different components of sustainability is achieved operationally by several means: organization of territorial spaces, development of community welfare systems, promotion of lifestyles and ways of organizing both economic and social activities. In this framework, there is also the search for different rhythms and lifestyles, which can become a political and social trajectory of growth. The promotion of lifestyles oriented to waste reduction and reuse of resources, as well as models of organization of production activities that go in the direction of an efficient use of resources, are just some examples of local policies aimed at sustainability (Pavione & Pezzetti, 2016a).

Sustainable development of a territory is therefore the result of different territorial government choices, made by defining a balance between economic development, ecological, cultural and social strategies. This integration requires a complex process of involvement of all stakeholders operating in a territory, both public and private, in a systemic long-term vision. Such passage, as will be noted later in this work, it is crucial to ensure a territory a sustainable development trajectory over time (Pavione & Pezzetti, 2016b)

## **Conclusion**

The management strategies of a territory is nowadays increasingly focus on the concept of sustainable development. Tourism represents an activity which, more than others, is based on an intrinsic and composite relationship with the both natural and social environment of territories.

The “slow territories”, which are characterized by the ability to enable original development paths quality-oriented, consistent with their vocation, are nowadays increasingly attractive to tourists who are looking for

high quality experiences, pleasant places, local traditions and exclusivity, far away from the highly urbanized contexts and from standardised tourism destinations. The development of these territories in the direction of strong recovery of identity and sustainability is consistent with the changing characteristics of the tourism market, which shows the growth of a substantial segment of demand seeking an experiential holiday away from the traditional routes, in the choice of which is gaining greater weight both ethical and environmental variables. In this context, the ability to integrate the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic and social) may represent a response of the smaller destinations to competitive challenges they are facing (Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 1993; Turnock, 2002).

In this perspective, the “slow territories” may qualify as new tourist districts, whose peculiarity is based on several interrelated factors: the specialization of enterprises not for the production phase, but by product excellence; the cultural and historical heritage; the valorisation of natural and cultural resources, the exclusivity of local product (such as food, wine, craftsmanship) often based on the valorisation of the Made in factor. In doing so, the district takes on the character of a territorial organisational entity characterized by both high quality companies that run tourist activities, either by a set of often unique environmental, cultural and social resources that make the area a tourism destination for a new segment of demand more aware and attentive to responsible and sustainable dimension of the holiday. (Lazzaretti & Petrillo, 2006; Pavione & Pezzetti, 2016).

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