Reading biocultural landscapes: a new concept for cultural tourism in rural areas, the experience of AGER

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(International agency for the protection of biocultural landscapes and for a new rurality)
Biocultural landscapes

Rural landscapes where there is a permanence of visible “signs” of a traditional symbiotic way of exploiting and inhabiting the land by man. A way that evolved for millenia producing a peasant culture based on adaptation and dependence from the environment and its resources.

An attitude that used to be reflected on agricultural and settlement practices and technologies that were sometimes very ingenious, but also on ritual, social, religious, habits.

These landscapes are characterized by beauty, complexity, and usually high levels of biodiversity. Their natural and cultural elements (the above mentioned residual “signs”) still show a network of mutual relationships which is the most particular and interesting feature of these territories.
In Italy and in Europe biocultural landscapes (SEPLs) are mostly residual fragments

In Italy, in particular, there’s been a sedimentation over millenia of a multitude of different ethnic groups and this coupled with morphological and climate diversity has produced a complex mosaic of ecosystems, settlements and farming practices with consequent diverse productive landscapes.

before agricultural and socioeconomic revolution (from the 2° w.w.) the whole rural territory in Italy could be considered a biocultural landscapes mosaic.

Today most of this plot is disappeared but, for some reasons, only in some confined areas you can still clearly recognize biocultural landscape ambits because their physical and immaterial elements are still conserved.
Sometimes even in more anthropized landscapes…. 

You can apply a “biocultural approach” to imagine landscape plot looking to the few residual tracks remaining, what does it practically mean?

“If you explore a rural territory and you encounter an element of its biocultural landscape, you can acknowledge its dense and complicated network of connections with other elements, material or immaterial, belonging to different thematic fields (natural, social, agricultural, ethnic, etc..). This brings you to reflect on its importance and its value today, as evidence of an ancient balance and wisdom, and you feel the need to reactivate this wealth of knowledge. This way of “reading” landscape, starting from single visible details and then extending to all the connections created by them with other elements, is the essence of the bio-cultural landscape approach”
This kind of landscape reading can be the focus of:

a cultural tourism aimed at discovering the deep identity of a territory and its rural community.

This is AGER’s main interest regarding tourism
Touristic product main phases

I. Thematic Content study ✓
II. Package design (rural holidays/excursions) ✓
III. Package organization (TO)
IV. Package promotion and selling (TO)
V. Realization ✓
VI. Verifying (TO)

(TO) Tour operator

 ✓ AGER competence
Studing Activities

....That Could be finalized to...

- Content production
- Content communication strategies/instruments elaboration
- Planning activities

Examples of activities done or ongoing and planned

Langa and Roero Biocultural landscape (Piedmont) study finalized to Magliano Alfieri’s Landscape Museum’s contents and to Landscape reading trekking itineraries design.

Study of Biocultural landscape of Passerano Marmorito (Piedmont - Satoyama Case Study)
Package design
(planning where to bring tourists and what make them do)

Examples of AGER activities done or ongoing and planned

Biocultural itinerary in sabina (Lazio region in the countryside of Rome) for adults (with an Italian local incoming TO)

Biocultural itineraries in India and South America (with an Italian outsourcing TO)
Realization

• guiding activities for "Landscape reading" holidays and excursions
• Guides training on biocultural approach

Examples of AGER activities done or ongoing and planned

- Environmental guided excursions discovering biocultural landscape of Passerano Marmorito and surroundings (upper artisan biocultural landscape)

- Environmental guides in school trips in Foreste Casentinesi National Park (Tuscany), in collaboration with a local TO, focused on communal use of forests by Camaldolese and Franciscan Monks and their influence on woodland landscape

- Guides within food and wine tasting events in an agritouristic farm discovering Langa (Piedmont)’s wine biocultural landscape and its biodiversity

Training project for Lazio Region’s Parks personnel on biocultural approach to landscape reading
Conclusions related to AGER's experience in tourism

1. Eco/Cultural/Responsible tourism, as universally recognized, is a fundamental additional income opportunity for European rural communities practising a non intensive farming and conserving biocultural landscapes. It can prevent isolation and rural abandonment and consequently landscape degradation.
Conclusions

According to our still limited but quite meaningful experience, Biocultural Landscape reading is a very appreciated form of cultural activity by adult tourists and families, because it brings them to a deeper understanding of the territory and the people they visit, furthermore it allows them to make sharings and comparisons with their territory of origin. It is an “exploring experience” in a wide sense and it has traits of exclusivity, which are a basic feature for a satisfying touristic experience. Particularly it can provide an added value to food and wine tourism and remarkably increase touristic proposal's quality, hopefully leading to longer stays and tourists' fidelization.
Conclusions

Biocultural landscape is a complex entity that has to be investigated. For this reason the preliminary studying phase is very important. It's not like for city monuments that have their own literature describing them. With landscape we have to select and organize informations coming from thematic fields usually treated separately emphasizing connections between elements. For this reason a critical issue is research funding.

Landscape visits with a biocultural approach need to be guided: a guide (human or multimedial) is fundamental for allowing visitors to discover and interpret the complex network between the elements of the landscape. Often it comes to be able to “look with new eyes” rather than seeing spectacular views... For this sake a fundamental issue is guides training or design of innovative disclosure tools for tourists,
Thank you!

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