

## **RURAL TOURISM IN APULIA REGION, ITALY: RESULTS OF 2007-2013 RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME AND 2020 PERSPECTIVES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Apulia Region has many resources for rural tourism development. The review paper analyses opportunities of Apulia region (south-eastern Italy) in rural tourism. The paper describes financial instruments of the European Union (EU), mainly the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), allowing rural operators to develop innovative and unique rural tourism offer. An important share of the EAFRD is dedicated to diversification including rural tourism. The paper sheds also light on opportunities offered by 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme (RDP) of Apulia region and the role of Local Action Groups (LAG). The manuscript illustrates as well tourism statistics evolution in the period 2007-2013. The paper ends with perspectives offered by the new RDP 2014-2020, that was just approved; it specifically focus on new financing measures for strategies to develop incoming rural tourism in Apulia region and cooperation networks among LAGs.

**Keywords:** *rural tourism, rural development program, Apulia region.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Apulia is a peninsular region located in the south-east of Italy. It has a land area of 1,954,090 hectares (6.5% of the Italian territory surface) and a resident population of 4,050,072 inhabitants (6.7% of the Italian population). Local institutional structure includes six provinces and 258 municipalities. The average density of regional population is 209.26 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (Apulia Region authority, 2015).



Figure 1. Italy and Apulia Region

*\*Source: University of Padua, 2016.*

To better define the areas with most significant problems in terms of social and economic performance, Apulia Region (Apulia Region authority, 2015) has taken steps to refine the classification of the degree of rurality defined by Eurostat (European Commission, 2012), identifying the following types of rural areas (Figure 2):

- Urban and peri-urban areas (A zones);
- Areas with industrial agriculture (B zones);
- Intermediate rural areas (C zones);
- Rural areas with development problems (D zones).

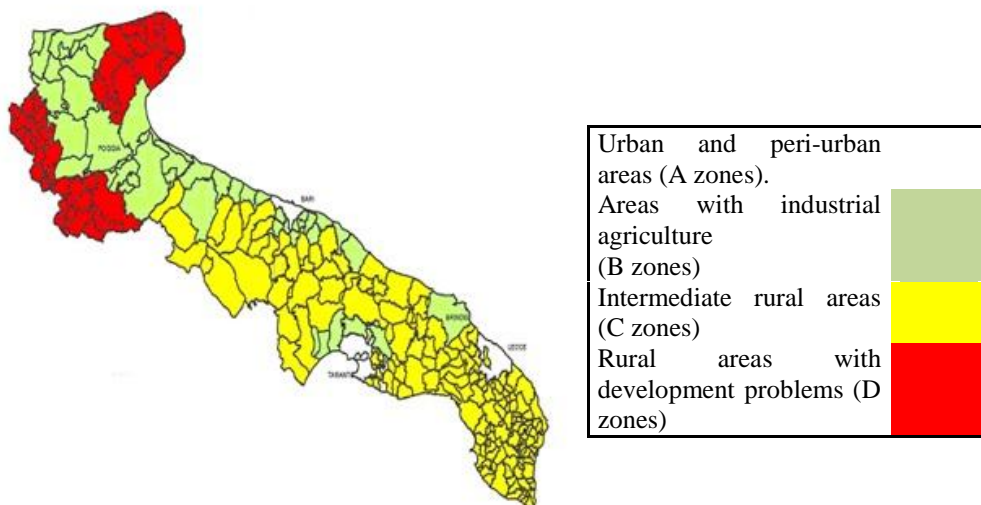


Figure 2. Rural areas in Apulia region

*\*Source: Apulia Region authority, 2015.*

Overall, rural areas amount to 97.1% of the regional area, within which resides 85.1% of the total population. The average population density in rural areas is 183 inhabitants per square km, much lower value than that recorded in urban centres - 600 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (Apulia Region authority, 2015).

The region has a mainly flat land and low hills with limited mountainous areas. Around 70% of municipalities of Apulia region are located in lowland areas, 27% in hilly areas and, therefore, only the remaining 3% in mountain areas. Agricultural use represents the largest destination of regional soil. A strong diversity of production situations characterizes the Apulian agriculture. Farms are almost 272,000, with a utilised agricultural area of over 1.2 million hectares (Apulia Region Authority, 2015). In Apulia about 110,000 people work in agricultural holdings (9.2% of agricultural workforce in Italy), 41% of whom are women. The majority of companies from Apulia are conducted directly from the grower (Istat, 2016). Also in Apulia region many producers and rural communities have turned to tourism for achieving sustainable development through economic activity diversification (Ivona, 2006; OECD, 2010). Rural tourism encompasses a huge range of activities, products and services (Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997 in Irshad, 2010). In general, tourism is termed rural when the rural culture is a key component of the tourism product (Gopal *et al.*, 2008). Rural tourism is not just farm-based tourism; it also comprises ecotourism, adventure, sport and health tourism, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism, and ethnic tourism (Irshad, 2010). The review paper analyses opportunities of Apulia region in rural tourism sector and explores the impact of the regional rural development policy on rural tourism structures and the tourism industry as a whole.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF RURAL TOURISM TO THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN APULIA REGION**

In 2015, Apulian tourism industry generated a turnover of 2.2 billion Euros. The tourist offer in rural areas is well diversified today. There are 224,241 beds in collective tourist accommodation establishments amounting to 93.8% of the number of places surveyed at regional level (IPRES, 2016).

Tourism supply in Apulian rural areas is characterized by the prevalence of hotel facilities (91.2% of the beds) and camping sites and tourist villages (95.6%). These two types of rural tourism structures and facilities offer 182,798 beds in rural areas alone. In recent years, there is more attention to the creation of educational farms and social farms: 66 structures were identified, an increase by as much as 83% compared to 2008. Along with the extra hotel facilities, the Apulian rural area beds represent approximately 67% of beds in Apulia (Apulia Region Authority, 2015).

In 2014, around 3.2 million tourists spent an average of 4 nights in Apulia. The predominant feature of the regional tourism system is represented by the marked seasonality, mainly in case of seaside tourism. There is a strong concentration of Italian tourists in August and foreign tourists in summer till September. Therefore, Apulian rural policy aims to increase tourism flow throughout the year by enhancing historical and artistic resources of Apulian rural areas (PugliaPromozione, 2015).

## **RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES**

The EU's rural development policy has continuously changed to meet the emerging challenges in rural areas. The most recent reform process, that introduced the general reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), has been largely completed in December 2013 with the approval of the basic legislative acts for the Programming period 2014-2020.

In line with the Europe 2020 Strategy and with the overall objectives of the CAP, the EU policy for rural development in 2014-2020 identified three long-term strategic objectives (Apulia Region Authority, 2015):

- a) to increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector;
- b) to ensure sustainable management of natural resources and climate action;
- c) to achieve balanced territorial development of the economy and rural communities, including the creation and protection of jobs.

The reform of 2013 maintains many of the main features of the rural development policy of the 2007-2013 programming period. In particular, as in the past, the policy will be implemented through the seven-year rural development national and/or regional programs.

Overall, the 2013 reform introduced the following changes (Apulia Region Authority, 2015):

- to improve the strategic approach in the preparation of RDPs;
- to strengthen the content of the rural development measures;
- to simplify the rules and/or reduce the administrative burden where possible; and
- to create greater synergies between rural development policy and other structural and investment funds.

Member States draw up their RDPs based on at least four of the six EU priorities (Apulia Region Authority, 2015):

1. promoting the transfer of knowledge and innovation in the agriculture and forestry sectors and in rural areas;
2. enhancing the profitability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture and promoting innovative technologies for farms and sustainable management of forests;
3. promoting the organization of the food chain, animal welfare and agriculture risk management;
4. restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forests;
5. encouraging the efficient use of resources and the move towards a low CO<sub>2</sub> emission and climate proofing economy in agriculture, food and forestry sector;
6. promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

In turn, for each rural development priority, a series of more detailed policy areas (cf. “priority areas”) was identified. As part of their RDPs, Member States/regions set quantified targets in relation to these priority areas, based on an analysis of the needs of the RDP area. Later, they set up measures to use to achieve these objectives and the corresponding funding. The funding comes in part from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and partly from national/regional funds and at times private resources. The policy implementation and impact are subjected to detailed assessment and monitoring by the Management Authority.

In its RDP 2014 - 2020, Apulia Region authority has endorsed all the six priorities and for each of them has identified the priority areas of intervention. Specifically, it wanted to focus on targeted financial measures promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development of rural areas. The aim is ensuring social and economic development of the territories through the support of economic activities linked to the elements of the agro-food chains, environmental, landscape, cultural, touristic and social resources of the individual territories; as well as increasing employment opportunities and development of new businesses, improving profitability, and encouraging the participation of local actors. Local development actions are implemented through a specific funding measure “Support to LEADER local development community”, which is entrusted and fully managed by the LAGs).

### **LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAG) IN APULIA REGION**

LAG is a local feeling and it is a part of a European process. The LAGs, that manage the LEADER (*Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale*) program funds, are active partnerships operating at the local level to promote integrated actions for development of rural economies (European Commission, 2006). The LAG promote the implementation of quality development strategies built around one or more priority themes that can make rural areas more dynamic, create new employment opportunities and have lasting effects. The goal is to help create lasting and endogenous development dynamics in every rural area, based on the history and on the specific competitive factors in each area. Therefore, the initiative aims to (European Commission, 2006): support the implementation of quality development strategies; support the implementation of integrated and/or complementary actions with the development objectives of the Community programs; encourage the opening of rural areas to other European and non-European countries; promote the dissemination of experience, knowledge and know-how; test solutions to the development problems of rural areas that could be an example for future EU policies. The LAG usually consists of actors belonging to three main categories: individuals or groups of persons (e.g. cultural, environmental, community groups); economic operators and private companies (e.g. employers' organizations, large companies, etc.); public institutions (local authorities, public services, etc.).

Currently, in Apulia LAGs are 25 and cover almost all the rural population of the region (Figure 3).

1. Daunia Rurale
2. Gargano
3. Meridania
4. Daunofantino
5. Piana del Tavoliere
6. Murgia Più
7. Le Città di Castel del Monte
8. Ponte Lama
9. Fior d'Olivì
10. Conca Barese
11. Terra Di Murgia
12. Sud Est Barese
13. Terra dei Trulli e del Barento
14. Luoghi del Mito
15. Colline Joniche
16. Valle d'Itria
17. Alto Salento
18. Terra dei Messapi
19. Terre del Primitivo
20. Terra d'Arneo
21. Valle della Cupa
22. Isola Salento
23. Serre Salentine
24. Terra d'Otranto
25. Capo di Leuca



Figure 3. Local Actions Groups in Apulia region

*\*Source: Apulia Region authority, 2015.*

Below, is presented a case of a beneficiary farm, which has enhanced its activities in a rural area, creating a different tourism product (box 1). This is specific example (that is rather not isolated) allowing to understand how the EAFRD co-financing of activities has contributed to the promotion of cultural heritage of this region and raised the level of quality of tourists' reception in Apulia.

Box 1. Example of a rural tourism structure in Apulia region: *Masseria Losurdo* Farmhouse.

*I am Domenico Losurdo, I'm the owner and together with my family manage the Masseria Losurdo (Figure 4), dating back to the beginning of '900. We are a real farm, basic producers and small farmers. We decided to diversify our activities, creating a small accommodation and farm restaurant in a wing of the farm, so we successfully got a funding from the LAG to renovate unused wing of the farm and turn it into a tourist accommodation and catering facility.*



Figure 4. View of *Masseria Losurdo* Farmhouse.

Photo credit: [Agriplan s.r.l](#)

*We made the structure in order to accommodate people with physical disabilities; we also have a menu based on local products while meeting the needs of vegetarians and for people with food intolerances. Since we manage it, during the years, we wanted to protect the intended agricultural use of the system. Not only as an economic activity, but also as an expression of a rural culture that strongly belongs to the territory of Alta Murgia (eastern and hilly part of Apulia region). We decided to diversify our activities and offer a small tourist accommodation service, as we believe in tourism as an experience and authenticity that in our case, only the rural culture offers. We believe that this kind of tourism can help enhancing and promoting local culture and productions.*

\*Source: Domenico Losurdo, personal communication.

The two graphs below show the change in the number of non-hotel accommodation facilities (Figure 5) and related beds (Figure 6) in Apulia region between 2008 and 2014.

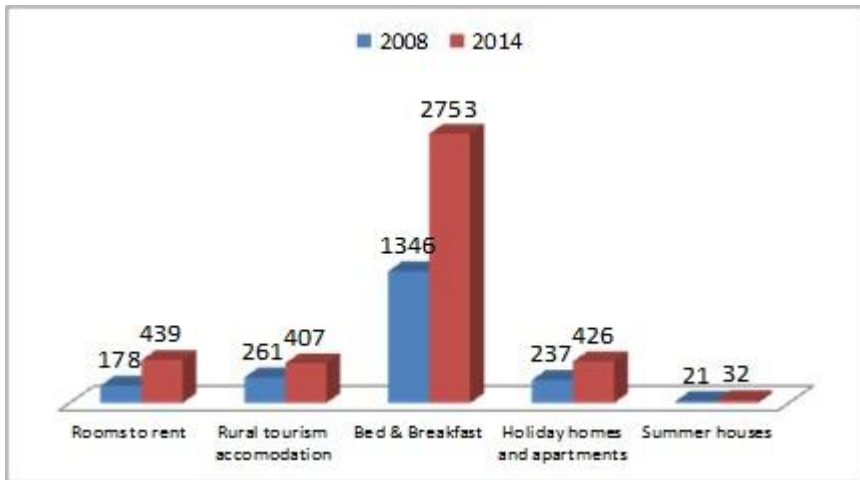


Figure 5. Evolution of the number of non-hotel accommodation facilities in Apulia region between 2008 and 2014

*\*Source: Authors' elaboration based on IPRES (2009, 2016) data.*

It can be noticed that between the 2008 and 2014 there was an average increase of about 70% in all non-hotel accommodation structures categories with a consequent increase also in the number of beds at regional level (Figure 6).

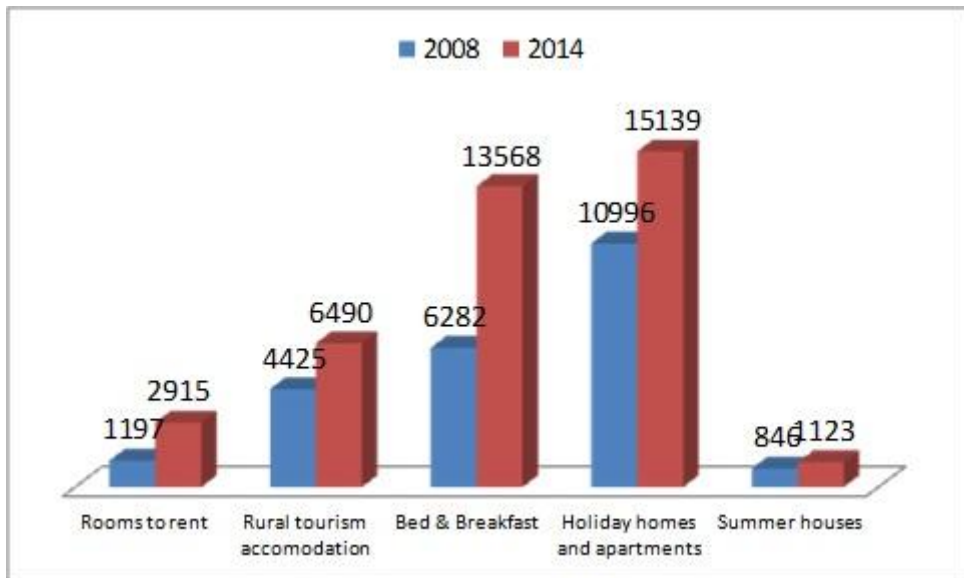


Figure 6. Changes in the number of beds between 2008 and 2014

*\*Source: Authors' elaboration based on IPRES (2009, 2016) data.*

At this point it is interesting to know how much the finance provided by the LAG to structures in rural areas, contributed to such a strong and positive change. At present, as the Apulia Region authority has formally closed the reporting of the



Fund on 31/12/2015, there are no official documents that indicate definitive and reliable data on the impact of the Fund. However, considering that the funds for diversification in non-agricultural activities are approximately equal to about 22% of the budget directly managed by the LAGs in Apulia between 2007 and 2013, it is assumed that these funds have largely contributed to the increase of the accommodation capacity of rural areas in Apulia region.

### **RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES IN APULIA REGION**

As part of the RDP 2014-2020, Apulia region authority, through LAG, applies the priority intervention axis on the development of rural economies for reinforcing and systematizing the results achieved under the RDP 2007-2013, characterized by the application of the diversification strategy.

The EU funding has, therefore, allowed a programming for the agricultural and forestry sector in Apulia, with a budget of 1.64 billion Euros, to generate investments of over 2.1 billion Euros (Apulia Region Authority, 2015).

Hereafter are some figures that Agriculture Commissioner of Apulia region authority envisaged for agricultural and rural development in the coming years (Apulia Region authority, 2015b). More than 2,200 farmers will receive support for the modernization of their companies and about 2,000 young farmers will receive financial support to start their own business: there are about 100 million dedicated to start-up businesses for young farmers and a premium grant between 40 and 60 thousand Euro. About 30% of agricultural land will be subject to contracts for the environment: 62 thousand hectares (ha) will be subject to biodiversity interventions; 150 thousand ha to the improvement of water and soil management and 180 000 ha associated with the improvement of soil management. In addition, almost 139,000 agricultural ha will receive support for organic production. More than 1,700 farmers will receive support for participating in quality schemes, local markets and short supply chains, or investing in the processing and marketing of agricultural products (investments that will affect 5% of food companies). The regional authority intends also to provide training services to more than 8,600 beneficiaries. Moreover, 30 operations will be supported in the field of renewable energy production. Finally, 94.3% of the rural population will be involved in participatory local development strategies implemented by LEADER local action groups, 17% will have access to services or improved infrastructure and 15% will benefit from broadband internet services or improved information and communication technologies. In terms of innovation, the region expects to finance 118 projects to strengthen the link between the agricultural, food and forestry sectors on the one hand and research on the other hand, in the frame of the European Partnership for Innovation.

## **RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM 2014-2020 AND LAGS ROLE IN RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

The 2014-2020 RDP, replies with different measures to six economic, environmental and social priorities. And what about tourism?

The planning documents, that led to the approval of the new lines of LAG management funding, highlight excellent results already achieved, and widely discussed in this paper, as well as difficulties encountered by rural tourism operators in the area.

In fact, the 2007-2013 OP-EAFRD, providing funding for the creation or improvement of accommodation facilities, focused on the design and development of a range of quality rural tourism packages, but once launched, did the offer succeed on setting in the market? It is wondered if have been used some instruments and strategies to identify the right target, thus working on a real improvement of rural economies, that is, exponentially increasing the income of local communities in these territories.

In fact, what missed in the LAGs management of public funds is that they assumed that each small rural territory, could present itself as a tourist destination. They have not worked in synergy with other rural areas of Apulia region. In other words, they were not able to meet the system need to respond efficiently and effectively to the needs of the tourism market.

As a matter of fact, in recent years LAGs had a greater need for skills focused on local tourism development, not only in terms of programming and planning, but also to design tourism products (tours, packages, themed networks) and marketing. In summary, LAGs started investing in their area to create the tourist offers. Then, only at the end, when they needed to set them on the market, they begun to worry about real things. Except that, the tourism offers that were funded were not designed for the market but only to meet the local requirements. So they are usually “unsaleable” and, often, “non-communicable”.

However, what about the other critical issues?

Many LAGs started their rural tourism promotion activities without any knowledge about tourism and after they found the same solutions/actions:

- service (more or less qualitative) and standards to which companies had to adhere in order to be networked and promoted as part of a tourism offer;
- structural funding by government and public authorities (visitor centres, educational workshops, food museums and popular traditions) often creating unconnected tourist services;
- inter-regional projects to promote tourism, maybe about the construction of the same itineraries: a very common way, but without taking into account how in practice tourists choose destination and their mobility;
- portals, websites and pages without the possibility of purchase;
- participation in tourism fairs or similar, where a tour operator is just a buyer of a well-defined and technically functioning tourism offer.

In general, for LAGs, it was hard to look in from the market and tourists' point of view; starting from their actual reputation and from the strengths directly related to

the territory, and they almost ignored the basic rules of the tourism market (sustainability, demand-supply, hiking and overnight, proximity and medium-long range, individual and intermingled, etc.).

Regarding these issues, many professionals have been called to intervene, very often lagging behind or suggesting predefined and strict actions, usually conceived by inexperienced staff.

At the same time, in fact, the LAG have taken, and will take on an increasingly central role in guiding the rural areas development, also relying on huge financial resources from the 2014-2020 programming period. Actually, each LAG territory configures an important opportunity for the region of Apulia, because it's a unique area, where to develop a seasonally adjusted tourism that stands out from other tourism products. Indeed, while the seaside tourism is a mass tourism product, it is structured and sold in each macro-continental area and, therefore, it proves less able to attract international flows from the medium and long distance. The only "new era" in tourism to explore and exploit is another idea of Apulia; that of the protected nature, of the low mountain, of the quality agriculture; one of the territories with large and unique identity, but that is disappearing.

The new 2014-2020 LAG (and the new Internal Areas and Protected Areas) should also develop their "sustainable" tourism projects and products. In order to manage EU funds better than in the past programming period the LAG will have to adopt a Local Action Plan; a document with a strategy and actions through which investing the funds.

However, unlike in the past and according to EU directives, such a strategy will be developed in a participatory way, or through the creation of local focus groups. Professional associations, tour operators and all actors in the rural economy will participate. They will have to set up the expenditure strategy regarding pre-defined themes within OP-EAFRD such as:

- development and innovation in local short chains (food, crafts and manufacturing);
  - development of renewable energy chain (production and energy savings);
- sustainable tourism;
- nature, land use and biodiversity (plant and animal) care and protection;
- development and management of environmental and natural resources;
- enhancement of local cultural and artistic heritage;
  - access to key public services;
  - social inclusion of specific disadvantaged and/or marginal groups;
  - urban renewal through the creation of inclusive places and services for the community;
  - networks and smart communities.

The strategy of each LAG will be drafted by a focus group and will address maximum three of the themes listed above. Many of the themes concern or are directly related to local tourism development. Of course, the Region of Apulia authority, as the Managing Authority, will ensure that all LAGs have many themes

in common, to create a development and investment strategy favouring synergies and avoiding as much as possible results dispersion.

### CONCLUSIONS

Apulia region - thanks to its cultural heritage as well as its natural capital - has a great potential for the development of rural tourism. Rural tourism packages concern typical agro-food product, sport activities, cultures and history of the region. Regional authorities are aware of this potential therefore they have dedicated a high attention to supporting tourism in rural areas in the previous rural development program (2007-2014) as well as the current one (2014-2020). In fact, tourism is considered as a strategy for the diversification of rural economies thus making local communities more vital and vibrant. The co-financing of the EAFRD allowed many rural operators to develop innovative and unique rural tourism products. In this a crucial role is played by the Local Action Groups as rural tourism is included in the local development strategies implemented by them. However, while it is doubtless that good results were achieved (e.g. increase of non-hotel accommodation facilities number in rural areas as well as number of beds) it is also true that the initial development phase was characterised by many weaknesses and deficiencies. That's to say that there is room for improvement in order to use in a more efficient and effective way the public funding dedicated to the development of the sector. What is urgently needed is to improve the governance of the rural tourism sector at regional level. This can be achieved, among others, by fostering coordination among the regional LAGs and also by fostering synergies among the rural tourism structures scattered in rural areas of Apulia region. Improved vertical and horizontal coordination will make easier the marketing of the unique tourism package represented by the region and its rural heritage. Finally, it is important to create an effective communication strategy targeting the travel market in order to achieve proper development of rural tourism and consequently that of local economies.

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