Community participation as a driver of sustainable tourism. The case of an Italian village: Marettimo Island

Gianpaolo Basile - Mario Tani - Mauro Sciarelli
Maria Antonella Ferri

Abstract

Purpose of the paper: The paper aims to study the role of community participation in an Italian marginal area in contributing to the social innovation phenomenon in which residents focus their economic efforts on tourism development. It aims to verify if community participation may enhance the tourists' perception of authenticity and the safeguarding of local resources.

Methodology: The authors present a theoretical framework and a case study of Marettimo, an Italian village. The paper analyses the interrelationships between authenticity and community participation and the community role in safeguarding local resources within the tourist's "living like a local" experience.

Findings: Community participation is seen as a relevant and significant factor in facilitating the interaction between the tourist and the place, and as a meaningful drive to strengthen both tourist perception of authenticity and its attachment to the place.

Practical implications: The paper highlights how local communities and tourism actors, may coordinate to create "authentic" tourist experiences. In this context, the paper presents and prescribes the role of community participation and authenticity to make stakeholders feel the importance of not only becoming place ambassadors but also place resources safeguards.

Limitations of the research: As for all case studies, the findings highlighted in this paper may be difficult to generalize to other rural and fishing areas without a further process of adaptation.

Originality of the paper: The proposed framework fills the gap in the role of community participation particularly in those areas with environmental and anthropological resources that can create tourist place attachment but, at the same time, are characterized by depopulation and limited welfare conditions as well.

Key words: community participation; sustainable tourism; authenticity; place attachment

1. Introduction

Several rural, and fishing, Italian villages have endured an ongoing decline of traditional industries in the last decades exposing them to depopulation, poverty growth and hydro-geological instability. This

condition, present in all European countries, has driven several changes that may be seen as a social innovation towards the exploration of alternative means to strengthen the places' economic resources and to foster social and economic community development (Lepp, 2007; Basile and Cavallo, 2020). Among these new development paths, community-based tourism has been proven as a viable option in traditional rural-fishing areas as it may:

- provide economic benefits to local residents (Bramwell and Lane, 1993; Mehmetoglu, 2001),
- promote host destinations (Boo and Busser, 2006; Mehmetoglu and Ellingsen, 2005),
- provide visitors with high-quality experiences and greater environmental awareness (Lee, 2009; Lepp, 2007; Shrestha *et al.*, 2007), and
- safeguard natural and cultural resources (Hiwasaki, 2006; Okazaki, 2008).

Community participation has become common in ecotourism (Snyder and Sulle, 2011), and according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2001) it was one of the most promising niches in cultural tourism.

The main strength of community participation, especially in cultural tourism, lies in its potential to empower communities and to make substantial contributions to their development and to eradicate poverty, depopulation, hydro-geological instability and the degradation of cultural and landscape heritage (Manyara and Jones, 2007).

In fact, community participation activities are designed and implemented through community consensus without top-down processes and they may enhance the opportunity for spontaneous encounters between destination communities and tourists. In fact, for many people, the development of a sustainable approach to cultural tourism is the same as local community participation (Salazar, 2012).

Several scholars have studied the factors influencing sustainable tourism supported by the local community such as attitudes (Lai and Nepal, 2006), perceived effects (Dyer *et al.*, 2007), community attachment (Nicholas *et al.*, 2009), and perceived benefits (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011). Other (Fallon and Kriwoken, 2003; Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004; Nicholas *et al.*, 2009) have shown that it is difficult to have sustainable tourism initiatives without the support and participation of the locals.

Other studies highlighted that community participation is a condition for tourism planning, aimed at the creation of an enjoyable tourism offer for both tourists and residents (Simmons, 1994).

A positive attitude from local residents can not only help in boosting tourists' tourist satisfaction level but it can also contribute to reaching experiential value co-creation based on the relationships between tourists and the local community that, furthermore, could stimulate a "word-of-mouth" phenomenon of the destination by the satisfied tourists (Presenza *et al.*, 2013).

On this basis, the authors develop a conceptual framework and use a case study, to argue that:

- community participation in tourism (community-based tourism, CBT) may be seen as a social innovation process in which the local community adapts its habits and practices to external stimuli using community attachment as a source of value;
- the relations between community host and tourists affect their authenticity perception fostering a real and virtual place attachment condition;
- there is a direct link between community attachment and environmental safeguard, making the tourism phenomenon sustainable.

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This paper is organized as follows. First, there is the theoretical framework on Social Innovation (Section 2), on the role of authenticity in the tourist experience (Section 3), in Section 4 we focus on the role of community participation in the sustainable tourism field; then we present the methodology (Section 5), the research findings (Section 6), and, finally, there is the discussion of the case with conclusions, implications, limitations and further research directions (Section 7).

2. Social innovation and community based tourism

Social innovation is part of the debate about the nature and role of innovation in modern society; it is a conceptual extension of the innovative character of socio-economic development (Hillier, Moullaert, and Nussbaumer, 2004).

Regarding that, Mumford (2002) argued that social innovation can be defined as the emergence and implementation of new ideas about how people should organize interpersonal activities, social interactions, to create new networks for production, new training processes and new tools for neighborhood governance in order to meet one or more common goals (Dredge, 2006).

Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) defined social innovation as those new configurations of social action practices, prompted by the community, or one of its parts, with the ultimate goal of coping better with needs and problems than what is possible using existing practices.

Furthermore, Crozier and Friedberg, (1993) interpreted social innovation as a process of collective creation in which the members of a certain collective unit learn, invent and lay out new rules for the social game of collaboration and of conflict or, in a word, a new social practice, and, in this process, they acquire the necessary cognitive, rational and organizational skills.

This trend combines commitment to both "difference" and "unity" in the same community effort. It builds upon familiar steps in the participation process but practices them in multicultural ways (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster, 2003).

In the present work the authors will consider community-based tourism (CBT) as a social innovation approach in which host residents, community members, support and/or participate in tourism development with their different habits, behaviors and social organization, and, sometimes, even in a passive way as the locals not directly involved in tourism activities may

still be considered as living repository of the local culture and the local traditions. Therefore, the hospitality industry has evolved from viewing experiences as passive activities (e.g., guided tour around historical buildings) towards co-created experiential consumption leveraging relationships with the local community (Ellis *et al.*, 2018).

CBT was considered a way for individuals to participate and integrate in community life, creating an affectional bond, or emotional link, with a specific community (McCool and Martin, 1994). Community attachment highlights the individual's relationship with, and belonging to, a community (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974). Therefore, community participation, a result of the local area "social capital", plays a significant role in CBT related sustainable development, as it creates a synergy between community members and between them and other stakeholders, and it helps increasing the community value by enhancing the positive effects of tourism and reducing its negative ones (Franch, 2010; Beritelli *et al.*, 2016).

The community-based approach is characterized by an active involvement of locals in development issues; in this approach, local residents are seen as a key resource in sustaining the product of tourism destinations particularly in rural and fishing areas in which are present social and environmental needs (Hardy *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, this approach provides incomes for villagers, while empowering them to exert control over community developments, and to prevent environmental degradation (Tolkach and King, 2015).

In this regard, various academics and practitioners acknowledge that community participation can be viewed from at least two different perspectives: (1) participation in the decision-making process and (2) participation in sharing tourism benefits (Höckert, 2009; Michael, 2009). On the other hand, CBT helps in sharing the various positive effects related to spreading the benefits of tourism development projects such as higher incomes, better employment, and education of locals (Brohman, 1996).

The role of community participation in the tourism development process have been studied in tourism literature. Cole (2006) clarified that tourism as a service-based industry is extremely dependent on the support and co-operation of host communities. Dogra and Gupta (2012) hold that community participation acts like the backbone of a destination. D'Amore (1983) and Murphy (2012) described the service as the key to the hospitality atmosphere and that community participation can increase the social carrying capacity. Wearing and McDonald (2002) saw the community-based as a place management process leveraging on creating a symbolic, mutual, relationship between the place and the tourist, that even when not focused on the tourist, consider it as a part of the system. At the same time community participation is a fundamental key to experiential economy and in creating a perception of authenticity (Pookhao Sonjai, *et al.*, 2018; Mannon and Glass-Coffin, 2020).

Accordingly, in rural and fishing areas, this is a social innovation according to Mumford (2002) as it asks local communities to change the drivers of local development and it may be seen as a social innovation according to Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) as it is designed to address depopulation, i.e. the movement of young people out of the area in search

for jobs. Finally, it meets the Crozier and Friedberd (1993) criteria as it requires local residents to change the rules of social game as they have to learn how to deal systematically with external stakeholders.

3. The role of authenticity in tourist place attachment

Tourism is highly dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of host communities, the service is considered central in creating a hospitable atmosphere and the local community is an integral part of tourist experiences (Murphy, 2012). Therefore, tourists have an active role in looking for meaningful and memorable experiences (Ritchie and Hudson, 2009), and, as Vargo and Lusch, (2004) argued, tourism value should be seen as 'value-in-use' emerging when tourists use, experience the tourism services in their creation context. For tourists, the value of tourism resides in, and derives from, their experiences, hence it is 'value-in-the-experience' (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012), or 'experience value' (Prebensen *et al.*, 2012). In this view, the residents and those involved will have to interact to stimulate a reciprocal value creation, fostering "value co-creation" (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004).Several authors agree that the essence of CBT is in the interactions between tourists and residents; tourists actively collaborate with residents in the product/service creation that tourists will later assess in order to determine the travel value on their usage experiences (Pencarelli and Forlani, 2002; Sharpley, 2014; Ranjan and Read, 2016).

Pine and Gilmore (2011) argued that experience is about creating a memorable and unique event, a vision commonly shared in the tourism industry (Prebensen *et al.*, 2018). In tourism studies, there is an ongoing discussion on the shift from tourist to traveler, as the latter is more interested in experiences, he/she demands authentic, experiential-oriented opportunities, and more meaningful interactions with locals (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Pencarelli and Forlani, 2016; Tussyadiah, 2016). In this context, CBT is seen as a source of authentic and memorable experiences, while travelling internationally, regionally or even locally (Williams *et al.*, 2014).

Community participation represents a clear shift from the services economy to an experiential one (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), and Scarpato (2002) argued that local culture is often a meaningful driving force behind the "cultural revival" of a place.

Accordingly, CBT is a way to transfer historical, social and naturalistic local characteristics (ideographic and organizational) in a set of dyadic relationships between the host community and tourists. CBT helps to give tourists a "living like a local" experience that may stimulate a place attachment that, usually, is represented by the residents' community sense of belonging, individuals' emotional bindings, tourists' perception of environmental and social conditions encountered on tour, as it is showed in figure 1 (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017; Russo and Richards, 2016; Shams, 2018).

Regarding that, using a co-creation-oriented perspective, these new resident roles of the host community help to define them as "makers and
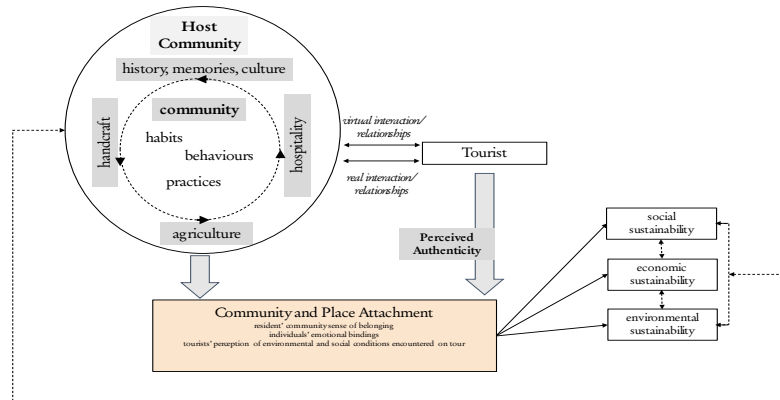
shapers rather than as users and choosers of involvements" (Simpson, 2008). The villagers' support in local area tourism development is especially important in rural or fishing villages, where 'meeting the local people' is often the real experience the tourists are searching for.

Pine and Gilmore (2008) hold that authenticity is an essential asset of firms that provide services for consumers, which are not only satisfied with low costs and high quality, but also seek to participate to the creation of genuine experiences.

In this view, co-production involves tourists in the experience design process, performing either a facilitation or active role through the sharing of knowledge or information with the community members (Palladino, 2020; Pizzichini *et al.*, 2020).

This interaction creates place *attachment* in both residents and tourists and contributes to drive tourists in supporting the place drive towards *social, environmental and economic sustainability* (see fig. 1) (Vrontis *et al.*, 2020).

Fig. 1: Relations between place and tourist

Source: our elaboration

Regarding that, Zenker and Braun (2010) defined the results of place-community and stakeholder-tourist relationships as a network of associations in the consumer's mind based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design.

Several scholars (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Rickly Boyd, 2012; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017; Basile and Cavallo, 2020) discussed the link between authenticity and experience, defining it as the relationship between enjoyment of tourists and their perception of "how genuine are their experiences". Costa and Bamossy (2001), in their work on the role of authenticity and its perception, noted how consumers suspend disbelief in their assessment of authenticity in some situations.

Arguably, visitors are approached with a cognitive perspective, leveraging both the authenticity perception and the emotional bindings

to create "place attachment" to the visited place (Lee and Shen, 2013; Conti *et al.*, 2020; Basile, 2020). Authenticity is associated with terms such as "genuine", "real", "to trust", "original" and other synonyms (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010).

Wang (1999) saw authenticity as a constructed phenomenon, as an experience or a perception. In territorial management and marketing, authenticity becomes a functional characteristic, especially when it stimulates the tourism sector (Apostolakis, 2003); it helps identifying "social" tourists - i.e. those more inclined to learn and live experiences - and "aesthetic" ones - i.e. tourists interested in perceiving artistic and cultural elements in local craft objects (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010).

In the last decade tourists are more and more demanding experientially oriented opportunities involving more meaningful interactions with the local community to develop local attachment (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017).

In tourism, this attachment perception is showed as: (a) a tourist identification with a certain symbolic value, (b) meeting of the tourists' needs, (c) the perception of a functional component, and (d) a social bond (Tsai and Wang, 2017; Yuksel *et al.*, 2010; Ram *et al.*, 2016). This emotional tourist-place link is known in psychology as 'place attachment' (Gross and Brown, 2006, 2008). It produces "the sense of physically being and feeling 'in place', 'at home' and 'living like a local'" (Yuksel *et al.*, 2010, p. 275; Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017).

Kianicka *et al.*, (2006) argued that the main factors in building a tourists' place authenticity perception, are landscape, social relationships, culture, leisure activities, and local economy. Therefore, it could be predicted that place attachment and authenticity are tightly linked (Ram *et al.*, 2016; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008), and Wildish *et al.* (2016) argued that visitors establish deep connections to a place through experiences centered on a sense of freedom, relaxation, and proximity to nature.

Place attachment is also seen as a positive emotional tie or an affectional bond between an individual and a particular place setting (Debenedetti *et al.*, 2014). Emotional ties are the socially driven roots of place attachment (Tonge *et al.*, 2015; Tumanan and Lansangan, 2012) as the place social bonding is the result of interpersonal relationships in the place enhancing the sense of belonging to a group and to a specific setting (Buchmann *et al.*, 2010; Hammitt *et al.*, 2009).

Buchmann *et al.* (2010) argued that, when a visitor engages in sincere interpersonal interactions based on the true self, they are more likely to establish meaningful social relations thereby developing social bonding to a place.

There is a clear dialectical interaction between place offer and the consumer experiential demand. So, place and tourists co-produce the experience and the perception of authenticity as the outcome of the experience itself (Jiang *et al.*, 2017).

Of course, a strong place attachment is able to increase tourist loyalty - i.e. to maintain over time the relationship between tourist and place - when the level of coherence between lived experience and expectations plays a predominant role (Gross and Brown, 2008; Basile *et al.*, 2016; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010).

So, we can argue that authenticity perceived by tourists mediates the relationship between place characteristics perception and different level of place attachment.

4. Community participation and sustainable tourism

Since the WCED Brundtland report (1987) tourism was considered as a social and economic variable interconnected with environmental sustainability.

According to numerous researchers such as Rozemeijer, (2001:13) and Salazar (2012), CBT can create sustainable development in rural areas for three main reasons:
1. Community participation generates new jobs and contributes to local development - a benefit that applies especially in marginal areas.
2. Community participation adds value to the territorial tourism product through diversification of tourism, increasing volume and economies of scale.
3. The benefits of using natural resources in tourism will prompt the community to use these valuable resources in a sustainable way.

Local community participation is an essential step to ensure sustainable tourism development (Salazar, 2012; Fan *et al.*, 2020), it is needed to obtain community support and acceptance of tourism development projects and to link the social, economic and environmental benefits to the local community needs (Cole, 2006).

Moreover, Tosun and Timothy (2003) argued that the local community is more likely to know what will work in local conditions; and that community participation can add to the democratization process and has the potential to increase awareness, interest and safeguard in territorial issues and resources.

As Kalisch and Cleverdon (2000) suggested, when the community as a whole works for social and economic empowerment, it will be more difficult to suffer from worker's displacement or to subtract from local actors the local valuable resources.

Jurowski, Uysal, and Williams (1997) predicted the residents' perceived social, economic, and environmental impacts using community attachment, economic gain, utilization of tourism resource base, and environmental attitudes.

Nilsson (2003) defined the local involvement in environmental safeguard as a social innovation model considering it a significant, creative and sustainable shift in the way a given society deals with several profound and previously intractable social issues such as poverty, disease, violence or environmental deterioration.

Murphy (2012) argued that the community participation in tourism is based on the place assets including not only local people but also the natural environment, infrastructure, facilities and special events. The community-oriented approach is a widely accepted sustainable development theory based on distributing the control on development processes, on creating a consensus-based decision-making, and on ensuring benefits for all the stakeholders (Inskeep, 1994; Tosun, 2006).

According to the participatory process, the system tries to improve residents' quality of life, to create positive relationships between residents and tourists, and also to support resident long-term well-being influencing policies development and place management decisions (European Commission, 2013). Finally, the authors argue that community participation may predict sustainable tourism initiatives.

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Therefore, community participation and conservation activities through sustainable development and planning create appropriate development frameworks and enable strategies to ensure favorable local attitudes, to protect local resources and, more importantly, to protect and improve the community's quality of life via tourism development (Faulkner and Tideswell, 1997; Tosun, 2006; Yoon *et al.*, 2001).

5. Research hypotheses, and research design

The research has been designed and implemented on a tripod of methodological approaches; its theoretical foundation is based on an extensive review of extant works pertaining to the subject. The resulting theoretical framework was tested with a case study, using qualitative means (interviews).

The results of the latter were further substantiated and enhanced through secondary (online) data collection and analysis.

Contextually, the awareness of being different from other places renders the territory a semantic space in which both social and economic actors create and/or maintain sustainable relationships with their relevant stakeholders (Shams, 2018).

Some researchers (Goodson; 2003; Scheyvens, 2003) argued that there are a several factors hindering active community participation in tourism development, such as a lack of ownership, capital, skills, knowledge and resources. In remote areas of less developed countries, as featured in this case study, a number of further barriers exist: the concept is new; decisions are taken by bureaucrats in a highly centralized system; planners believe that local people are uneducated and too ignorant to be involved; and importantly the local people do not have the knowledge to participate.

Social empowerment results from increased community cohesion when members of a community are brought together through a tourism initiative. The enhancement of community cohesion is discussed by Sanger (1988) in relation to Bali, by Cole (2003) in relation to Ngadha, by Mc Gettigan *et al.* (2005) in relation to Ireland, and by Ashley *et al.* (2001).

In light of these considerations, the present paper has been design to test three main propositions: (a) community based tourism, in marginal areas, can be seen as a source of social innovation; (b) relations between community and stakeholders create authentic experiences increasing place attachment; (c) community "cohesive" participation is a territorial component contributing to create authentic relationships between the stakeholders and the place, achieving also sustainable development of the territory safeguarding local resources.

In order to test these propositions, we decided to study the role of CBT as a way to create a shared platform where community members and

tourists may interact to co-create their perceptions and help in making the tourism-related activities authentic and sustainable. We used a case study approach, as it allows us to analyze the items identified in our literature review in a real-life context (Saunders and Lewis, 2012). This approach is considered functional for an explorative purpose, following a "constructivist", a "qualitative" and an "inductive" logic. Qualitative methods help to look at the experiences of local residents, tourists, and travelers, to investigate their meaning and how they were translated by individuals in social media.

The case was studied in three phases as summarized in the following table 1.

In the first phase we studied the local actors' web communication (looking at their websites, blogs and Facebook page) to comprehend the induced image (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2013) "presented" to tourists and travelers. We focused this phase on the main tourism-oriented actors such as a local promotion Organization (Associazione CSRT "Marettimo"), and three websites promoting tourism on the island (Marettimo Web; Marettimo Isole Egadi; Turismo Trapani). We looked for the main resources they were promoting and how they were described to see if they leveraged the community and/or the authenticity. In this phase, we looked to the induced image projected by local tourism players as well, studying the websites of the only Booking.com listed Hotel (Marettimo Residence) and five more apartment renters or B&Bs.

Tab. 1: Phases of case study development

Phase	Method	Period	Stakeholder "involved"
1: Induced Image	Text analysis (Websites, blogs, Facebook Pages)	10/2019 to 12/2019	Local Promotion Organization (1) - Local Tourism Websites (3) - Hotels (1) - Apartments, and B&B (5)
2: Modified-Induced Image	Interviews	12/2019 to 03/2020	Local Promotion Organization (1) - Apartments, and B&B (4) - Fishermen (involved in tourism services) (3) - Residents (5)
3: Organic Image	Online Platforms text analysis	03/2020 to 04/2020	Facebook (messages on 4 pages/groups in 2019) - Instagram (500 most recent posts tagged "marettimo") - Tripadvisor (10 highest ranked attractions – 145 reviews)

Source: our elaboration

In the second phase, we interviewed 13 residents both involved and not involved in tourism-related activities. In particular, we interviewed the president of the local promotion organization, four B&B owners, and three fishermen operating in the tourism sector as well (in sea-tours or diving tours).

We investigated their motivations, the local community engagement and, in particular, the role of authenticity and natural resources preservation in tourism products. Then, we interviewed 5 local residents not directly involved in tourism to get their view on tourism-related place development. The interviews were used to identify the main factors to investigate on how authenticity, relationships and natural resources preservation helped in co-creating the tourists' modified-induced image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991).

In the third phase we studied the reviews of the various local area attractions, and tourism services on three online platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and TripAdvisor) in order to verify the organic image of the destination - i.e. the place brand consumers are projecting - and the roles of authenticity and culinary resources in shaping it.

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On Instagram, we looked at the 500 most recent photos tagging the island to check if there were shots of local products and local traditions (we carried out this research before the "summer" season, in the months of March and April, so the shots were mostly posted by locals or by tourists acting as place ambassadors).

On Facebook we looked into all the 2019 content in the public groups promoting the local area to locals (Noi dell'Isola di Marettimo; Marettimo Di Qua e di Là del Mare) and in the pages of local tourist services (Marettimo Giro dell'Isola con PIPPO; Beb Sulmare Marettimo). On Tripadvisor we looked into the tourists' reviews for the ten highest ranked local attractions (145 reviews in the 2019). In both Facebook posts and TripAdvisor reviews, we looked for explicit passages, or photos, dealing with the local traditions and with authenticity, with the relationship with the local community and the local culture, and with the preservation of local resources, both natural and cultural ones.

6. Case study: The Island of Marettimo

Our case study is the Island of Marettimo, one of the Aegadian Islands in the Mediterranean Sea, West of Sicily, Italy. It is part of the Favignana municipality in the Province of Trapani. The ancient name of the island was Hiera ("Sacred Island" in Greek) and Pliny referred to it as "Sacra" (Sacred). The name of Marettimo comes out of the combination of two words: mar (sea) and timo (thyme), probably for the widespread diffusion of thyme on the island. According to some the name is just the local pronunciation of the word "maritimo" (sea-related).

In the Roman age, the island was used to monitor the sea routes to North Africa. As a consequence, on the island there is a complex called Case Romane (Roman houses). Later, in the Norman period (1100-1150 A.D.) a castle was built on the island, and during the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (1734-1861 A.D.) it was used as a jail. Today, the island is populated by almost 2000 inhabitants in summer and about 100 in winter. In recent decades, the fishing village has opened up its economy by adding to the historic work of fisherman, tourist activities, creating a spontaneous community-led hospitality. Therefore, Marettimo's tourism offer is based on private houses, some bed-and-breakfasts and other structures that are not aimed at tourists (in particular, 3 restaurants, 4 bars, 3 grocery stores).

Phase 1: induced image

The general tourism websites present Marettimo as a fisherman island with several traditions and a wonderful sea. It is described as a genuine place mostly untouched by tourism, as a real hideaway, a quiet, sleepy place. It is promoted as a place to visit for the crystalline waters to explore swimming, snorkelling, and diving, but, above all, it is famous for its sea-

caves both above the water, such as the Grotta del Cammello (Camel's sea cave) or underwater, such as the Cattedrale (Cathedral's Cave).

The Island is seen as the most pristine of the Aegadian Islands as it still preserves a rich, almost unique, endowment of natural resources (more than 200 local plants). The island is part of the biggest Protected Sea Area in Europe. It is famous for many trekking paths linked to both natural and cultural resources (such as Old Castle of Punta Troja, and Case Romane); this helps in creating a heterogeneous, and slow-paced tourism offer mostly defined around local traditions as dances and local recipes.

Marettimo is seen as a place for cultured, long-stay regulars rather than hit-and-run day-trippers. It is an unspoilt island mostly attractive to walkers and scuba-divers. On the island there is a single human settlement, the "modern" town. This is an ageless place, with most of the houses white with blue shutters, and a smattering of small fishing boats tied up at a small ramshackle port.

The vision of Marettimo that the local actors present reflects this rich endowment. The place is promoted for trips on the boats of local fishermen, for the natural and the cultural resources that travelers may visit with, or without, the help of locals in order to interact with them. In particular, the local promotion organization, the Associazione CSRT "Marettimo" presents the tourists with several local attractions in part related to the sea and the heritage, and in part related to living the place with the locals. The association organizes several "slow tourism" events during the summer as the Poetry readings, music shows near the Case Romane, and visits to the local "Museo del Mare" (Sea Museum) where tourists can get information on the history of the Island, its traditions, and the local habits. For example, tourists may get all the information on the Festa di San Giuseppe (March, from 10th to 19th). The website uses the local dialect as a way to create a more authentic image and it explains all the phases of the celebration in order to help tourists be prepared to get the most out of it.

In this first phase we have found that both authenticity and community participation are factors in the tourism-related place development, and the local tourism players leverage the local community in the tourist experience. For example, a local B&B, il "Corallo", presents several services provided by third parties such as "Franco the Boat-man" for the boat-tour of the island or "Nino" for the excursion with the donkeys. Another B&B, the "Scalo Vecchio", advise tourists to try the fishing experience with "Ignazio and Gaspare, two local sea-dogs" that "after teaching you several fishing techniques, will cook and serve you the fish on the Azzurra", or the traditional recipes by the "passionate Enza".

Phase 2: modified-induced image

In the second phase of our case study, we have interviewed thirteen local residents. They told us that the change from fishery to tourism has been slow and more and more participative over the last 35 years. At the beginning only a few locals were embracing the idea to substitute the traditional fish-based economy with a new one based on tourism and that "over time tourism has evolved without a precise guidance" with the community that has been engaged in order to preserve the traditions. For

example, the traditional Blue Fish Festival has been moved from August to July in order to preserve it for the locals even if that meant losing an attraction.

But the importance of tourism has not superseded the relationships among locals. For example, the owner of a B&B, when prompted on how he planned to make his business grow, told us: "In the family we already have two jobs… We have the boats and houses… we could open a restaurant, but we won't do it! It is a matter of respecting the others!". Another local resident, not involved in tourism services, told us "everyone tries to integrate his own services with those provided by the other in order to propose a more enjoyable experience".

The local promotion organization (Associazione CSRT "Marettimo") has several times highlighted that tourism has developed spontaneously and that the local community has always safe-guarded the local traditions. In several interviews we have heard that safeguarding the place is a meaningful thing, for example a fisherman told us that "There is not a strong coordination in the local area, several persons promote the island on their terms… the other residents just actively participate to warrant that the place is promoted fairly and that the new initiatives are not able to endanger the place", on the same topic another one told us that "over the years, before it was protected as a Natural Park, several entrepreneurs have tried to build hotels and campsites on the Island, but they failed, in part as they were not able to build up the needed scale, and in part as the community was not happy with these abrupt changes".

Tourism development is based on perceived authenticity. For example, one of the local actors told us that "we hosted tourists in the fishermen's houses, so they got the real deal", while another explained to us that "RAI5 (An Italian television) broadcasted a 30-minute documentary on Marettimo's winter life… Now tourists come here to get that experience, to live the local traditions, not just the seaside".

At the same time, authenticity is meaningful for Marettimo tourists. A local actor told us "Our tourism is not the same as Rimini and such, we are like a family, tourism is an experience that we share with the tourists", and another added "Tourists stay here for several days in a row. This helps them to have the right pace, and enables them to taste, and appreciate, the local slow life-style".

Moreover, the local residents are convinced that CBT is a meaningful factor in the tourism economy as highlighted by a local house renter telling us that "it may happen that my mother helps the tourists in the kitchen. She goes to them and prepares several local recipes. This is not a service we sell… it is just to show them how we cook our fish". Another one explained to us that in Marettimo "Everyone lives off tourism. They may have a job during winter but tourism is needed to enhance their living".

Phase 3: organic image

In the third phase we looked at how Marettimo is perceived by the tourists analyzing their behavior in the social media. In particular, on Instagram we found more than 59 thousand images tagging Marettimo and we focused on the 500 most recent. Most photos, obviously, were

showing the local sea and the related caves, but many of them focused on different attractions such as the town (boats, wharf, alleys), or the local food (mostly fish, and traditional pastries such as those stuffed with ricotta cheese). Another common topic is the photo of the locals both in the case of special events (festivals and fairs) and as street-photography (impromptu shots of locals).

We have got similar results on Facebook about the island, as several messages speak about the local history (such as the case of several old photos of the area's events) or of the tourists' experiences (in one extreme case a tourist from Genova has written a poem on Marettimo Islands and its colors). At the same time the analysis of this social media highlights the desire of locals to promote their island. Locals share photographs of the place (mostly sea sights) or their memories of older editions of the Blue Fish Festival. They use it to spread online versions of documentaries and old videos (for example a recent one on the life in Marettimo during the recent pandemic).

More precise information on the tourist perceptions can be drawn from the tourists review on Tripadvisor. In the last years the ten highest ranked attractions of Marettimo reflect the same variety of resources the Island has. Tourists prefer the Old Castle of Punta Troja and the local Sea-Caves, they highlight the relevance of Cultural resources (the Byzantine Church or the Case Romane) but even the diving experiences (4 attractions are diving centers) and the Boat Trips ("Marettimo con Pippo").

Among the 145 reviews that tourists have left in the 2019, 49 of them speak of the interactions with the locals, both referring to tourism-related experiences ("We have visited it with Francesco" or a more explicit "I was lucky to meet Giuseppe T. He has made me, and my friend on his boat, fall in love with this island and its traditions") and to more general ones ("What a pleasure to meet with Pippo at the door of his house every morning").

42 reviews spoke of authentic experiences ("You visit a still wild place, too much comfort would make it less attractive", "In the evening, when the moon lights the wharf, you see the town as a traditional village", "All the various votive offerings shown out of the local church are amazing! They are peculiar and really artsy!", and "This is a special town. It seems that time has been stopped in another age").

Tourists are able to grasp that the local residents' main desire is not to taint their life as we can get from several comments ("This is a special town. It seems that time has been stopped in another age", "they protect their own island to leave it as it has been created", "Marettimo is an untainted island, clean, silent, you have to visit it!") and this drives them to become active promoters of sustainability ("If you will ever want to visit it, please, respect the island, its nature, and its traditions" or a way more explicit (emphasis in the original) "A REQUEST TO THOSE WHO ARE READING ME, if you have a snorkeling mask and see some "HUMAN" wastes in the sea… PLEASE HELP TO PRESERVE THIS AMAZING PLACE").

As a consequence, the tourist gets attached to the place (107 reviews on 149 hints at being attached to the place or its services) and in 37 cases the reviewers classify themselves as loyal visitors ("See you soon Mario", or

the more explicit "It is nice to be back and meet all the old friends. To meet them while snorkeling in Cala Martina… see you next year").

7. Conclusions and limits

Our analysis shows that Marettimo's community has had to overcome both the effects of young depopulation and those coming out of the new fishing regulations leading to high unemployment rates, mostly among young residents.

In Marettimo, local residents have been slowly responding to these stimuli by changing their social and economic practices from fishing to a community tourism destination. Moreover, this new drive is helping in creating a new perception of authenticity in the relationship between locals and travelers based on memories, culture and natural resources. As a consequence, the place has become attractive for those travelers looking for authentic interactions with the community as it lets them get involved in the "living like a local" experience; and, at the same time, these interactions drive locals to care for the local natural and cultural resources providing evidence to support our second proposition. Moreover, some residents have started to make this social innovation their own, so they are offering ancillary services based on local traditions, such as the boat trips by local fishermen. In these new activities they try to keep an eye to the preservation of local traditions that are seen as a valuable resource that should not be "exploited" in order not to lose the local culture.

At the same time, the social media analysis in the third phase suggests that many tourists get attracted by the slow pace of the local life in the Sicilian island as shown by several photos of residents and local alleys, and by the various posts and reviews speaking of the local traditions.

Regarding the framework propositions, we can conclude that, in the Marettimo case, tourism may be framed as a social innovation in the perspective defined by Mumford (2002) as locals are slowly accepting that they had to change from being an isolated fishing village to be a tourism destination (Crozier and Friedberg, 1993) without losing sight of their roots (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974). Marettimo has demonstrated that social innovations can be seen as actions that spread through society as a result of imitation, bringing about social change: a 'process of change in the social structure of a society in its constitutive institutions, cultural patterns, associated social actions and conscious awareness' (Zapf, 2003, p. 427). Tourism has become one of the main sources of jobs supporting the visions of Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) but without creating a homogenous approach in support of the multicultural approach (Checkoway *et al.*, 2003). These findings support the first proposition.

We have found support for our second proposition as well, as in Marettimo residents interact with tourists to create a holistic travel experience based on authentic experiences and to help tourists get a glimpse on the community life, creating an emotional bond with the local community supporting McCool and Martin (1994). For example, the locals create "tourism packages" suggesting tourists to satisfy their needs interacting with residents to get the authentic service; they may buy fish

from local fishermen, they can travel the inner island on mules, and they can visit the town center to interact with the elders. The need to interact with the locals is strengthened by local laws on marine protected areas, requiring tourists to get access to several locations.

Moreover, our research process has highlighted that the interaction between locals and tourists helps in creating a stable relationship with tourists leveraging on their perception of authenticity and making them loyal to the destination (Gross and Brown, 2008; Basile *et al.*, 2016). This trend is both the effect and, through feedback loops, the cause of a reciprocal involvement that is shown also in social media confirming previous studies (Buchmann, *et al.*, 2010; Hammitt, *et al.*, 2009) as shown by the several contents in social media highlighting that the place attachment is based on the tourist's memories driving him/her to create eWOM (Tsai, 2016).

Furthermore, we have found that CBT not only drives residents to highlight the importance of safeguarding the local natural and cultural resources, but it is also able to attract tourists that are actively promoting their protection (Faulkner and Tideswell, 1997; Tosun, 2006; Yoon *et al.*, 2001). The topic of preserving the local "untainted" environment and its specific characteristics has been found in all the three phases, giving us further support for the third proposition.

The findings of this paper highlight the role of recognition of territorial identity and authenticity as part of the policy action. Place-based policies should be aimed at the production of collective goods to contribute to the solution of the main issues that characterize marginal areas: the depopulation and the ageing population.

In Italy, the National Inner Areas Strategy (SNAI) introduced important territorial management innovations in the same direction of highlighting the importance of engaging the community to restore places without endangering them.

At the same time the excerpts highlight that these marginal areas become more attractive, and more resilient, when the local area is able to integrate the new tourism activities with the existing ones linked to local area traditions that can help them to create a unique offer without betraying their cultural and natural resources. So, the local actors, policy makers or just tourism entrepreneurs, could try to engage the local community in order to attract a specific niche of tourists that may become more loyal to the place as their experience create a link between them and the local further enhancing the value of coming back in the future. In terms of limitations, as all single case studies, the present research requires additional studies of a wider spectrum in order to generalize its findings. Therefore, it may not be possible to standardize DMO community-based approaches to tourism development because processes and results in any particular case are contingent on factors unique to that situation alone: differences in background conditions will probably result in different outcomes.

Furthermore, focusing on the technological context of the subject, the research has concentrated on social media, thus considering only a limited subset of the place stakeholders.

Gianpaolo Basile
Mario Tani
Mauro Sciarelli
Maria Antonella Ferri
Community participation
as a driver of sustainable
tourism. The case of an
Italian village: Marettimo
Island

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Academic or professional position and contacts

Gianpaolo Basile
Adjunct Professor of Destination Management
Universitas Mercatorum, Rome - Italy
e-mail: gianpaolo.basile@unimercatorum.it

Mario Tani
Researcher of Management
University of Naples Federico II, Naples – Italy
e-mail: mario.tani@unina.it

Mauro Sciarelli
Full Professor of Management
University of Naples Federico II, Naples – Italy
e-mail: mauro.sciarelli@unina.it

Maria Antonella Ferri
Full Professor of Management
Universitas Mercatorum, Rome – Italy
e-mail: a.ferri@unimercatorum.it