Check for updates

METHOD ARTICLE

Towards fair and sustainable tourism: cooperative strategies for cultural heritage management

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

Jose Maria Martin Civantos, Elena Correa Jiménez, María Teresa Bonet García, Sergio Couto González

University of Granada Department of Medieval History and Historiography Science and Techniques, Granada, Andalusia, Spain

v1 **First published:** 22 Jun 2026, **6**:214
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23636.1
Latest published: 22 Jun 2026, **6**:214
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23636.1

Abstract

In this article we present how participatory and collaborative methodologies with local communities, developed by the Laboratory of Biocultural Archaeology (MEMOLab) at the University of Granada, are enabling the creation of social intervention tools and alternative business models that promote sustainable tourism in remote rural areas.

These tools for participation and collaboration between local communities and administrative bodies have led, on the one hand, to the empowerment of the former and, on the other, to the creation of spaces for dialogue that benefit both parties. All of this is based on the conservation and use of agricultural heritage and the landscape, whose cultural and tourism potential is enormous.

The tools implemented and referred to here have been service-based payment agreements, land stewardship agreements and the creation—still in progress—of Heritage Communities, in accordance with the guidelines of the Faro Convention. The proliferation of Heritage Communities as avenues for cooperation and partnership between local organisations and stakeholders aims, in the long term, to promote the protection of rural cultural heritage whilst fostering fair, creative and sustainable tourism (FaCS Tourism).

Keywords

Historical irrigation systems, fair, creative and sustainable tourism, innovative business models, local communities,

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ?

	1	2
version 1 22 Jun 2026	? view	? view

1. **Fandi Achmad**, Telkom University, Bandung, Indonesia

2. **Antonia Gravagnuolo**, National Research Council, Institute of Heritage Science, Naples, Italy

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

Corresponding author: Jose Maria Martin Civantos (civantos@go.ugr.es)

Author roles: Martin Civantos JM: Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Correa Jiménez E**: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Bonet García MT**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Couto González S**: Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101132584. (Sustainable, engaging, and CREative Tourism as a driver for a better future in rural and remote areas. [SECreTour]).
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Copyright: © 2026 Martin Civantos JM *et al*. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Martin Civantos JM, Correa Jiménez E, Bonet García MT and Couto González S. **Towards fair and sustainable tourism: cooperative strategies for cultural heritage management [version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:214 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23636.1

First published: 22 Jun 2026, **6**:214 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23636.1

1. Introduction

In 2014, with the launch of the "MEditerranean MOuntainous LAndcapes" project (MEMOLA FP7; Grant agreement no. 613265; 2014–2017: www.memolaproject.eu), a series of activities began that linked social participation with local communities, laying the foundations for close collaboration that has continued to this day. This project was based on the study and analysis of cultural landscapes, understood as the spatial representation of the footprint of different societies over time. The project was carried out in partnership with the communities themselves, the heirs and stewards of a cultural and agricultural heritage that has proven to be sustainable and resilient over the centuries. Collaboration with local communities, primarily the irrigation communities that manage historic irrigation systems, fostered their empowerment and their capacity to engage with public authorities.

The relationship with the irrigation communities, local bodies that govern the distribution of water and the communal maintenance of *acequias* (irrigation channels), was approached as a fundamental element both for the collection of historical information and for the safeguarding of traditional ecological values and knowledge. These local irrigation communities are based on communal governance systems that enable them to manage infrastructure, water resources and water-related conflicts very effectively. However, their traditional nature and current circumstances (the ageing of their members and the lack of generational renewal, coupled with the invisibility of their values and ecosystem services) have led to them being disparaged by the authorities. Despite the significant environmental, social, cultural and productive values they embody and the vast array of ecosystem services they provide, they are under threat from policies and processes of industrialisation and agricultural intensification, as well as the severe crisis facing the rural world.

The need to re-evaluate the role of these irrigation communities and, more generally, local communities in remote rural areas, led us to base our proposal on working with them as a research and action strategy that we adapt to each specific location.

One of the main initiatives undertaken by MEMOLab has been the restoration of historic *acequias*, many of which were abandoned or at risk of abandonment. The participation of more than 5,000 volunteers over the years in the restoration of millenary *acequias* that form part of these historic irrigation systems, most of which were created in medieval times, was remarkable for its effectiveness and for the educational and awareness-raising impact it had. The most significant example was the restoration of the Barjas *acequia* (Cáñar, Granada), a collaborative project which, having begun in 2014, is still ongoing today, with an annual clean-up that enables water to be supplied to some of the village's springs.

The experience gained with these communities during the MEMOLA project enabled progress towards new forms of participation in subsequent projects. The project "Visiting the margins: INnovative CULtural ToUrisM in European peripheries" (INCULTUM; Horizon 2020, Grant agreement no. 101004552; 2021–2024, https://incultum.eu/) explored the potential of Europe's peripheral areas when local communities manage their heritage resources. Through work in various rural and remote areas, we were able to highlight diverse tourism resources managed by the communities themselves, such as historic irrigation systems.

The pilot area we coordinated from MEMOLab-UGR within INCULTUM was the "Altiplano de Granada" (Martín, Correa & Bonet, 2024), and specifically the management of historic irrigation systems carried out by irrigation communities. The aim of the work in our pilot area was to use traditional irrigation systems, the *acequias*, as cultural routes, given the high ecological, environmental, landscape and heritage value they embody. The work was once again carried out in collaboration with the irrigation communities, who played a central role in selecting the *acequia*, creating the route and maintaining it.

These cultural routes form part of a broader working strategy based on service fee agreements (Redford & Adams, 2009; Costanza *et al.*, 2015) signed between irrigation communities and local councils. Under these agreements, both institutions act as public-law bodies. The local council recognises the public interest of the irrigation system managed by the community and the services it provides to local residents, and actively contributes to its remuneration through various human, administrative, financial, material or public recognition resources. The main aim is for the administration to recognise the values and services that irrigators generate in cultural, landscape, social, environmental and productive terms (Cabello *et al.*, 2026), and to provide active support to their communities so that they can continue to do so. Furthermore, service remuneration agreements, formalised under the legal framework of administrative agreements, enable local councils to invest public funds in the conservation and improvement of traditional and historic irrigation systems within a context of legal certainty.

In short, the trail is a cultural service (within the ecosystem services provided by historic irrigation systems), aimed at both local residents and visitors, within the framework of sustainable cultural tourism. It is a tool for social intervention and

innovation that has not only enabled these services to be launched but, above all, has revitalised and empowered irrigation communities and laid the foundations for a new paradigm in the agricultural sector and its relationship with the administration and public policy.

Within the framework of the REVIERTE project, in this case funded nationally[1], land stewardship agreements were signed between the owners of the historic irrigation systems (the irrigation communities) and external non-profit organisations (referred to as stewardship entities, in this case the University of Granada through MEMOLab UGR), whose objectives include environmental conservation. This is, in this case, a mechanism promoted by the administration itself as a tool for the conservation and use of natural, cultural and landscape values and resources (Fundación Biodiversidad, 2025). In our case, we secured the full institutional involvement of the University of Granada, which became the first university to act as a custodial entity in Spain (UGR becomes custodial entity for the traditional irrigation systems of Cáñar-Barjas | University of Granada).

In the project "Sustainable, engaging and creative tourism as a driver for a better future in rural and remote areas" (SECreTour; Horizon Europe, Grant agreement ID: 1011325; 2024–2027, https://secretourproject.eu/), we have taken a further step by using tourism as a tool to strengthen the resilience and cohesion of local communities (Coppin & Guichard, 2024). To this end, we propose a strategy in which heritage is potentially regarded as a common good, following the work of Elinor Ostrom (1990), as a resource governed and managed (or co-governed) by the people who inhabit, enjoy, use and consider it their own. This group of people would constitute a Heritage Community. This is a concept enshrined in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, better known as the *Faro Convention* (2005), which recognises the right of every person to benefit from cultural heritage and to contribute to its management and conservation through direct and active participation. The SECreTour project aims to experimentally create these Heritage Communities in the project's various pilot areas (Granada, Spain; the Vjosa Valley, Albania; Ireland, amongst others), drawing on the diversity of situations and contexts, but once again employing tools of social innovation.

2. General methodological approach

The participatory and collaborative methodology[2] applied to the study of cultural heritage recognises that it is socially constructed and that local communities are key actors in its definition and management (Smith, 2006). Through tools such as workshops, collective mapping, open interviews or social mapping, a horizontal dialogue is promoted between specialists and residents, generating more inclusive knowledge. The incorporation of this methodology into cultural tourism projects is particularly relevant, as community participation improves the sustainability of the destination, reinforces the authenticity of the tourist experience and fosters shared responsibility for heritage conservation (Richards, 1996; González Santa Cruz, 2019). In general, this collaborative approach not only yields better assessments but also more democratic and sustainable management strategies. Our research is based on a participatory and collaborative methodology developed between 2014 (Delgado Anés, 2017) and 2025, within the framework of various European projects focused on cultural heritage, sustainable tourism and community governance. It combines ethnographic work with local irrigation communities, research into historical and heritage documentation, interviews and meetings with stakeholders. It also involves processes of negotiation, mediation and facilitation within communities and between them and public administrations, social participation, the restoration of traditional irrigation systems, the implementation of social intervention tools, and the continuous assessment of social, heritage and territorial impact.

We highlight here the methodological approach of the Payment for Services Agreements, the Land Stewardship Contracts, and the Heritage Communities. We mention the first two initiatives because they are highly innovative in the field of cultural and agricultural heritage and, as we have observed in various projects, because they have a high degree of replicability, being adaptable to different cultural contexts.

In the case of Heritage Communities, although this is an experimental initiative for which we currently have only preliminary results, we highlight it because we consider it to have high potential in terms of its capacity to mobilise the local population, as well as its power to empower heritage governance in rural and remote areas.

2.1 Payment for services agreements

Payment for ecosystem services agreements (Palomo *et al.*, 2016) are an emerging tool in the environmental context. This type of agreement, which involves a consideration (not necessarily financial) for the maintenance of environmental

[1]*Revierte is supported by the Biodiversity Foundation of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO) as part of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan (PRTR), funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.*
[2]In all cases, participants were informed in advance of the participatory activities, via the information sheet and by signing the consent forms.

resources and ecosystem services, originated in the 1990s in Costa Rica (Pagiola, 2008) and has seen increasing implementation in various territories over time, demonstrating its effectiveness.

In the case of the administrative agreements developed by MEMOLab-UGR, the first step is to establish the legislative framework at regional and national level within which landscape protection is situated: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that refer to the protection of historic and traditional irrigation systems (SDGs 9, 13, 15, 16, 17), as well as their identification as green and blue infrastructure; and Law 13/2011 on Tourism in Andalusia, which promotes sustainable tourism as a strategic sector of the Andalusian economy. Furthermore, the recognition of Irrigation Communities as public-law bodies with a long historical tradition and social legitimacy is enshrined in legislation; these bodies organise the use of irrigation water and are responsible for the maintenance of historical and traditional irrigation systems. On this basis, the commitments of the signatories (the Irrigation Community and the Town Council) are established:

- The Irrigation Community undertakes to preserve the municipality's historic irrigation system (including, where they exist, traditional water harvesting and storage practices), to collaborate in the design, co-financing and implementation of programmes linked to the improvement of water governance and management and agricultural activity; to work to guarantee the municipality's water supply; to promote a network of cultural trails along the *acequias*' right-of-way paths; to enhance traditional irrigation areas as resilient and efficient spaces in terms of water use and environmental management, etc.

- The Council undertakes to: preserve and keep the municipality's traditional irrigation system alive and functional; collaborate in the design, co-financing and implementation of programmes linked to improving water governance and management and agricultural activity; conserve and regenerate fertile soils; support the irrigation community in maintaining traditional irrigation infrastructure (*acequias*, reservoirs, weirs, etc.), and to participate in and facilitate, according to its capabilities and remit, the financial, administrative, operational and institutional burden required to govern the irrigation system.

- What is distinctive about this type of agreement is that it does not necessarily establish a monetary payment for the services and commitments provided by both parties, but rather provides for a wide range of support and recognition measures based on compensation for the services provided by the irrigation system.

2.2. Land stewardship agreements

This type of agreement has been signed between the University of Granada, through MEMOLab-UGR, and several irrigation communities in the province. In these agreements, both institutions acknowledge the importance of the maintenance, conservation and operation of traditional and historic irrigation systems, and the need to reconcile these traditional land-use practices with the conservation of the area's natural, landscape and heritage features for the use and enjoyment of future generations (Montesdeoca de la Fuente, 2014; Camacho-Castillo *et al.*, 2018). Under these agreements, the irrigation community acts as the owner and holder of the irrigation infrastructure (including springs, reservoirs, *acequias,* service roads, etc.) and is also responsible for its governance, management and maintenance. The University of Granada, through MEMOLab, as a signatory institution acting as a custodian, undertakes to provide technical and scientific assistance, mediation, support for volunteering and fundraising to the irrigation community. The University's aim is to enhance its service to society in the field of nature conservation and, specifically, regarding the sustainable use of natural resources. The University, for its part, undertakes to promote the protection and cataloguing of the natural and cultural heritage of the traditional and historic irrigation systems managed by the Irrigation Community, It also undertakes to establish a feedback loop by providing all scientific studies carried out to the irrigators' communities involved, recognising and citing local information sources as valid partners in scientific studies, and providing institutional support and recognition to the irrigators' community as a key institution in the region. In short, to provide technical and scientific support, facilitation and mediation in conflicts and processes, support for volunteering and fundraising.

2.3. Creation of heritage communities

The concept of "heritage communities" was first introduced in the Council of Europe's *Faro Convention* (2005)[3] and defined as a group of "people who value specific aspects of a cultural heritage that they wish to preserve and pass on to future generations, within the framework of public authorities' actions". Therefore, these groups or communities share a cultural heritage, whether tangible (monuments, archaeological sites, agricultural production areas) or intangible

[3]In drafting this section, we consulted ChatGPT (version GPT-5.3) to conduct an in-depth analysis of the Faro Convention in relation to Heritage Communities, their establishment, and key characteristics.

(traditions, languages, local ecological knowledge). These communities are "guardians" or "protectors" of a cultural heritage of the past and present, playing an essential role in the preservation of this heritage, cultural identity, as well as local traditions and knowledge. The current situation of social and economic change means that this heritage, particularly agricultural heritage, finds itself in an extreme situation, on the brink of extinction, both in material terms and in terms of all customary knowledge and traditions (intangible heritage). Furthermore, mass tourism is having a direct impact on local communities, leading to a loss of identity and authenticity, as well as the deterioration of natural and cultural landscapes and, ultimately, of historical heritage.

The proposal to establish Heritage Communities, within the SECreTour project, is based on placing the local population at the centre, with them making the decisions on how to use, enjoy, manage and conserve their heritage and the role that tourism should play in local development. We propose community-based tourism, as the local population can and should be part of the research into their territory as well as the decisions regarding development or, more specifically, tourism and how to approach it. Ultimately, these Heritage Communities are also a tool for empowerment and citizen participation in the management of a common good and, in some cases, a public good: heritage.

The Faro Convention does not set out the guidelines to be followed in the creation of a Heritage Community, but it does provide the guidelines and theoretical framework for public institutions and governments to recognise and facilitate the work of these communities. The criteria for identifying and organising these heritage communities are as follows:

- The community comprises people from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds and is intergenerational.
- The community has formed around a project, based on consensus regarding a specific heritage-building process.
- The project relates to an urban or rural enclave or a specific territory.
- The community develops its own interpretation or narrative regarding its relationship with its territory and heritage.
- The community's relationship with the project involves participation and responsibility.
- The community's dynamics for carrying out the project are democratic and active.
- The actions carried out involve both political actors and the community, following a model of community participation.

Within the framework of the SECreTour project, we are laying the foundations for the creation of Heritage Communities, following the guidelines of the *Faro Convention*:

1. **Identification of a local community** concerned with the management of its cultural, rural and environmental heritage, which is regarded as a defining element of its identity, and which is also aware of its right to protect and enjoy that heritage and its duty to conserve it for the next generation.
2. **Fostering discussions and dialogue** among those interested in joining the Heritage Community to agree on the most suitable legal structure for heritage management (association, cooperative, etc.)
3. **Collaboration with public institutions**. The *Faro Agreement* refers to the participation of public bodies within the Heritage Community itself, which provide the legal framework for its effective functioning and decision-making.
4. Establishment of **specific activities by the Heritage Community** to ensure effective heritage management. It is also essential that these activities promote sustainable development and improve the quality of life for the entire community.

Following years of heritage studies in the province of Granada and engagement with various local communities, we have selected three municipalities as pilot cases (Salar, Castril and Galera) within the SECreTOur project. Salar was the first of these to begin implementing a Heritage Community.

In recent years, the municipality of Salar has undergone a series of developments that are establishing it as a benchmark in the management of Granada's cultural heritage (Román Punzón *et al.*, 2018–2019). The Roman villa discovered in 2004, where excavations are yielding significant finds, combined with the existence of a proactive local council committed to heritage management, make Salar a model to follow.

One of the most interesting aspects of this village is the sense of identity that cultural heritage fosters among its inhabitants. Social mobilisation around the Roman villa has played a fundamental role in fostering this sense of identity. The defence of its heritage (including by the local administration) has meant that archaeological excavations have continued for years, yielding increasingly significant scientific findings. These, in turn, have brought economic benefits that have been felt across all sectors of the village. Visitors to Salar can visit the villa, but also the local businesses that have become involved in the tourist offering, thereby reaping benefits themselves. Educational activities, guided tours, scientific conferences, etc. are organised, making Salar a model of heritage management for the province.

It is within this context that we have begun to introduce the creation of the Heritage Community. Whilst it is true that the process has only just begun, we believe that the circumstances are favourable for achieving very interesting results.

Taking the process of creating other local communities as an example (Portoles & Sanfont, 2023), it has been decided that the steps to be taken for the creation of the Salar Heritage Community will be:

- Distribution of an information leaflet, both in print and on social media, to publicise the proposal to create the Heritage Community. This is aimed at the general public, but with particular attention to local stakeholders or key actors.

- Conducting a survey open to the public on perceptions of the municipality's heritage and on tourism (what does heritage mean to you? Which elements do you value most and why?).

- A participatory workshop with interested parties, including the local council, which is collaborating in organising the meeting. All interested parties will be invited to the workshop, including individuals, traders, members of the educational community, associations, etc. At this meeting, interests and objectives will be established, and an attempt will be made to create a space for dialogue on possible business models of interest to the Heritage Community. It will be necessary to establish a potential agenda to continue addressing any outstanding issues. Efforts will continue to open new avenues for dialogue to finalise the type of group to be created.

- Definition of the type of group or institution to be created, along with its objectives and a specific programme of activities

- As a final, long-term objective, the SECreTour project aims to include Heritage Communities within the Faro Convention Network, as the culmination of the process. The Faro Convention Network is a platform comprising heritage communities working together in accordance with the principles and criteria of the Faro Convention. The Network works to identify best practices and professionals, organises workshops and supports its members' efforts to address heritage-related challenges. Furthermore, the Network aims to demonstrate the role of heritage in addressing the social challenges we face today.

3. Results

The results obtained from applying these participatory methodologies in working with local communities and their tangible and intangible heritage can be organised into two complementary and inseparable levels: on the one hand, social and institutional impacts, which are cross-cutting, and on the other, results linked to heritage and territorial management.

In terms of socio-institutional impacts, these methodologies have fostered a clear process of social empowerment, raising greater awareness among local communities of the value of their territories, their local ecological knowledge and their importance in participation and decision-making regarding their villages. Working to foster this recognition has strengthened their capacity to engage with public administrations and other stakeholders, as they have been equipped with formalised tools (such as agreements on the redistribution of ecosystem services) as well as scientific arguments regarding the value of their work and knowledge.

As part of the work to highlight the ecosystem services provided by traditional irrigation systems to the landscape and cultural heritage, we can highlight the work with irrigation communities such as those in Cáñar-Barjas or Castril (Granada, Spain), whose active involvement enabled the signing of the first service payment agreements. In total, in the province of Granada, 11 service payment agreements (based on the legal framework of administrative agreements) have been signed in the municipalities of Cáñar, Dílar, Benamaurel, Castril, Castilléjar and Fonelas, and 18 land stewardship agreements (signed in Benamaurel, Cáñar, Castril, Dílar, Jérez del Marquesado, La Tahá, various irrigation communities in the Alpujarra region, Fonelas, Belerda and Castilléjar). The social innovation tools implemented are also easily replicable and scalable, and have proven successful in terms of sustainability and stakeholder engagement, for example, through the growing demand for new land stewardship agreements or administrative agreements in other parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Cáceres or Almería).

In relation to the quantitative results mentioned above, another consequence has been the strengthening of institutional and formal collaboration, manifested in stewardship agreements and administrative agreements. These instruments have helped to consolidate stable cooperation frameworks between local groups, public bodies and other stakeholders involved in territorial management.

These mechanisms have demonstrated significant progress in various areas, particularly in the recognition of cultural and agricultural heritage as strategic resources for society and the territories. Formalising relationships through agreements has fostered new participatory structures focused on heritage management. This demonstrates that heritage protection is not merely a duty of cultural preservation, but is also fundamental to social sustainability, the local economy and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and heritage.

Within these mechanisms, the creation of Heritage Communities is intended to be a major stimulus for the management of cultural heritage at the local level. The creation of Heritage Communities will signify recognition by all parties involved of the importance of heritage.

4. Conclusions

The experience gained from the European MEMOLA, INCULTUM and SECreTour projects, together with other nationally funded projects developed by MEMOLab, demonstrates that participatory and collaborative models involving local communities, universities and other public administrations can generate robust frameworks for the management of cultural heritage and the promotion of fair, creative and sustainable tourism. In this regard, service-based payment agreements and land stewardship agreements have proven to be effective tools both for the conservation of historic irrigation systems and for the active involvement of public authorities in their maintenance. Likewise, the creation of Heritage Communities (still in the experimental phase) is emerging as a key governance model for the future, capable of integrating local identity, citizen participation, sustainable development and tourism management.

Beyond the specific actions that such agreements generate, their potential lies in strengthening the capacity of local communities, in all their forms (irrigators' communities, heritage communities, local groups and associations, shops and small businesses), to engage in joint reflection and participate in decision-making regarding the protection and management of their cultural (both tangible and intangible) and environmental heritage. The strength of local actors is often underestimated by many of those involved in heritage conservation; however, it is precisely at this level that decisions are made which have the greatest impact on people's daily lives. Hence the relevance of this type of solution, which views heritage as a strategic resource capable of improving the quality of life in peripheral rural communities.

The renewal of the agreements, as well as the future creation of Heritage Communities, will confirm the potential of these tools and the success of the application of this participatory methodology. The SECreTour project envisages the implementation of Heritage Communities with tangible results from the first half of 2026.

Ethics and consent

In all cases, participants were informed in advance of the participatory activities, via the information sheet and by signing the consent forms. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the project activities described in this methodology, using a standardised consent form developed by UGR and documented in SECreTour Deliverable D8.5 (Ethics Requirements), submitted to and accepted by the European Commission in August 2024.

Given that this article contains no primary participant data and that the underlying research activities operate under a formally established and EC-accepted ethical framework, no separate ethics approval was sought for this publication.

Data availability

This article is a methodological contribution describing procedures developed within the SECreTour project (Sustainable, Engaging and Creative Tourism as a driver for a better future in rural and remote areas; Horizon Europe Grant Agreement No. 101132584). The methodology involves working groups and meetings with local stakeholders; however, no participant data are reported, analysed, or presented in this article, which focuses exclusively on the design and description of the procedures themselves. No underlying data are associated with this article.

References

Arguments in defense of traditional and historical irrigation systems. Historical and traditional irrigation systems provide efficient, multifunctional solutions for all.
Reference Source

Cabello J, Casas JJ, Escudero-Clares M, *et al.*: **Acequias tradicionales de Sierra Nevada (España): una infraestructura socio-ecológica para la conservación de paisajes multifuncionales.** *Ecosistemas.* 2026; **35**(1): 3042.
Publisher Full Text

Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention). Council of Europe; 27 Oct. 2005.
Reference Source

Coppin F, Guichard V: **Tourism as a tool for social and territorial cohesion: Exploring the innovative solutions developed by INCULTUM pilots.** Borowiecki A, Fresa M, Martín-Civantos J, editors. *Innovative cultural tourism in European peripheries.* Routledge;1st ed 2024; pp. 7–27.
Publisher Full Text

Costanza R, Alperovitz G, Daly HE, *et al.*: **Ecological economics and sustainable development: Building a sustainable and desirable economy-in-society-in-nature.** *Routledge International Handbook of Sustainable Development.* Taylor & Francis; 2015; pp. 281–294.

Couto González S, Fernández Fernández E, Correa Jiménez E, *et al.*: **Regadíos históricos y gobernanza: las herramientas de mejora de la gobernanza para comunidades de regantes históricas y tradicionales del Geoparque de Granada.** *MGZN Geoparque de Granada. Invierno 2025–2026.* 2025; Pags. 26–67.

Delgado Anés L: *Gestión, comunicación y participación social en los paisajes culturales de Andalucía: El caso del Proyecto MEMOLA.* Granada: Universidad de Granada; 2017.
Reference Source

Fundación Biodiversidad: *Informe de custodia del territorio (Informe No. 7).* Fundación Biodiversidad; 2025.
Reference Source

González Santa Cruz F: **Turismo cultural y participación comunitaria: nuevos enfoques para la sostenibilidad.** *Rev PASOS.* 2019; **17**(4): 863–880.

Martín Civantos JM, Correa Jiménez E, Bonet García MT: **Historical water management systems and sustainable tourism: The case study of Altiplano de Granada (Spain).** Borowiecki A, Fresa M, Martín-Civantos J, editors. *Innovative cultural tourism in European peripheries.* Routledge; 2024; pp. 170–184.
Publisher Full Text

Montesdeoca de la Fuente M: **La custodia del territorio como estrategia de protección del medio ambiente.** *Actual Jurid Ambient.* 2014, 27 de enero de 2014; 2–22.
Publisher Full Text

Ostrom E: *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action.* Cambridge University Press; 1990.

Pagiola S: **Payments for environmental services in Costa Rica.** *Ecol. Econ.* 2008; **65**(4): 712–724.
Publisher Full Text

Palomo I, Felipe-Lucia MR, Bennett EM, *et al.*: ***Disentangling the pathways and effects of ecosystem service co-production.*** *Advances in Ecological Research.* Elsevier; 2016; Vol. **54**: pp. 245–283.
Publisher Full Text

Portolés Górriz Á, Safont Pitarch E: **Las personas y los patrimonios. Definir la comunidad patrimonial de Penyagolosa.** *Revista UNES. Universidad, Escuela Y Sociedad.* 2023; **15**: 102–116.
Publisher Full Text

Redford KH, Adams WM: **Payment for ecosystem services and the challenge of saving nature.** *Conserv. Biol.* 2009; **23**(4): 785–787.
PubMed Abstract | Publisher Full Text

Richards G: *Cultural Tourism in Europe.* CABI; 1996.

Román Punzón JM, Moreno Alcaide M, Ruiz Montes P, *et al.*: **La importancia de la investigación, conservación y puesta en valor del patrimonio histórico local: El ejemplo de la villa romana de Salar (Granada).** *Cuadernos de Prehistoria y Arqueología de la Universidad de Granada.* 2018; **28**: 233–257. 2174-8063.
Publisher Full Text

Román Punzón JM, Peña Moreno MJ, Delgado Anés L: **La percepción del patrimonio en el ámbito local. El caso de la villa romana de Salar (Granada).** *UNES — Universidad, Escuela y Sociedad.* 2019; **7**: 112–130.
Reference Source

Smith L: *Uses of Heritage.* Routledge; 2006.
Publisher Full Text

Yacamán-Ochoa C, García-Llorente M: **Enfoque cooperativo y custodia del territorio: dos factores impulsores de la transición agroecológica de los sistemas agroalimentarios locales.** *Estud Geogr.* 2020; **81**(289): e050.
Publisher Full Text

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 15 October 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25590.r79609

© **2026 Gravagnuolo A.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Antonia Gravagnuolo
National Research Council, Institute of Heritage Science, Naples, Italy

The article presents a relevant and valuable contribution to participatory cultural heritage management and sustainable territorial development, particularly through the application of cooperative instruments such as Payment for Services Agreements and Land Stewardship Agreements. These approaches appear especially promising for rural and disadvantaged territories.

Considering the nature of the paper as a Method Article, I would suggest strengthening the scientific background and methodological description. In particular, a more substantial literature review would help contextualise the proposed approaches within existing research and previous applications, beyond the European projects mentioned, and better clarify their methodological foundations and innovative contribution.

It would also be useful to describe more systematically, step by step, the methodological process followed and how the proposed instruments were identified, adapted and implemented in the territories concerned. This would help readers better understand their practical application and potential transferability.

Regarding the results, the article could provide a more substantive description of the experiences beyond the number of agreements established, explaining which stakeholders were involved, their respective roles, and the activities undertaken collaboratively. Further clarification on how the Heritage Community concept has been operationalised or institutionalised in the pilot territories would also be valuable.

Finally, I would encourage the authors to expand the discussion on the replicability of the proposed instruments, including the contextual and institutional conditions required, the potential users and beneficiaries, and references to practical documentation, such as examples or templates of the agreements developed.

Overall, I consider this a valuable contribution with significant practical potential. These

improvements would help strengthen its scientific foundations, methodological clarity and applicability in other territorial contexts.

Is the rationale for developing the new method (or application) clearly explained
Partly

Is the description of the method technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the method development and its use by others?
Partly

If any results are presented, are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Partly

Are the conclusions about the method and its performance adequately supported by the findings presented in the article?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sustainable cultural tourism, Cultural heritage conservation and regeneration, Participatory heritage approaches, Impacts evaluation.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 06 July 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25590.r76407

© 2026 Achmad F. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Fandi Achmad
Telkom University, Bandung, Indonesia

The manuscript addresses a highly relevant and timely topic by integrating participatory governance, cultural heritage management, and sustainable tourism. The practical experiences derived from several European-funded projects provide valuable insights into collaborative approaches that have the potential to contribute to both academic research and policy development. However, several aspects require further improvement to enhance the scientific

rigor, methodological transparency, and overall contribution of the manuscript.

Abstract
#1. The research objectives are not explicitly formulated, making it difficult for readers to understand the article's main focus and scientific contribution. Furthermore, the research methodology is described very generally, without information on the research design, study location, participants, or data analysis techniques.
#2. The research results are still descriptive and normative, without empirical indicators that can measure the success of the intervention.

Introduction
#1. The research gap is not explicitly stated, so the academic urgency of the research is not clearly evident.
#2. The research objectives and research questions are not clearly formulated.
#3. The introduction is too dominated by project descriptions (MEMOLA, INCULTUM, REVIERTE, and SECreTour) rather than developing a scientific argument.
#4. The literature review is still limited and lacks a critical approach to recent international research on heritage governance and sustainable tourism. I suggest several articles to enrich the sustainable tourism literature.
#5. Key concepts such as fair tourism, social innovation, and Heritage Communities have not been operationally defined from the outset.

Methodology
#1. The methodology is still explained conceptually and lacks operational clarity, making it difficult for other researchers to replicate.
#2. There is no systematic methodological framework explaining the research flow from data collection to evaluation of results.
#3. Indicators of success and criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the approach used are not clearly explained.
#4. Heritage Communities are still in the experimental stage but have been positioned as a key component of the proposed model.

Results
#1. Most of the research results are still qualitative claims without clear empirical indicators or measures.
#2. There is no comparative data available before and after the intervention, so the effectiveness of the program is difficult to prove.
#3. The number of agreements formed is not enough to demonstrate success without evaluation of implementation and impact.
#4. Claims regarding the scalability and replicability of the model have not been supported by strong evidence.
#5. There are no results that directly show an impact on the tourism sector, even though the main research theme is sustainable tourism.

Conclusions
#1. Conclusions contain stronger claims than the empirical evidence presented in the results section.
#2. Heritage Communities is still in the experimental stage but has been concluded

#3. Policy implications and practical recommendations for the government and cultural heritage managers have not been specifically formulated.

References

1. Achmad F, Wiratmadja I: Understanding the nexus of green innovation and sustainable performance: evidence from the tourism industry in Indonesia. *Innovation & Management Review*. 2026; **23**: 49-65 Publisher Full Text

Is the rationale for developing the new method (or application) clearly explained

Partly

Is the description of the method technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the method development and its use by others?

No

If any results are presented, are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Partly

Are the conclusions about the method and its performance adequately supported by the findings presented in the article?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sustainable Tourism, Knowledge Management, Innovation Management, Performance Management, Sustainability

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.