

Living Heritage: Digital Ecomuseums in the Terre di Siena

by Elisa Bruttini, Luigi Di Corato and Valentina Lusini

Elisa Bruttini graduated *cum laude* in Art History from the University of Siena and obtained a Ph.D. on the critical historiography of 18th century Siena. Following her early studies in the field of restoration techniques, conservation and cataloguing, and her collaborations with the Biblioteca degli Intronati and Palazzo delle Papesse—Contemporary Art Centre in Siena, her twelve-year tenure at Fondazione Musei Senesi, where she currently serves as Director (since October 2014), offered her the chance to continue her research in the fields of museography, museology and ICT.

Valentina Lusini earned degree in Anthropology at the University of Siena and attended a two-year postgraduate course in Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Subsequently, she obtained a Ph.D. in Ethnoanthropology and a post-doctoral research fellowship at the University of Siena. She has worked as data manager at Fondazione Musei Senesi, where she coordinated the project on digital ecomuseums in the Sieneese area. She is currently a lecturer in Anthropology of Arts (University of Siena) and in Cultural Anthropology (Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence).

Luigi Maria Di Corato graduated *cum laude* in the Humanities from the University of Siena and earned an Executive Master in Business Administration (M.B.A.) at the MIP School of Management of the Politecnico of Milano. A lecturer in the Economics Department the Università Cattolica in Milan since 2001, he currently teaches Museum Management and Museum Services Management in that same institution. He was General Director of Fondazione Musei Senesi from 2009 to 2014. A member of the board of directors of the ICOM Endowment Fund, he is also part of the ICOM Finance and Resources Committee (FIREC) and the 2016 ICOM General Conference Organizing Committee in charge of the Museum World Conference to be held in Milan in 2017.

The Digital Ecomuseums of the Terre di Siena project, conceived and managed by the Fondazione Musei Senesi since 2012 and still ongoing, was initiated as part of a strategic plan to relaunch museum services in the Terre di Siena area. The plan won the 2011 Federculture Cultural Management Prize, and aimed to consolidate the creation of evolved cultural districts, integrating the area's extensive material and immaterial heritage, the items conserved in its museums, natural heritage, cultural and knowledge-based industries, and traditional local products and infrastructures. The Digital Ecomuseums project is a functional tool for the realisation of territorial cultural districts, intended to make the process of production and utilisation of culture more effective by further expanding and opening the cultural network to citizens. It offers ways of experiencing the territory for both local communities and visitors, in keeping with the Fondazione's vision: *Visit the museum and experience the territory*. Based on the definition of the ecomuseum as 'a pact with which the community takes care of a territory' (Maggi 2002), it is not hard to imagine that a place with a high identity-determining coefficient and weighty historical baggage can easily constitute fertile terrain for an approach aimed at enhancing the value of heritage through ecomuseums.

The Fondazione Musei Senesi

The Fondazione Musei Senesi was established in 2003 at the initiative of the Administration of the province of Siena, with the aim of consolidating and developing the informal museum system created in the 1990s in conjunction with the territory's municipalities. Other collaborators included the Archdiocese of Siena-Colle di Val d'Elsa-Montalcino, the Diocese of Montepulciano-Chiusi-Pienza, the Monte dei Paschi di Siena Bank and Foundation, the Università degli Studi di Siena and the Industry, the Craft and Agriculture Chamber of Commerce of Siena, and the Region of Tuscany and the Ministry of Cultural Assets and Activities and Tourism.

The Fondazione Musei Senesi unites, coordinates, enhances and promotes over 40 museums dedicated to a diverse range of aspects of cultural heritage (from art to archaeology, from anthropology to ethnography, from science and technology to nature), bringing together the vocations of the various geographical milieus that make up the province of Siena (Val d'Elsa, Chianti, Siena, Crete and Val d'Arbia, Val di Merse, Val d'Orcia and Monte Amiata, Val di Chiana).¹ It promotes and supports museum development projects, study and research activities, educational and teaching activities, permanent and temporary exhibitions, collection conservation and restoration programmes, print and digital publishing initiatives, training and scientific information, and development and promotional strategies at local, national and international levels.

The objective of what has, until now, been the first and largest province-wide museum management foundation in Italy is to support museums and oversee their integration within the cultural heritage of the places that host them. The foundation offers them not only services and consulting, but also serves as a bridge for intermediation between institutions involved in enhancing and communicating the value of their heritage. The result is a wide-ranging interaction that allows, firstly, the optimisation of the use of resources and the creation of economies of purpose, scale and specialisation, and secondly, the construction of integrated itineraries that organically link multifaceted expressions of history and society favouring participation and accessibility to cultural heritage in order to better serve society² (Fig. 1).

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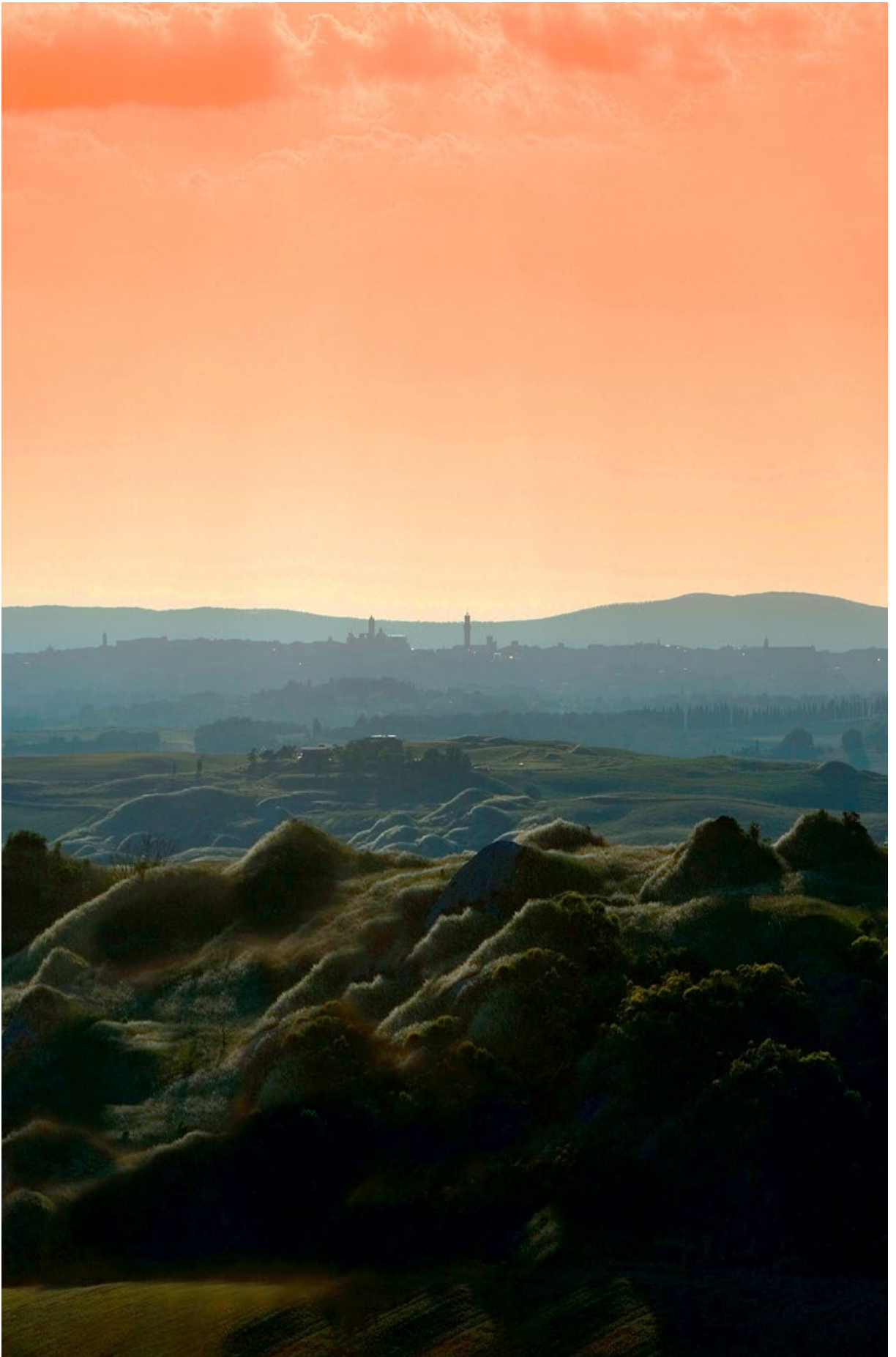


Fig. 1. An impressive example of *museo diffuso*: the link between the city of Siena and its natural backdrop and immaterial heritage from the Crete territory. © Bruno Bruchi, Fondazione Musei Senesi

From the museo diffuso to the digital ecomuseum

As pertains to the Fondazione Musei Senesi's management model, based on the evolved concept of the museo diffuso or multi-site museum in relation to the cultural landscape, a path has developed gradually over the last few years, enhancing the development of digital ecomuseums and their related actions.

There was a need to complement the Fondazione's organisational and institutional efforts with a platform that could incorporate the knowledge of members of each community of reference, making it available—in a logic of co-creation—on a wide scale. Such knowledge, which is largely immaterial, risked being lost, in part due to the generation gap between so-called 'digital natives' and earlier generations. Luigi Di Corato, then General Director of the Fondazione between 2009 and 2014, came up with the idea to employ digital means to overcome that barrier, and to be even more pervasive through social networks, 'entering the homes' of potential users and visitors.

On 23 and 24 November, 2010, the Fondazione Musei Senesi organised the international conference *Ecomuseo del Chianti e mappe di comunità: verso una progettazione condivisa* (Ecomuseum of the Chianti region and Maps of Communities: Towards a Common Plan) hand in hand with Opificio Chianti, with the contribution of the Monte dei Paschi di Siena Foundation and in collaboration with the Archaeological Museum of the Chianti Senese in Castellina and the Museum of the Landscape in Castelnuovo.³ Hugues De Varine and Peter Davis were among the guests of honour.

January 2012 marked the first appearance of the travelling exhibition *Mondi Locali. Bisogni, energie, opportunità* (Local Worlds: Needs, Energies, Opportunities), curated by Donatella Murtas, in the municipalities of the Chianti Senese area, testifying to the homonymous community of ecomuseum good practices, which has united Italian and European ecomuseums for over a decade. The exhibition was dedicated to the value of people, places and choices, and to the local projects supported by and 'starring' small communities capable of expressing an autonomous vision for their future.⁴

During this experimental phase, thanks to the sensitivity demonstrated by certain municipal administrations, these same Municipalities of the Chianti Senese were conducting a traditional participatory process, through encounters aimed at creating a map of communities. At the same time, the Municipality of Monticiano, in Val di Merse, demonstrated its desire to launch a heritage digitisation project that constituted a hi-tech version of a map of communities, in an area with an abundance of sites of great environmental interest as well as important archaeological, artistic, architectural, historical and anthropological aspects.⁵ Such a project could not have been carried out without the scientific support of the Sienese University, and especially by a researcher, Valentina Lusini, who was employed by Fondazione Musei Senesi in order to develop and follow up the entire project. She was assisted by Elisa Bruttini, then in charge of Museum Services at the Fondazione and Scientific Director since 2015.

The Digital Ecomuseums of the Terre di Siena project focuses on the notion of a participatory, multi-site museum working towards the dematerialisation of the results of research projects regarding the territory and its transformations through the planning of ecomuseum itineraries, initiated through collaboration between young experts and residents and financed through the contribution of the Region of Tuscany and the respective municipalities.⁶

The project is continually updated and requires the creation of a series of web platforms, one for each of the areas of reference, which will soon be accessible from a single portal in logical clusters.⁷ In short, each digital ecomuseum is based on navigable digital maps that allow users to consult geo-referenced text entries co-created by citizens, dedicated to elements of material and immaterial heritage and accompanied by content for further reading, archival materials, photographs, audio-visual documents, video interviews and bibliographical resources that can be viewed online.⁸

Thanks to the creation of a first group of about 250 entries noting important, distinctive elements of heritage, in September 2012 the new Val di Merse portal was presented, followed by the one dedicated to the Val d'Orcia, realised in December 2012 with ministerial funds provided by UNESCO. Soon afterwards, the Chianti site was put up, in the wake of activities carried out in conjunction with the aforementioned Pact for the Chianti Ecomuseum. Finally, August 2014 saw the preview of the Siena Ecomuseum, characterised by a few unique elements setting it apart from the other portals, coordinated more or less directly by the Fondazione Musei Senesi.

In this case, the direct involvement of the Contradas of the Palio di Siena—the city's neighborhoods, historical rivals in the celebrated Palio that also constitute a unique example of an ecomuseum—in collaboration with the Magistrato delle Contrade, the Consortium for the Safeguarding of the Palio and the Prefecture of Siena led to the development of content owned by the Contradas themselves, compiled by the '*contradaioli*', residents and conscientious custodians of each neighborhood.

Capitalising and contextualising cultural heritage

The Digital Ecomuseums of the Terre di Siena project is thus aimed at de-materialising the results of mid- and long-term interdisciplinary research on Sienese territory. It builds on the notion of *museo diffuso*, already the basis of the Fondazione Musei Senesi's management model, to promote a process of reflection on the value and meaning of places and of the landscape intended as a living context, in which the involvement of local communities and their centuries of knowledge are a necessary condition for the production of a conservation-oriented result (Feld-Basso 1996; Davis 1999). The Museo Torino website is a similar endeavour that was inaugurated in 2011 for the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy, which was strictly focused on the city centre. It inspired our work that expanded to a whole province.⁹

The rural landscape provides more than just a lovely view; it is a stratification of presences, territorialisation and change that preserves memories, vestiges and nostalgia. This means that the safeguarding and study of such a unique 'object' comprises not only the ecological, naturalistic and panoramic aspects, but must also include its dynamic, historical, aesthetic and identity-creating significance. Moreover, one of the most meaningful principles expressed in the text of the European Landscape Convention concerns the definition of landscape as 'living context', that is, as a sphere of transformations generated by residents' social, housing, environmental, emotional and productive needs (Fig. 2). The Convention establishes a central role for the communities of reference in particular, with the aim of promoting sustainable, cooperative development in which planning, enhancement and the government of the territory imply rights and responsibilities for each one.

The Digital Ecomuseums of the Terre di Siena offers these communities the prospect of capitalising on the heritage directly held by citizens, which comprises ecological and safeguarding aspects as well as the social, housing, emotional and productive meanings ascribed by residents. The platforms allow for the contextualisation of cultural heritage, as well as the opportunity to link this heritage to the places of residents' everyday lives, festive events, oral traditions, the culture of food and wine and artisanal craftsmanship, generating a narration of the territory conceived to initiate participatory experiences of utilisation and enjoyment of the heritage.

The visit to the Digital Ecomuseums of the Terre di Siena continues with exploration of the territorial map, which can be 'surfed' and searched by thematic categories, distinguished by different colours (landscape, material cultural heritage, immaterial cultural heritage, daily life, sense); or by time periods of interest, geographical filters or by relevant by municipality, and lastly, by keywords. The maps present a series of pointers, each linked to a preview of an entry. Clicking on the preview takes the user to the full entry, with images, audio and video documents, archival and bibliographical materials, useful links and related entries.

Digital Ecomuseums are developed on several levels: collection of collective memory, inventory of the territory's heritage and resources, cataloguing of assets and presentation of the results through platforms that provide access to participatory itineraries, and at the same time transfer cultural content by means of social media (Fig. 3). Research results can in fact be used through a collaborative 'wiki' platform that offers users the opportunity not only to comment on and discuss the content presented, but also to propose new contributions and additions, share audio-visual documents and open up new spaces for impromptu reflections.

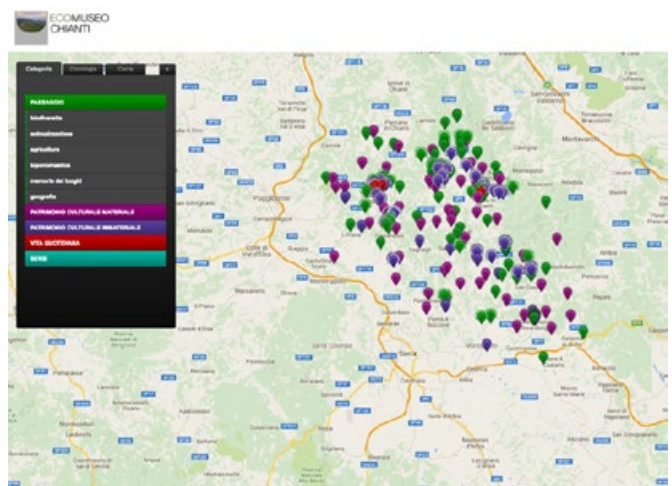


Fig. 2. Georeferenced map locating the tangible and intangible forms of heritage on the Chianti territory. © Fondazione Musei Senesi

Research methodology¹⁰

In the initial implementation planning phases, a number of methodological and content-oriented principles still partially had to be defined. The creation of a technical coordination group including Fondazione Musei Senesi and anthropologists from the Università degli Studi di Siena, with the participation of individuals already working in the field, institutional representatives and research professionals, made it possible to specify ways to carry out documentation campaigns, identifying the functions of work groups and modes of internal and external communication.

For each territorial area, the project was initiated with the creation of interdisciplinary qualitative research groups made up of young historians, archivists, archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, environmental specialists and semioticians who were chosen based on their skill profiles. They worked hand in hand to identify 'informer'-citizens to interview and local actors able to ensure collective participation: representatives of associations and cooperatives, scholars, museum operators and interested individuals. These people were involved, to varying degrees, in the achievement of shared objectives and in bibliographic, iconographic, archival and ethnographic research to identify themes and specific elements of local heritage, including those neglected by traditional territorial promotion methods—places of landscape-oriented interest, archaeological sites, historical, monumental, architectural and artistic assets, demo-ethno-anthropological features, aspects and contexts of everyday life, people and anecdotes of experiences and memories. The goal was to identify and lend value to forms of human relationships with the landscape intended as a space of living and belonging, in terms of its naturalistic, economic and cultural aspects.

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Particular emphasis was placed on direct testimony as the primary source for identifying places, events and people with which the community identified, conserving the memory of its own development. So, from an operational point of view, researchers used not only analysis of existing bibliographic and archival sources, but also direct contact with the territory and its inhabitants.¹¹

The project's coordination entailed a series of relational, methodological and theoretical complexities. The interdisciplinary approach required, first and foremost, a commitment to being interactive in choosing subjects to involve and research objectives, which, on the cognitive level, translated into an effort to link and adapt themes, skills, languages, procedures and methods of choosing, gathering and organising information.

The direct involvement of local communities in the co-curation and facilitation of the development process in cultural heritage is now a frequent practice. While it is usually applied to traditional museum or galleries, here it was applied to large territorial areas, within which major artistic, archaeological and landscape landmarks were indicated. Such a path, 'from me to we', through the use of social objects and the co-creation led by community members and visitors and welcome and elaborated by institutions, is the baseline of the 'participatory museum' defined by Nina Simon.¹²



Fig. 3. A sample of an entry from Val di Merse Ecomuseum. © Fondazione Musei Senesi

The decision to take various points of view into account also called for a completely transversal approach in handling the meanings of items. Thus, for example, for a country village, the events described are those that shaped it over time, dating to Etruscan, Roman or medieval times, as well as processes of gentrification and aestheticisation of the peasant past that brought it into the post-agricultural era. Similarly, a rural landscape is described through the impressions of painters, film directors and poets, but also through the story of an ex-sharecropper, 'a landowning wine producer from the nobility', an immigrant farm labourer, or from a scholar's point of view on the territory's history or a geologist, describing its production and governmental transformations as well as its climatic and pedological characteristics.

The research was organised within this space of interaction and re-composition of real environments, as a result of the mediation between speculative standpoints, methodological practices and diverse voices. To convey the relativity of knowledge and its dependence on epistemology, the interaction between premises and choices and the network of interactions of which it is also a part, a multidisciplinary approach was adopted.

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On several occasions, coordination activities required to manage the relations between researchers and representatives of local communities, which sometimes proved challenging. In particular, efforts were made to deconstruct the conventional and contrived image of 'peasant' culture prevalent in touristic and commercial promotion, often interiorised by local subjects who are less oriented towards self-examination and more inclined to reason in terms of consumption of the 'territorial product'.

Interaction between local and global dimensions, between the folkloristic value of autochthony and the need for visibility of local products and tourism in the worldwide market has been a recurring topic of discussion among some local administrators, who indicated that their ideals of enhancing the territory coincided with the marketing of its heritage. From their point of view, often bound by stereotypical rhetoric, research for the project should have been oriented mainly towards mass-media circuits and the commercialisation of local places. Some asked us to include entries on farm stays, restaurants, local craft businesses and high-quality products with an eye on promoting and selling the *genius loci* in the form of appealing goods and services linked to specific, unique and intangible cultural, historical and landscape features (Rautenberg *et al.* 2000). Such requests were denied, given the non-commercial nature of the project.

The question of building political consensus is obviously a central aspect for territorial institutions, for which the value of the Digital Ecomuseums project lies above all in its impact on improving the cultural and economic competitiveness of the local system. The interpretation of these processes in the management and communication of rural heritage today, understood as an instrument of negotiation and legitimisation, entailed the need for researchers to serve first and foremost as negotiators.

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For this purpose, various entries on ordinary aspects of the everyday life of the territory, meeting places and workplaces, 'minor assets' and other elements that take on identity-building meaning for the community, as well as everyday practices and sentiments that form (or formed) the subjective and collective feeling of the place were conceived and created (Fournier 2008). Other entries had a critical perspective on the concept of the picturesque as a sentimental construction of an ideal context of agrarian life, absorbing landscapes and traditions that survive in the form of bucolic historical reenactments or idealised holiday spots (Löfgren 2001).¹³ A few entries were accompanied by reflections in the form of video interviews from academic anthropologists and scholars who had done research on the sharecropping system in Tuscany, or on themes of its heritage.¹⁴ The introduction of their point of view, alongside that of representatives of the local community, allowed for reasoning on different levels of analysis and different degrees of awareness, which highlighted the overall complexity of interpreting and describing the lived-in cultural landscape (see Meloni 2014, pp. 86-89).

For the anthropologists involved in the project, work on the Digital Ecomuseums was an effort to strive for connection and continuous negotiation, until a consensus between all experts involved was found. Ultimately, this allowed to come to terms with differences in points of view and the needs of self-representation and reconcile the project's informative intent with aims of reflection and in-depth understanding.



Fig. 4. Digital content on the Valdelsa Ecomuseum showing the famous skyline of San Gimignano. © Brunon Fondazione Musei Senesi

Critical points and potential

To ensure the continuity of the process initiated a few years ago, we must consolidate the local network with entities operating in the territory, in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity. The involvement of local entities, inhabitants and locally active subjects guarantees the solidity and value of development processes and objectives, because when the bonds between ecomuseum, local administrators and participatory decisions are strong, prospects are improved for effective local intervention in the form of laboratories and projects that support the idea of an active citizenry and increased levels of awareness and culture (Fig. 4). It seems necessary to build up a structured coordination system capable of leading to the autonomous organic management of the individual web platforms, and to be able to evolve without reverting to past practices or deviating from concrete actions.

The frequent and consistent sharing of research results by the coordination structure and local communities was necessary. It was done through public presentations on ecomuseum activities, which eventually put the concept of Digital Ecomuseums into practice.

The planning of educational workshops serving schools and socio-cultural activities focusing on themes of sustainability, the landscape and cultural heritage, and in particular, in relation to work/study programmes proved

particularly fruitful. The collaboration between Fondazione Musei Senesi, as an accredited training organisation, and secondary-school institutes, has led to the publication of new entries that represent a significant percentage of young people, through their exclusive point of view (but which is inclusive of multi-cultural situations).¹⁵

The ecomuseums project sometimes involved the development of participatory trail-building projects and integrated tourist routes that provide additional alternative cultural content on offer, with the involvement of agricultural businesses, restaurants, tour agencies, tourism-sector business associations and environmental and cultural associations. Such is the case of the Ecomuseum of the Chianti region, for which dedicated signage will soon be set up, and a guide on walking, cycling and driving routes printed.¹⁶

The Val di Merse Ecomuseum has brought about the development of an application for mobile devices dedicated to the area of Monticiano, in which the ecomuseum's informational entries are used in thematic itineraries, with functions geared towards hikers (with the possibility of downloading .gpx files of routes), accompanied by *ad hoc* signage.¹⁷

Also in Val di Merse, anthropological research has led to the printing of a map of the community of Iesa, a village in the Municipality of Monticiano, which involved local residents in a process of autobiographical storytelling rendered in a modern graphic style.

Based on this input, web platforms are currently being implemented to manage content for tourism purposes, with the possibility of constructing personalised routes (tour planning, trip diaries, etc.) and dialoguing between various platforms, for example, for virtual exhibitions and official events.

As for future developments, we foresee the creation of sustainable agricultural chains of production, with the collaboration of professional associations, agricultural districts, local businesses and fair trade forms of commerce. Similarly, in terms of awareness and revitalisation of handicrafts and local products, we hope to involve associations and agencies geared towards local economic development.

Dedicated networks, from Mondiali Locali to the National Ecomuseums Workshop, have been linked with the purpose of sharing the objectives of the Strategic Ecomuseums Manifesto and involvement in the planning of conferences and system-wide activities.¹⁸

Within a broader perspective, the goal of the Digital Ecomuseums project—which arose from a network of museums, in the strictest sense—is to offer a non-pre-packaged image of the territory that highlights local knowledge, with a view to economic enhancement and diffusion beyond the local context. The network of institutions relating to or in contact with Fondazione Musei Senesi constitutes a privileged base from which to set in motion forms of territorialisation that create solid ties with the area's museum heritage, immaterial cultural heritage and local contexts. There is a further intention to augment residents' sense of responsibility through full involvement in the process of enhancing and promoting their own cultural heritage and creating the conditions for a truly active, vibrant cultural landscape in which containers, content and citizens come together.

NOTES

1 In 2015, the museum network (spread over a territory of more than 3,800 sq. kilometres and containing four UNESCO World Heritage Sites—Siena, San Gimignano, Pienza, the Parco Artistico Naturale e Culturale della Val d'Orcia), had an overall total of approx. 650,000 visitors, according to the Region of Tuscany's *Museums Report*. Data for 2015 are currently being processed.

2 See the site: <http://www.museisenesi.org>, in particular the annual reports for 2009-2011 available at: <http://www.museisenesi.org/pagine/bilancio-di-missione>; Di Corato, L. and Bruttini, E. (2013); Borgioli, C. (2011). The Fondazione Musei Senesi was established on 23 January, 2013, and registered on 27 April, 2014, as n. 386 in the Tuscan Regional Registry of private corporations, following which operations were launched in a systematic and structured manner.

3 Opificio Chianti was an association made up of the municipalities of Castellina in Chianti, Castelnuovo Berardenga, Gaiole in Chianti and Radda in Chianti, which in 2004 had made a pact for made up the Chianti Ecomuseum within the sphere of actions geared towards rediscovering the values of that territory.

4 See the online website at: www.mondilocali.it, in particular the resources available in the 'Further Reading' section.

5 A special thanks to Sandra Becucci, anthropologist and mayor of the Municipality of Monticiano, who strongly supported the Val di Merse digital ecomuseum project and provided a great deal of valuable advice.

6 The website is available at: www.ecomuseovaldimerse.org. It is dedicated to the Val di Merse, southwest of Siena. On the evolution from the *museo diffuso* to the ecomuseum, see, in particular, Rivière 1989.

7 See www.ecomuseidigitali.org, in set-up phase. The sites can be viewed at the following addresses: www.ecomuseochianti.org, www.ecomuseovaldimerse.org, www.ecomuseovaldelsa.org, www.ecomuseovaldichiana.org, www.ecomuseocrete.org, www.ecomuseosiena.org. Each platform currently hosts only a small portion of the multimedia entries planned. The contents will be augmented and translated progressively as research continues. As of yet, about 1,000 entries have been created for the four geographic areas, thanks to the collaboration of more than 200 scholars and authors.

8 The sites, hosted on WordPress platforms, were designed in collaboration with 77Agency, Milan. The addition of new features is being handled by T4All-Technology for All, Siena.

9 See the museum's website at: www.museotorino.it [accessed 16 June 2017].

10 The following paragraph is based on Lusini 2015.

11 During the research, each work group carried out a series of meetings to discuss issues regarding the source identification. This allowed us to adjust roles, functions and activities appropriately. Regarding access to certain documentary sources, collaborations were established with Superintendences, the State Property Agency, competent offices of the local Archdioceses and other institutions.

12 The overlap of augmented reality to the historical images of some places through the mobile version of the website would be an exciting step. Similar examples include the recent and much appreciated Streetmuseum app by the Museum of London. The London Museum website is available at: <http://ourmuseum.org.uk> [accessed 16 June 2017].

13 Heritage from the past is a selection of what in the present appears worthy of being conserved and even transformed into merchandise, but is also simply what we happen to inherit. This equilibrium is central to that undefinable 'authenticity' that is the fruit of syncretism and continuous transformation. On the inheritance of tradition, see Lenclud (2001). On the relationship between heritage and merchandise see Papa (1999).

14 Pietro Clemente, Alessandro Falassi, Fabio Mugnaini and Pier Giorgio Solinas were particularly involved.

15 In particular within the sphere of the Valdelsa Ecomuseum. Available at: www.ecomuseovaldelsa.org.

16 Website available at: www.ecomuseochianti.org [accessed 16 June 2017].

17 The application can be downloaded from: <https://itunes.apple.com/it/app/monticiano/id1070738390?l=en&mt=8> and <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.fms.monticiano>

18 Fondazione Musei Senesi participated in the November 2015 National Ecomuseums Workshop in Argenta, with a talk dedicated to digital ecomuseums; the project has also been included among the 35 best practices within the sphere of the 'Museum and Cultural Landscapes' study promoted by ICOM Italy in 2016 in conjunction with the ICOM General Conference in Milan (3-10 July, 2016).

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