

THE ROUTE OF TERRACES IN VALTELLINA: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND TURISM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Dario Foppoli*

Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale
Via Piazzzi, 23
23100 Sondrio - ITALY
dario.foppoli@fondazioneviluppo.sondrio.it

* Local Development Foundation - Sondrio - ITALY

Fulvio di Capita**

Amministrazione Provinciale di Sondrio
Corso XXV Aprile, 22
23100 Sondrio- ITALY
fulvio.dicapita@provinciasondrio.gov.it

** Provincia di Sondrio, servizio Produzioni vegetali, assistenza tecnica, infrastrutture e foreste - Sondrio - ITALY

Abstract

Following the experience acquired in the *Distretto Culturale della Valtellina* (Valtellina Cultural District) project, the territory was stimulated to further strengthen the relationship between culture, heritage/cultural landscape and the economy. The process emphasized the need to implement positive synergies across these fields and to experiment models of collaboration, which due to the distinctive features of the Valtellina valley hinge on an appropriate development of cultural tourism.

The cultural landscape of the Valtellina terraced area was identified as the first asset from which to begin to develop a quality tourism policy. The idea is to create a walking and cycling route called '*Via dei Terrazzamenti*' (The Route of Terraces), linking existing routes and paths (thus minimizing environmental impact) and allowing tourists to visit the terraced landscape. This has resulted in the local community acquiring a greater awareness of its territory and offering tourists an interesting cognitive experience.

Key words: cultural landscape, quality tourism, community involvement, pedestrian route, cycle route

1 Introduction

In Valtellina, as in all other alpine areas, the landscape is characterized by centuries-old signs traced by the man and by the close relationship that has necessarily developed between the territory and human activities: there are signs of this both in high-mountain and valley-bottom areas. The only exceptions, until quite recently, were restricted to completely unproductive environments, for instance glaciers and rocky peaks.

In the alpine regions, man has always had an extremely positive relationship with the territory; a good example of this being high-altitude alpine meadows, which owe their beauty and biodiversity to slow and constant mowing, as well as grazing and manuring over time. This observation is confirmed by the fact that abandoned pasturelands, as can be often seen today, undergo substantial vegetation and biological impoverishment in just a few years. In fact, it should be underlined that in the alpine area man's relationship with the environment has always been characterized by constant care and maintenance. In the past, this was

obviously aimed at preserving not so much the aesthetic value of the landscape, as the functional value of the territory. Only careful work focused on the care and maintenance of the land guarantees the environmental stability that is fundamental in the alpine area for man to live and carry out an economic activity on a continuous basis (Bätzing, 2005).

What changes in man's relationship with the territory is the intensity with which the land is exploited. This is low at high altitudes and high at low altitudes, i.e. the potentially more productive areas. The huge terracing work on the mountain slopes that characterizes the Rhaetian side of the Valtellina valley exemplifies this (Fig. 1). Careful observation of this landscape makes it all the more evident that the cultural heritage (churches, mansions, castles and vernacular architecture) is admirably inserted in it, enhancing it, while being enhanced in turn. We just have to think of the church of S. Perpetua above Tirano or the church of S. Bartolomeo close to Castionetto, which with their monastic communities were probably the first sites where the slow terracing work and cultivation of the slopes (Zoia, 2004) began. Another site is Castel Grumello above Sondrio, where the very walls of the castle - now reduced to ruins - merge with and interpenetrate the surrounding terraces (Fig. 2). Man's ability to transform and maintain the territory, changing it into a cultural landscape, is probably the most important expertise underlying the alpine identity, which, in neighbouring areas, is sometimes used in the same way, at other times in a different way, but always necessarily in an effective manner.

Besides the immediate aesthetic perception, the deep acceptance of the value of the landscape requires it to be shared and, above all, understood. This was one of the key points of the observations included in the intervention made by the *Distretto Culturale della Valtellina* (Valtellina Cultural District).

2 The project

The Cultural Districts project was developed in Lombardy by Fondazione Cariplo to bolster the opportunity of enhancing cultural heritage as a driver of territorial economic and social development, by promoting and implementing integrated development (also of an economic nature) of the region's cultural heritage. The Sondrio local government joined the project, promoting the establishment of the Valtellina Cultural District, which has been in operation since July 2011. *Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale* (Local Development Foundation), together with the Provincial Council, Mountain Communities, Municipalities and other territorial stakeholders - such as banks and foundations - oversaw the implementation of a series of concrete actions (restoration interventions and interventions aimed at creating networks of cultural heritage sites and monuments). Moreover, these subjects also actively participated in the field of intangible assets (promotion, research and education). The aim of these actions was to focus on the role played by landscape, monument and artistic heritage in territorial development strategies, to encourage the local community to identify and increase their awareness of it, to promote the territory's cultural heritage and to create a network of the cultural activities already underway in the specific area.

One of the actions carried out by the Valtellina Cultural District involved the creation of a route aimed at enhancing the terraced landscape on the slopes of the north-facing Rhaetian Alps. Valtellina is an east-west trending alpine valley: due to this geographical feature, the

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slopes along the northern side of the valley (having better sun exposure) feature impressive terracing, from the valley bottom to 700-900 m asl, stretching over about 70 km. The vineyards were obtained by terracing the steep, rocky mountain slopes using dry stone walls. The Valtellina terraced district is the largest wine-growing mountain terraced area in Italy, extending over 850 ha, representing 37% of the total Italian surface (Various authors, 2004).

This area is a perfect example of man's transformation of the alpine area. In order to live here and carry out an economic activity, man has radically transformed the natural environment, creating a cultural landscape. Thanks to constant care and maintenance work, man has also ensured environmental stability, which nature had deprived the territory of. The area, which in the past was densely populated, also boasts a remarkable heritage, comprising small and large churches, as well as characteristic villages and superb civil and religious buildings, with great symbolic value for the community, interconnect with the terraced vineyard landscape.

The *Via dei Terrazzamenti* (The Route of Terraces) which has been designed foresaw the linking up and use of several routes that already existed along the mountain slopes, thus creating a trail that boasts cultural sites, although with constant reference to local production activities, thereby fostering, on the long term, the recovery and enhancement of major and minor cultural heritage sites, which can be used in an interesting manner, and to create an authentic tourist attraction within the overall cultural, tourist, excursion and recreational network offer.

3 Project development

The initiative was supported, funded and implemented by a variety of subjects representing many of the public and private stakeholders operating in Valtellina¹. In order to create effective synergy, all the subjects identified as stakeholders were involved in designing and planning the route.

In developing the activity, it was decided to first provide an example of the method and, especially in the programming and planning phase, to foster the maximum degree of involvement of professionals with precious expertise who are present in the territory. The explicit aim was to overcome conflicts of interest and to adopt a collaborative approach, which is the only way to really obtain synergy (I will use this term well knowing how much it has been exploited, but also how little it has been applied).

For instance, active collaboration amongst professional registers covering various expertises was used, thus acknowledging that in studying the landscape the problem of achieving harmony of the whole cannot be solved by simply juxtaposing specific specialist expertise. The appropriate integration of expertise ensures a better result than the simple sum of the same. In order to pursue a multidisciplinary approach on the subject, *Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale*, from the very first phases of the operational feasibility study, set up a working group, composed of representatives of the territorial professional registers², who worked in close

¹ Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale (coordinator of the action), Mountain Communities of Sondrio, Tirano and Morbegno, Valtellina Food and Wine Roads Association, Sondrio Provincial Council and the banks Banca Popolare di Sondrio and Credito Valtellinese.

² Register of Landscape Architects, Planners and Conservationalists, Register of Engineers, Register of Geologists, Register of professional Agronomists and Foresters.

cooperation, providing a series of recommendations, which were subsequently integrated into the development of the activities. As regards the design of The Route of Terraces, among other things, the group suggested the following:

- to go beyond the mere preliminary design work, by first developing a broader plan on a territorial scale (Programme Plan), in order to contextualize the route within a wider territorial framework;
- as regards the method to be adopted, to operate according to the procedure (foreseen by the public works regulations) entailing a call for ideas.

The working group also drafted the call for tenders, analyzed the planning requirements and, in particular, defined the specifications for the future project.

The decision to hold a call for ideas was taken with the aim of promoting the participation of the largest number of professionals so as to encourage, instead of imposing, the need for a multidisciplinary and integrated approach to planning. The *modus operandi* was successful as 15 project groups, comprising 120 professionals, were involved in the exemplary project process. *In itinere*, maximum visibility was given to the project, taking care to communicate the results of the call for tenders (Fig. 3) in the most extensive manner, through public meetings, as well by exhibiting the work carried out in the territories involved. The method that was adopted was considered to be so positive that it was presented at the Polytechnic University of Milan, in April 2012, during a workshop called “The Route of Terraces: a path for Valtellina sustainable development”.

At the same time *Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale* held a series of meetings with local stakeholders (the route pass through the territory of 3 Mountain Communities and 18 Municipalities) in order to share with the territory the path of the route that was defined during the operational feasibility study and the detailed proposals for improvements. Subsequent meetings, held at the still preliminary phase of the planning activities, aimed to present the route to the territory’s economic operators³, a fundamental strategy in order to ensure maximum participation in the initiative for the next phase entailing the management of the development of the activities.

Following the results of the cultural heritage mapping, carried out as a first step and concerning the fragmentary nature of available historical information, an agreement was defined with local associations which take care of historic, artistic, archeological, geographical, ethnological and philological research⁴. They expressed their availability to complete and systematize the information they are experienced for as this data is crucial for developing the Cultural District’s educational and communication activities.

4 Educational activities

With a view to encouraging the sharing and understanding of the values of the cultural landscape, particular attention was paid to educational activities, carried out by Valtellina Cultural District through several activities aimed at achieving specific objectives. A school

³ Sondrio Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Handicrafts and Agriculture, Valtellina Destination Management Organization, Valtellina Quality Agro-food District, Consortium for the Protection of Valtellina Wines, Sondrio Confederation of Farmers, Sondrio Trade, Tourism and Services Association.

⁴ Società Storica Valtellinese, Associazione culturale Ad Fontes

curriculum called “Landscape and its transformations” was defined for students attending classes of the compulsory school programme; teachers were involved in a course on “Landscape and civil cultural heritage” in the 2011-2012 school years. Following these initiatives, schools were encouraged to work on the topic within the framework of a competition striving to increase the awareness of the cultural landscape value of the territory in the province of Sondrio.

Alongside these initiatives, a course addressed to professionals, local government technicians and university students entitled “Transformation of the territory, culture and local identity” was held in 2013-2014. Theoretical activities (in the morning) were combined with onsite visits in the territory (in the afternoon), thus allowing the teachers to present and discuss the arguments on the field in an operational manner. This course provided a further opportunity for an extremely positive collaboration with the board of experts, composed of registers of several professional categories. Activities were foreseen to help analyze and understand the landscape, to know effective occasions for economic sustainable development of the territory, as well as to present experiences acquired elsewhere. The course, held over two years, was divided into three modules focused on the following themes: “The landscape of the terraced area”, “Other Valtellina landscapes (woods, stone, water)” and “Management and development of cultural heritage and landscape”. The papers of the modules have been collected in a publication (Bonardi et al., 2014).

The course also implemented the experience acquired in the Interreg CPRE project, tuned in partnership with the Valposchiavo area and financed within the Italy-Switzerland cross-border cooperation programme (Foppoli et al., 2014), which integrates and develops the activities foreseen by the Valtellina Cultural District. The fundamental collaboration involved also technicians from nearby Switzerland, allowing the comparison of best practices on cultural landscapes implemented in the two areas, which are very close from a territorial and cultural point of view, but sometimes very far in operational terms.

To optimize the various contact points between the Valtellina and Valposchiavo experiences joint courses were organized for operators interested in building dry stone walls (Fig. 4), one of the fundamental traditional skills required to build and maintain terraced landscapes, but currently increasingly underrated and wrongly interpreted. These courses aroused great interest involving the participation of building craftsmen, wine growers, in addition to professionals interested in rediscovering these traditional skills. During the practical and theoretical activities themes were developed that were linked to the historical, cultural and geological importance of dry stone walls, as well as the craft skills required to build them; the course led to build some traditional dry stone walls.

5 Management, promotion and development

During the numerous meetings that were held, the aspects linked to the maintenance and management of the route, which are strategically important to make the intervention sustainable over time, were identified and discussed. The meeting attendants agreed on the observation that for this purpose The Route of Terraces should be “managed” not only by the territorial authorities involved, but also and, above all, by that part of the local community that take from territory development and income.

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In this regard, contacts were immediately started with production operators, for instance farmers involved in cultivating the vineyards and in maintaining the relevant terraces, wine producers, that from the terraces provide the most important link to identify themselves with the territory, restaurant/hotel operators, as well as those operating in the area of quality products, such as farmhouses, trattorias and bed & breakfasts, situated along the route or close by.

These subjects, who were involved through their relevant trade associations, fully approved the initiative and showed keen interest in and appreciation of the topic. They readily disseminated information on the project among members of the associations, fully recognizing that a joint strategy could not only be extremely effective, but also advantageous for all the parties concerned. The action that is being implemented intends to leverage the sense of belonging and identification with the area. The aim is to promote both the quality and the management and maintenance of the route through effective choices in terms of contributions (not only of an economic nature, but also as regards “employment” opportunities) by the economic operators.

Underlying all this, a detailed maintenance plan was implemented, which, by using GPS (Global Positioning System) techniques, describes, qualifies and quantifies the operations that are required.

The promotion and development of The Route of Terraces cannot disregard the appropriate management of the route and the implementation of all available resources. In order to define an effective development strategy for the route and the territory, from a territorial marketing point of view, subjects who are the strategic interlocutors of the promotion sector⁵ in the province of Sondrio were also involved. On the initiative of the Sondrio local government, a forum was instituted among these stakeholders, *Fondazione di Sviluppo Locale* and the competent territorial authorities (the Mountain Communities), which drafted a specific protocol that defines the best strategy for promoting and developing the route, closely integrated with the other aspects of the provincial promotion. The link between the Valtellina Cultural District and this territorial network will enable widespread dissemination of information and the implementation of pluri- and inter-disciplinary projects, while avoiding duplication of initiatives.

Due to the particular position of the Valtellina - on the border between Italy and Switzerland - particular attention was paid, also within the framework of promotional activities, to finding a link with the experiences acquired in nearby Switzerland. From the start of the project, The Route of Terraces was presented to ViaStoria, the association that take care of Swiss historical routes, which decided to include it as an extension of the existing *Via Valtellina* (a route whereby Valtellina wine was historically exported to Northern territories), which crosses the Canton Graubunden, reaching Voralberg Region in Austria.

Therefore, it was possible to draw a route that is closely linked to the culture of producing and transporting wine, linking Italy, Switzerland and Austria (Fig. 5), which in future could be

⁵ Valtellina DMO for the Development of a Tourism System, Valtellina Quality Agro-food District, Valtellina Wine and Food Roads Association

extended from Bodensee down to Como Lake, becoming an important tourist and cultural attraction for the territories it crosses.

6 Conclusions

The development process is still in underway. However this experience demonstrates that thanks to

significant collective efforts it is possible to draw attention to the territory and favour its recognition as a cultural landscape.

The awareness of the historical and economic significance of the landscape supports the acknowledgement of the key role played by conservation and maintenance in actively protecting it from environmental and geological damages (Various authors 1996).

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