Strengthening The Link Between Conservation and Sustainable Development: Can Ecotourism Be a Catalyst? The Case of Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, Italy

Elena Mondino
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Supervisor: Thomas Beery
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BR</td>
<td>Biosphere Reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIST</td>
<td>Dipartimento Interateneo di Scienze, Progetto e Politiche del Territorio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>Diagnostic Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECST</td>
<td>European Charter for Sustainable Tourism</td>
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<td>ETIS</td>
<td>European Tourism Indicator System</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>IES</td>
<td>International Ecotourism Society</td>
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<td>MaB</td>
<td>Man and the Biosphere Programme</td>
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<td>MBR</td>
<td>Monviso Biosphere Reserve</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNSD</td>
<td>United Nations Statistics Division</td>
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<td>WNBR</td>
<td>World Network of Biosphere Reserves</td>
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<td>WWF</td>
<td>World Wildlife Fund</td>
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ELENA MONDINO

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Abstract:
The dichotomy of conservation vs. sustainable development has generated numerous debates since the introduction of the latter in the late 1980s. When UNESCO introduced the Biosphere Reserve concept in the early ’70s, it drew even more attention to the matter. In the recent past, many initiatives to address the issue gained ground not only across Europe, but worldwide. This is the case of ecotourism, a responsible (and sustainable) form of tourism that takes place in natural areas, sustains local communities, and involves a learning experience. Even though it might look like the perfect tool to strengthen the link between conservation and sustainable development, especially in a Biosphere Reserve context, ecotourism faces many challenges. Through a case study of an Italian Biosphere Reserve that was recently awarded with the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, this research aimed at understanding local stakeholders’ stand on the matter. A series of interviews were conducted and subsequently phenomenologically analysed to explore the possibility for ecotourism to act as a learning tool for sustainable development. Results show that ecotourism had some positive effects in the area, such as the creation of a network for collaboration between various stakeholders, among others. However, negative perception of ecotourism still play an inhibiting role, as it is not perceived as a sufficient source of income. It is discussed that this might be a consequence of two main factors: a lack of proper environmental education and the economic crisis the country is currently facing. Adjustments in the language and methods used in the educational system and a change of course at higher governmental levels might foster ecotourism to become a catalyst by being a learning tool.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Conservation, Ecotourism, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Learning tool, ECST, Monviso, Environmental Education

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Summary:
In the broader context of conservation and protected areas management, the compatibility between human activities and the protection of nature has always represented a challenge. This occurs because the two concepts often present contrasting perspectives, as conservation implies the protection of nature from damages caused by human activities, while sustainable development highlights the development of human activities in a way that cause the least exploitation of resources. Actually, the two have different focuses: the former is nature-centred, while the latter is man-centred. More recently, The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve concept, which has its foundation on the coexistence between conservation and sustainable development, drew attention to the matter. In fact, a Biosphere Reserve consists in three complementary functions: conservation function, sustainable development function; and logistic support function. In recent decades, many initiatives worldwide have tried to address this problem, and, among these, ecotourism stands out. Ecotourism, which can fall under the logistic support function in a Biosphere Reserve, is a form of sustainable tourism that encourages the protection of natural areas and, at the same time, sustains the wellbeing of local communities. Through a case study of Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, in Italy, this research aims at gaining a better understanding of stakeholders’ perspectives on ecotourism and the possibility for it to be a learning tool for sustainable development. Results show that ecotourism had positive effects and it can be a catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development by being a learning tool. However, to reach its full potential, other conditions, such as stronger environmental education efforts and an improved economic situation, must be satisfied.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Conservation, Ecotourism, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Learning tool, ECST, Monviso, Environmental Education

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1. Introduction

Many initiatives that encourage development that is compatible with nature conservation are gaining ground across Europe, especially in the UK, France, Italy, and Austria (Nepal, 2002). Such initiatives include a more sustainable form of tourism, namely ecotourism. Ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015b). Given that the approach merges conservation with the sustainable development of the area, ecotourism fits well within the context of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BR). In fact, since its first introduction in the early ‘70s, the Biosphere Reserve concept raised numerous debates on the potential coexistence of objectives such as conservation and sustainable development (Schultz, et al., 2011). To offer a clearer idea of why the two kinds of objectives often hinder each other, it is important to understand what is meant by the two terms. In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (Bruntland Commission) defined sustainable development as "development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 16). Nature conservation can be defined more narrowly as “the management of human use of organisms or ecosystems to ensure that such use is sustainable” (IUCN/WWF,1991 in UNSD, 2017). Nature conservation is an important part of sustainability and the conservation function of the BRs, however, sustainability must also consider human development. Agreement is found in the literature regarding the need for future research to consider how being “learning sites” will help BRs to combine conservation and sustainable development objectives in ways that support both simultaneously (Ishwaran, et al., 2008; Schliep & Stoll-Kleemann, 2010; Nguyen, et al., 2010; Coetzer, et al., 2013).

A number of BRs across the world already tried to employ ecotourism as a substitute economic activity that could provide conservation awareness as well as sustainable local development (Maikhuri, et al., 2000; Nolte, 2004; Hearne & Santos, 2005; Yuan, et al., 2008). This is also the case of Monviso Transboundary BR (MBR), in Italy. The area was designated in 2013 by UNESCO, and recently the BR was awarded with the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST). Being a relatively young BR, MBR has not been explored by research yet. Therefore, through a case study of Monviso BR, this research aims at assessing whether ecotourism can act as a catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development. To this regard, the study has three main objectives: to assemble opinions and ideas from the main promoters of ecotourism initiatives in the Italian Monviso about their conception of ecotourism; to investigate whether they see it as a potential catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development; and to gain a better understanding of the role of ecotourism as a learning tool to support Biosphere Reserve objectives.
2. Background

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism

When it comes to defining sustainable tourism and ecotourism, some scholars choose not to make a distinction between the two terms, interchanging them throughout their papers (Sharpley, 2000; Wnuk, 2013). However, a distinction between the two concepts is helpful. The UN World Tourism Organization has defined sustainable tourism as a form of tourism with a balance between environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects (WWF, n.d.). Yet, this delineation is rather broad and it falls into those definitions of sustainable tourism that Hunter (1997) already described as vague and not explanatory, “as if the reader must have an intuitive understanding of what is meant, or the meaning is so obvious to render any elaboration unnecessary” (p. 857). A more pragmatic approach is adopted by Wnuk (2013), who presents six characteristics to describe sustainable tourism in practice:

1. It meets the expectations of contemporary tourists and people living in tourist areas,
2. It preserves and strengthens the possibility of meeting such expectations in the future,
3. It develops space and manages natural resources as well as takes advantage of the cultural heritage in order not to diminish their industrial role, not to lower the social and aesthetic values, but to preserve biological diversity, the cultural integrity and the smooth course of ecological processes,
4. It provides protection for the characteristic and original features of landscape for a given area,
5. It protects and improves the quality of the environment,
6. It does not detrimentally affect other users of common space.

The points above depict a type of tourism which could be practiced everywhere, both in an urban and in a natural environment. Given this frame, the International Ecotourism Society (IES) restricts the concept of ecotourism to the natural environment (2015b), making it a sub-category of sustainable tourism. A series of researchers pinpoint Ceballos-Lascurain’s definition as one of the most widely embraced (Jacobson & Robles, 1992; Chiutsi, et al., 2011; Coria & Calfucura, 2012). He defines ecotourism as “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Ceballos & Lascurain, 1987 in Jacobson & Robles, 1992 and Chiutsi, et al., 2011). The former also adds that ecotourism necessitates high-quality maintenance of resources such as landscapes, rivers, pristine forests, and wildlife (1992). Chiutsi, et al. (2011), in their comprehensive analysis of existing definitions, underlie the fact that, however satisfactory such definition of ecotourism is, it is rather tourist-centric and it falls short in defining the impacts that this form of tourism can have on the cultural and ecological environment of the destination. Another factor that was also neglected in the previous definitions is the financial factor. However, a number of other scholars filled the gap by suggesting that, while on the one hand there has to be a balance between the socio-cultural, economical, and environmental sustainability, on the other there has to be financial stability (Godwin, 1996; Fennel, 2001; Buckley, Pickering and Weaver, 2003; Weaver, 2008 in Chiutsi, et al., 2011; WWF, n.d.).

Considering all the above-mentioned factors, the most inclusive definition of ecotourism was eventually proposed by the IES. In its revision of the definition in 2015, the IES defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2015b). This definition might look similar to the one offered by Ceballos-Lascurain, but the IES (2015a) delved deeper and drew a list of principles to be followed by those who implement and practice ecotourism:

- Minimize physical, social, behavioural, and psychological impacts,
- Build environmental and cultural awareness, and respect,
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts,
- Produce direct financial benefits for conservation,
- Generate financial benefits for both local people and private industry,
- Deliver memorable interpretative experiences to visitors that help raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climates,
- Design, construct and operate low-impact facilities,
- Recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the Indigenous People in your community and work in partnership with them to create empowerment.

The definition and principles of ecotourism followed in this paper are therefore those proposed by the IES. One critique of ecotourism is a reliance upon market-based conservation. McCauley (2006 in Fletcher, 2009) argued that market-based conservation strategies do not always offer satisfying guidance on how to protect the parts of nature that conflict with human interests and the ones that neither help nor harm us. Indeed, he believes that if the goal is to make significant and long-lasting gains in conservation, ethics and aesthetics must hold a paramount position in conservation. He eventually underlined how, while conservation of nature should be perpetual, the market forces that would regulate it are certainly not.

2.1.2. Ecotourism as a Learning Tool for SD

The fact that ecotourism includes a learning experience, usually delivered to small groups by small-scale businesses, and stresses local ownership, particularly for rural people, (The Global Development Research Center, n.d.), theoretically makes it a potential catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development. Previous research shows it is possible, and what happened in Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica, serves as a good example. To address the ever-growing number of park visitors (24-fold in a decade, as of 1992) – in an area known for being a traditional nesting ground for sea turtles – Jacobson and Robles (1992) considered the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism, and developed a tour guide training programme for local rural communities. After a pilot training course was held, research demonstrated that a tour guide programme: 1) helped mitigate negative tourism impacts; 2) provided environmental education to a segment not usually reached through school or other government development projects; 3) enhanced visitors’ knowledge of the area, improving their experience; and 4) brought an economic inflow to local communities, allowing them to be an active part in the process. The study showed that after the guides started receiving training on sea turtles, they were eager to know more about the topic. This ended up building a stronger concern for conservation issues and a greater motivation in the conservation process. In addition, better-trained tour guides provided visitors with an enjoyable learning experience. (Jacobson & Robles, 1992). In relation to this, Harris, et al. (2002 in Chiutsi, et al., 2011) note that training people with local knowledge and with a passion for the place in which they have grown up and come to love as guides and interpreters represents an important sustainable development strategy.

Another study (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008) conducted across the Amazonian regions of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, shows ideas and concerns of indigenous leaders about ecotourism as a catalyst for change in their communities. Positive changes after the introduction of ecotourism are listed as follows: opportunities to gain skills and leadership, heightened self-esteem, expanded network of support, and better organizational capacity. In addition to a new source of income and employment, and training opportunity, ecotourism had other positive effects on people involved, such as personal growth and improved communication skills. However, the study proceeds also to illustrate negative effects ecotourism had, including new restrictions on time, erosion of reciprocity and other traditional relationships, and new conflicts associated with the distribution of profits. (ibid.).

According to previous research exposed above, ecotourism can be a learning tool for a sustainable community development, but it can also be challenged. To fulfill the purpose of this research, the next step will be to analyse how it develops in a biosphere reserve context and whether such context may influence it.

2.2. The Biosphere Reserve Concept

The Biosphere Reserve (BR) concept was first introduced by an international expert panel, in the early 70s (UNESCO, 1996), and it constitutes an essential part of the Man and the Biosphere programme (MaB) (Batisse, 1982). The MaB programme, as presented by Batisse (1982, p. 101), was established through a resolution passed by the “Biosphere Conference” held in Paris by UNESCO in 1968, which defines MaB as “an intergovernmental programme of research aiming to develop an interdisciplinary scientific basis for the rational use and conservation of the resources of The Biosphere”. As of today, UNESCO counts 669 biosphere reserves in 120 countries, of which 16 are transboundary sites (2016). UNESCO defines BRs as follows:
“[…] ‘Science for Sustainability support sites’ – special places for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems, including conflict prevention and management of biodiversity.” (ibid.)

When the Second International Congress on Biosphere Reserves was held in Seville in 1995 (UNESCO, 1996; Ishwaran, et al., 2008), three main complementary functions of BRs have been highlighted:

- **conservation function**, to preserve genetic resources, species, ecosystems and landscapes;
- **development function**, to foster sustainable economic and human development;
- **logistic support function**, to support demonstration projects, environmental education and training and research and monitoring related to local, national and global issues of conservation and sustainable development (UNESCO, 1996).

Furthermore, each BR should physically contain three elements (UNESCO, 1996, p. 4):

- one or more **core areas**, which are securely protected sites for conserving biological diversity, monitoring minimally disturbed ecosystems, and undertaking non-destructive research and other low impact uses;

![Figure 1. BR concept design timeline](image-url)
- a clearly identified buffer zone, which usually surrounds or adjoins the core areas, and is used for co-operative activities compatible with sound ecological practices, including environmental education, recreation ecotourism and applied and basic research;
- and flexible transition area, or area of co-operation, which may contain a variety of agricultural settlements and other uses and in which local communities, management agencies, scientists, non-governmental organizations, cultural groups, economic interests and other stakeholders work together to manage and sustainably develop the area’s resources.

The International Co-ordinating Council of the MaB Programme proceeds to designate a biosphere reserve following a request by the interested country. To improve communication and collaboration at national and international level and to strengthen common understanding, the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) has been developed. The main purpose of the Statutory Framework is thus to provide BRs worldwide with shared best practices (UNESCO, 1996).

2.2.1. Ecotourism in the Biosphere Reserve Context

Coetzer, et al. (2013) stress that substitute economic activities – such as ecotourism – can be the means to support both the conservation function and the sustainable development function. In fact, ecotourism theory suggest that economic development and natural resources conservation are compatible goals (King, 2009, in Chiutsi, et al., 2011), and this is particularly relevant in the context of BRs. However, outcomes from earlier studies reveal that the introduction of ecotourism in a BR context is not without challenge. Previous research analysed the effectiveness of ecotourism approaches and practices and show consistency between results (Maikhuri, et al., 2000; Nolte, 2004; Hearne & Santos, 2005; Yuan, et al., 2008), even though BRs investigated by these studies are found across various continents, such as Europe, Asia, and Central America, which entail differences in socio-economic conditions and culture. BRs such as Sumava-Czech Republic, Aggtelek-Hungary, Slovensky Kras and Polana-Slovakia, Maya Biosphere Reserve-Guatemala, Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve-India, and Changbai Mountain Biosphere Reserve-China all showed a common trait: Ecotourism can be a game-changer, but it has not reached its full potential yet. Local communities are often skeptical towards this form of tourism, as they do not feel they could gain anything from it (Maikhuri, et al., 2000; Nolte, 2004; Hearne & Santos, 2005; Yuan, et al., 2008). Locals as well as tourists need to be aware of what a BR actually is, and a greater knowledge about its implications could result in a different approach towards ecotourism and its potential benefits. Research carried out in East Central Europeans BRs shows that a great number of stakeholders did not know they were living in a BR, and some could not make a distinction between a BR and a national park (Nolte, 2004). In their research concerning the Nanda Devi BR in India, Maikhuri, et al. (2000) underline the “urgent need” (p. 340) to develop learning material and visitor information centres, so that tourists will be better informed about the BR and at the same time it would provide a source of profit for the local community. Very similar considerations are provided by Yuan, et al. (2008), who believe more knowledgeable local communities result in a more conscious approach to the BR concept. The previous examples confirm that ecotourism represents a substitute economic activity as well as potentially being a learning opportunity for stakeholders in the area, matching the third complementary function of a BR, but at the same time, they stress how ecotourism can only be defined as such if it implies a financial revenue for local residents, as previously discussed. The issues remain how and why local residents can be motivated in participating in ecotourism projects. While asserting that the tourism industry is sustainable only if the community derives revenue through it, both Fletcher (2009) and Chiutsi, et al. (2011) assert that people will only protect what they receive value for.

2.2.2. Parco del Monviso

The Park was first established on April 17th, 1990, with the name of Parco del Po Cuneese, when a Management Authority was created for the System of Protected Areas of the Po river band. On August the 3rd, 2015, The Regional Law n. 19 reorganised the protected areas management system in Piedmont, so Parco del Po Cuneese turned into Parco Naturale del Monviso. The Parco del Po Cuneese spread over 1.057 hectares in the Cuneo Province and Turin Province, in Piedmont, located in the North-West of Italy. The new Parco Naturale del Monviso spreads over 8.334 hectares, and it includes the territories of the previous
denomination plus the Alevè forest, in Varaita valley, and the Prà-Barant oasis, in Pellice valley. (Parco del Po Cuneese, 2015a).

Figure 2. Monviso peak (red dot) and Po River. (Retrieved from: http://cultura.biografieonline.it/fiume-po/)

2.2.3. Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve

In 2013, the Monviso area became the first Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in Italy, as, at the same time, also the “twin” French reserve has been approved by UNESCO (Monviso Piemonte, 2013). MBR is the ninth BR in Italy, and the country now counts fourteen BRs in total (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO describes the biosphere reserve as follows:

“Monviso encompasses a mosaic of ecosystems ranging from the arid and rocky landscape found in the high altitudes of the Monviso massive (at a maximum elevation of 3,841 m) to the unusual forest ecosystem, which hosts, among others, Pinus cembra. The Alevè forest, which follows the whole length of the Western Alps, is the most unique and intact part of the reserve, while a continuum of different riparian environments can be found along the Po River, from its springs at Pian del Re (at an elevation of 2,020 m) to the Casalgrasso municipality, and then downstream towards the Torino Province – all of which are related to the permanent presence of the water stream.” (UNESCO, 2013)

Inhabitants amount to 266’474 in the Italian part and to 25’895 in the French part of MBR. The administrative authority of the reserve at the time of the establishment was the Parco del Po Cuneese (ibid.), but now the Parco Naturale del Monviso is in charge. Together with a joint programme between the University of Turin and Turin Polytechnic University, CED-PPN (European Centre of Documentation on Natural Parks Planning), and the International Academy on Sustainable Development, the administrative authority drew a management plan, in 2015, where they analysed existing best practices and designed action
plans in the framework of the UNESCO MaB programme (DIST, 2015). The document is divided into four sections: 1) “Man and the Biosphere” program and Monviso; 2) Analysis of good local practices; 3) Action plans; 4) Tools for the realisation, the development, and the update of the management plan.

The second section is particularly relevant because the analysis of good local practices was based on the awareness that sustainable development foundations lay on culture and on the necessary virtuous relationship between men and the environment. Five themes have been identified during the candidacy phase, which are Sustainable Tourism, Local Produces, Renewable Energies, Cultural Heritage, and Sustainable Transportation. Based on such themes, good local practices were identified and analysed according to five branches of analysis: Agribusiness, Craftsmanship, Environment & renewables, Tourism, and Cultural Heritage. (DIST, 2015). For every branch, strengths, weaknesses, and development opportunities were then identified and they are synthesised and reported in Table 1 below.

![Figure 4. Map of Monviso BR with core zones (red), buffer zones (yellow,) and transition zones (green). (DIST, 2015)](image)

### Table 1. Branches of analysis and their relating strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. (DIST, 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agribusiness</strong></td>
<td>Firms multi-functionality&lt;br&gt;Strong local rooting&lt;br&gt;Entrepreneurial dynamism&lt;br&gt;Variety and diversification of products and services offered by firms&lt;br&gt;Medium-high products quality&lt;br&gt;Great spread of bio-brands High care and maintenance of agricultural soil</td>
<td>Limited openness to external markets&lt;br&gt;Fragmentation of support projects for supply chains&lt;br&gt;supply chains</td>
<td>Openness to external and international markets&lt;br&gt;Acknowledgement and valorisation of multi-functionality&lt;br&gt;More chances of inter-sectoral development projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Craftsmanship</strong></td>
<td>Deeply rooted traditions and know how&lt;br&gt;Large supply of products</td>
<td>Supply chains not structured enough&lt;br&gt;Limited promotion</td>
<td>Creation of integrated supply chains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment &amp; renewables</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Cultural Heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Links with tourism and other sectors</td>
<td>Variety and diversification of services</td>
<td>Variety of cultural offer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good/excellent raw materials quality</td>
<td>Mainly high tourist package quality</td>
<td>Excellences at international level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renewable energy plants across the whole area</td>
<td>On average adequate and innovative accommodations</td>
<td>Quantity of cultural heritage in the area</td>
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<td>High level innovation hubs</td>
<td>Sustainable tourism as a widely share concept</td>
<td>Presence of economic activities tied and rooted in the local culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong training network for sustainability</td>
<td>Low level of local promotion integration</td>
<td>Weak coordination among initiatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bottom-up initiatives</td>
<td>Weak coordination of touristic initiatives among different areas</td>
<td>Limited awareness of the development potential connected to the cultural heritage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor coordination at institutional level</td>
<td>Using MaB UNESCO brand as an added value</td>
<td>Valorisation and promotion are not effective</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Obsolete energy distribution network</td>
<td>Integrated and coordinated tourism promotion</td>
<td>Lack in intercepting resources and connections with other sectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong commitment from institution towards self-sufficiency and energy saving</td>
<td>Integration with other sectors</td>
<td>Lack in building a network to promote important entities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunities to access to different financing channels on themes such as environmental and energetic sustainability</td>
<td>Strengthening the partnership between private and public sector</td>
<td>Planning and developing integrated projects inside the area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monviso UNESCO area</td>
<td>Creation of new services for visitors</td>
<td>Creation of thematic itineraries</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater valorisation of study tourism and sport tourism</td>
<td>Building a network for cultural entities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration with international circuits</td>
<td>Connection and networking with other areas</td>
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</table>
2.2.4. European Charter for Sustainable Tourism

As Nepal (2002, p.106) notes, many initiatives that encourage a development that is compatible with nature conservation are gaining ground across Europe, especially in the UK, France, Italy, and Austria, as a result of a new philosophy for European parks. To this effect, at the 1st World Conference for Sustainable Tourism held in Lanzarote (Spain) in 1995, the EUROPARC Federation introduced the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (ECST) with the purpose of promoting care not only to European lands, but also to the people who live and work in them (EUROPARC Federation, n.d.; Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2012). As Torres-Delgado and López Palomeque (2012) put it, the charter established a “broad framework for local-scale sustainable development of tourism by listing several objectives related to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the phenomenon” (p. 4). European parks – and in general, natural areas – are feeling the pressure of an increased number of visitors and its implications, but at the same time, they could act as catalyst for sustainability on local, regional, and even national levels (EUROPARC Federation, n.d.).

In 2015, MBR decided to adhere to the Charter, seeing it as methodological tool to improve the management of the protected area with the ultimate goal of developing a sustainable form of tourism (DIST, 2015, p. 34). In fact, the Charter was a logical consequence of the MaB UNESCO recognition, and it represented a way to turn such recognition into a concrete (economic) advantage. The map in Figure 5 shows the municipalities involved in the ECST project compared to the MaB territory.

Before engaging in the Action Plan design process, the Diagnostic Report (DR) had to be drawn up. The DR is a document that gathers information about the former Parco del Po Cuneese (now Parco del Monviso), including its geology and palaeontology, fauna and flora, the socio-economic situation, the tourism industry in the Park, and opportunities and threats related to the ECST.

Figure 5. Map of ECST municipalities. (Parco del Po Cuneese, 2015b)

The tourism industry section of the DR is particularly relevant to this paper, as it gives a satisfactory overview of the tourism flow, the appeal the area has for tourists, and by and large how the area deals with tourism. Information regarding the tourism demand and the indexes used to assess and compare the area to regional and national averages are presented hereinafter. The tourism demand of a location is constantly monitored through the tracing of arrivals and presences. Arrivals represent the number of tourists coming to visit the area, and they are therefore an indicator of the area attractiveness. Presences take into consideration the number of nights spent by a tourist in the area, measuring the economic and social weight of the phenomenon. In the ECST area, both arrivals and presences show a similar increasing trend over the years. In fact, the former increased by 60% and the latter by 50% in the last nine years. However, there has
been a slight decrease in the trend in 2011 – for both arrivals and presences – entirely concerning national visitors. Foreign visitors, instead, keep accounting for a little less than the 30% of the total demand. The analysis of presences seasonality shows that both national and foreign presences follow a bell curve, with a higher number of presences during the summer months and lower during the rest of the year. As underlined in the document, this – however indicating characteristics more typical of a tourist resort than of an ecotourism destination – implies a large margin of improvement regarding the seasonal adjustment towards the spring and autumn period. To have a better understanding of the potential of the area, the Parco del Po Cuneese presented five indexes that are useful for comparisons on a regional and national level: Receptive Density, Receptivity, Tourism intensity, Average occupancy rate, and Average length of stay of tourists (see Table 2) (Parco del Po Cuneese, 2015b). The average occupancy rate and the average length of stay of tourists are also listed as ETIS core indicators under the section “Economic value” (European Commission, 2016). The European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) was launched in 2013 by the European Commission with the aim of helping destinations to monitor and measure their sustainable tourism performance, by using a common comparable approach (ibid.).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Used for</th>
<th>ECST area</th>
<th>Piedmont avg.*</th>
<th>Italy avg.*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receptive density</td>
<td>Beds/Km²</td>
<td>Ability to accommodate tourists</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>100.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptivity</td>
<td>Beds/Inhabitants</td>
<td>Ability to accommodate tourist in relation to the number of inhabitants</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism intensity</td>
<td>Annual presences/Inhabitants</td>
<td>Pressure of tourism on the community</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average occupancy rate</td>
<td>Annual presences/Beds·365</td>
<td>Ability of accommodations to optimize their activity</td>
<td>7.22%</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of stay</td>
<td>Presences/Arrivals</td>
<td>Average number of days spent by a tourist in the area</td>
<td>2.23 days</td>
<td>3.23 days</td>
<td>3.99 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process for obtaining the Charter covered a span of roughly one year. Figure 5 illustrates the process MBR completed to present its candidacy for the ECST.

The ECST objectives were presented in a MaB Monviso conference. A month later, the first Plenary Forum was held and this represented the initial step in the Action Plan design process. During the Forum, the president of “Qualità Parco”, from the Adamello Brenta Natural Park, talked about his experience with the ECST. Some fundamental values Parco del Monviso should rely on were also emphasised, such as the sense of belonging, the added values a sustainable form of tourism can bring, the importance of teamwork, and building a network to strengthen the local system. In March, the first Technical Panel was held. It was divided into three sections, one for each valley in the Park: Maira Valley, Po Valley (including Saluzzo and its surroundings), and Varaita Valley. Figure 4 shows the municipalities where the technical panel was held in each valley. Participants in the technical panels included tourism operators and stakeholders in the tourism industry in general: local municipalities, farmers and animal breeders, lodgers, restaurant owners, cultural associations, environmental associations, alpine guides and environmental educators, local professionals, local development agencies, museums and eco-museums, trade unions, and pro loco organisations. During the meeting, they had the chance to express their expectations and concerns regarding the future of the natural area from a tourism perspective and from these a potential strategic overview was drafted. The second Technical Panel was dedicated to a simulation, in which participants had to identify themselves with activities and roles which were not their own. This role-play (“Fabbrica delle idee”, Ideas factory in English) helped collecting suggestions concerning the pillars of a sustainable tourism development strategy. The second Plenary Forum was then held to present the DR and to share best practices from other Regional and National Parks that were already awarded with the ECST. In addition, during this Plenary Forum the final strategy was validated. Afterwards, the third and fourth Technical Panels were dedicated to the design and redefinition of concrete actions by the stakeholders, i.e. the Action Plan. During the last Plenary Forum, the
final Action Plan was presented together with the formal candidacy to obtain the ECST. (Parco del Po Cuneese, 2015a).

**Figure 6.** The Action Plan design process, 2015. *(Parco del Po Cuneese, 2015a)*
3. Methods

The aim of the research, as presented above, was to explore whether ecotourism could act as a catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development inside UNESCO Biosphere Reserves.

3.1. The Case Study Methodology

By choosing to focus on the Monviso Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, the research project turned into a case study. The definition of case study used in this paper is given by Thomas (2011):

Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates. [Italics added] (p. 513)

The practical unit (ibid.), or the subject, is in this instance represented by the Monviso Biosphere Reserve, while the theoretical frame (ibid.), or the object, is the concept of ecotourism as a learning tool for sustainable development. Among the three ways to identify a subject suggested by Thomas (2011) – local knowledge case, key case, or outlier case – the former was used to identify the MBR, given the researcher’s familiarity with the area, the culture, and the language.

Figure 7. Typology of a case study (Thomas, 2011)

Figure 7 illustrates the typology of a case study developed by Thomas (2011).

“A typology encourages a clear articulation of the distinctness and necessity of both subject and object; it encourages consideration of theoretical or illustrative approaches, methodological decisions, and decisions about process” (ibid., p. 518)

As specified above, the case study presented in the paper is a local knowledge case, with the purpose of exploring local stakeholders’ opinions on ecotourism and eventually assessing whether ecotourism could act as a learning tool to link conservation and sustainable development objectives. The approach followed here is phenomenological and it falls under the descriptive side of the spectrum. The objectives of the paper do not test a theory and neither help build one, but they rather aim at providing an insight on the phenomenon. The time boundary is limited to the year passed from the start of the ECST application process to the present, and questions are mainly based on experience. Therefore, this case study falls within the single-snapshot category.

It is important to note that a case study must not be seen as a method in itself, but rather as a frame in which different methods are employed (Simons, 2009 in Thomas, 2011).

Desk-based secondary research was conducted to analyse existing literature about biosphere reserves, sustainable tourism, and ecotourism, and to provide a basis for the theoretical framework of the study. Field work was necessary to collect stakeholders’ ideas and opinions in regards to the research question. Additional insight was gained based on researcher participation in one of the ECST meetings, held by the park authorities and Federparchi.
3.2. The Interviewing Process

The first contact was established with who Gobo (2008) identifies as an intermediary. The intermediary is “the person who creates the contact between the researcher and certain members of the organization or group” (p. 121). The intermediary set up a meeting with the park’s director, so further discussion could occur in relation to this research and its purpose. The park director can be identified as a guarantor, who is usually a leader, or someone exercising authority (ibid.). The guarantor informed the technical manager about the discussed work so that he, in turn, could provide useful related documentation. Such documents included the Management Plan for the UNESCO Monviso Transfrontalier Biosphere Reserve and the Strategy and Action Plan for the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (to be referred to as simply, ‘Action Plan’). In the latter, information needed to select the participants was found. Participants represent the social actors (ibid.), i.e. the ones who were going to be contacted and asked for an interview. The Action Plan is a collection of actions presented to the Europarc Federation by different stakeholders in the tourism industry, such as lodgers, farmers, administrative authorities (e.g. municipalities), and tourist guides to obtain the ECST. Such actions are divided according to the ECST principle they represent and the ten principles are listed as follows:

1) Engaging all stakeholders,
2) Preparing a strategy,
3) Protecting the area,
4) Guaranteeing quality for tourist,
5) Communicating the peculiarities,
6) Promoting local products,
7) Improving the knowledge of the protected area,
8) Ensuring support to inhabitants,
9) Increasing benefits for the local economy,
10) Monitoring visitors’ flow

Every action has a referent who is responsible for it and the total amount of actions is 67. Given the fact that time constraints would not allow to interview all the referents, only the actions that fell under principle 3), 6) and 7) were taken into account. The three principle were chosen because they are closely aligned with the three complementary functions of a biosphere reserve, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. ECST principles taken into account and their related BR function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECST Principles</th>
<th>Biosphere Reserve complementary functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3) Protecting the area</td>
<td>1) Conservation function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Promoting local products</td>
<td>2) Sustainable economic and human development function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Improving the knowledge of the PA</td>
<td>3) Logistic support function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After applying this filter, the remaining actions amounted to 25. Since there were still too many initiatives considering time constraints, the actions deemed less informative or less engaging were excluded from the research: for instance, one action consisted in only one event throughout a year, so it was less likely to be meaningful for the scope of the research; others consisted in trail maintenance only, with no inclusion of tourists or other stakeholders. In the end, the 14 remaining actions became the focus. The next step was to contact the actions’ referents to check whether they would agree on being interviewed. Twelve out of fourteen referents’ email addresses were retrieved from the internet. Of the two missing contacts, a phone number was retrieved for one of them, but there was no available information on the other one. Therefore, an email was sent out to 12 out of 14 referents and the thirteenth was called, but no response was given. After all the emails were sent out, in the upcoming days, positive responses by potential interviewees who were willing to be interviewed were collected. Communication over the phone was established with every contact and a suitable date and time for the interview was agreed upon. Eventually, 7 interviews were set up, amounting to the 50% of the identified target group. One of the projects had five referents instead of just one, and two of them agreed on being interviewed, so 8 was the total number of interviewees as two
The type of interview adopted is the semi-structured interview. As Rabionet (2011) underlines in her paper, the risk in using a completely unstructured interview might be that important topics related to the research question will not be investigated. Instead, she continues, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to narrow down on certain topics without the risk of missing the participant’s own personal story. After choosing the type of interview, the second step was to draft the interview protocol. The protocol used consists of 6 sections, in the following order: icebreaker, project/initiative, ECST, BRs, ecotourism. Each section includes a broad question on the topic and some probing questions to keep the conversation going in case the interviewee stopped talking. The last section, the one on ecotourism, also includes the research question. Before starting the interview, every participant was asked if he agreed on being recorded, and the interview was then recorded using a recording device. At the end of each interview, the interviewee was asked if there was anything he/she wanted to add and was told that he/she would have been free to contact the interviewer should they have anything to add in the future. The complete protocol can be found in the Appendix A.

3.2.1. Coding the Interviews

The interviews data was analysed using a qualitative phenomenological content analysis. For every interview, the coding process was carried out as follows. The first step was listening to the interview to have a sense of the whole. Hycner (1985) stresses the fact that listening to the whole interview sets the context for specific units of meaning that will be found later on in the transcript. The interview was then manually transcribed by the researcher and, during the transcription, units of general meaning were identified. A unit of general meaning can be defined as “those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning (irrespective of the research question) clearly differentiated from that which precedes and follows.” (Hycner, 1985, p. 282). Each unit of general meaning was noted down on a blank column on the right of the interview transcript and a number was assigned to each one of them, as shown below in Figure 8.

The next step, following Hycner’s procedures, consisted in delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question. The process consists in understanding whether the units of general meaning responds to the research questions. If they do so, they turn into units of meaning relevant to the research question (see Figure 9). At this point, all the redundancies needed to be eliminated. However, it is important to note how many times a unit of relevant meaning appeared, as it could give a hint on the importance of such unit.

![Figure 8. Units of general meaning.](image-url)
The next step was to see whether some units of relevant meaning clustered together, i.e. if there were commonalities that brought together different units (see Figure 10 for an example).

Afterwards, *themes were determined from clusters of meaning*, i.e. themes that can represent such clusters. (Hycner, 1985).

![Figure 9. Units of meaning relevant to the research question.](image)

![Figure 10. Clusters of meaning (Roman numbered).](image)

When all the above actions were carried out for each interview, it was time to identify *general and unique themes* for all the interviews (see Figure 11). If a theme was delineated in almost every interview, it represents a general theme. However, it is also important to discuss unique themes, i.e. themes that came out from maybe just one or few interviews, as they may indicate a polyphony in interviewees’ opinions. (Hycner, 1985). General and unique themes identified in the interviews will be presented in section 4 and consequently analysed and discussed in section 5.

### 3.3. Observation

During the sixth interview, the researcher was invited by one of the interviewees to take part in a meeting that would have been held the next week by the Park authorities and Federparchi. The meeting was the first one after the ECST was awarded to the area, in December 2016, and it served as a way to gain perspective upon the current situation. Every participant was provided with a monitoring sheet in which he/she had to self-evaluate his/her project: problems they had to face, failures, successes, a trend analysis.
The second part of the meeting was dedicated to the set-up of thematic working groups. This meant that all the referents whose actions were related to a certain theme were put in the same group, so that, by collaborating, they could help each other and share best practices. The 5 thematic working groups suggested by the Park were:

1) Community training and land promotion
2) Outdoor and dynamic holiday
3) Occitan area and surroundings – Culture, history, traditions
4) Discovering biodiversity and nature
5) Intersection of tourism and agriculture

3.4. Limitations

During the research project, a number of limitations was encountered. The first one concerns the boundaries of the case study. The BR taken into account is a transboundary one, meaning it spreads on both Italian and French territories. However, given time constraints – it would have required more travelling – and language barriers, the French side was excluded from the case study. Losing opinions and worldviews of stakeholders from a different cultural environment might have negatively affected the results of the research.

The second limitation presented itself during the research participant selection process. As already mentioned above, time constraints did not allow to have a full picture of all the stakeholders involved in the ECST. However, if what a future researcher is looking for is to hear all the voices, it is suggested to use a different research method, maybe a questionnaire, which is less time-consuming and provides a more even collection of data.

One last limitation concerns the coding of interview data. To have as few biases as possible when pointing out units of relevant meaning, it is suggested to train independent judges to verify such units. Obviously, that was not possible, mainly because of time constraint. Therefore, there is the possibility that the interpretation of interview data might be influenced by the researcher’s views and background.
4. Results Analysis

4.1. Interviews

In this section, the results obtained through the coding of interviews will be presented, i.e. the general themes. For an easier consultation, they have been arranged in Table 5 in a decreasing order, starting from the most mentioned. Themes emerged from less than three interviews will be discussed at the end as they show relevant traits, despite their low frequency. Note, in the text below interviewees will be referred to by number I1, I2, I3, etc. The two interviewees from #6 will be referred to as I6a and I6b.

Table 5. General themes emerged from the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>I1</th>
<th>I2</th>
<th>I3</th>
<th>I4</th>
<th>I5</th>
<th>I6a, b</th>
<th>I7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of BR objectives</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECST</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecotourism as a learning tool</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation for the place</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of networking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International comparisons</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective on monetary revenue</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic crisis and its effects</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perception of the Park</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling to gain knowledge</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perception of tourism</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge of BRs Objectives

The majority of interviewees have a partial understanding of BR objectives. All of them refer to the conservation objective, which is the most acknowledged. I1 explains that he “shares the same values the MBR has” and he later adds that “I know the MBR well and all its biodiversity […] My main focus is biodiversity”. I2 admits that “if I am asked about details regarding the Park’s goals I struggle [to give an answer], apart from managing terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity”. Similarly, I7 admits that he knows them in general, “but obviously not in detail”. I4 talks only about “biodiversity conservation objectives”. Both I6a and I6b affirm that they are aware of the BR objectives, but they do not communicate them. I3, when asked about his knowledge of the BR, replied asking for clarifications, “explain it to me again because I do not have a clear idea about it”.

I5 is the only interviewee who refers to both conservation and development, stating that “there is the matter of the land, of the land restoration, [and] trying to make it coexist with intensive agriculture”. The other interviewees never referred to the sustainable development objectives, and none of them mentioned the logistic support function at all.

ECST

Overall, the majority of interviewees seem to be satisfied with the ECST experience, and have a positive perception of ecotourism. One positive note concerns the collaboration with the Park administration. I1 reports that “we had many meetings with the Park authorities where they trained us on the ECST, they introduced it to us, they went deeper detailing its priorities, and then we had time to think about potential
actions”. He later adds “[the Park authorities] were very chill, I tell you. They understood that there are difficulties nowadays, especially following certain paths, but I tell you, we were at ease. […] The meetings we had were on a ground level, for everyone, you know […] even for those who are not in the field, we have been involved. It has been a positive experience”. I2 thinks the most important aspect is that the Park [authorities] believe in what they are doing, “they believe in it, and they invest in… how can I say, they support us. We speak the same language and we are not disconnected […] and well, this is what keeps me going, despite the struggles and the aging”. I7 connects to this when saying that “collaborating with Parco del Monviso, with which we already collaborated in the past, and with other actors who took part in building proposals… to present the ECST, has been surely interesting and positive and I think it can’t have [anything] but positive developments from now on. […] We already have two or three standing initiatives with the Park. […] You can actually work and collaborate in a positive way with the Park”.

I6a perceives the ECST as a great opportunity because of many reasons: “the Park, especially in the past years, has always been seen as negative and restrictive, while this could indicate a change in its perception among those who have always feared the limitations the Park could impose instead of the opportunities; […] it is the first tangible step, hence easier to communicate because of its opportunities; it could encourage touristic operators to renovate their facilities […], as many hotels here do not care about the environment yet; it is an opportunity to meet up with other businesses in the area”. I6b connects to this “I see [the ECST] as a wonderful opportunity, also because… I mean, I was a lodger in my former life [now retired], so my [professional] enthusiasm is double, right? Thinking about a modern way to attract tourists from abroad and at the same time offering chances to such a rich land”. According to I4, the ECST is “a chance to guarantee that our effort is oriented in a certain direction […] and the fact that we took part with an action that allowed the Park to obtain such an award means that the discourse we have always followed has a value, and we are glad it is recognised more officially too”.

I3, while he believes that, in fact, ecotourism can be a catalyst, he thinks that by itself it will not be enough. He explains that “yes, we need tourism, […] but tourism only is not perceived as a valid resource by locals”. When talking about the valley he lives in, he also stresses the fact that locals would first like to have the same services the cities have, such as schools, for instance. I5 believes that the ECST is good as a principle, as he thinks that ecotourism allows the area to be self-sufficient, “it is not a [form of] tourism that only exploits the resources of an area and takes it all. This is a trade-off, right? It is likely that, if you are in a territory and you just exploit it, it ends up dying. There is a risk it will lose all its characteristics. So… I believe in this self-sufficient system”. He thinks that MaB principles are positive and should be applied in all their facets, but the conservation element has to coexist with intensive agriculture. Moreover, he later adds that an environmental culture has to be instilled in young people. On a negative note, I2 complains about a generally inhibited system. “We have to simplify the procedures […] we have to find a way to unravel the bureaucratic system”. He thinks that this is what made people living in the area angry. He believes that there should be more contact with locals and their experiences, “[we should] go out from our offices, [we should] walk with our people”.

**Ecotourism as a Learning Tool**

Concerning ecotourism as a learning tool, there are positive remarks as well as uncertainties. I2 believes that ecotourism can help shift the balance by focusing on the [land] treasures, and he agrees with I1 when stating that it can “absolutely” help reaching the MaB and the ECST objectives. I1 sees the ECST, and more generally ecotourism, as a means to sustain disadvantaged areas, such as mountainous areas where agriculture is hard to practice, believing that “it can be an alternative path”. Also, he thinks ecotourism can help both the tourists and the locals to become aware of conservation and sustainable development objectives, and he adds that “there is a more sensitive kind of person with whom you have less troubles, then there is the one that has no clue on how to live more sustainably, and with whom you struggle more, but let’s say those are the targets. After all, whomever engages in environmental education has the goal of making people understand that at this rate we are not going anywhere, we have to… we only have one planet”. He goes on by saying that “you can talk about sustainability and tourism and at the same time you can try to find alternative ways to reduce the common impacts tourism has on the environment. […] [The ECST] is difficult because it tries to do something new […], to bring people back to walking, or other means, and still enjoy the journey”. He believes that ecotourism can be a learning tool “as long as you catch people’s
interest with something attractive”. I4 believes ecotourism “is a golden opportunity to learn”. When pupils visit her oasis, they watch a short movie right at the beginning and “the fact that they see certain things in the movie which they can later observe in reality is really an opportunity to teach them many things”. She believes ecotourism lets the tourist go home with “a larger cultural awareness”. According to I7, ecotourism can be a learning tool, “because linked to this kind of project, you can have many things, many activities”. For instance, he recalls staying in hotels in other areas where, together with the room key, he was provided with info regarding garbage collection for recycling.

I3, when asked if ecotourism could function as a learning tool, replied that “it worked in Maira valley”, but he still thinks that “there is a delay in understanding in the administrations”. I6a thinks that ecotourism can be a learning tool, but she is sceptical as “it is still at an early stage, I do not really see it as a developed tool, but… it can be, I mean, surely it is an opportunity”. I6b connects to I6a’s stance and she adds that first “we have to understand how to intercept this kind of tourism”. Later, I6a argues that ecotourism and conservation present some difficulties too, and she reports the example of the “exaggerated defence of wolves” and thinks that “if you are a shepherd who spends three months in alpine pastures and wolves kill your sheep, it is a problem, [and] we cannot pretend it is not, right? So, according to me, we have to find solutions for the coexistence of ecotourism and human activities, the most positive for all”. Following up, I5 believes ecotourism could be a tool to reach the BR objectives, but “it has to coexist with the industrial development, doesn’t it?, with agriculture, industries, and trades. I mean, we cannot give up industries, supermarkets, or breeding farms, especially here in the valley floor”.

Appreciation For the Place

This theme emerged in 6 out of 7 interviews. It is a shared opinion among interviewees that the ECST area they live in presents remarkable features. Particularly, they refer to Monviso, the mountain at the centre of the core zone, which dominates the landscape. I1 talks about a “beautiful area” and adds that “especially when you show foreigners the slopes of Monviso, what surrounds us, you know… […] We have it there every day, you know… we do not appreciate it, we are used to living… you know what? We are used to living in a wonderful place according to me”. I2, who lives up in one of the valleys, expresses similar feelings “[…] when I wake up in the morning and I look outside the window I say… on a [sunny] day like this, you see Monviso […] it might be an underwhelming place, but I won’t change it”. He also specifically stresses the fact that the landscape is a good hand to play, and that they do not have less than any other places, “[…] the first time I got to Lake Bagner, I had no idea, it seemed like I got to Canada […] and I told myself “we have [such places] here and we don’t know them and we look for them somewhere else”. The same concept is recalled by I3, who once met a couple of tourists from Vancouver and asked them “So you, from the Rocky Mountains, come here in Maira valley? Are you insane?”. However, after living in the area for a while he realised that one “does not have to go to the Kilimanjaro, or to Madagascar, but literally 80 kilometres away from Turin” to discover such places.

I5 believes that ecotourism should be promoted through the valorisation of “land treasures”. I6b stressed how privileged they are to live in this area, stating that “when you have a group [of tourists], on one side one has Monviso, then one has these fields, this hill, these… even the plains, fertile, I mean we are privileged to live in this area”. She also believes that being MaB might help those who live in the area to realise what they have. I7 believes that both old town centres and the natural landscapes are “absolutely intact from an environmental point of view”, and this, in turn, might imply an economic revenue.

Education

Education was noted in 5 of the 7 interviews and is one of the themes that were discussed with passion. Further, it was noted by the researcher that it might be the most relevant to the purpose of this research. Education here mainly refers to the process of raising awareness on environmental matters among students in primary, middle, and secondary school. It is believed by all the interviewees who mentioned education that there is a need for addressing environmental-related issues starting from an early age. However, I2 and I4 express their concern about the lack of a knowledgeable teaching staff. “According to me, there is an educational phase that entails the Park collaborating in tight synergy with schools; therefore, it is a matter of educating the teaching staff” (I2). I4 believes that “the teachers’ training is the problem […] teachers who teach natural sciences in middle school, but even in universities, generally would have preferred having
According to some of the interviewees (I2, I4, I6a), the quality of environment-related lectures still depends on the single teacher’s sensibility, thus not offering a continuum through different stages of the educational system. According to I4, this happens because, in Italy, “nature is not taken seriously” and “in high-school, science and biology are not considered primary subjects”. An explanation for the phenomenon is provided by I2, who refers to a “generational gap”, i.e. a total lack of education on environmental matters for the past 20-30 years. I4 reinforces this concept by stating that, only recently, the environment, the habitat, and recycling has started being addressed in schools. The majority of those interviewed, precisely 4 out of 7, believe that it is necessary to start raising awareness and educating new generations at an early stage. Both I2 and I4 refer to the fact that children can learn a lot and will release what they learned in the future, for they are like “sponges”. As stated by I2, “[ecotourism] pass through [education]”, and both I6a and I7 already noticed a higher awareness among younger people on these themes.

The important thing, I5 believes, is to create a culture among youths, to “make them understand that some things need to be done […], that it takes an effort to do it, but you’ll have a return”. I2 thinks, “[…] we have to work on the human material that we have in order to educate to a different form of tourism and consideration of nature”. I7 noticed that, since they started raising awareness about recycling in schools, the percentage of people who carry out a correct door-to-door collection of recyclable waste is higher among people in the 20-25 year-old range. He also believes that ecotourism can be a means to raise awareness, both for locals and for visitors. In fact, the garbage disposal company he presides over usually has information points during local fairs and manifestations to sensitize local citizens and “temporary citizens” (i.e. tourists) on the importance of recycling. In parallel, the company carries out a project to raise awareness in schools: the projects include an indoor training module in the class, followed by a visit to the local waste disposal plant. Similarly, I2 and their chorus are planning lecture-concerts to take place in schools or in the city theatre, with a nature theme. These concert-like lectures will be in multi-vision, linking together visual and audio elements through an interdisciplinary approach, e.g. if the song is about water, pictures from a stream or a river will be shown, and so on. I4 organises guided tours for schools in a stork oasis, and she believes that the visit to the oasis should be at either the beginning or the end of an educational process that takes place in school, stating that “kids who are introduced to the [habitat] reality tend to ask higher quality questions”. She considers a pupil coming back to her naturalistic centre with his/her parents as one of the greatest achievements, as “he/she can, in turn, become the guide and show the parents what he/she learnt”. Activities with schools are also being carried out by one of I5’s colleagues, who holds lectures about recycling in primary and middle schools in the area.

The Importance of Networking

The majority of those interviewed agree on the fact that networking is highly important. It helps both businesses and tourists, as the former have the “occasion to get to know other activities in the area” and share best practices, as pointed out by I6a, while the latter are offered a diverse set of options among which they can choose (I1, I4). It is particularly stressed how, by networking, it is possible to provide visitors with a complete touristic experience. I1 explains that “if you network [with other tourist operators], the person spends one moment here, another moment in another place, […] you can organise sight-seeing days in an itinerary, so that if people come here they can see something on a naturalistic level, but then there are other businesses that offer, as we do, local products, others that offer catering, so you create a package, and I think this is one of the objectives the BR wants to pursue”. He also believes that “if you walk around the biosphere for fifteen days, you’ll go back home with something”, meaning that exploring different aspects of the area can be enriching. Similarly, I4 thinks that presenting options to the tourists is a faster alternative [for them], because “maybe someone has a strong willingness [to organise the visit], others either will not bother or do not have time”. Precisely, she refers to the reality of her small town, where the castle is the first and foremost touristic attraction, “if people stay on after visiting the castle, they will visit the town. […] the municipality complains about the fact that tourists [who visit the castle], do not stay in town. Well, […] you need two or three permanent tourist attractions, […] when one gets out of the castle the question is always ‘what now?’”. She says that her activity is alive thanks to the castle tourism.

It seems like the idea of networking is promoted by the Park authorities, who also suggest to those with similar actions to collaborate to reach better results (I6a, I5). I5 believes that being a part of a comprehensive
itinerary is “a good vehicle to getting ourselves known”. I7, whose business is not directly related to the tourism industry, asserts that “connecting with the Park and the other actors has been interesting and positive” and that “by constantly working together, good results are reached”.

International Comparisons

The theme, mentioned in 5 of 7 interviews, sheds light on the perceived differences between Italy and other countries concerning sustainability and the environment in general. I6a explains how “sustainable tourism is well established in [other countries in] Europe, but not here in Italy” and I1 reinforces the concept by stating that “a project for eco-sustainable tourism is a big gamble in this area”.

In general, a feeling that Italy is culturally behind on such themes emerges. “Abroad they are way ahead of us” (I1), “[…] from what I read about other European countries, I mean… we are way behind” (I2), “from a cultural point of view, as Italians we are light-years behind” (I3), “abroad they are more sensitive towards the environment” (I6b), “Germans are more sensitive on such themes” (I7) are just some of the statements which convey the idea of a cultural issue. I2 also refers to Germany when he says that “in Germany, they had an educational discourse of a certain kind”. I6a, who deals with both national and international tourists, asserts “for example in my case I show around many German tourists and they are more careful, compared to our fellow citizens or Italian tourists”.

Perspective on Monetary Revenue

The economic factor is slightly controversial. All interviewees who refer to it (5) agree on the fact that ecotourism is not perceived as a value-creating business by the majority of stakeholders in the ECST area. I1 points out how his fellow farmers “do not see [ecotourism] as something that can bring money, […] an immediate profit”. I5 believes that “touristic operators did not see in the ECST a potential profit, […] [the ECST] is not understood because you cannot see an immediate (economic) revenue”, in general, “it is not seen as a business”.

On the other hand, some interviewees think eco-tourists represent a great source of income. “We have to eradicate the idea that an eco-tourist does not bring profit”, I6a states, “an eco-tourist surely has a higher spending potential, also because more often than not he/she is an already retired tourist”. I6b brings up her experience as a lodger when she says that “in average, they come from far away to hike, they want the most comfortable room, special restaurants, I mean they choose B&B, where meals are not included, really to allow themselves restaurants, to taste good food, right? Therefore I do not see it as a cheap [form of] tourism, but rather I see it at a slightly higher level”. Similarly, I4 points out that a tourist “has to sleep, to eat, to spend time”, and adds “in the agricultural environment tourists are perceived as an annoyance, but tourists are an opportunity, not an annoyance”. She also states that it is difficult to build bicycle lanes because farmers cultivate “even that last piece of land”. I7 sides with the previous when he suggests that “ecotourism is a great hand to play. […] This kind of activity can only bring benefits even at an economic level, because we can promote ourselves at a European level without fearing competitors such as the Dolomites, or Mont Blanc, or situations similar to ours, with the advantage of not being too well known yet”. A tourist is perceived as someone who indirectly supports satellite businesses, e.g. agri-foods, “a tourist who hangs around in here then buys something” (I1), “[an eco-tourist] then buys locally produced honey” (I6b). I3 stresses the fact that “the Park should be seen as an economic resource [too]”.

Contribution

What emerged from 4 out 7 interviews is the idea that, in order for the ECST project to succeed, everyone has to play their part. “It is going to be difficult at the beginning” I1 admit, “but… each and every one of us has to do its own. […] The Park and the ECST can help, but you have to be the one that, one way or the other, tries to do [something]”. I2 share the same opinion, “I have to do my part, someone else will do theirs”, and he tries in his “very small own way, with all the limits, the flaws, and the mistakes one can make” to promote the area. He also adds that “you cannot, on your own, convince the people living in the area that having a Park is a good thing. I5 believes that “on your own, you cannot… you cannot obtain anything”. Eventually, when discussing the ECST so far, I7 stresses that “they have contributed for their own part”.

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Economic Crisis and Its Effects

Four interviewees referred to the current economic situation in Italy, and an overall disillusion shows. “Nowadays you don’t have guarantees anymore” I1 states. He later confessed he has two jobs to sustain himself and his family. I2 underlines the fact that “there have been difficult moments, many sacrifices were required, [and] people are tired, fed up. Here at least, they are less open to dialogue, less likely to accept further compromises”. However, he “tries to go on despite difficulties”.

On a more positive note, two interviewees see this as an opportunity for local tourism. “It might be a consequence of the crisis, but we notice that we have more and more people who come [here] to picnic with the intention of spending a day outside, more and more people who bike here and ask for cycling lanes and destinations easily reached by bike, so maybe people who, due to the crisis, do not go to the seaside for a whole month […] discover destinations closer to their homes, discovering even very interesting things that they have not thought about before”. (I4). I6a has noticed that “recently [they] are more careful even in school trips, to the [environmental] aspect, not only due to a different perception, but also to the economic crisis, so not organising school trips far away, but staying in the area, so it turns into ecotourism because you cannot do much else”.

Negative Perception of the Park

A recurrent theme is the concept of the Park as a negative entity. In 4 out of 7 interviews, interviewees pointed out how locals do not appreciate having a park. In general, they believe that people living in the Park area do not understand its mechanisms and are often sceptical about it. I1 witnessed it first-hand, stating “You know, parks are still seen as… you know, activities where everything is restrained, you know, when I tried to involve other more sensitive activities here in the neighbourhood I said ‘Look, the Park is one matter…’ ‘Uh no, because you know, then you might not be able to cut trees anymore’. There is still a legacy of beliefs, you know… […] as if they keep you from growing”. Similarly, I3 explains that “I do not know about other valleys, but [here] in Maira valley, if you talk about parks […] they prick up their ears, because if someone works in it as a herder, with sheep and so on, he/she does not see it as an advantage, but rather as an obligation to… to… to defend wolves, right? Just saying…”; he also adds that “We are not England, we are not France, we are a country of… we became Italy 150 years ago, so, right? So there is not… you always think the State fools you, rather than helping you, and this is a widespread concept”. He also reports that, during a meeting between bordering municipalities about a new project for hiking itineraries, he proposed to call it a ‘park’ and there was an uprising among all representatives, “‘park’ was a… taboo”. I6a too affirms “a large share of operators has always seen the park [as a negative entity] with fear of its obligations”.

I2 believes that “the first Park, I’m talking about Parco del Po [Cuneese], unfortunately, had… it got the label of being ‘against’, against… but not against… hmm… it was the one that put restrictions, and nowadays the farmer, the bio-farmer remember that first park, right? ‘Oh you are the ones that [say] ‘I cannot do this’, ‘I cannot do that’”, and so on…” and he thinks that today the Park should get rid of that “authoritative” label. I3 reinforces this concept when he says “It is necessary to make people understand that a park is not only about protection, it is not about… I mean, it is about protection, but protection includes protection of human beings too”. I6a sees the ECST as an opportunity to change people’s perception of the park, because “in the past years the Park has been experienced in a restrictive and negative way”.

Communication and Information

One of the issues standing out from interviews is a general difficulty in communicating. The problem of communication takes three main shapes: promoting one’s own activity/business, dialoguing with other stakeholders, and conveying concepts to the public. For instance, I1 reports that, when talking about his action, he is “not yet capable of intercepting, of making [themselves] known” and he adds that he put the greatest effort in creating their image, in promoting his business “outside”. I3 believes that misunderstandings among people who live in the mountains are the results of insufficient communication, and he sees one of the causes as the mountaineer nature, which keeps people from working together and collaborating. The three interviewees who mentioned a problem in communicating agree on the fact that communication towards the public is lacking. When asked about his opinion about the BR objectives, I1 believes that “Communication towards the outside is still… is still lacking”. I3’s project has the goal of
improving the communication and the knowledge of the surroundings, “so there should be a greater knowledge of what surrounds us among different stakeholders, so if there’s a museum in Varaita valley worth visiting, one should be able to say ‘Look, there is something worth visiting, you should go!’”. However, there have been few people showing up at his meetings, and he commented on it by saying “it is necessary to find a way to spread the news, this is what we are lacking”. This concept was also brought up by I6b, in relation to her shared project with I6a. Her idea is to train not only touristic operators but also, for instance, taxi drivers, so that if a tourist asks for information they know what to suggest.

I4, when discussing the touristic attractions of the small town in which she lives, introduced the concept of technology to partly address the issue “[the tourist] leaves the castle and there should be an automated box that tells you ‘You are here. Today you can visit this’, immediately, as soon as you’re out, a quicker information, because everyone has a smartphone, yes, but if you find [the information] right there, you might be more persuaded to follow it. […] You don’t need to offer a hundred alternatives, even just three, maybe too many alternatives confuse them, just three alternatives… according to me, thinking about my very small community, this could help”.

Technology inevitably takes the shape of the internet and, more specifically, social media. I1 admits that tourists get to know his activity through his blog and his Facebook page and believes that “being online is a window to the world, you know, it opens to a lot of contacts”. I3 believes that the internet is solving this communication gap “even, I believe, quite quickly” and he thinks this is due to the fact that the internet does not have a hierarchy, “not like an administration, in which there’s the mayor, there’s the town council”. He continues by saying that “Facebook is demonised by some […], but it’s all bullshit, it is an extra tool that we have today, which should be used like you use your car, you don’t use your car to run over people, you use it to commute from one place to another. If you think that hunting is fine, you use your shotgun to shoot a chamois, but not to shoot people, the same goes for internet and Facebook”. In addition, I4 underlines that “you can do anything with your smartphone”.

Travelling to Gain Knowledge

Another noteworthy theme emerged throughout the interviews is the fact that travelling to other places can help stakeholders improve what they are offering. Two interviewees report that travelling to different locations helped them realise that they could improve their offer. “You got to wander a little bit, you really have to… it helps a lot. You know, I always tell my sons ‘Go!’” I1 explains, and he later adds that “when you’re attracted by sustainable tourism, you start to position yourself as a tourist in other places, you understand what you expect, so as a consequence you experience first hand what you would have liked to find […] Nobody stops you from creating, in your own place, what you would have liked to find”. He also hopes that people will start looking for inputs from the outside world. I4 reports that her father started their current business taking inspiration from a trip to England. She also adds that were inspired by the England trip for other activities, such as playing a short movie to grab children’s attention at the beginning of the study visit, “Essentially, we wander around and copy”. The learning experience that occurs when one travels is perceived as valuable. I3 believes that “the best inhabitants of the valley are those who spent their whole life abroad […], working in France, and then came back [here]. This mixing brought an added value”.

Negative Perception of Tourism

When asked about the ECST and ecotourism in general, I3 replies with “So, well, I believe in it, but the area doesn’t believe enough in it”. He later adds “this ecotourism, for example… people coming here, all the German friends, I have more friends who are Germans than [friends who are] locals, and they are all professors, graduates, or people who have higher life standards or a higher education, and therefore they appreciate ecotourism”. He compares them with locals, who instead see the eco-tourist as someone who might employ them to rebuild an old lodge, for instance, “but that’s all”. He believes that “local administrators don’t consider… or at least for as far as I’m concerned, they don’t consider ecotourism as a sufficient resource”. “The fact that tourism could be… it is not understood”. Similarly, I4 reports that fellow farmers see their choice of switching from agriculture to a sustainable wetland to host storks and other birds as craziness. She points out that “villages with an agricultural background require more time [to understand tourism as positive], but it’s an opportunity”. She explains that there is a project called “Fattoria Amica” (“Friendly Farm”) promoted by the Farmers Union (Coldiretti, in Italian), to support farms that want to show children their livestock, but in her village, there is “one farm, one, that does it”. She hopes that in the
future the farmers’ sons, who maybe will have had a higher education, will be more open-minded. I5 believes ECST principles are good and worth working on, but he saw “a relatively low interest from tourist operators”. He explains that “initially, at the first meeting, many showed up, but then some fell by the wayside because – I talk about the two or three businesses in this area – they have understood it as something like ‘Yes, okay, good, but what do we get?’, in the sense that we’re going to get a label. They didn’t quite get it, you know what I mean?” He also points out that the BR in general “is not understood, honestly, it is not understood, and as I was saying before, not even by the touristic operators themselves”. He makes a difference among those who live inside the Park borders and those who live outside, saying that “outside, they are not that excited about [the BR]”. He thinks that it is seen as something for misty-eyed people, i.e. people that romanticise the idea.

Other relevant themes

A number of themes emerged from less than three interview, however their relevance has to be taken into consideration. Such themes include the need for actualisation, the dualism nature-culture, and the bottom-up approach. The following paragraphs will briefly report the related findings.

In two interviews, a fear that the ECST might turn out to be only an abstraction emerged. I2 explains why he has such feelings, “[The ECST] is a good thing, uhm… the only difficulty lies in actualising it, right? I don’t want to say I’m sceptical because I’m not. I’m a little afraid, but that’s because I’ve been burnt by many past experiences where many dreams did not come true”. When talking about the ECST, I3 refers to Giorgio Gaber, an Italian singer and songwriter, when he says, “an idea, a concept, an idea // as long as it remains an idea it is only an abstraction” and he adds “you must have it under your skin. Now we only have it on our lips”. I2 connects to the previous statements “I tell myself ‘I got to try to actualise it’ because you design a project, you place it there, you say ‘Okay, well, I have the ECST’, but then either you actualise it, and it’s not… it’s not easy. […] You need time to inform yourself, to follow up, to understand how to actualise it. Therefore, it is not always about hypocrisy, lack of willingness, et cetera, but there’s a lack of time, usually because you get caught up in bureaucracy […]”. He believes that “[ecotourism] should not be a shooting star. It has to be embedded in a broader discourse”.

Similarly, two interviewees referred to the dualism nature-culture. I3 decided to take part in the ECST “to join nature and culture together”. When he met the Canadian couple mentioned before, he reports they said “your mountain is a mountain with a history” and he adds “this is what I was talking about, nature and culture […]. Man is embedded in the Park”. He complains that “no one sees this as a valuable card yet. We have it on our lips, but that’s all”. Regarding his activity, he commented “[…] if someone comes here for an excursion, I am capable, across the same area, of showing him/her the historical families itinerary, the faith itinerary […] or the naturalistic [itinerary] […]”, and he sees the concept of “nature and culture, land and history” as the direction followed by the local museum he is working for. He also underlines that he tries to connect to other entities in the name of the “nature and culture” binomial, “which is in everyone’s mouth in every valley, but is not actualised with struggle, or not actualised at all. […] They are two different realities joint together […]”.

I2 describes one of his objectives as integrating themselves (he and his choir) in the territory, “not only by performing on demand but also by trying to promote activities that could combine the music, the culture, with the land and its characteristics”. He also believes that one of the Park’s goals is to promote the area through tools, cultural events, and, in his case, musical events”.

One last relevant theme, a bottom-up approach to the ECST and more generally ecotourism, was highlighted by two interviewees. I1 thinks that “like any other projects, there has to be someone who starts from the bottom”. Similarly, I2 believes in “something that starts from the bottom” and that is why he focuses on “working in the land, for the land, and with the land”. I1 underlines the fact that “those who promoted the project (ECST) believe in it, and they believe in us as agricultural businesses, services businesses… but then, you know, we are the ones who must make a difference”. I2 relates to I1’s statement and he adds that “[the ECST] is a challenge, but we must not leave it to someone else. We must not hold the [Park’s] administration responsible, or the European Union. […] It is everybody’s challenge”.
4.2. Observation

The meeting in which the researcher took part as an observer was an ECST forum. It was held on 16 March 2017 in the Old Town Hall in Saluzzo, and it was divided into two parts. A first introductory part was held by the Park’s President, who presented the results of a project carried out in schools for developing the Park’s motto. Pupils had to create a motto for the Park based on the concepts of nature and culture. The winning motto was “Una cornice per le tue emozioni” (“A frame for your emotions”, in English).

The forum itself took up the whole second part, held by a Federparchi delegate and a Park delegate. Since it was the first forum after being awarded with the ECST, they first stressed how the Charter is not only a certification, but a real tool. In fact, the Charter was presented as:

1) A methodological tool  
2) A certification of a process (not a quality certification)  
3) A strategy for developing a sustainable form of tourism

Afterwards, they introduced the monitoring activity. Every year, for the next five years, they will be monitoring the different participants’ actions to assess their status. The monitoring has three main goals:

- To highlight potential issues (what deviated from the Action Plan)  
- To identify actions at risk (what will not be possible to actualise)  
- To identify results

Every participant will be given a self-evaluation sheet to be filled in in regards to their project. In the self-evaluation sheet (see Appendix B), the project representative must write down a brief description of the action, the positive and negative aspects, and possible remarks. Timing and budget also need to be stated. At the end of the sheet, the compiler has to evaluate their action by choosing for an overall positive, average, or negative evaluation. They also must analyse the trend compared to the previous year’s performance, and it can be better, stable, uncertain, or worse.

Consequently, they introduced thematic work groups. Every group will have two meetings in which participants will discuss about monitoring, and share the problems faced so far. The five themes suggested by the Park delegates are the following: 1) Community training and land promotion; 2) Outdoor and dynamic holiday; 3) Occitan area and surroundings – Culture, history, and traditions; 4) Discovering biodiversity and nature; 5) Intersection of tourism and agriculture. After the introduction of the themes the meeting was concluded.
5. Discussion

This analysis of results will explore the themes in relation to the research question and highlights similarities with previous research. The concept of ecotourism as a catalyst in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development will be discussed addressing the three main objectives of the research. To summarise, the first objective was to assemble opinions and ideas from the main promoters of ecotourism initiatives in the Italian Monviso about their conception of ecotourism; the second, to investigate their stance on ecotourism acting as a catalyst. The third objective was to gain a better understanding of ecotourism as a learning tool for sustainable development.

One of the most significant traits that stands out in relation to the first objective is that local inhabitants are generally sceptical towards ecotourism as they do not see any profit coming out of it. This matter emerged in previous studies too. Nolte (2004), Hearne & Santos (2005), and Yuan, et al. (2008) underline the same theme in their papers. In addition to being sceptical, people living in the area tend to have a negative perception of tourism itself, partly because of the above-mentioned reason and partly because some of them perceive tourists as a nuisance. This might be a direct consequence of two main factors: a lack of environmental education, and the effects of the current economic crisis the country is facing (see Fig. 11).

5.1. The Role of Environmental Education

Concerning the former, existing research already pointed out on how the less knowledgeable local communities are about principles such as BRs and ecotourism, the less conscious their approach is to the matter (Yuan, et al., 2008). In the case of MBR and other Europeans BRs investigated by Nolte (2004), namely Sumava-Czech Republic, Aggtelek-Hungary, and Slovensky Kras and Polana-Slovakia, inhabitants often do not know they live inside a BR, and even if they do, their understanding of it is not comprehensive. To this regard, I6a pointed out that “if you ask the average Saluzzo inhabitant whether they know about the MaB, they would probably think it is a code for online purchases”. More generally, results from the MBR case study show how the knowledge regarding BR objectives is limited to biodiversity conservation, not acknowledging the fact that it is only one out of three complementary functions. Unfortunately, besides representing a fragmentary knowledge, this has a potential negative side effect too: if biodiversity conservation is the only known objective, people might be led to believe that it will entail only restrictions and obligations towards the environment and the promoting authorities. Indeed, this is happening in the MBR. Some interviewees reported their experience talking to local inhabitants who decided not to take part in the ECST project due to a fear of new limitations to their activities. The direct consequence is a negative perception of the Park. This leads to confusion over the concept of park – which in the case of MBR represents only the administrative authority – and the BR concept; in fact, this issue is nothing new and it had already been noted by Nolte (2004) in his research on East central European BRs.
A part of the problem may be a lack of education on the BR concept and, more generally, a lack of environmental education in schools. Many interviewees complain about the fact that, in Italy, schools do not take the environmental matter seriously, being it considered a “second level” subject. A more comprehensive environmental education in schools could potentially bring some desirable results. Firstly, pupils would get acquainted with nature and the importance of protecting it. As long as nature is not considered important, defending it will inevitably be seen as a bothersome task, or as something that prevents people from succeeding in their businesses. Furthermore, the introduction of the BR concept in schools could help pupils – i.e. the future inhabitants of the area – understand that a BR is not only about nature conservation, but rather about human beings and them being a part of nature with all their activities. As emphasised by Beery (2014), the nature-culture dualism has a long history, especially in Western societies, and it has largely influenced the educational system (e.g. the distinction between natural sciences and social sciences). The same author stresses the need for a change in language in education to address this separatist approach: substituting the term *nature* with the term *landscape* can provide a more comprehensive approach. Undeniably, human beings are an inseparable part of nature, and it is even more noticeable in areas where human presence has been traced back to many centuries, like in the Alps. It is therefore not surprising that the Canadian tourists encountered by I3 referred to the Italian Alps as “mountains with history”. In relation to this, and to provide a clearer understanding of what is meant by the term *landscape*, it is appropriate to refer to the European Landscape Convention’s definition, “‘Landscape’ means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (Council of Europe, 2000, p. 9). The Convention was ratified by 38 countries in 2000, including Italy. Its preamble states the following:

“[…] the landscape has an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields, and constitutes a resource favourable to economic activity and whose protection, management and planning can contribute to job creation; […] [it] contributes to the formation of local cultures and it is a basic component of the European natural and cultural heritage, contributing to human well-being and consolidation of the European identity; […] [it] is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas […]” (Council of Europe, 2000, pp. 7-8)

Under Article 6 of the Convention, Section B, “Awareness-raising”, and D, “Education”, are particularly relevant. In the former section, the Council underlines that, even though there are existing sensitivities to the matter, the civil society, the private sector, and public authorities do not always recognise the link between landscape and their daily lives. Raising awareness is therefore a way of making clear the relations that exist between people’s day-to-day lives and the characteristics of the natural environment they live in. (ibid., p. 49). In section D, among other measures, signatory countries undertake to promote “school and university courses which, in the relevant subject areas, address the values attaching to landscapes and the issues raised by their protection, management and planning” (ibid., p. 12). The importance of environmental education is therefore reinforced. School curricula at various levels should promote a sensitisation to relations between everyday life and landscape, to relations between ecology and landscape problems and to social and economic questions (ibid., p. 53), and could draw from place-based environmental education to support learning about the world via the MBR as a unique local classroom (Sobel, 2004). This approach to education, as highlighted by Sobel (2004), increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens.

The sustainable development function of a BR represents a game changer compared to other previous conservation strategies. The fact that so few interviewees mentioned it might be in itself an indicator of why ecotourism is not understood by local inhabitants. Being knowledgeable about every aspect of the BR could help locals have a positive approach to initiatives such as the ECST and to ecotourism in general. To reach this goal, however, teachers must also be aware of and understand the BR concept. Now, as mentioned in the previous section, the quality of environment-related education still depends on each individual teacher’s understanding and passion about the subject, thus it does not serve as a satisfactory support function – the third complementary function of a BR.
5.1.1. Alternative Forms of Education and Awareness-raising

Education and awareness-raising come not only in the form of formal school teaching, but they can also happen through other means (informal education). To fill the educational gap in adults, measures such as local awareness-raising experiences suggested in the European Landscape Convention (2000, pp. 49-50) have already been put in practice in the MBR. One of the interviewees’ activity follows the example of Tortuguero National Park, in Costa Rica, where a tour guide programme was developed for local rural communities. In the MBR case, it takes a slightly different shape, but the concept remains unchanged. A group of tour guides (I6a, I6b, and others) offered to train local stakeholders about points of interest in the ECST area at no charge. As a result, stakeholders could in turn use their newly acquired knowledge to enhance the tourist’s experience in the area. They report that, after the first meeting, participants were enthusiastic and this confirms what Harris et al. (2002) noted before: training people with local knowledge and with a passion for the place in which they have grown up and come to love represents an important sustainable development strategy. If looked at from an environmental connectedness perspective, recycling strategies promoted by I7 and his company might have a greater relevance in the context of place. What is important to note about the concept of place is that it involves a geographic location (Beery & Wolf-Watz, 2014), and this, in addition to environmental education, may play a key role in the understanding of recycling practices. If locals and tourists alike come to realise that their activities affect the place they live in and love, and not only a general nature, they might be keener in paying attention to their behaviour. I7 states how, after the introduction of activities to promote a more careful disposal of waste, the percentage of recycling among 20-25 years-old notably increased.

5.2. Effects of a “Crisis within a Crisis”

While education plays a vital role in determining its success, the general scepticism towards ecotourism could also be broadly due to the effects of the economic crisis Italy is currently facing. An excursus on the Italian economic situation helps understand why. When the 2008 financial crisis occurred, as a consequence of the Lehman Brothers investment bank collapse, Italy’s bank system did not fall into a deep crisis, mainly due to a low financialisation of the system (Di Quirico, 2010; D’Ippoliti & Roncaglia, 2011). However, the country was hit by the real economic crisis induced by the financial crisis, which caused a drop in GDP. In addition, Italy was already going through a latent crisis, characterised by stagnation, inflation and a decreasing income per capita compared to other European countries. This “crisis within the crisis” had its roots at the beginning of the 90’s, when, to overcome the Italian historic low occupation rate in comparison to other Euro area countries, a series of reforms were adopted to facilitate the entrance to the job market. Unfortunately, these reforms had a negative effect on the quality of jobs and their insecurity. This eventually caused a higher rise in prices in Italy compared to other countries in the area. All of the previous consequences provoked an income redistribution in favour of richer groups, therefore impoverishing the middle and lower classes. (D’Ippoliti & Roncaglia, 2011). This explains both the fact that “people are fed up” as expressed by I2, and the lack of guarantees complained by I1. Indirectly, the economic factor can also be an indicator of why people have an intense desire to gain immediate profit and why they do not see ecotourism as a profitable business in the short run. Ecotourism, and in general investments in sustainability and conservation, might necessitate more time to bear its fruits compared to mass tourism.

However, this is not an issue confined to the MBR. Previous studies underlined how, in general, people tend to protect what they receive value for (Fletcher, 2009; Chiutsi, et al., 2011). Value, on the other hand, does not have to be necessarily in the form of monetary revenue. The majority of interviewees expressed their love for the area they live in and its landscapes. As mentioned by Nolte (2004), people are probably more likely to respect their own natural and cultural surroundings if they experience the value of these through being confronted by visitors looking for just that, and the fact that the beauty of the area is acknowledged and perceived as valuable will definitely play its part in building a stronger ecotourism culture. Statements such as “we are used to living in a wonderful place” or “we are privileged to live in this area” indicate that there is an evident appreciation of the land, and despite scepticisms, ecotourism could still have an important role to play.

Yet, despite the evident challenges the economic crisis is posing, some interviewees perceive it as an opportunity. According to them, the fact that families cannot spend a lot of money on expensive holidays influences them to prefer closer destinations. In this regard, a study conducted at the University of Naples
suggests that a situation of uncertainty, which in this particular instance might be caused by the economic crisis, can have three main effects on the tourism sector: the desire to purchase substitute products (to reach the same level of satisfaction); managing the free time in alternative ways at home or nearby; and a preference towards medium to short distance destinations (Sciarelli & Della Corte, 2011). The last two factors, even though they might be viewed as negative in a broader tourism context, do in fact play in ecotourism’s favour. In the case of MBR, they could represent, for instance, a chance to see an increase in cycle tourism in the area, or the choice, especially for families, of exploring the surrounding nature with their children.

5.3. Ecotourism as a Learning Tool for Change

Undoubtedly, the experience of the ECST and ecotourism in general in the MBR presents positive features too. One of them is embodied by networking. This theme emerged in the majority of interviews and it is reported as being not only helpful for tourists, but for touristic operators alike. What the visitors have to gain from a network among touristic operators is the possibility of choosing from a wide variety of activities that can be linked together to make the most out of the visiting experience. Indeed, presenting the tourists with a set of options helps them plan their stay and eventually guarantees an enriching trip. For touristic operators, networking means enjoying the possibility of sharing best practices and tips with other operators and stakeholders. This concept is not new, and was already noted by Stronza & Gordillo (2008). The two authors reported how an expanded network for support has been one of the positive changes detected after the introduction of ecotourism in the Amazonian regions of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, allowing stakeholders to learn from others. A practical example of the benefits of networking is represented by the thematic working groups introduced in one of the ECST forums. Observation of the forum resulted in a clearer understanding of networking activities. Collaborating in groups will give the participants a chance of sharing their insecurities and problems they faced when carrying out their respective actions. Moreover, they will be able to discuss their own self-evaluation sheet with their peers and therefore their analysis will be enriched by other participants’ opinions and ideas. The thematic work group could also be a moment for making suggestions on how to improve the different activities.

As for awareness raising, Parco del Monviso has already taken some steps in the right direction. For example, the project carried out in schools with the purpose of creating the Park’s motto was successful. As pointed out by I2, this project had a positive impact because, in order to design a motto, the pupils had to get acquainted with the Park and its elements. An increased knowledge of what is inside the MaB area will potentially make younger students understand what is at stake. A study conducted in the Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve, in Sweden, underlines how an outdoor experience in nature has the ultimate goal of supporting the direct relationship between people and the landscape, and not only to present the content of nature itself (Beery & Jönsson, 2015). However, the authors warn that providing a direct experience in nature is not enough: specific outcomes of such experience need to be provided as well. In the case of MBR, the outdoor experience had the outcome of designing a motto for the Park. The winning motto “A frame for your emotions” stresses once again how the human dimension cannot be detached from the landscape. This concept helps building a strong place identity, as pupils realise the beauty and the special characteristics of the place they live in. In turn, this gives them an understanding of the place’s value and of the reasons why it is a suitable ecotourism destination. Recognising the value of their own place helps them understand why other people might perceive the same value.

Many interviewees refer to the fact that other countries have a higher sensibility to the matter, pointing out how Italy still needs to work on raising awareness on such themes. I6a explained how more sustainable forms of tourism are well established abroad, and in this regard, some interviewees brought up the concept of travelling in order to gain knowledge. The process in Figure 13 illustrates it. Placing themselves as tourists could help touristic operators offer a better experience to the visitors coming in the area. As one of

Figure 13. Process of gaining knowledge through tourism
the interviewees pointed out, when the touristic operator turns into a tourist, they understand what they are expecting and that makes them realise what a potential tourist, in turn, could expect from them. As a result, a tourist visiting the area can get inspired. This learning experience, besides being enriching for the person’s cultural background, could help improve their business and inspire new tourists. In the case that the visiting tourist is a touristic operator too, the process might repeat itself.

All the above-mentioned factors lead to the main finding of this research. Ecotourism has the potential to act as a catalyst by being a learning tool. Placing oneself as an eco-tourist is a direct learning source, while networking and awareness raising are indirect outcomes of the ECST and ecotourism experience in the area. Ecotourism involves a learning experience by definition, but the complementary activities necessary to its development in the MBR area are themselves a source of knowledge and learning for every stakeholder. These play a crucial role in fostering the success of the BR, and represent a noteworthy example of how the third complementary function of a BR allows the first two to coexist.
6. Conclusions

*In the end, it is like sowing: you plant the seed in the ground and take care of it, but you need the ideal conditions for it to produce something.* (I1)

Through an analysis of stakeholders’ perspectives, the research shows how ecotourism can become a catalyst by being a learning tool for younger people as well as adults, and for locals as well as for visitors. However, many factors still prevent ecotourism from reaching its full potential in strengthening the link between conservation and sustainable development in the MBR. A more conscious approach to a place based environmental education in schools and appropriate policies to lift the country out of the recession would inevitably play a vital role. Unfortunately, this kind of policy-making is not a direct responsibility of local administrative authorities and stakeholders, and a change of course at higher governmental levels is required.

Nonetheless, Parco del Monviso, in its small reality, seems to be on the right track. The promotion of projects in schools regarding MBR is of utmost importance, and it showed it helps in building a stronger culture in younger generations. However, these projects should be paired with outdoor activities too, which, if carefully designed to have specific outcomes, embody a learning experience and at the same time provide a chance to spend time in the actual landscape of the MBR. Such place-based education will potentially allow a deeper understanding that comes with authentic experiences. In addition, these activities, by promoting a new, more comprehensive form of education, help strengthen the logistic support function of the BR, which in turn assists both conservation and sustainable development objectives. To this regard, investing in research in the MBR, especially from a social perspective, might support local policy-makers. Further studies regarding the current level of awareness on the MBR might lead to an improved design for future initiatives, as they may present the Park with new opportunities to consider. Moreover, studies including the French side of the MBR might shed light on best practices worth adopting in the Italian side too, encouraging a tighter collaboration.
Acknowledgement

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References


Appendix A – Interview Protocol

**Duration:** 45’ – 60’

*Brief introduction of the interviewer and the reasons for the interview.*
The interviewee is asked if it is fine with him/her to use an informal register.

*Clarification of details such as:*
- Interviews will be manually transcribed by the interviewer
- Interviewees will be kept anonymous
- Each interviewee will have a chance to review the interview transcript

*Recording starts*

1) Little warm up: “Can you tell me more about your occupation and the region?
   - What are the main activities?
   - How long have you been living here?
   - …

2) Connect to occupation → “I see your project is one of the initiatives contained into the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism that Monviso Biosphere Reserve recently received. Can you tell me something about your project?”
   Potential probing questions:
   - “Why did you decide to take part?”
   - If they say something relevant: “Interesting! Can you tell me more about this?”

3) “What do you think about the ECST?”
   - How do you understand the goals?

4) “What do you know about the BR concept?”
   - Goals, functions, etc.
   - MBR in particular

5) “What is your idea of ecotourism?”
   - “How do you think ecotourism will contribute in reaching those goals (BR’s and ECST’s)?”

6) “Can it be a learning tool (connect to 3rd complementary function)?”
   - “Learning tool for whom?” (for tourists/for promoters/…)
   - “How will the learning contribute to conservation and SD?”

“Is there anything you want to add?”

“Feel free to contact me anytime should you have any additional comment.”

*Recording ends*
### Appendix B – Action Monitoring and Evaluation Sheet

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#### Brief description, Positive and negative aspects, Remarks

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<td>←→ stable</td>
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Further monitoring will follow in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020