

## A bioregional reading of the rural landscapes of the Italian inner areas and the regenerative potential of rural tourism. The case study of the VENTO project \*

### Una lectura biorregional de los paisajes rurales de las zonas interiores italianas y el potencial regenerativo del turismo rural. El caso del proyecto VENTO

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**Abstract:** Talking about abandonment means talking about fragile territories that need a regeneration territorial project. In this paper the phenomenon of abandonment becomes an opportunity to identify relationships between unused resources, anthropic dynamics, original landscapes. Bioregionalism is proposed as a possible theoretical approach that guides actions of project, reveals and holds together tangible and intangible resources and identifies the most suitable spatial scale for regeneration of depopulated territories. VENTO project, the 780 km cycle route financed by Italian Ministries that connects northern Italy, becomes a case study to investigate the potential of the slow line to be a bioregional project.

**Keywords:** Bioregional approach, rural landscape, abandonment, local resource-based development, territorial capital.

**Resumen:** Hablar de abandono significa hablar de territorios frágiles que necesitan un proyecto de regeneración territorial. En este artículo, el fenómeno del abandono se convierte en una oportunidad para identificar relaciones entre recursos no utilizados, dinámicas antrópicas y paisajes originales. El biorregionalismo se propone como un posible enfoque teórico que guíe las acciones del proyecto, revele y mantenga unidos los recursos tangibles e intangibles e identifique la escala espacial más adecuada para la regeneración de los territorios despoblados. El proyecto VENTO, una ruta ciclista de

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780 km, financiada por Ministerios italianos, que conecta el norte de Italia, se convierte en un estudio de caso para investigar el potencial de la línea lenta para ser un proyecto biorregional.

**Palabras clave:** Enfoque biorregional, paisaje rural, abandono, desarrollo local endógeno, capital territorial.

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## 1. THE RURAL ABANDONMENT: FRAGILITY CONDITIONS AND REGENERATION APPROACHES

Rural areas have undergone economic restructuring during the last century in many countries around the world, with devastating consequences on the ecological and cultural resources they hold. They have undergone transformations linked especially to the intensification of production (with the use of pesticides, the consumption of soil fertility, the destruction of original historical traces and ecological connections), but also to the land abandonment. The abandonment of rural territories is a complex phenomenon, indirectly linked to the evolution of economies and identities.

The scientific literature reports three major types of drivers of agricultural land abandonment (Rey Benayas et al., 2007). The first type refers to unexpected environmental factors, such as climate change (South-eastern Spain). The second type of driver is represented by the morphology of agricultural systems that are not suitable for the increasingly widespread globalizing production models (Northern Spain, Greece, Northern China), whose incorrect management can lead to soil degradation, flooding, productivity loss. The third driver, that refers to socio-economic reasons, is the most common one in Europe and out of Europe. The scarce offer of essential services, accessibility and job places characterizes rural areas and it is the effect of a series of dynamics that emerged at different times and intertwined in various ways. These dynamics were mainly due to historical phenomena and to some more recent ones. On one hand, the rural exodus from the mountain to the plain; on the other, in the lowland territories, the reduction of job places for the increasingly industrialized agriculture. Then, more recent phenomena due to the crisis of some industrial-type local economies and strong contractions of employment in large industrial activities (Lanzani & Curci, 2018).

Rey Benayas et al. (2007) have identified five main problems that the abandonment of agricultural land and rural territories affected to local resources: (i) reduction of landscape heterogeneity, with the consequent vegetation homogeneity and the increase of fires; (ii) soil erosion and desertification (plant colonization is limited by lack of seeds; conservation structures, such as terraces, break down due to lack of maintenance); (iii) reduction of water stocks (reforestation may lead to a decrease in water yield); (iv) biodiversity loss for the penetration of invasive species; (v) loss of cultural and aesthetic values linked to heritage and identity of places.

Already in 1961, the Italian agrarian economist Emilio Sereni (1961) had understood the extent of this transformation by speaking of “a prelude to the disintegration of agrarian landscape”. That gives us the idea that the abandonment of rural areas is a physical phenomenon, as a change of land use, but it is also a moral fact and a cultural result of a descending story of places, people, memories.

This can be seen from the data. Although a large part of the Italian national territorial surface is destined to agricultural activities (17.3 million out of 30.2 million in 2010), for decades the SAU (*Superficie Agricola Utilizzata*, that is Utilized Agricultural Area) has undergone a progressive contraction. This reduction in the SAU was accompanied by a significant reduction in farms (in particular, farms with less than 1 ha are decreased by 50.6%)<sup>1</sup> and by a general demographic stagnation (from 1951 to 2011 the 18% of Italian municipalities experienced a constant decrease in the population)<sup>2</sup>. These data define real fragile areas where, without external action, a recovery seems difficult (Reynaud & Miccoli, 2018).

In recent years, disciplinary reflections have generated critical visions aimed at producing alternative strategies: to support the decline of incomes, to favour sustainable agricultural policies, to protect ecosystem services of “town ecology” (Forman, 2017), to generate job places and assistance to disadvantaged categories.

Among the strategies that deal with these territories there is the SNAI (*Strategia nazionale per le Aree interne*, that is National Strategy for Inner Areas). SNAI is an initiative of the Italian Minister of Territorial Cohesion Fabrizio Barca, launched in 2013 and coordinated by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion. It tries to stop depopulation and regenerate the “inner areas”, which occupy more than 60% of the Italian territory, in which about a quarter of the Italian population resides (SNAI, 2013). These “inner areas” are defined by the Strategy as “areas significantly distant from the centres offering essential services (education, mobility and health care), but rich of important environmental and cultural resources and highly diversified by nature” (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2013). In this definition it is possible to guess the two classes of actions of the SNAI: (i) the first focuses on adjusting the offer of essential services; (ii) the second aims to implement interventions in favour of local development. Precisely in this last class of actions there are tools which, coherent with European directions, solicit the enhancement of local resources through actions with low environmental impact and able to generate job places.

In rural areas, an activity that can meet these characteristics is rural tourism. Rural tourism falls within the macro-segment of ecotourism defined by the World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization, 2001: 4) as “all nature-based

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<sup>1</sup> These data come from the *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* (ISTAT), 2011.

<sup>2</sup> ISTAT, General Censuses of population.

forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas”.

In the coming years, luxury will be made up of rare goods, such as time, silence, conviviality and a healthy environment. Then, given a new tourism demand always more oriented towards these values, rural tourism has been identified as a real opportunity for the regeneration of these contexts (Commission of the European Communities, 1996; European Commission, 2003; OECD, 1995).

Due to the complexity of the phenomenon, there is no univocal definition of rural tourism in literature, but Lane (1994) tries to list the characterizing factors: localized in rural areas; small-scale; small businesses; involves contact with agriculture (landscape and products) and with local traditions and culture; traditional character; connections with local community; developed by local actors in a long-term perspective; the integration of environment, economy and history.

The European Union tends to enhance the multi-faceted capacity of rural tourism, linked to the territorial dimension, but it leaves the possibility of regulating it at local law. Although the Italian law has committed itself to regulate and define the only agritourism activity, in favour of a purely corporate vision, the territorial approach stimulated by European policies suggests an integrated view.

At the same time, it is worth noting that, despite the variety of potential that rural capital can offer, a sustainable development cannot be taken for granted, due to the variety of processes and stakeholders involved. Rural tourism depends on a wide range of publicly and privately resources, multi-scalar actions, associated infrastructure, as well as provision of accommodation, food, beverages, and goods (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The risk of an activity that falling into exploitation or into trivialization is possible and frequent. That’s why issues of sustainability are receiving increased attention in the context of rural tourism (Garrod et al., 2006).

After the Rio de Janeiro World Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992, the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), the WTO and the Earth Council elaborated the *Agenda 21 for the tourism industry: towards a sustainable development*, which establishes some fundamental principles: tourism should contribute to the conservation and restoration of the earth's ecosystems; travel and tourism should be based on sustainable consumption patterns and production; tourism development should recognize and support the identity, culture and interests of local populations.

More recently, in 2015, the historic agreement *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* committed all countries to pursue a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that would lead to a better future for all (UN, 2015). The bold agenda sets out a global framework to end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and fix climate change until 2030. Tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly to all of the goals<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> It has been included as targets in Goals 8 (inclusive and sustainable economic growth), 12 (sustainable consumption and production) and 14 (sustainable use of oceans and marine resources).

From this point of view, not merely consumerist but aimed at a win-win strategy (both for the local economy and for the environmental protection), tourism assumes a new role with a great regenerative potential.

Despite SNAI's intuition, it is evident the need for an interpretative key that can act as a theoretical-utopian but also real and pragmatic bridge between: the phenomenon of abandonment; the socio-economic dynamics affecting the territories; local resources closely connected with identities, which find their meeting point in the original geographies of the places; the regenerative potential of tourism, if applied with a territorial and sustainable approach. But what can be an interpretative key that connects: material and immaterial elements, local and territorial spatial scales, environmental and socio-economic elements, fragility and regenerative potential, in a short- and long-term time frame?

In this article we will take the bioregional paradigm (Berg & Dasmann, 1977) as a theoretical reference for a geographical reading that goes beyond administrative boundaries and is guided by a resource-based perspective. For this reason, if we talk about development processes based on local resources, the bioregional approach can become ethical, theoretical and practical guide for a territorial project based on regeneration.

## **2. THE BIOREGIONAL LENS FOR A SPATIAL READING OF PHENOMENA, TERRITORIES, RESOURCES**

In the early 1970s, from the regionalist approach to the emerging ecological criticism, and drawing from ecological anarchist roots, the term “Bioregion” was born (Berg & Dasmann, 1977; Berg, 1978; Sale, 1985; Alexander, 1990; Aberley, 1993; Iacoponi, 2001; Thayer, 2003; Magnaghi, 2010; Magnaghi & Fanfani, 2010; Fanfani & Saragosa, 2011; Ferraresi, 2014; Church, 2014; Dezio & Longo, 2018; Poli & Gisotti, 2019). It is an alternative approach that sees localism as a possibility for safeguarding biodiversity and social diversity from the degenerative processes of urban artificialization. “Bioregion” is a term full of meanings. It is a holistic attitude that calls for the ability to integrate knowledge and techniques within a territorial vision, in close relationship with local communities.

Doug Aberley (1993) declares that there is no official ideology but rather a dialogue that evolves and it is this flexibility that guarantees its continuity over time. Beyond the great evolution over the years, we can go back to the father of the concept, Peter Berg, who, with the ecologist Raymond Dasmann, published an article in which he attributed the term “Bioregion” to a geographical space and a place of consciousness (Berg & Dasmann, 1977). In particular, Berg (1978) describes the Bioregion as “the territory to which a conscience, a place corresponds but also ideas on how to live there [...], an economy that is in balance with the ecosystem by reducing dependence on imported food and

energy, flexible boundaries [...], social units with full powers, politically autonomous, economically self-sufficient”.

It is a re-appropriation of the “place of conscience”, defined by Alberto Magnaghi (2010) as “the awareness, acquired through a process of cultural transformation of the inhabitants, of the patrimonial value of territorial common goods”. It’s an aware path for setting common goals and guidelines and a necessary condition to re-centralize territory (*Back to the territory*, by Becattini, 2000).

However, it is not a new concept. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Kropotkin, the greatest exponent of the environmental anarchist movement, studies the problems of agriculture and policies that have brought to the abandonment (Kropotkin, 1899). For him, it is necessary to reconsider land as a common heritage and to put agriculture at the centre of productive activities, developing cultures starting from local traditions (Kropotkin, 1899; Scudo, 2011). To do this, a social change is needed.

Another ecologist anarchist, Murray Bookchin, in *Toward an ecological society* (1976), argues that all ecological problems are social problems. This leads to say that the intervention to remedy ecological problems must be of a purely social nature:

“The sensitivity, ethics, the way of seeing reality, the sense of self, must change through educational methods, rational arguments, experiments that take into account the possibility of learning from one’s mistakes: only this will enable humanity to reach the consciousness necessary for its own self-management” (Bookchin, 1976: 205).

This quote tells us that cultural education is needed in order that bioregion can be felt by the inhabitants to make conscious choice of management methods (Sale, 1985).

The “place of conscience”, environmental sustainability and self-sufficiency have a conscious and cooperative system in the resource management as their common principle (Iacoponi, 2001).

Berg (1978) talks about “re-inhabiting-the-place”: it means knowing the place deeply, beyond political conventions (Sale, 1985, uses “to dwell”). Different bioregions have different perceptive images; for this reason, we note the difference of change from one type of landscape to another, rather than from one administrative border to another. Therefore, “re-inhabiting-the-place” starts from the assumption that local communities are involved in the redesign of original landscape, enhancing the cultural diversity of place. In this sense, the physical dimension of the Bioregion is strictly linked to these theoretical bases: a territory characterized by a recognizable identity and delimited by natural (geographical) and social (cultural) boundaries, not imposed at the administrative level (Alexander, 1990).

Peter Berg (1978) describes the space of the bioregions as “geographical areas that have common physical and climatic characteristics and exist in the entire planetary biosphere as unique parts as a whole”. It could be a territorial cross-section coinciding with a province or a metropolis, both lying in a natural environment; or it may correspond to a river basin or wild areas, where forests or rivers with basic resources are located. It will be a dimension in which local communities can manage their own resources and share a unique geo-cultural identity (Iacoponi, 2001).

It is clear that methods of defining boundaries of a bioregion, being influenced by the development of human activities and phenomena, cannot be established certainty. Boundaries delimitation can be linked to different multidisciplinary approaches that in history have dealt with the concept of “region”. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, it coincides with the concept of “natural region” (defined by physical geography and bounded by a geological or geomorphological structural boundary). Then, with the progress of human geography of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the trend was to favour a cultural reading.

More recently, the Italian territorial planner Alberto Magnaghi (2010: 163) has specified the spatial dimension of the Bioregion:

“The Bioregion is a set of strongly anthropized local territorial systems [...]; systems interrelated by environmental relationships aimed at the year-end closure of the cycles characterizing the ecosystem equilibria of a river basin, a valley system, an orographic node, a hilly system, a coastal system and its hinterland”.

It's important to underline that cultural identity is decisive in defining the boundaries of a bioregion. Identity does not assume a unique and homogeneous value, it is a set of many concepts, behaviours, needs which change according to themes and places.

Therefore, it will be a matter of defining homogeneous areas that integrate the common socio-economic, environmental and cultural aspects, with shared sustainable goals.

According to all that has been said so far, the bioregion can be conceived as an analytical and planning tool for the realization of a territorial scenario characterized by renewed coevolutionary relationships between man and environment (Poli & Gisotti, 2019). Norgaard's coevolutionary paradigm (1984) sees economic history as a process of adaptation to environmental changes, where transformations are biunivocal. In this sense, landscape is the result of a coevolution of natural and anthropic system. This coevolutionary optics leads to a different perspective on the relationship between physical geographies and the use of resources. About that we can remember the Valley's Section by Patrick Geddes (1909), which related the physical characteristics of the river basins with productive system and lifestyles. Citing Magnaghi (2012),

Geddesian principles can be traced back to the bioregion paradigm: the principle of coevolution between place, work, inhabitants; uniqueness of identity; the long-lasting coevolutionary principles guide the discovery of production rules. We could redefine the bioregion as a local coevolutionary product, where landscape becomes a method (Farinelli, 2003) of re-composition and dialogue.

The theoretical framework of bioregionalism described so far seems apparently utopian, but actually it has strong connections with reality. Until today, in assonance with the globalization process, it is no longer produced due to the needs of the adjacent territory but to sell on a market that knows no boundaries. With the end of “oil-illusion” (the era of delusion given by oil), caused by the slow exhaustion of oil sources, landscape scale will change: transportation will become less accessible and supplies will be repositioned more locally (Thayer, 2003). We can see again the strong relationship established between fragility phenomena, the use of resources, and spatial scales and geographies; this relationship would determine a slow but significant change in the value of places. For example, a self-sustaining objective would lead to a multifunctional agriculture, which is able to produce resilient territories and communities; the return to polyculture, with the relative increase in crops value; an increase in biodiversity and fertility of land; an evident strengthening of identity features of places.

From that, we can guess the four fundamental aspects of bioregionalism that make it an ideal approach for abandoned rural inner areas: (i) the first one is the ability of the bioregion paradigm to distract from pre-established places and scales; (ii) the second is its ability to reconstruct the “heritage” concept as a set of local tangible and intangible resources for a regeneration territorial project; (iii) the third refers to the bioregional concept of self-reliance, a significant utopia for areas distant from essential services; iv) the fourth is the holistic dimension that systematizes concepts, today distinct and abused, within a single theoretical framework (i.e. sustainability, km 0 resources, green cities, anti-globalization, participation).

Thus, it is possible to understand how rural areas in depopulation and resource-based regenerative projects, with particular focus on a rural tourism project, are part of a single framework that can be read by the Bioregional approach.

Some research has reconceptualized rural resources as “countryside capital” (Garrod, Wornell & Youell, 2006), which means “the fabric of the countryside, its villages and its market towns” (Countryside Agency, 2003, p. 45). This definition includes both material and immaterial elements (Gambi, 1961), environmental, cultural and settlement component (Garrod, Wornell & Youell, 2004, 2006). Essentially, this involves the re-casting of rural resources as a kind of capital asset, on which it is possible to invest, and from which a



stream of benefits and services may be responsibly drawn. This concept borrows from the ecological and economic approaches the principles of “capital” (Costanza & Daily, 1992; Costanza, 1997), “ecosystem services” (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) and “sustainable development” (UN, 2015).

In line with this approach, a synoptic matrix is proposed here (Table 1), which systemizes: (i) countryside capital (Garrod, Wornell & Youell, 2004, 2006); (ii) fragilities of inner areas (SNAI, 2013); (iii) the bioregional paradigm, as a guide to sustainable regeneration goals; (iv) rural tourism characteristics, as a possible territorial project.

<b>Countryside capital</b>	<b>Fragilities of Inner Areas</b>	<b>Bioregional vision</b>	<b>Rural tourism</b>
Garrod, Wornell & Youell, 2004 Garrod, Wornell & Youell, 2006	SNAI, 2013	Berg & Dasmann, 1977 Berg, 1978 Sale, 1985 Magnaghi 2010	Lane, 1994
Landscape, including seascape Wildlife, both fauna and flora Biodiversity Geology and soils Air and air quality Hedgerows and field boundaries Agricultural buildings Rural settlements, from isolated dwellings to market towns Historical features, such as historic buildings, industrial remnants Tracks, trails, bridleways, lanes and roads Streams, rivers, ponds and lakes Water and water quality Woods, forests and plantations Distinctive local customs, languages, costumes, foods, crafts, festivals, traditions, ways of life	Limited essential services (education, health, mobility) High social costs (hydrogeological structure, landscape) Unused territorial capital (historical-artistic capital, semi-natural systems, protection of territory, craftsmanship)	Enhancement of original geographies of places Enhancement of variety and typicality of landscape Protection of biological and cultural diversity Tendency to self-support (local production of food and energy) Multifunctional agriculture Waste reduction Active participation of local community Protection of recognized and unrecognized tangible and intangible heritage	Localized in rural areas Small-scale business Involves contact with agriculture (landscape and products) and with local traditions and culture Traditional character Connections with local community Developed by local actors in a long-term perspective Represents the integration of environment, economy and history

Table 1: Resources and fragilities for a Bioregional regenerative project.  
Source: Produced by the author.

This framework is based on the theoretical concept of “back to the land” (Magnaghi, 2013). This return can be favoured by interpreting and promoting the growth of local societies, through the process of enhancing territorial capital and rebuilding local identity for a durable, resilient and sustainable wealth.

### **3. THE CASE STUDY OF VENTO AND CASALE MONFERRATO (ALESSANDRIA, ITALY)**

To undertake a territorial analysis that uses the bioregional paradigm as a reading lens, it was decided to use the VENTO cycle route project as an application opportunity.

VENTO is a territorial project conceived and developed by a group of researchers from the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Polytechnic of Milan. It is a project of a cycle route that, following rural landscape of the river Po and connecting Venice to Turin, has the declared aim to “mend the beauty of the territories crossed, reviving their vitality” (Pileri, 2018). In 2010, VENTO was born to regenerate rural areas in depopulation through cycle tourism, with innovation and tradition: to activate economies starting from local identities, avoiding freezing, trivialization or exploitation.

VENTO entered the Stability Law in 2015 (Law N°. 208 of 12/28/15, art. 1 paragraph 640), being recognized as one of the four priority cycling routes as part of the National Cycle Roads Tourism System. It is promoted and financed by Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MIT) and Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MIBACT). The long cycle route of 780 km is now arrived at the feasibility project, after years of involvement of municipalities, regions and national governments, ready to support the project also in future management. VENTO is the example of a new tourism that does not exist in the countryside along the Po river. It experiences the paradigm for a different way of territorial design: a test for sustainable alternatives, shaped for helping inner and fragile areas, able to generate new jobs, slow down depopulation, create new economies with very low impact, save the beauty that still exists there (Pileri, Giacomel & Giudici, 2015). All this thanks to the cycle line. The line is a light thread that “works as a hidden supporting structure, a wire that can hold up the fragile stories that are deposited in the territory that is crossed” (Pileri, 2018: 11).

VENTO is chosen as case study for several reasons: it is a territorial project that uses conscious and pedagogical tourism to regenerate rural inner areas; it is a transcalar project, which acts on local scale and on territorial scale at the same time; and it is a project that, through the line, has the ability to unveil Bioregions. Despite crossing four different regions and numerous provinces and municipalities, the line unites the extremes (Venice and Turin) but, above all, it unites all the elements that it crosses. VENTO talks about

territories through the narration of stories that have more to do with physical and cultural geographies, rather than with administrative boundaries.

The line has the ability to activate rural tourism that these areas need, reconstructing “broken narratives” (Meini, 2018; Pileri, 2018). It means, for example: the rice landscape and the sale of local rice that it produces, the rice museum which tells the traditional rice methods and tools, restaurants with the typical rice recipe, and the testimonies of those who worked it in the past constitute a single story made of single points that the line can reconnect, activating a virtuous economy. In this way VENTO reveals the bioregions: it denies the administrative boundaries, returns to the original geographies of places, enhances local products and reconstructs identities and economies.

The research group of VENTO has been organizing for years VENTO Bici Tour (VBT)<sup>4</sup>, a collective ride along the line, to which hundreds and hundreds of people enrol every year. During this initiative, VENTO leads to discover territories: their cultural heritages, churches, small museums, local foods<sup>5</sup>. It is through the decades-long practice of VBT that the great economic and social potential can be tangible.

Thanks to a research opportunity with the Province of Alessandria, in the Piedmont region, we talk about a section of the VENTO line, a territory that asks to find a new identity. We are in the VENTO section that falls within the Province of Alessandria, a predominantly agricultural area which includes 16 municipalities: the most populated municipality, that is Casale Monferrato (34,812 inhabitants), the second most populated, that is Valenza (18,634 inhabitants), and other 14 small municipalities around them, with less than 2,000 inhabitants and in the depopulation phase (12 out of 16 have a negative population variation rate; data source: ISTAT, 2001-2013).

In particular, we consider the municipality of Casale, as the most reference point for this territory in terms of cultural identity and economic system, even if in constant depopulation. In 1981 Casale had 41,899 inhabitants; in 1997 there were 37,493 inhabitants; in 2019 there were 34,812 inhabitants (source: ISTAT). The municipality of Casale Monferrato has an extension of 86.21 km<sup>2</sup> and is located between the cities of Vercelli, Alessandria, Asti and Novara, in the industrial triangle of large cities of Turin-Genoa-Milan.

From a geographical point of view, Casale extends over a rural flat area crossed by the river Po and manned by Po Park Vercellese Alessandrin<sup>o</sup>.

Recalling what Turri described as landscape icons, or “elementary units of perception” (Jodice & Turri, 2001), the image of the local landscape is given by

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.ventobicitour.it> (accessed: 05-04-2020).

<sup>5</sup> In particular, VENTO has involved Slow food companies and foods since the beginning, marking identities of territories that it crosses. Slow food is an international non-profit association committed to restoring the right value of food, respecting those who produce it and in harmony with ecosystems.

some characterizing elements: the most common crops, namely rice fields, poplars and arable land; the local building typologies, first of all the “cascine” (farmhouses of northern Italy) and some mills still partially functional; native flora and fauna.

Even from the point of view of economics, Casale is the subject of an intersection. There is the historical economic activity of the place, that of rice cultivation, linked to irrigated landscape of rice fields. Then there is the wine-growing activity of hills, which has long been in decline due to abandonment of marginal land. But the main economic activity of the place is the production of cement, which has also generated the most incisive identity image. For many years Casale has been known for the presence of the Eternit factory, now in disuse, which dispersed asbestos dust in the surrounding environment. From the 1950s to the present day, inhalation of this material has caused more than 2,500 deaths and even today there is a high mortality rate attributed to Eternit among people born in the late 1980s, when the factory was dismantled.

The success of tourism linked to the Monferrato landscape is concentrated only on some hill villages, other villages and the river plain (covered by the Po Park) are instead subjected to abandonment phenomena<sup>6</sup>.

These depopulation data concern the municipal boundaries but, actually, the territorial conformation allows us to intuit how the scale of abandonment is not limited to the administrative one. For this reason, following the VENTO line (and of the Po river) we have tried to map the abandonment (Figure 1), with the double and connected objectives of: on one hand identifying geographies and abandonment scales; on other hand, classify unused resources and landscapes. In the realization of this map, which represents a sort of abandonment census, we can extrapolate reasonings concerning relationship between abandonment and territorial geographies. From the survey, it is possible to identify three types of different abandonment, linked to three building types, three types of productive landscapes, and three possible resource basins. The first type of abandonment concerns the “cascine”, which represents the largest widespread heritage, traceable in the flat area and inserted in the agricultural landscape of open fields of arable land (mostly rice). The second type of abandonment is that of the house in the small hill villages. The third type is the abandonment of the apartments in the historic centre of Casale. In all three cases, abandonment may be due to multiple factors. We arrived to identify three different causes.

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<sup>6</sup> Within the Piedmont region, only 15% of agrotourisms are in the lowlands, the remainder is divided between 66% of the hill and 19% of the mountain (Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2017).

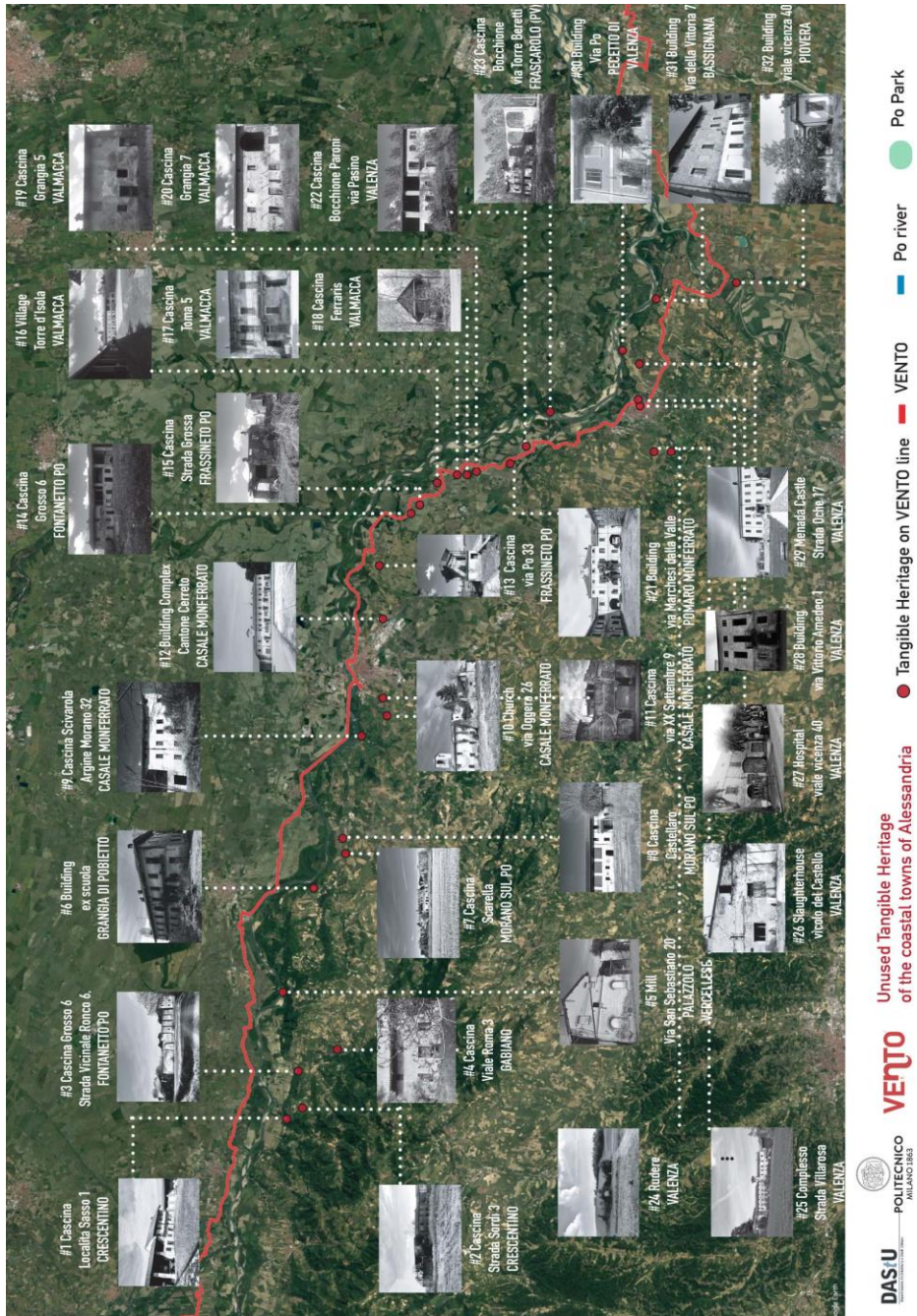


Figure 1: Map of Abandoned Buildings, Tangible Heritage along VENTO route and Po river.  
Source: Produced by the author

In the first case, the abandonment of the “cascine” is mainly linked to the transformations of agricultural activity. Thus, loss of economic value and mechanization of agriculture may have led to the gradual abandonment of fields. In the second case, the abandonment of houses of small hillside villages is due mostly to the logistic conditions, that is the distance from essential services and job opportunities. In the third case, the abandonment of historical centres, increasingly growing throughout the Italian peninsula, is due to many factors including: the lack of opportunities; the high renovation costs compared to new buildings outside the centre; tourist activities more profitable than normal rent.

In parallel with the analysis of abandoned tangible heritage, another survey was carried out that links agricultural products, traditional recipes and productive landscapes. The map obtained (Figure 2, built starting from Novellini & Soracco, 2002; and Barbero & Giorcelli, 2002) represents the possibility of identifying food geographies of the bioregion. Food geographies tell about products, landscapes, economic activities and popular traditions. If on one hand they are places connected to the phenomena of abandonment, on the other hand they are centres of great regenerative potential, given precisely by economic, cultural and landscape resources. There are foods related to the geography of the river Po; foods of rice landscapes; foods of the hilly landscape of Monferrato. These three geographies are very different and more complex than the simple administrative boundaries; they represent the iconic identity and memory of places.

The survey produces “gender maps”, thought to reveal hidden resources able to find new image for the territory.

It would be possible to cross and mix the maps to obtain others that bring together landscapes, economies, products and heritage. For example, the map of the river geography will have ecology of river landscape, typical building types, productive economies linked to the river, traditions and food products (i.e. typical fishes).

The same would be for the geography of rice: the map could collect rice fields landscapes, rice types, traditions linked to cultivation, buildings in which it was worked, etc.

This would mean representing tangible and intangible elements together that represent the true scale of the place and its potential for regeneration through the spatial and geographical dimension of the Bioregion.

Finally, in addition to the geographies of the place, this map also contains other geographies: geographies linked to the hybridization of recipes, that means all the places that influenced a recipe through the migration of peoples and materials.



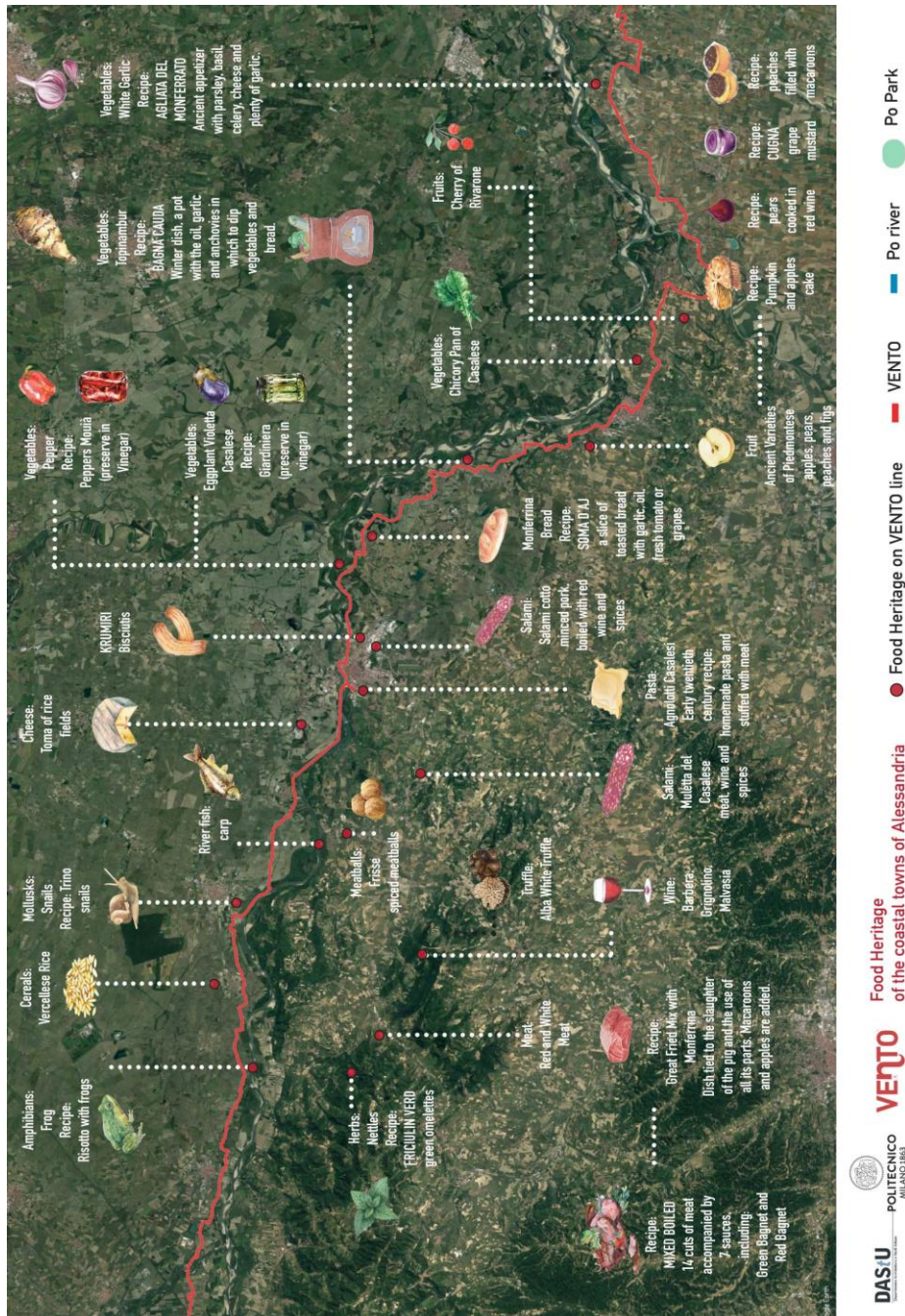


Figure 2: Food Geographies Map along VENTO route and Po river.  
Source: Produced by the author.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how the bioregion becomes a method, sometimes provocative, to find new approaches to fragility: keeping tangible and intangible aspects together in the same reading framework; shift attention from administrative to identity boundaries; keeping fragility aspects linked to regeneration opportunities; keep local and territorial scales together; enhance local resources with sustainable economic and social objectives; orient actions with objectives, both part of a single reference system.

The multidimensional paradigm of the bioregion has the ability to be a platform of opportunities for territory, useful for feeding a tourism project that is not consumeristic, but narrative, pedagogical, ethically oriented.

In this sense, the use of the VENTO line as application case is coherent. The VENTO project is not a tourist action, but a territorial project. VENTO crosses depopulated areas with the intention of generating jobs based on the enhancement of local resources and on the identity of rural world (slowness, authenticity, specificity, traditions, landscape). VENTO can be the example for a new care of places, that goes through pedagogical discovery: you can't care until you don't know it exist.

This involves dedicating actions, projects and policies oriented to tourism that is a constructive and reciprocal experiential exchange between residents and strangers, mainly aimed at: placing the individual food products back in the thread of their history (the landscape, the buildings, the people, the traditions linked to a product); develop the ability to attract tourists aware of what they are discovering; enhance the specificity, rhythms, flavours, emotions, stories and roots of place and people who have decided to stay there; produce work and provide additional income to consolidate the presence of a population in the area (Nocifera, de Salvo & Calzati, 2011; Pavione, 2016). Therefore, it is a tourism that is an economic activity but also it is a multidimensional cultural practice (Nocifera, de Salvo & Calzati, 2011). It is a balanced relationship of exchange between residents and tourists, in the perspective of an economic rebirth but also in the perspective of instructing to history, roots, identity and civic sense.

The analysis undertaken is an intuitive first effort of how the bioregional perspective represents a congenial approach to the complexity of the inner areas and their potentials. But above all the bioregion paradigm is capable of acting as a solid basis for objectives and actions of an ethically oriented regenerative territorial project.



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