

EcoMuseums: not only expressions of the local culture and environment, but also instruments for local development. How the EcoMuseum, as an expression of the local culture and environment, has been used as a instrument for local development

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The concept of cultural heritage has changed with time and is now firmly connected with its local context. There has been a shift from the idea of cultural heritage as an object or a monumental artifact in itself to a more modern concept considering it as an intricate complex of nature and history, customs, language and traditions. Thus, we have stopped pursuing preservation and protection policies and we are now following valorization and enhancement policies, which are of fundamental importance in the process of researching and discovering the cultural identity of a region.

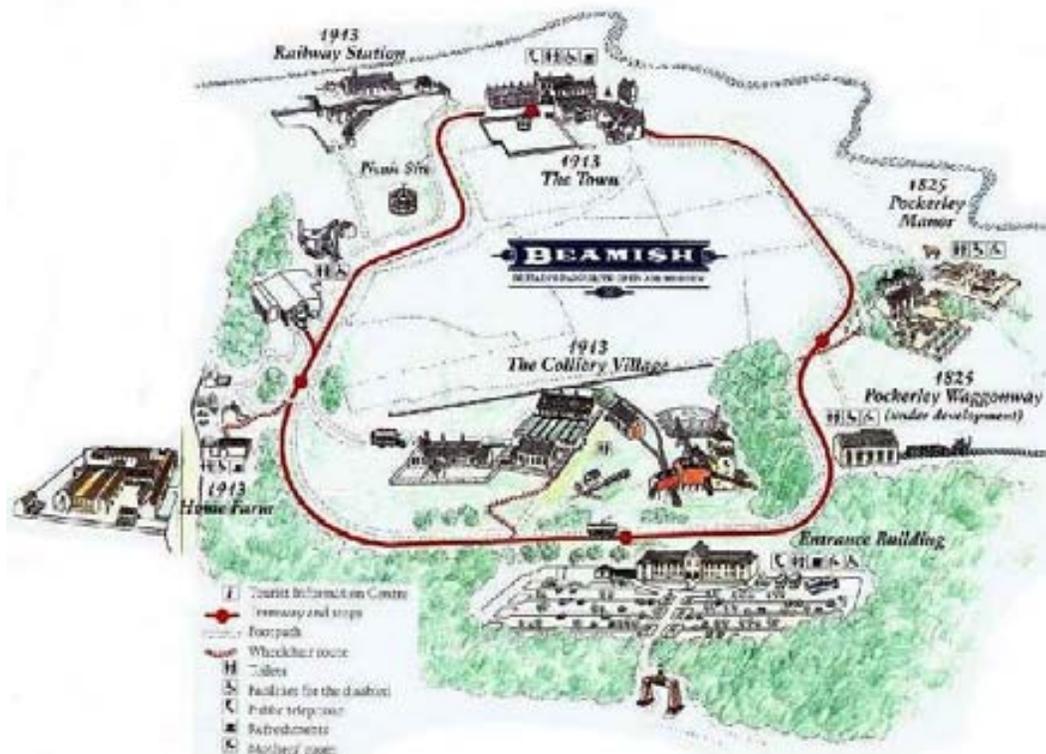
Increasingly, tourism is described as an activity based on the exploitation of the cultural identity of a place ("heritage tourism") and aiming to develop an awareness of the value of the past. As a consequence, this awareness should lead us to know, understand and communicate with the local territory through its cultural heritage. Within this framework, the idea of the EcoMuseum is seen not only as a place of nostalgia, but as an "active co-operator" with the local community and with companies, organisms, committees associated with tourism. The relevant multiple areas (ethnology, agronomy, sociology, history, and so on...) involved enable the EcoMuseum to become a driving force behind initiatives which aim to safeguard local heritage and development.

The term EcoMuseum was coined by Hugues de Varine in 1971. He used this neologism to describe a museum devoted to the global environment. Defined as a museum of space and time, the EcoMuseum sets out to represent, simultaneously, the changes of the various places according to a synchronous perspective, and the variations of the same place during different periods of time, in a diachronic perspective.

"...the EcoMuseum expresses the relationships between man and nature through the time and space of that particular area; it is composed of a series of acknowledged scientific and cultural assets, which are representative of the heritage of the community, ... a mirror in which this population can see itself..."

EcoMuseums spread rapidly in Europe during the 'seventies, a period characterized by a general decline of the traditional economy and the abandoning of industrial sites and mines, with the aim of exploiting and enhancing features and aspects of culture destined to disappear, as well as providing a new boost to the local economy.

However, the spontaneity and original authenticity of the concept of the EcoMuseum was modified and adapted to the specific historical and social situations of the nations involved. We have to remember that in some Northern European countries (for example Sweden, Norway and Denmark) folklore museums and demo-ethno-anthropological museums were already developing at the end of the 19th century, when the industrial revolution began to eclipse the traditions, beliefs and objects associated with farming culture. In Great Britain it was never really necessary to recur to the term EcoMuseum in order to describe territorial museums extending over vast areas; in fact, they were defined as "open-air museums". Buildings were brought to a given area and re-built according to an ideal format, the fulcrum of which was the visitor, who had to be totally immersed in the atmosphere of the period represented. This sort of museum is often known as "village museum" and consists of a series of sites grouped together in such a way that an environment with a highly historicized context is provided. Museums of this type were created at Beamish and at Ironbridge.



Museum Open Air , Beamish , *The guide of Beamish*,
Jarrod Publishing, Beamish, 1998

In Italy there was also a great interest in the phenomenon of the EcoMuseum, to the extent that, in the early 'eighties, an initiative involving both public (the Regions, Provinces and Mountain Communities) and private bodies (associations, local action groups, etc.) led to the promotion of such museums throughout the country. These aimed to exploit and enhance certain human activities or particular areas in the hope of preserving traditions and identity of such places. Thanks to this public enterprise, many Italian Regions tried to insert their heritage into a context which, to some extent, fell under the definition of an EcoMuseum. In fact, EcoMuseums represented an opportunity to intervene in contexts, where places of natural beauty had been abandoned, or previously-thriving-activities had declined.

Even though there is no specific legislation at a national level concerning this problem, there were certain rare and valuable by-laws. In this sense, the most effective regulations were issued by the Regione Piemonte (Piedmont) in 1995 and aimed at protecting, exploiting and enhancing specific territorial features. Owing to the creation of the Progetto Cultura Materiale, the Provincia di Torino (that is, the local authority in charge of the legislation for Turin) set out to exploit and enhance its local heritage by advertising its resources on the Internet and in order to promote its cultural promotion all over. One of the first results led to the upgrading of the mining complex at Prali, (thanks to massive investments and a considerable number of project and scientific resources), and contributed to the opening of the "Scopriminiera" EcoMuseum (October 1998). During its first year of activity, this mining site was highly successful in terms of numbers of visitors (approximately 25,700) and operating revenues (approximately Lire 213,000,000), and had a positive effect on local employment and on social and economic factors in the Val Germanasca.



Ecomuseum Scopriminiera, Prali , *Passi in galleria*, Pinerolo, Alzani Editore, 1998

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