

# INTERPRETING THE MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE THROUGH STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION – THE CASE OF VRSAR, CROATIA

| 49 |

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The paper deals with the interpretation of the Mediterranean archaeological landscape in the sustainable development of cultural tourism, as an important attractive factor for tourists visiting countries in the region. It reflects on the possibilities of sustainable tourism valorisation of archaeological sites through participative stakeholders' co-creation. The empirical research focused on the municipality of Vrsar, a typical Mediterranean destination characterised by mass tourism and high seasonality. The observed destination is also marked by an abundance of archaeological sites, which are still not adequately valorised, presented and interpreted. The empirical research, realised through workshops, interviews and questionnaires, has involved all relevant stakeholders (experts, local inhabitants, tourists). All key stakeholders agreed that the main sustainability issues could be improved through the sustainable valorisation of local cultural and natural resources



by creating innovative tourism experiences - attracting much interest in participating in this co-creation process. The conducted research indicated the possible models of presentation and interpretation of the local archaeological landscape through archaeological routes connecting the most important sites, participatory experiences such as interactive workshops and living history programmes, and the network of interpretation centres in the function of the future archaeological parks.

*Key words:* archaeological landscape, Mediterranean, cultural tourism, sustainable valorisation, Vrsar, Croatia

## INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Basin is one of the most attractive regions in the global tourism market, constituting one third of international arrivals worldwide (UNWTO 2015). Many destinations in the region, until the current pandemic, were faced with over-tourism, high seasonality and pressures on local natural and cultural resources, as well as local communities. The pandemic crisis is an opportunity to reconsider the current tourism development model and to accelerate the transition towards more sustainable development models, which will take into consideration long-term economic, social and environmental impacts. The successful implementation of sustainable tourism development models requires the informed participation and collaboration of all relevant stakeholders.

This paper is focused on the interpretation of the Mediterranean archaeological landscape in the sustainable development of cultural tourism as an important attractive factor for tourists visiting countries in the region. It reflects on the possibilities of sustainable tourism valorisation of archaeological sites through participative stakeholders' co-creation. The authors analysed the situation and the potential for the sustainable valorisation of cultural and archaeological heritage in the Municipality of Vrsar in Western Istria, Croatia. The location is a typical Mediterranean tourist destination characterised by high seasonality, mass tourism concentrated on the coast, and

inadequately valorised cultural heritage, which is still not recognised as an important and valuable tourism resource.

Bearing in mind the mentioned challenges, the authors tried to identify the reasons for the inadequate valorisation of rich archaeological heritage, elaborating the role of key stakeholders in the sustainable tourism development, presentation and interpretation of archaeological sites. The previous research has shown that informed stakeholders' participation and co-operation, including public and local community involvement, are among the most important requirements to implement the sustainable development concept in archaeological landscape valorisation and interpretation. As emphasised by experts, coordination between sectors and successful collaboration between heritage and tourism management through stakeholder involvement helps to minimise conflicts between conservation and profit, establishing channels of communication, involving local stakeholders in decision-making and generating income for heritage conservation (Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher 2005). To understand and improve the local situation as an example useful for the broader region, it was important to define a conceptual framework and to analyse key policy documents by international organisations related to stakeholders' collaboration in the sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of archaeological landscapes as part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management. The concept of the archaeological landscape- preserved, managed and interpreted in such a sustainable and multidisciplinary way, which involves all key stakeholders- brings together both natural and human factors, and reflects on the interactions between people and their natural environment over space and time (Fairclough 2002). Such a holistic understanding is particularly important for Mediterranean archaeological landscapes, which are especially valuable due to their diversity, fragmentation, connectivity and richness, thus offering plenty of opportunities to study the long-term interaction between humans and their landscape. To indicate the importance of adequate communication and interpretation of the key values of unique Mediterranean landscape/s, the authors analysed important documents, such



as *The ICOMOS Charter for The Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites* (2008), which proposed the most adequate interpretation and presentation models and infrastructure. Field research and the elaboration of recent publications and monographs related to specific models, as well as local, national and European best practice (archaeological parks and routes, site interpreters, informational panels, museum-type displays, formalised walking tours, lectures and guided tours, living history programmes and interactive workshops, multimedia applications and websites) were also very useful.

In order to analyse the role of key stakeholders in the sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of the local archaeological landscape, the authors have tested the following key hypotheses:

- H1: special interest tourism, such as cultural, creative, archaeotourism and ecotourism, has the potential to involve key stakeholders in heritage preservation and resolve the main sustainability issues;
- H2: the archaeological landscape in Istria has the potential to be adequately valorised, presented and interpreted through sustainable cultural tourism;
- H3: the proper models of participatory heritage management of the archaeological landscape could contribute to sustainable tourism development in the Municipality of Vrsar.

In the next section, the authors elaborate on the conceptual framework of stakeholders' participation in sustainable archaeological tourism. This is followed by an overview of the Mediterranean archaeological landscape in Istria County. The next section presents the research methodology. The authors combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies involving all interested stakeholders (experts, the local community and visitors). The research was organised in three phases, the results of which will be summarised in this paper. results of all three phases.

The obtained results confirmed the great potential of the proper valorisation of the local archaeological landscape through sustainable cultural tourism by involving all key stakeholders.

The main contribution of the article would be in proposing a model of sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of a typical Mediterranean archaeological landscape, adjusted to local cultural and creative resources.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE SUSTAINABLE VALORISATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

| 53 |

There is a broad literature on the importance of stakeholders' participation in sustainable cultural tourism development and heritage management. Informed stakeholders' participation and cooperation are among the most important requirements for the implementation of the sustainable tourism development concept (Mihalic 2015). This was also indicated by Byrd (2006), who applied stakeholder theory to sustainable tourism development, and analysed stakeholders' roles in policy development as well as types of stakeholder participation. The stakeholder theory, pioneered by Freeman (1984), was discussed later by numerous authors, among others by Sautter and Leisen (1999), as a normative tourism planning model. Recent research evaluated stakeholders' roles in governing sustainable tourism destinations, emphasising the importance of strengthened partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders in the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and addressing concerns on sustainability, environmental conservation and local community involvement (Rocax, Riviera and Gutierrez 2020). Seminal works dealing with the partnership between tourism and heritage management (McKercher and du Cross 2002; Timothy and Boyd 2003), as well as heritage and archaeology (Carman 2002; Mcmanamon, Stout and Barnes 2008), elaborated different dimensions of stakeholders' collaboration and also engagement with the public.

Within the framework of the UNESCO stakeholder project, which focused on communication between the heritage and tourism groups, experts elaborated models for collaboration among stakeholders, by forming mutually beneficial alliances



that are both economically profitable and socially acceptable. They concluded that successful collaboration between heritage and tourism management through stakeholder involvement could minimise conflicts between conservation and profit, establish channels of communication, involve local stakeholders in decision-making and generate income for heritage conservation (Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher 2005). Collaborative processes can take many forms; from strong public engagement for binding decision-making by consensus, to different situations and cultural contexts requiring varied approaches (Myrers, Smith and Ostergren 2016). The role of stakeholders in sustainable tourism development, and the presentation and interpretation of archaeological sites is discussed in an extensive study on the conservation and management of archaeological landscapes (Agnew and Bridgland 2003). Challenges of sustainable management, conservation and presentation of specific Mediterranean archaeological landscapes in Italy, Greece and Turkey have been explored previously in de la Torre (1999). Stakeholders' participation in archaeological heritage management projects, with an emphasis on cultural tourism stakeholder value perceptions towards specific Mediterranean archaeological landscapes, was discussed in recent research, which used as a case study the Petra Archaeological Park in Jordan (Alazaizeh, Ababneh, Jamaliah 2019). Another recent analysis, focused on the place of archaeology in integrated cultural landscape management (Moore, Guichard and Sanchis 2020), mentions some key documents that recognise the importance of stakeholder participation in mutually dependent integrated management and landscape sustainability: the *European Landscape Convention*. It emphasised that all landscapes are a product of human and natural interaction and indicated the need to integrate a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure landscape sustainability – where the public is encouraged to take an active part in its protection, conserving and maintaining the heritage value of a particular landscape; in its management, helping to steer changes brought about by economic, social or environmental necessity; and in its planning, particularly for those areas most radically affected by change, such as peri-urban and coastal areas (Council of Europe,

2000). The 'principle of participation', reinforced by the 1998 *Aarhus Convention* and echoed in the right to heritage under the *Faro Convention*, stressed that diverse stakeholders should be integral to landscape and heritage management.

Stakeholders' collaboration in the sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of archaeological landscapes, as part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management, is also elaborated on through several key documents by the International Council on Monuments and Sites. *The Salalah Guidelines* emphasise the importance of stakeholder participation where archaeological sites should be under the rightful control of stakeholders residing in the region in which they are located. The sustainable management of archaeological sites that are open to the public requires an understanding of how public access and experience combine to help protect the sites concerned. It is indicated that a visit to an archaeological site can advance the wide spectrum of benefits - social, economic, and cultural - associated with heritage. The ongoing relationship and interaction between humans and nature, embodied in the diversity of archaeological landscapes, could enrich our understanding of the past, present and future through conscientiously presented heritage (ICOMOS 2017).

Preserved, managed and interpreted in such a sustainable way, which involves all key stakeholders, the archaeological landscape brings together both natural and human factors and reflects the interactions between people and their natural environment over space and time. Understood in this way, the archaeological landscape becomes a place where archaeology, geography, history and anthropology can join together and build links to biodiversity, ecology and artistic/associative views of the world (Fairclough 2002). The archaeological landscape could be defined as a layered landscape, with archaeological evidence and ruins from different ages. The archaeological landscapes have a high degree of representation or a large area of archaeological finds, which illustrate the way of organisation and life of a particular historical period. Unlike the archaeological site, which may be an unexplored area that is known, or presumed to have, a concentration of archaeological findings



- following research, such a site can become an archaeological landscape with explored and presented finds (as is the case with the ancient Salona). Starigrad plain on the island of Hvar was protected as an archaeological site, and was enrolled in the World Heritage List as a cultural/archaeological landscape (Dumbović Bilušić 2015).

According to Athanassopoulos and Wandsnider, recent studies of Mediterranean landscapes have emphasised their diversity, their fragmentation and their connectivity. Moreover, the Mediterranean landscape record is recognised for its length and richness, and the opportunity it offers to study long-term interaction between humans and their landscape (Athanassopoulos and Wandsnider 2004). The archaeology of Mediterranean landscapes thus enables the evaluation of the range of human-environmental interactions from the Neolithic to the Roman and later periods across the Mediterranean (Walsh 2014).

*The ICOMOS Charter for The Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites* (2008) defines interpretation and presentation models, as well as activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding. This is in addition to the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretative information, physical access and the interpretive infrastructure for archaeological landscapes. The information about the cultural significance of archaeological heritage could be conveyed through site interpreters, informational panels, museum-type displays, formalised walking tours, lectures and guided tours, as well as multimedia applications and websites. This Charter also established seven cardinal principles, upon which interpretation and presentation should be based, including: Access and Understanding, Information Sources, Attention to Setting and Context, Preservation of Authenticity, Planning for Sustainability, Concern for Inclusiveness as the result of meaningful collaboration between heritage professionals, host and associated communities and other stakeholders, Importance of Research, and Training and Evaluation (ICOMOS 2008).

*The International Cultural Tourism Charter - Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance* (ICOMOS 1999) also defined



the principles of sustainable participatory management, conservation and interpretation programmes, which will present the heritage significance of a particular archaeological landscape, ensuring that the visitor experience will be worthwhile, satisfying and enjoyable. Host communities should be involved in planning for conservation and tourism and hence benefit from such activities. According to the *Charter for the Protection and Management of Archaeological Heritage*, active stakeholder participation must form part of the policies for the protection of archaeological heritage. The overall objective of archaeological heritage management should be the preservation of monuments and sites in situ, including proper long-term conservation and curation of all related records and collections etc. Local community participation should be actively sought and encouraged as a means of promoting the maintenance of archaeological heritage. Presentation and information should be conceived as a popular interpretation of the current state of knowledge, and it must therefore, be revised frequently (ICOMOS 1990).

| 57 |

In previous research, the authors analysed best practice in the sustainable valorisation of archaeological landscapes in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Among the best presented prehistoric archaeological sites, we elaborated on the Megalithic Temples of Malta, Talayotic sites of Menorca, Spain, connected by an archaeological route, as well as the ancient fortresses on the Aran Islands in Ireland. In Croatia, Vučedol Culture Museum, or Museum of Krapina Neanderthals, were proposed as good practice examples of multimedial interactive presentation and interpretation of prehistoric sites. The period of classical antiquity is also well represented by eco-archaeological parks, open-air museums and interpretation centres in Greece (the Athenian Acropolis, Epidauros, Mycenae or Delphi), and Italy (Rome, Pompeii, Siracusa and Agrigento), Jordan (Petra), Turkey, Tunisia etc. Among the most important Croatian archaeological parks from the Roman Period, the Andautonia Archaeological Park and Eco Museum near the Croatian capital, Zagreb are mentioned, as well as the Sopot Archaeological Park near Vinkovci, Acqua Iasae near Varaždin, Naronia museum and Salona archaeological park (Afrić Rakitovac, Urošević, Vojnović 2018).



According to *The Salalah Recommendation*, the archaeological park should be seen “as a tool for conservation of archaeological sites on the one hand, and their presentation and interpretation as a means to understand the shared past of humanity on the other hand” (ICOMOS/ICAHM 2017). Besides visits to archaeological parks, museums and interpretation centres, archaeological tourism includes walks and travels on archaeological paths, re-enactments of historical events, festivals, theatres, and all those products connected with promoting archaeology to the public. It also involves participatory experiences, such as experimental archaeology, community digs and practical workshops, which could involve both the local community and their guests. Archaeological itineraries are created by amalgamating archaeological attractions or various elements that form the complex cultural, historical, archaeological and ethnographical heritage of a particular area and their presentation (Mihelić 2009). An increasingly popular form of interpretation of archaeological heritage are “living history” or “living museums” programmes, where visitors can experience and taste the way of life, gastronomy and leisure of ancient inhabitants. Recent research (Petrić, Rukavina, and Obad Šćitaroci 2016) indicated possible presentation and interpretation models of archaeological landscapes, designed with the aim of developing cultural tourism and integrating archaeological heritage into the life of the local community: an archaeological route linking archaeological sites with interpretation centres, using the existing traffic and tourist infrastructure along hiking and bike trails as well as by creating new thematic routes for recreation and education, with multimedia interpretive panels, replicas and reconstruction of finds and innovative sightseeing models for archaeological landscapes, such as hot air balloon tours. As Rodríguez-Hernández and González-Álvarez (2020) note, those programmes, in addition to their role in shaping contemporary identities, contribute to strengthening tourism and promoting public awareness of cultural heritage preservation. Heritage interpretation is here defined as a communication and education process, designed to reveal meaning and the relationship with local cultural and natural heritage, through involvement with objects, artifacts,

landscapes and sites, which could enable visitors to become more sensitive to the need to conserve and protect them (Klarić et al. 2021; Draženović and Smrekar 2020; HERCULTOUR 2018; Ludwig 2015; Binoy 2011; Tilden 1957).

## THE MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE IN ISTRIA COUNTY

Istria is a border Euro-Mediterranean region with a unique transnational history and multiple layers of a wealth of archaeological heritage (see Figure 1).

| 59 |

Figure 1: *Geographical location of Vrsar on the northern Adriatic littoral*



Source: Authors' work



Nowadays, there is an official regime of protection of more than 50 historical landscapes in Istria and many hundreds of individual localities and monuments. From an archaeological and cultural-historical point, the Istrian cultural landscape includes a variety of prehistorical hillforts (e.g. Monkodonja near Rovinj, Picugi near Poreč), as well as very valuable ancient heritage in Pula (the Amphitheatre, the Temple of Augustus, the Roman Theatre, the Arch of the Sergii et al.), the medieval and modern fortresses in central Istria (the Morosini-Grimani castle in Savičenta, Rota in Momjan, Pietrapeloza near Buje, Paz et al.), the fortified towns in central Istria (e.g. Sv. Lovreč Pazenatički, Motovun, Roč et al.), which could all represent the points of a network in a cultural landscape around which a narrative can be construed on the past and present. In 1997, the Euphrasian Basilica complex in Poreč was inscribed onto UNESCO's list of world heritage, and ancient monuments in Pula (Amphitheatre with the historical urban core) have been a candidate on more than one occasion (Buršić-Matijašić and Matijašić 2017).

The most important archaeological parks in Istria are Brijuni, Vižula and Nezakcij near Pula and Monkodonja near Rovinj. The Istrian peninsula features an exceptionally dense concentration of fortified, hillfort settlements, more than 300 sites from the Bronze Age, as well as very well-preserved monuments from the Roman times. The biggest archaeological park in Istria is the Brijuni Islands National Park, the only one for which a ticket is charged. The Islands are visited annually by more than 160,000 tourists (Afrić Rakitovac, Urošević and Vojnović 2018).

According to the Register of Cultural Goods in Croatia of the Ministry of Culture (2018), there were altogether 316 immobile cultural goods in Istria,<sup>1</sup> which are classified into seven groups (see Table 1). Most represented are sacral cultural goods, making up 28.98%, and profane heritage, which constitutes more than a quarter of cultural goods in Istria, among which most represented are fortified buildings, palaces, town lodges and town

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1 Istria is geographically equalized with the regional self-government unit of the Istrian County, which consists of 31 municipalities and 10 towns.

halls. Archaeological sites and landscapes<sup>2</sup> make up 22.93%, also including those underwater. Out of the 316 listed cultural goods, only seven of them are categorised as cultural goods of national significance. Among them are St. Mary's Church at Škriljine in Beram near Pazin, the Complex of the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč, under UNESCO protection, as well as the five monuments in the Town of Pula: The Amphitheatre (Arena), the Temple of Augustus and the Roman Forum, the Double Gate, the Roman Scenic Theatre that is an archaeological site and the Arch of Sergii.

Table 1: *Classification of immobile cultural goods of Istria 2018*

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Share (%)</b>
Sacral heritage	91	28.98
Profane cultural heritage	84	26.75
Archaeological sites	72	22.93
Cultural and historical entities	47	14.97
Sacral-profane heritage	9	2.87
Cultural landscape	2	0.63
Other	11	3.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>100.00</b>

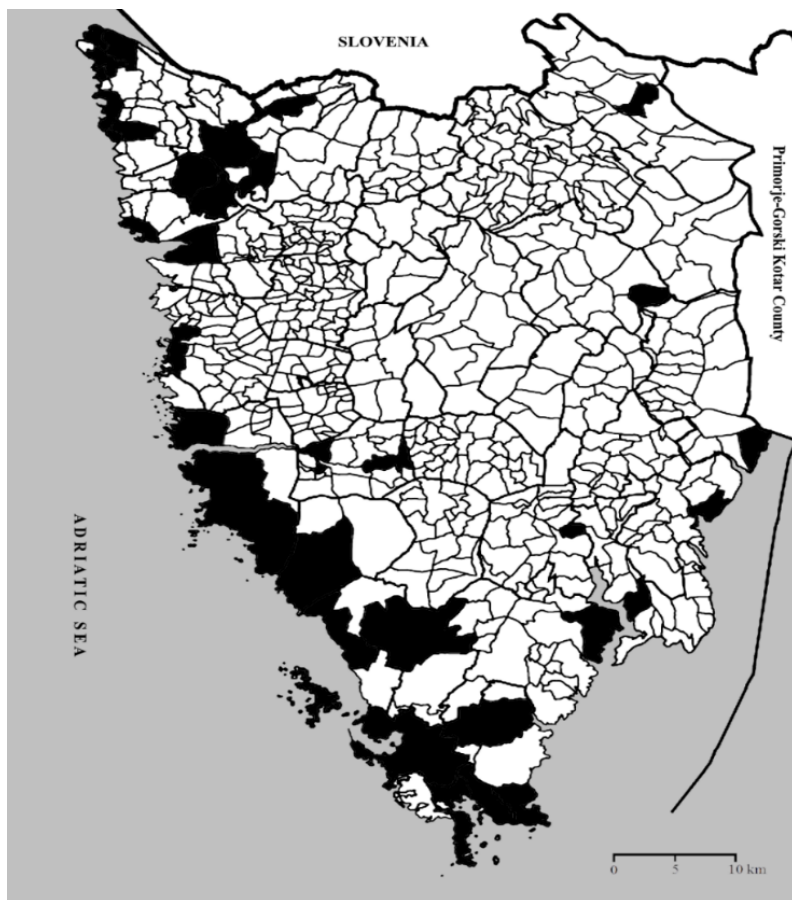
Source: Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture (2018), calculated by authors.

In Istria there are 72 archaeological sites, which are spatially distributed in 37 settlements in all parts of the region (Fig. 1). Among them, 15 archaeological sites are distributed on the seabed near the coastline. Underwater archaeological sites are distributed across 10 settlements of West, South and East Istria. By type, there are sunken war, passenger and merchant ships from various historical periods and underwater archaeological

2 Official name of archaeological site, according to the Register of Cultural Goods in Croatia of Ministry of Culture, is archaeological heritage.

zones. The highest concentration of archaeological sites is along the West Istria coast.

Figure 2: *Geographical distribution of settlements in Istria with archaeological sites*



Source: Adapted from Ministry of Culture (2018), created by authors

The geographical distribution of archaeological sites, including 15 underwater, points to the fact that, in Istria County, 21 municipalities have at least one archaeological site in their territory. (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Number and density of archaeological sites by municipalities and towns of Istria*

<b>Municipalities/ Towns</b>	<b>Archaeo- logical sites</b>	<b>Tourism microregion</b>	<b>Municipality/ town surface area (km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>km<sup>2</sup>/ site</b>
Umag	11	West Istria	82.2	7.5
Rovinj	10	West Istria	77.5	7.7
Brtonigla	7	West Istria	32.9	4.7
Medulin	6	South Istria	34.1	5.7
Vodnjan	6	South Istria	101.0	16.8
Pula	5	South Istria	53.8	10.8
Poreč	4	West Istria	111.7	27.9
Buje	3	West Istria	99.2	33.1
Kanfancar	3	Inland Istria	59.9	20.0
Bale	2	West Istria	82.1	41.1
Ližnjan	2	South Istria	68.1	34.0
Novigrad	2	West Istria	26.6	13.3
Marčana	2	South Istria	131.0	65.5
Vrsar	2	West Istria	36.5	18.2
Barban	1	Inland Istria	90.5	90.5
Cerovlje	1	Inland Istria	105.6	105.6
Kršan	1	East Istria	123.4	123.4
Labin	1	East Istria	72.3	72.3
Lanišće	1	Inland Istria	143.7	143.7
Raša	1	East Istria	80.4	80.4
Tar-Vabriga	1	West Istria	27.1	27.1
Total	72			

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Culture (2018), calculated by authors

The geographical distribution of archaeological sites by tourist microregions shows that the greatest concentration is in the microregions Western and Southern Istria (Table 2). Both microregions are the most developed tourist areas by number



of tourist beds, arrivals and overnights in Istria and Croatia (Vojnović 2018).

Due to its favourable geographical position in relation to the developed urbanised regions of Central and Western Europe and the diversity of natural and anthropogenic attractions, Istria County is today the leading tourist region in the Republic of Croatia, with a quarter of the tourist beds, a quarter of the tourist arrivals and almost a third of total tourist overnights of the Republic of Croatia. In the pre-stage of the sustainable tourism theory, Blažević (1984) in the case of Istria, Perkovic (1993) in the case of Poreč-Vrsar tourist region and Alfier (1994) noted the problems of the sustainability of the Croatian mass tourism model and extreme seasonal concentration in the summer months. That concentration threatened sociocultural, economic and natural resource dimensions of sustainable tourism as Baum and Lundtrop (2001) argued. Similar results were suggested in the research by Orsini and Ostojić (2018) for the Croatian tourism industry, including seasonality issues (Kožić, 2013; Afrić Rakitovac et al. 2018) as well as the case of Istria County, by Štoković and Kolić (1994). In 2016, a total of 10 Istrian coastal towns and municipalities individually realised more than a million tourist nights, seven of them in West Istria: Funtana, Novigrad, Poreč, Rovinj, Tar-Vabriga, Vrsar and Umag, two on the southern Istrian coast (Medulin and Pula) and the town of Labin on the eastern coast. In this area, a total of 235,531 beds were registered in commercial accommodation facilities (80% of all beds in Istria County). In the same year, there were 3,212,775 tourist arrivals (85.4% of all arrivals in Istria County) and 19,252,042 total overnights (83% of all overnight stays in Istria County). Furthermore, the most important Istrian tourist towns and municipalities are also characterised by a significant geographical and socioeconomic intensity, as well as by density, spatial, environmental and demographic impacts of the tourist activities (Vojnović 2018; Afrić Rakitovac et al. 2018).

Continuously inhabited since the earliest prehistory (Palaeolithic), and through all prehistoric and historical periods, the Municipality of Vrsar is today a typical Mediterranean destination, marked by the high tourism seasonality and the

geographical concentration on the coast. Besides the number of caves inhabited in prehistory with extremely valuable findings, located around the protected natural area of the Lim Bay, another important feature in the local archaeological landscape are Bronze Age hillforts and burial mounds, combined with later rural Roman villas, built on their foundations. This unique Mediterranean archaeological landscape is located in the most developed tourist area both in Istria and in Croatia, on the western Istrian coast, in the southern part of the tourist micro-region Poreč-Vrsar littoral. In this micro-region, tourism and supporting activities have most influenced the entire geographical and socio-economic transformation of the cultural landscape (Iskra 1991; Perkovic 1993; Hrvatin, 2006). Destination Vrsar, corresponding to the municipality of the same name, consists of nine settlements where the majority of the population and the largest number of central functions are localised in the settlement of Vrsar. According to the estimates of the Central Bureau of Statistics (2020), the municipality had 2,147 inhabitants at the end of 2019. Most of the inhabitants (82%) live in Vrsar settlement, where 99% of all beds are in commercial accommodation facilities of the municipality, including hotels and campsites. In the remaining settlements, there are individual facilities (apartments, rural villas) intended for a shorter holiday. Therefore, tourist development in the Vrsar destination shows a marked geographical orientation in the coastal area of Vrsar and a significant concentration in the summer season, with predominant activities related to stationary, restful tourism with stable growth of all indicators (see Table 3).

The unsustainability of the existing model of mass tourism points to the necessity for the revalorisation of the tourism supply and existing approaches to the natural and anthropogenic attractiveness, including valuable archaeological landscapes. The pressure on key resources could be reduced by developing special interest tourism that functions all year round and by creating specific products, such as thematic routes, which enable the dispersion of tourist demand in time and space through innovative interpretation programmes. In this process, stakeholder participation and public involvement would facilitate an

increase in successful tourism destination management and help to resolve key sustainability issues (Woodley 1993; Priestley et al. 1996; Hall and Lew 1998; Swarbrooke 2005; Mason, 2016).

Table 3: *Number of tourist beds, arrivals, overnights and average stay in Vrsar 2012-2019*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Beds</b>	<b>Tourist arrivals</b>	<b>Tourist overnights</b>	<b>Average stay</b>
2012	18,763	177,469	1,429,075	8.1
2013	18,911	175,668	1,387,941	7.9
2014	19,026	187,475	1,414,816	7.5
2015	19,610	201,649	1,461,433	7.2
2016	19,821	214,177	1,562,246	7.3
2017	18,071	210,829	1,588,420	7.5
2018	18,112	223,054	1,606,131	7.2
2019	17,843	218,887	1,589,671	7.3

Source: Calculated by the authors according to data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2013-2020

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The conducted research was part of the current scientific project ArchaeoCulTour, which connected the archaeological field research, analysis and systematisation of data on archaeological sites in the Municipality of Vrsar, and their use in making plans and developing the concept of cultural tourism development. Besides using the classic archaeological techniques and modern information tools (GIS) and prospection technologies (LIDAR) to evaluate the research potential of archaeological sites and models of preservation of archaeological heritage, the project aims at strengthening the sustainable valorisation of archaeological landscapes through researching the attitudes of local residents, professionals and tourists on cultural tourism development potential. The research results should help in awareness raising and capacity building processes, by suggesting

innovative models of presenting and interpreting the archaeological landscape, as well as the preparation of selected sites for presentation. The research methodology included an opinion survey and analysis of public attitudes towards the local archaeological landscape and its importance in the development of cultural tourism. The key idea was that the collaboration of archaeology and tourism can be a good model for elaborating the possible forms of symbiosis, on which new paradigms for use in other Mediterranean historical-geographical and economic environments can be tested (ArchaeoCulTour 2020).

Since the base of the archaeological heritage management process involves all interested stakeholders and a detailed situational analysis (Sullivan, 1999), our research started with workshops involving all key stakeholders. The main purpose was to define the current situation, main problems and development priorities. Interviews and focus groups with experts were supplemented by local community surveys and questionnaires for tourists, in which the attitudes towards the key attractions and development resources, as well as the most appropriate models of sustainable cultural and creative tourism development, were explored (Richards and Munster 2010). The first phase, conducted in April 2018, included interviews and focus groups with 15 experts, with the aim of defining key issues and collecting information for situational analysis. A local community survey was conducted from March to May 2018 and involved 182 inhabitants of Vrsar. The third phase of research, from May to September 2018, involved 881 tourists. This paper summarises the research results of all three phases. The results of the research were presented to local stakeholders at a workshop in May 2019, which included the second cycle of interviews with the same expert group, with a request to propose the most adequate solutions and models for the sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of the local archaeological landscape, including specific sites with the most important finds that will be connected and presented by an archaeological interpretation route.



## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *Experts' views*

In the initial phase of the situational analysis, the authors conducted empirical research aimed at exploring the opinions of 10 relevant experts (representatives of the local municipality, the local tourist board, the largest hotel company in the destination, and experts and scientists in sustainable tourism and archaeology) regarding the actual situation and the potential for promoting and presenting archaeological sites through sustainable cultural tourism. The situational analysis results indicated the most important issues related to the current situation and potential for the more sustainable valorisation of unique local cultural resources through cultural and creative tourism. The results showed that, despite the very rich natural and cultural heritage resources, the local tourist offer is still characterised by high seasonality and mass tourism concentrated on the coast. Lack of strategic planning, collaboration and coordination between the key stakeholders, inefficient destination management and inadequate spatial planning are exacerbated by the inadequate valorisation of cultural heritage and local creative resources, which are still not recognised either as development potential or as a motive for visiting Vrsar. On the other hand, local stakeholders are aware of the opportunity for sustainable development of cultural tourism through creative valorisation and the interpretation of the unique and most valuable local cultural resources. The interviews, focus groups and workshops conducted with experts, as informed representatives of key local stakeholders, indicated key issues related to the (un)sustainability of the current model, which was very useful in situation analysis and preparing the next stages of the research. (Afrić Rakitovac, Urošević and Vojnović 2018).

### *Local community perceptions*

The second phase of the research has shown that the local community of Vrsar is aware of the problems referring to sustainable development, the importance of the proper valorisation of

cultural heritage and the potential for sustainable cultural tourism development.

As indicated in Table 4, the local population is mainly satisfied with tourism development in the municipality (arithmetic mean on Likert's scale higher than 4). The examinees expressed the highest levels of agreement with the following statements: tourists are welcome regardless of their country of origin (4.68), tourism contributes to higher levels of employment in the Vrsar Municipality (4.59), tourism is the most important economic activity in the municipality (4.47), tourism development benefits the majority of the population in Vrsar (4.47), and tourists' language(s) are not a barrier to communication (4.14). The examinees expressed the lowest levels of agreement regarding the possibilities of active participation of the local population in the tourism planning process (3.32), the contribution of tourism to environmental protection (3.45) and levels of satisfaction with the cultural offer in the municipality (3.24).

Table 4: *Local population's attitudes regarding the proposed statements*

Statements	Arithmetic mean	Std. dev.	Skewness
Tourism contributes to higher employment in the Vrsar municipality	4.59	0.706	-2.177
Tourism is the most important economic activity in Vrsar	4.47	0.733	-1.586
Tourism development benefits the majority of the population in Vrsar	4.47	0.798	-1.770
Tourists do not hinder daily life and work in Vrsar	3.59	1.127	-0.434
I actively participate in the tourism planning process in Vrsar	3.32	1.269	-0.275
Tourism contributes to environmental protection in Vrsar	3.45	1.085	-0.291
Tourists' language(s) are not a barrier to communication	4.14	0.880	-1.119



Tourists are welcome regardless of their country of origin	4.68	0.637	-2.586
Tourists contribute to the preservation of customs and cultural heritage	3.98	0.934	-0.573
Estimate of the level of satisfaction with the cultural offer in Vrsar	3.24	1.163	-0.089

Source: Authors' research

Table 5 indicates the local population's perceptions of the proposed attractions of Vrsar as a tourism destination. As expected, considering the arithmetic mean scores on Likert's scale higher than 4, the local population has recognised the following natural factors as the most significant attractions: the vicinity of the Adriatic Sea, the beauty of the coast and nearby islands, the pleasant weather and climate, the Lim Bay, Vrsar's old city centre, etc. It is interesting to note that the local population considers local cultural resources as less attractive: Vrsar's mosaics, St. Michael's Church and the Monte Ricco archaeological site.

Besides the prevalence of classical Mediterranean mass tourism focused on the sun-and-sea tourist season, it is obvious that the main issue is the sustainability of such a development model, resulting in infrastructure problems and neglect of the key cultural resources. which should be the basis for the sustainable development of cultural tourism. Although the majority of the local population is professionally involved in tourism, they are not satisfied with the level of inclusion of residents in tourism planning and in heritage management. The residents are concerned with environmental issues as well. Fully aware of the unique characteristics of the local natural and cultural heritage, as well as the good geographical position and proximity to emissive markets as the most valuable attractiveness factors, our respondents emphasised the neglect of the infrastructure, the lack of high-quality cultural manifestations and the need for better presented and interpreted cultural attractions as the main problems in the planning of sustainable





cultural tourism. Our research has shown that local residents are well informed about the main cultural resources and the possibilities of their sustainable valorisation through innovative models of interpretation, such as cultural routes, living history programmes and workshops, which would include the local community and interpretation centres. The results of the community survey are in line with the results of interviews and focus groups with experts organised in the first phase of the research.

Table 5: *The importance of proposed attractions of Vrsar as a tourism destination*

Attractions	Arithmetic mean	Std. dev.	Skewness
The vicinity of the Adriatic Sea	4.58	0.675	-1.865
The weather and the climate	4.55	0.644	-1.379
The coast and islands	4.57	0.753	-2.407
Natural and rare land cover type	4.26	0.844	-1.023
The Lim Bay	4.53	0.710	-1.848
Parks	4.28	0.830	-1.210
The Kontija Forest	4.25	0.868	-1.130
St. Michael's Church	3.91	0.959	-0.506
Monte Ricco archaeological site	3.90	0.995	-0.777
Vrsar's mosaics	3.88	1.086	-0.674
St. Mary's of the Sea church	4.14	0.853	-0.754
Vrsar's old city centre	4.36	0.841	-1.389
Dušan Džamonja's Park of Sculptures	4.20	0.846	-0.0900
The culinary tradition	4.03	0.957	-0.946
Cultural, sports and entertainment manifestations	4.04	1.034	-1.088

Source: Authors' research



*Attitudes of tourists*

The third phase of the research, related to tourists' attitudes, has confirmed that the tourists visiting Vrsar are mostly motivated by the opportunity for rest and recreation in preserved nature. The data was collected in May and July 2018, where the research instrument was a questionnaire structured in five parts, consisting of 38 questions. The paper presents the most relevant questions and answers. When tourists were asked about their interest to explore the local archaeological heritage, more than a half of them expressed their interest (Table 6).

Table 6: *Tourists' interest in exploring the local archaeological heritage*

Answers	May		July	
	N	In %	N	In %
YES	169	<b>56.0</b>	194	<b>56.2</b>
No	133	44.0	151	43.8
Total	302	100.0	345	100.0

Source: Authors' research

In the next group of questions, those tourists who expressed interest in exploring the local archaeological heritage were asked about a potential activity they would be interested in, and if they were willing to pay for it. As indicated in Table 7, for tourists visiting Vrsar, the best way to explore the local archaeological landscape would be through cultural routes or archaeological parks, followed by events – living history programmes, interpretation centres and museums, as well as interactive workshops. Approximately three-quarters of tourists are ready to pay for such a creative, innovative experience.



Table 7: Preferred ways of exploring archaeological heritage for tourists visiting Vrsar

Activity	May			July			
	N	Willingness to pay		N	Willingness to pay		
		N	In %		N	In %	
Through interactive workshops		56	45	80.3	92	76	82.6
Archaeological parks	86	66	76.7	123	96	78.0	
Cultural routes	97	59	60.8	117	84	71.7	
Interpretational centres/museums	70	54	77.1	101	80	79.2	
Events – living history programmes	76	47	61.8	101	72	71.3	

Source: Authors' research

Although only a third of them could be defined as 'cultural tourists', since they planned a visit to a cultural attraction/exhibition during their stay, more than a half of them are interested in attending organised activities related to the local archaeological heritage, mostly through cultural routes and archaeological parks and, even more importantly, most of them are willing to pay for such an experience. This means that tourists are interested, but still not well informed, about the local cultural heritage and the possibilities of experiencing it through innovative products of creative and archaeological tourism.

The results of the third phase have confirmed those of the previous two research phases, related to the experts' attitudes and the local community survey, both oriented towards considering the current cultural tourism development trends in the observed municipality and its development potential (Afrić Rakitovac, Urošević and Vojnović 2019). All key stakeholders agree that the main sustainability issues in the Vrsar municipality, i.e., high seasonality, mass tourism, infrastructure problems, could be resolved through the sustainable valorisation of

the local cultural and natural resources by creating innovative tourism experiences through special interest tourism.

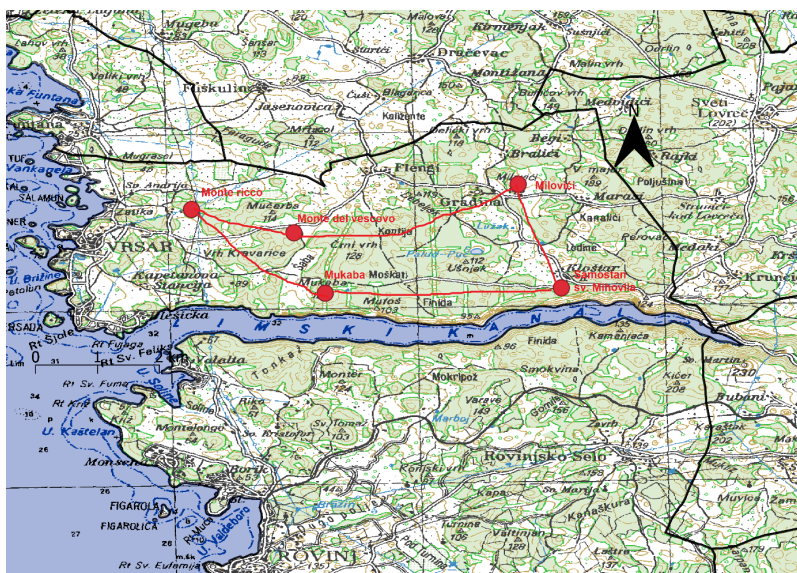
### *Experts' views*

The results of the research were presented to local stakeholders at a workshop in May 2019, as a second cycle of interviews with the same expert group. The experts and representatives of key local stakeholders were asked to propose the most adequate solutions and models for the sustainable valorisation and presentation of the local archaeological landscape, including specific sites with the most important finds that will be connected and presented through an archaeological interpretation route. The interviewed experts proposed the presentation and interpretation of five archaeological sites in the immediate hinterland of the Municipality of Vrsar: Monte Ricco hillfort and the Roman Villa, the ancient quarry Bišupovi Vrhi, Mukaba hillfort and tumulus, Milovići tumulus and the Monastery of St. Michael in Kloštar (interpretation centre), and the valorised archaeological sites in the settlement of Vrsar (see Figure 3). They also suggested connecting the most attractive archaeological sites with natural and cultural attractions in protected areas of the Lim Channel and Kontija forest through cultural routes and educational paths, as well as through a network of interpretation centres/eco-museums. Asked about sustainable alternatives for the current mass tourism model, they indicated the potential for development of special interest tourism focused on a combination of ecotourism, cultural and archaeotourism, as well as recreational, wellness and eno-gastronomic activities during the off-season by the inclusion of cultural and natural attractions in cultural routes. Analysing the existing infrastructure and available attractions, the authors proposed the route presented in the next figure, which connects the archaeological sites selected for presentation and which, for the most part, can fit into the existing bike route 171 "Magic Archipelago." This is the most popular circular bike route in Istria, and runs from Vrsar to St. Michael's Monastery in Kloštar (18.5 km), which connects the most attractive natural and cultural heritage sites along the Lim Channel, including the selected archaeological sites St. Romuald



Cave and the protected Kontija forest with the interpretation centre ZEC (which will also be used as the visitor centre for the route).

Figure 3: Archaeological landscape of Vrsar Municipality: sites selected for interpretation



Source: The field project team data

For the next phase, after creating the local archaeological route, which will connect the most important archaeological sites near Vrsar, the authors propose a wider route around the Lim Channel, from Vrsar to Rovinj. This would connect, present and interpret the rich archaeological landscape, but also the unique natural and cultural heritage, in the most proper way. Besides the most important local archaeological sites from the prehistoric and ancient Roman periods, the second phase of presentation would involve very attractive caves along the Lim Channel, but this will only be possible after the opening of Romuald's cave with its valuable prehistoric paintings for the public.

## DISCUSSION

Informed participation, collaboration and, when appropriate, networking of relevant stakeholders is among the most important requirements for the implementation of the concept of sustainable tourism in the valorisation and interpretation of archaeological landscapes. Stakeholder participation requires the implementation of different methods, i.e., interviews, surveys, focus groups, ongoing dialogue and reflections on each stage. It is a process in which no one's interest dominates and in which different, sometimes conflicting, interests are named, processed and resolved (Đokić et al. in: Kordej-De Villa et al. 2009). Different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts require different approaches. The participatory process faces a number of limitations: it takes time, many stakeholders have different perspectives and expectations, a consensus among stakeholders is often difficult to achieve, so it needs to be carefully planned and managed. As indicated in the paper, stakeholder collaboration in the sustainable valorisation, presentation and interpretation of archaeological landscapes, as part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management elaborated in different documents from ICOMOS, UNWTO, the Council of Europe, etc., results in a wide spectrum of social, economic and cultural benefits and contributes to environmental protection and proper valorisation. Many previously mentioned best practice examples of the sustainable valorisation of archaeological landscapes in the Euro-Mediterranean area confirm the importance of participatory processes.

Empirical research was focused on the municipality of Vrsar, a typical Mediterranean destination characterised by mass tourism and high seasonality. The observed destination has an abundance of archaeological sites that have not yet been properly valorised, presented and interpreted. The research conducted in four phases through workshops, interviews and questionnaires included all relevant stakeholders (experts, local population, tourists). The initial situational analysis pointed to the most important issues related to the current situation and the potential for more sustainable valorisation of the unique



archaeological heritage through cultural and creative tourism. The results showed that, despite the very rich heritage, the local tourist offer is still characterised by high seasonality and mass tourism concentrated on the coast. Lack of strategic planning, cooperation and coordination between key stakeholders, inefficient destination management and inadequate spatial planning are exacerbated by the inadequate valorisation of cultural heritage and local creative resources. Local experts pointed out the possibilities of the sustainable development of cultural tourism through creative valorisation and interpretation of unique and most valuable local cultural resources. Although the local population, involved in the second phase of the research, was mainly satisfied with tourism development in the municipality, it is nevertheless interested in more actively participating in tourism planning processes. The members are well informed about major cultural resources and the possibilities of their sustainable valorisation through innovative models of interpretation, such as cultural routes, life history programmes, workshops involving the local community and interpretation centres. The results of the third phase, which has involved tourists visiting Vrsar, indicate that tourists do take an interest, but are still not well informed, about the local cultural and archaeological heritage. They are interested in experiencing it through innovative products of creative and archaeological tourism, i.e., cultural routes or archaeological parks, events – living history programmes, interpretation centres and museums, as well as interactive workshops. Approximately three-quarters of tourists are ready to pay for such a creative, innovative experience. In the fourth phase, the results were presented to the same expert group. They proposed the presentation and interpretation of five archaeological sites in the intermediate hinterland of the observed municipality, and to connect them with the natural and cultural attractions in the area through cultural routes, educational paths and a network of interpretation centres and Eco museums. The authors, considering the research results, the existing infrastructure and available attractions, proposed a new archaeological route, which connects the proposed archaeological sites with the most attractive natural and cultural heritage sites in the area.





The research confirmed the importance and benefits of stakeholder participation in the proper valorisation and interpretation of archaeological heritage. It has confirmed the readiness of local experts and residents to be more actively involved in the heritage management process and the interest of tourists to become more acquainted with the archaeological heritage in the host community. As previously mentioned, the proper valorisation and interpretation of archaeological heritage contributes to a better understanding of the complex historical heritage of a particular area, and its protection and preservation, for future generations.

## CONCLUSION

The obtained results confirmed the great potential of the proper valorisation of the local archaeological landscape through sustainable cultural tourism, in order to create innovative tourism experiences as a way to enrich the visitor experience by involving all key stakeholders in the participatory cultural tourism planning process, which could help to solve the main sustainability issues and extend the tourist season in the observed tourism destination. The research hypotheses, i.e., that specific forms of tourism, including the cultural and creative, as well as archaeotourism and eco-tourism, have the potential to resolve the main sustainability issues and involve key stakeholders in heritage preservation through the sustainable valorisation of archaeological landscape in the Vrsar municipality, have been confirmed. All stakeholders agree that the main sustainability issues in the Vrsar municipality, such as high seasonality, mass tourism and infrastructure problems, could be resolved using the sustainable valorisation of local cultural and natural resources by creating innovative tourism experiences.

Bearing in mind the local community commitment to sustainable and inclusive development, the Euro-Mediterranean best practice and the experts' recommendations, as well as tourists' preferences, the authors proposed the following models of sustainable valorisation of the local archaeological landscape: the archaeological route, which connects selected sites arranged

as eco-archaeological parks and open-air museums, interpretation centres as well as living history programmes, educational paths, community digs and practical workshops as models of participatory heritage management, which would involve the local community and their guests in the process of co-creation of innovative tourist experiences.

Our research showed that the necessary prerequisites for the improvement of cultural tourism, based on unique local cultural and creative resources, united in a unique Mediterranean archaeological landscape are:

- a participatory strategic planning model,
- information and education on all relevant stakeholders and
- the proper valorisation, presentation and interpretation of the local archaeological landscape through cultural tourism.

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