

SUSTAINABLE HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN THE ALPS: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN NATURE AND PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

The contribution aims at proposing a reflection on the growing recognition of natural areas as contexts capable of new approaches of living, reconnected with nature and its rhythms, experiencing wellbeing, health and sustainability practices that can result in new tourism and local development possibilities. An interesting framework that put in connection tourism and psychology has emerged in the context of the actions and results of the European Interreg Alpine Space project *Healps2 - Healing Alps: tourism based on natural health resources as a strategic innovation for the development of Alpine regions*. Jointly implemented by partner institutions from six European countries, in Italy an experimental activity was conducted by the Protected Areas Management Authority in the high Ossola valleys, in Piedmont Region, based on a renewed approach to health tourism. Some pilot experiences have been proposed, and here presented, that combine the psychological impact of outdoor experiences with the role of sustainable tourism in the enhancement of alpine territories.

Keywords :Sustainable tourism, Health tourism, Protected areas, Nature-based experiences, Adventure Therapy, Italian Alps

1. Alps, tourism trends and contribution goals: an introduction.

The Alpine arc, with its precious natural territories, ecosystems to be protected and safeguarded, villages and ancient settlements, is a context of great interest and an active repository of knowledge, heritage and visions for the future of people and the planet. As indicated by the EU macro-strategy EUSALP (Teston, Bramanti, 2018), the Alpine area is composed of territories with contrasting demographic, social and economic trends and great cultural and linguistic diversity; this diversity is accompanied by a great variety of governance systems and traditions, and they both call for cooperation. The Alpine region represents a transit region, a living and working space for the resident population and an attractive tourist destination. The Alps are the water tower of Europe

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and are known worldwide for beautiful and varied landscapes, rich biodiversity and cultural heritage (Paunović, Jovanović, 2017). They have a significant potential for dynamism, even if face some major challenges (Pechlaner et al., 2017) linked to economic globalisation, which requires the region to distinguish itself as competitive and innovative by developing the knowledge and information society; to demographic trends, characterised in particular by the combined effects of ageing and new migration patterns; to climate change and its effects on the environment, biodiversity and the living conditions of its inhabitants; to the energy challenge of managing and meeting demand in a sustainable, secure and cost-effective manner.

The mountain, understood in its complexity of environments, purity and authenticity, the scene of strong contrasts between simplicity and difficulty, has today, particularly within the Alps, taken on features and functions of a booming laboratory. Several small and widespread practices and initiatives have begun to dot the Alpine, mountain and neighbourhood territories wishing to establish and spread new and firm awareness on the priorities of recovery, promotion and sustainable valorisation, starting from the most fragile and marginal contexts.

The voices of communities, of old and new inhabitants, of so many small think-tanks, are therefore rising from the Alps, expressing a significant turning point, the beginning of a new era in experiencing the mountains, also in terms of tourism and overall well-being experiences. A re-appropriation of identity and heritage that stems from the profound and shared intention to resume and build sustainable living and development possibilities, also in response to the crises of other territories, metropolitan and industrial contexts. But above all, it is the result of an important “cultural renaissance”, which took place with the recognition and regaining of the values and resources inherent in the territorial fabric, in its historical seeds and sediments, in the contaminations between inhabitants and travellers, in the specific connotations of the environment and its morphology. Tangible and intangible assets that assume the role of pivotal elements, and not more background, to draw new perspectives within the responsible use of resources and their valorisation for a systemic sustainability of the territory.

In the past decades, classical tourism approaches have negatively impacted the Alpine environment and showed distorting socio-economic effects on receiving destinations (Alparc, 2019). More recently, tourism has been affected by Covid-19 like no other sector in the Alpine region. As a result, the hospitality industry, the service sector, and indirectly affected sectors such as agriculture, trade, crafts and transport service providers are changing. On the other end, the pandemic outbreak has duly influenced tourists’ psychology and subsequently their behaviour and decision making to participate in outdoor activities (Humagain, Singleton, 2021). So many changes are affecting mountain and Alpine tourism both as economic sector and social phenomenon. It emerges that natural resources can increasingly determine the development of competitive tourism destinations and drive the development of nature-based value chains aimed at improving the health and well-being of tourists. Today, several segments of the tourism market are changing and leading to a transformation of the competitiveness of the whole sector: there is a growing demand for more nature-based experiences that integrate the pleasant elements of beauty, relaxation and regeneration with more

challenging activities of prevention, health and sport. Growing awareness and collaborative proposals go hand in hand with key trends that are reshaping the health tourism landscape in Alpine regions, including an ageing population, climate change and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of commercial losses and the need for natural remedies against the long-term effects of this virus.

In this complex and general frame, the contribution aims firstly at presenting the situation of the sustainable and health tourism related to the Alpine protected areas, identified as a geographical region useful for the analysis of a case study held in Piedmont Region (Italy) within the European Interreg Alpine Space project *Healps2 - Healing Alps: tourism based on natural health resources as a strategic innovation for the development of Alpine regions*. Specifically related to the research work jointly conducted by *Upontourism Study Centre* and the Protected Areas Management Authority in the high Ossola valleys, Ente Gestione Aree Protette Ossola (EGAPO), the main features, actions and outputs of the project are traced, before moving on to the outcomes reading of an experimental activity aiming to underline its implications in terms of psychology and tourism relation. An innovative and pilot action has been developed and tested in high Ossola Parks through the *Adventure Therapy* method. As further specified below, *Adventure Therapy* is an outdoor-based approach aimed at increasing one's psychological wellbeing, by undertaking subjectively challenging activities in nature together with a group of people and then reflecting on each one's emotions and coping behaviours, to gain awareness and become able to use them in everyday life. A kind of "emotional and healing geography", inextricably linked to the Alpine parks involved and to the presence during the experiences proposed and investigated, of the figure of psychologists to support and supplement the role of the more traditional guides. The enhancement of Alpine territories and natural landscapes thus becomes the medium for a process of personal enhancement and enrichment, and vice versa. After presenting content and output of this pioneering initiative, focusing on the discussion of the results of a direct participants' survey, some final considerations and remarks close the work.

2. The protected areas in sustainable and health tourism

There is a deep-rooted link between protected areas and tourism: they need each other, even if their relationship is sometimes complex and sometimes conflicting. Tourism is always an important and critical component to consider in the establishment and management of protected areas. Building sustainable tourism models that contribute to enhancement and conservation of protected areas, requires strong cooperation and partnerships among the tourism industry, governmental subjects, local communities, protected area managers and planners, and the tourists themselves. It is become a matter of common knowledge that the application of sustainability principles, that represents the only way to avoid that tourism compromises both places and cultures, can orient and strengthen local development strategies both in protected areas and their proximity surroundings.

UNWTO has been involved in the field of ecotourism since the early 1990s and developed a set of guidelines focusing on the strong link between protected area and

tourism, with the aim of ensuring that tourism contributes to the purposes of protected areas and does not undermine them. More recently, sustainable tourism is firmly positioned in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, showing Tourism a great potential to contribute, directly or indirectly, to all of the 17 goals.

As concern Europe, sustainable tourism in protected areas provides a meaningful quality experience, safeguards natural and cultural values, supports local livelihoods and quality of life and is economically viable; parks have the opportunity and potential to act as catalysts for sustainability and lifestyle changes at local, regional and national levels. The EUROPARC Federation is dedicated to practical nature conservation and sustainable development, improving the management of protected areas in Europe through international cooperation, exchange of ideas and experience, and by influencing policy. EUROPARC has long recognised the need of caring for both the land and the people who live and work there. In 1993 EUROPARC published the report *Loving them to Death*, which first called for sustainable tourism in Europe's protected areas. Furthermore, in 1995, EUROPARC took the initiative to set up the *European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in protected areas* (ECST), a practical management tool that enables them to develop tourism sustainably. The core element of the ECST is working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders to develop a common sustainable tourism strategy and an action plan on the basis of a thorough situation analysis. The aim of ECST projects and activities is the protection of the natural and cultural heritage and the continuous improvement of tourism in the protected area in terms of the environment, local population and businesses as well as visitors (figure 1). After over 25 years of experience, it has proved to be a useful and important tool that delivers social, environmental and economic benefits and indeed can be described as a model of governance that delivers protected areas as sustainable tourism destinations, in particular



within the Alpine region.

Fig. 1 – *ECTS documents*.

Source: www.europarc.org/sustainable-tourism/

Concerning health tourism related to protected areas (Puhakka, Pitkänen, Siikamäki, 2017; Azara et al., 2018), although naturalistic fruition has been an integral part of national parks since the beginning, interest in the potential role of parks in human health and well-being is relatively new. National parks and other nature environments with environmental and cognitive value can be considered as a fundamental health resource, particularly in terms of disease and illness (Maller et al., 2008). Growing recent efforts have been flourished to develop nature-based well-being tourism; scientific evidence shows that contact with nature promotes mental and physical health. Observing nature and being in a natural environment can give direct physical, mental and emotional health benefits, for an overall impact on a person's psycho-physical state. All rural, alpine, natural ecosystems, as well as social, cultural, and economic conditions should be considered and be protected, promoted, and financed in a sustainable way (Hammer, Siegrist, 2008; Pröbstl, 2010; Richins, Johnsen, Hull, 2016). In tourism research recent studies highlight the crucial role of various forms of health tourism as key strategies to sustainable valorisation of Alps and protected areas, and beyond (Schalber, Peters, 2012; Paunović, Jovanović, 2019). It has been realised that spending time in close contact with nature, enjoying immersive experiences, even simple walks in parks and natural settings, can greatly contribute to generating powerful health and wellness benefits. Well-being, therefore, not only physical but also psychological, which also reflects and flows into the construction of a broader vision of global, systemic well-being and sustainability, for mankind, communities, environment. It is possible to state that the sustainability of protected areas and the viability of tourism to provide conservation and socio-economic benefits strictly depends on planning and management strategies of tourism that enhance community participation and entrepreneurship, sustaining benefit-sharing mechanisms between parks and communities (Candrea, Ispas, 2009; Trček, Koderman, 2018; Buccheri, Passerini, 2019; Bhamman et al., 2021).

The natural environment is capable of generating direct and indirect positive impacts on multiple levels including environmental, economic, social and community's ones. Examples of potential benefits achievable are: transmit understanding and greater appreciation of natural values and resources through experiences, education and interpretation; support the development of good environmental practices and management systems to influence travel and tourism businesses; support natural ecosystem monitoring through citizen science volunteers; increase jobs and oncome for local residents; stimulate new tourism enterprises and diversify the local economy; encourage people to value and take pride in their local culture and protected areas, improve intercultural understanding through social contact; promote aesthetic, spiritual, health and other values related to well-being (Cerutti, Menzardi, 2021). Connecting health, well-being and natural environment is a key driver for local and regional development (CEETO, 2020). Tourism can affect sensitive Alpine ecosystems and human health. The Covid-19 pandemic led to several changes in the protected areas' visitor flows from what we had expected at the beginning of the year. A significant reduction in outdoor activities during the lockdown period was followed by a rising demand for nature-based tourism in the summer season 2020. The Alpine protected areas had to adapt to these changes, particularly by increasing awareness both in offer

and demand tourist systems, and consequently by planning adequate policy recommendations and practical advices to the different stakeholder for tourism management and promotion. Additionally, diversifying the tourism offering and the tourism services provided by the protected areas is important for sustainable tourism growth (Cerutti, Menzardi, 2022).

3. The project *Healps2 Healing Alps*

A project with a European scope between 2019 and 2022 led six Alpine countries to reflect and plan new tourism project directions, paying specific attention to prefigurative scenarios based on local natural resources as strategic innovation elements for the sustainable development of territories. *Healps2 - Healing Alps: tourism based on natural health resources as a strategic innovation for the development of Alpine regions*, of the Interreg Alpine Space programme, joined partners from Italy, Switzerland, France, Austria, Germany and Slovenia (figure 2).



Fig. 2 – *Healps2* project partners.

Source: www.alpine-space.org/projects/healps-2/en/about/partners

The partners shared a plan of actions aimed at supporting the creation of tourist enhancement practices based on the health and wellbeing that place-specific resources can bring. The characteristics of the landscape, the variety of flora and fauna, the water forms, the peculiarities of the forest areas, and many other site-specific factors of nature's identity, are intrinsic qualities of inestimable value not only for the environment itself but also because they allow multiple possibilities for the sustainable use of territories, through slow tourism, sports activities, approaching nature and outdoor

practices in various ways. It proposes a vision, therefore, of revitalisation that aligns itself with the need of marginal territories, mostly areas with a strong natural presence, in finding keys to turning around the abandonment, degradation, and impoverishment of the resources that reside there. The *Healps2* project in particular saw the participation of an Italian partner, the Ente di Gestione delle Aree Protette dell'Ossola, EGAPO, which ran a research and pilot experimentation phase of tourism for health and wellbeing contextualised to the mountain valleys of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola valleys, in northern Piedmont. Comprising the area of responsibility of the Ossola protected areas are: the Alpe Veglia and Alpe Devero nature park, the Binn Valley Landscape Park, and the Alta Valle Antrona nature park. Since 2013, Alpe Veglia and Alpe Devero parks and natural park of Alta Valle Antrona have also been awarded with the ETSC and with the EMAS environmental Certification. The work carried out, started in the spring of 2021 and completed in June 2022, involved the *Upontourism Study Centre* of the University of Eastern Piedmont in a strategic collaboration to support the scientific elaboration of the project, through the involvement of local tourism operators engaged in the areas of local hospitality, catering, Alpine sports and psychotherapy. A preliminary research work was conducted with an initial study and framing of health tourism in the scientific literature, which was followed by a survey and selection of exemplary case studies. These were the reference bases from which indicators and key concepts were extrapolated, useful for the subsequent formulation of guidelines, instrumental in the creation and application of a prototype of a tourism activity/service for health and well-being in the Ossola valleys. In the first part of the work, the *Upontourism Study Centre* was also the organiser of a series of five webinars aimed at raising awareness of the frontiers of new tourism geared towards health, well-being and the experience of nature. The webinars, aired online from 10th of May to 7th of June, 2021, aimed to offer training sessions for operators and anyone interested, investigating the topic by also exploring innovative cases of sustainable tourism already active from a social, environmental and economic point of view. The webinar episodes, gathered under the umbrella of “Tourism, mountains and... health”, were attended by expert guests who specifically explored: regenerative tourism, the role and opportunities of the agri-food chain, mountain therapy and the mountain ethical charter, accessibility and enjoyment of the mountains for all, and environmentally friendly sports and recreational activities. Following the collection of case studies, identified among experiences of the interrelation between tourism, health and natural environments in Italy and Europe, the work continued by detailing the dimensions of wellbeing and analysing their characteristics. Activities, experiences and initiatives for wellness tourism have been arranged in clusters by assigning them a position with respect to the polarities of physical and psychological well-being. Each cluster-category was then evaluated according to five lines of polarities and characters to outline their profile and compare their positions. From the case studies and the framework of macro-categories of wellness tourism proposals, fundamental considerations arise for the setting up and design of new proposals, which are presented in the form of a practical guide intended for tourism operators and practitioners. The guide is therefore a ready-to-use output of work that offers reflections and practical stimuli for the tourism project, focusing on three basic aspects of proposal building: the target audience, the business

model and the communication plan. The materials produced thus formed the theoretical and reference basis for EGAPo proposal of a pilot action-project that conformed to the principles of *Adventure Therapy*. The exploratory action sought to combine, in a therapeutic experience in the Alpine environment, the approaches and benefits of sports practice with those of meditation and psychological reflection, both individual and group. An alternation of visions and concentration on different focuses that highlighted the wealth of stimuli and input that nature can offer, depending on the predisposition and the way in which it is listened to and received. The dialogue between territories and communities, nature and people, is brought to light through the implementation of a proactive approach to the natural environment and its properties, which also provides a glimpse of multiple possibilities of interpretation for sustainable tourism.

4. A pilot project on tourism and psychology: the experience of *Adventure Therapy*

4.1 The Adventure Therapy: methodology and relationship with the natural context of the area

In spite of the lack of an unambiguous definition, Outdoor Therapies are a category of therapy forms that share a core and are supported by a growing body of empirical evidence in recent years. In this context, reference is made to *Adventure Therapy* (AT) as a particular declination within the category of *Outdoor Therapies*. The two cardinal elements of AT are experiential learning, more specifically participatory involvement in activities carried out in the natural environment, and therapeutic intent. Having established the centrality of the demand for therapeutic support, the key mechanisms through which change in AT is elicited can be identified in:

- Nature: ecological experiences in the natural environment;
- Adventure: physical experiences between risk and safety;
- The space for reflection: therapeutic support and intentional conversations;
- Meaningful relationships: social experiences and connection with others.

4.1.1 Nature: ecological experiences in the natural environment

Nature is an essential element in the context of an AT programme and can be declined in different ways. In fact, nature provides both the main context in which activities take place and a set of features, opportunities and tools such that it acts as a co-facilitator of the therapeutic process (Harper, Rose, Segal, 2019). Studies have shown that immersing oneself in nature has positive effects in the direction of personal development and therapeutic success (Beringer, 2004) and that simply viewing natural environments can reduce anger, stress and anxiety while sustaining attention and interest as well as promoting feelings of pleasure (Bird, 2007). Nature offers the possibility to increase sensory awareness and enhance physiological and emotional regulation (Harper, Rose, Segal, 2019). In this perspective, exposure to nature may, however, elicit different responses in participants and trigger strong reactions especially in people with previous

traumatic experiences (Pryor et al., 2018). Nature can therefore be an unusual environment that can provide a therapeutic setting that, through exposure to the concreteness of nature itself, the inevitable direct consequences (rain, cold) and through the activities performed, predisposes participants to express and act out their emotional, cognitive and relational patterns. By providing immediate feedback in this regard, nature helps to generate an inner state of cognitive dissonance that can lead to a transformative experience (Beringer, 2004).

4.1.2 Adventure: physical experiences between risk and safety

In general, AT uses a variety of activities with the aim of providing experiences and opportunities to stimulate participants physically, emotionally and mentally (Gass, Gillis, Russel, 2012). Activities can be both relaxing and perceived with a subjective degree of risk. They can range, for example, from a walk and a Mindfulness session outdoors to a climb on steep terrain. From this perspective, notions such as challenge, risk and danger on the one hand and physical safety and psychological safety on the other emerge accordingly. These concepts are used both as therapeutic levers and as tools for designing the activities to be proposed to participants. A key factor in the therapeutic reach of AT programmes is in fact the relationship that is established between the participant's resources, the perceived level of challenge and the meaning that the experience takes on: what is experienced as a safe adventure by one person may be a serious misadventure for another and, consequently, lead to different personal considerations. The "success" of an activity, therefore, is not the complete overcoming of difficulties or the achievement of an objective with respect to a task, but it is the emotional involvement in the experience itself and the possibility of learning from it. The design and implementation of activities is therefore process-oriented and not outcome-oriented in an attempt to push participants out of their comfort zone and simultaneously provide opportunities to feel effective and adequate in different situations (ATE, 2017; Outdoor Therapies, 2021).

4.1.3 The space for reflection: therapeutic support and intentional conversations

If the activities and the environment in which they take place are a fundamental part of an AT programme because they provide experiences and opportunities, it is the reflection around these experiences that is the most relevant factor in stimulating change in the participants and transferring it into the everyday life of their lives. In this sense, it becomes important to create a space that is psychologically supportive in which to stimulate curiosity, exploration and sharing of one's own processes in the context of a pathway towards awareness and self-determination (Peeters, 2013; Ringer, 2002; Deane, Harrè, 2013). The presence of a reflective space can be structured at scheduled times of the day or exercised freely during the activities. In both circumstances, the therapist's function is to facilitate reflections in a non-directive manner that reflects and makes the participants' processes evident. In doing so, the therapist acts by directing attention to salient elements, proposing questions and, overall, assisting the user in taking on a different perspective. One way is, for example, to invite the participant to focus on the emotions experienced during a climb and then follow their development and extend the

reflections to different areas and life circumstances. Facilitation is therefore an emergent process rooted in the participant's personal and particular experience developed and mediated in the participant's own relationships with different professionals, the whole group of participants and the natural element and is intentionally directed towards awareness and change.

4.1.4 Meaningful relationships: social experiences and connection with the other

AT programmes generally take place in groups. This notation highlights how relationships are considered a fundamental dimension in AT and are therefore central to both the planning and operational phases. Functionally, it is useful to distinguish a number of possible significant relationships that exist between the subjects of the group and to which different therapeutic levers are attached. Among the most important are the individual participant's relationships with the therapist, with the mountain guide, with the group and with nature. The one-to-one relationship between participant and therapist is based on the therapeutic alliance, which is a key factor underlying therapeutic effectiveness (Luborsky, Singer, 1975; Bordin, 1979). In the context of AT, this relationship is established, developed and maintained on the basis of the therapist's accessibility and willingness also to share severe environmental conditions and relevant experiences by exercising empathy, acceptance and congruence (Elliot et al., 2003). The establishment in the relationship of a sense of trust and caring becomes the substrate on which the facilitation process, risk-taking, experimentation, insight and change are grafted (Greenberg et al., 1998). The mountain guide is the member of the group designated primarily to deliver the activities from a technical point of view and to ensure psychophysical safety during the course of the activities. Through his technical, social and communication skills, the mountain guide is a concrete and present mentor through whom specific skills can be learned directly and practised in a context of personal and interpersonal experimentation (Ringer, 1994). The group is in fact an interpersonal space where thoughts, emotions and relational modalities are expressed and acted upon. In this perspective, the AT group is a community that can be used as a therapeutic tool where to experiment, learn and exercise communication and social skills. This contributes to nurturing a sense of trust and mutual care and to building a supportive group culture by satisfying the needs for acceptance, inclusion and belonging (ATE, 2017). As highlighted above, in the context of TA, nature is a co-therapist and a meaningful relationship is established with it as a therapist. However, creating a connection with nature can be difficult especially for those who are functionally and conceptually disconnected from the natural element. Urbanisation, technology-related changes and socio-economic differences are examples of factors that can limit such a connection. To immerse oneself in the natural environment is to go towards oneself. Explicating and strengthening the human-nature relationship through experiencing it means giving nature time and space to exercise its therapeutic function: nature can be an ideal setting to observe both external and internal landscapes and scenarios (ATE, Outdoor Therapies, 2021). For this very reason, selecting the appropriate natural setting for the programme is crucial. It is a choice based on the resources of the area, both from a naturalistic point of view and in terms of accessibility to the designated sites. Above all, it is a way of

allowing participants to discover (but also rediscover) places of great touristic interest, but through a new modality geared towards psycho-physical well-being. Specifically, the VCO territory possesses a great wealth of unique environments, both from a historical and naturalistic point of view, suitable for hosting *Adventure Therapy* trails. Here the participant is provided with an optimal set of elements both to explore one's own internal psychophysical mechanisms, but also to broaden one's cultural background.

4.2 Methodology and activities of the pilot action

Within *Healps2*, the Protected Areas of Ossola (EGAPO) have developed a pilot project called "An adventure in wellness" focused on the organization of some *Adventure Therapy* weekends in the Ossola region. It is important to mention that the idea for the pilot action originated from a suggestion coming from a group of local professionals (psychologists and mountain guides who had been researching the topic of *Adventure Therapy* for a while) following the first *Innovation Technique* implemented by EGAPO: a series of five webinars, organized in May-June 2021 in order to stimulate a reflection on wellness and health tourism among local stakeholders¹.

The main objective of the pilot project was to improve and differentiate the tourist offer of the Ossola mountain areas, testing a new wellness experiential tourism product based on the local natural resources and skills. In September 2021 (first implementation phase) and June 2022 (first implementation phase), the Ossola Protected Areas organised two and one weekends respectively, jointly led by local psychologists and mountain guides. According to the *Adventure Therapy* methodology, participants were invited to take part in different outdoor activities (climbing, orienteering, trekking on different types of terrain and at night...) designed to challenge them and stimulate insights which could prove valuable in their everyday life. Each weekend was addressed to a small group of 7-8 participants, selected within two predefined age groups (18-35 and 36-55) in September and on the fitness level of people in June, in order to ensure a certain uniformity.

During the live-experience, the mountain guide adapted a predefined tentative schedule according to the weather conditions and the fitness level of participants, guiding them in carrying out safely all proposed activities. Under the guidance of the psychologist, on the other hand, participants reflected on their experiences, the emotions they felt and the lessons to be learned from it, both in a one-to-one and in a group setting. During all activities, the two professionals worked closely together, while still respecting their individual roles. Overnight accommodations were arranged in an Alpine hut, which have also provided a packed lunch for the second day. The group stay in this informal environment was an integral part of the experience and a source of further insights. The costs incurred in order to engage mountain guides and psychologists was covered within *Healps2* project, as well as every organizational and promotional cost. In order to

¹ Pilot identified with short action plan template, WP2, Deliverable D.T2.4.1, EGAPO Database documents 2022.

encourage the application of truly motivated participants, they have been asked to cover the cost of accommodation.

The pilot project was implemented within two of the most scenic spots in the Protected Areas of Ossola, taking places respectively at the Alpe Devero (4th-5th September 2021 and 4th-5th June 2022) and the Alpe Veglia (11th-12th September 2021) (figures 3, 4, 5). Both areas are deemed perfect to host the initiative as they are rich in different natural landscapes, surrounded by a number of mountain paths of varying difficulty and support additional outdoor activities as climbing. Also, they host a mountain hut, allowing the group to spend the night in the area.

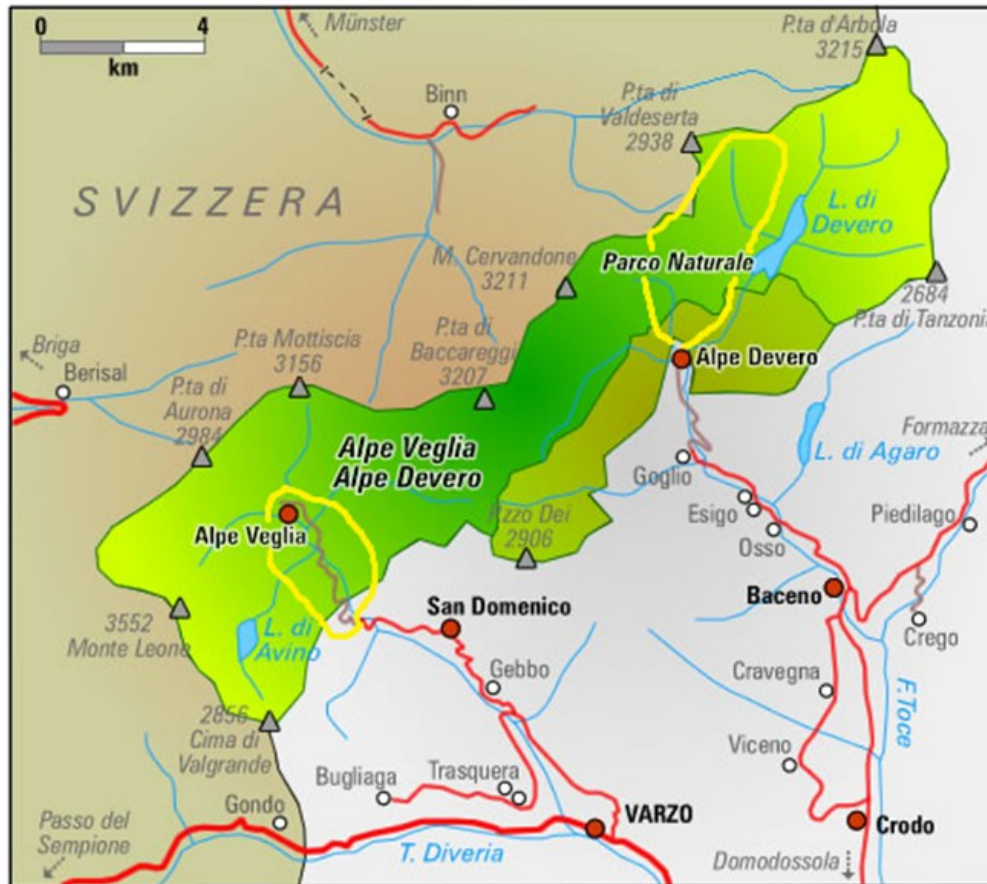


Fig. 3 – Map of the pilot action area.

Source: EGAPO, 2021

Fig. 4 – Adventure Therapy at Alpe Devero, participants facing the difficulties of the path – 4/5 September 2021. Source: EGAPO, 2021



Fig. 5 – Adventure Therapy at Alpe Veglia: follow up among participants and psicologists – 11/12 September 2021. Source: EGAPO, 2021

Since no infrastructural interventions were required, it can be seen that the list of resources needed to launch such an initiative was not prohibitive. Worth mentioning are:

- mountain guides and psychologists willing to try themselves out in an unusual setting, in cooperation with professionals bringing in different skills. Generally speaking, all involved subjects (from the promoter of the initiative, in this case the Protected Areas of Ossola, to the accommodation facility) must be ready to support at their best the common proposal with their professional skills;
- territorial setting allowing a variety of outdoor experiences without requiring extensive transfers (ideally, some valid options for bad weather conditions should be available, as well);
- at least one accommodation facility suitable to host a group experience;

- human resources taking care of organization and promotion (particularly challenging if the initiative is completely new to the area and to the involved professionals, certainly much less demanding in case of further repetitions);
- financial resources to cover part of the costs of the weekend, unless the goal is to test the new offer under real market conditions;
- financial resources to support promotion.

Much attention was paid to collecting feedback from participants, as a way to understand whether this pilot action could evolve into a regular proposal within the tourist offer of the Protected Areas of Ossola. Participants have, thus, been asked to fill out two short questionnaires:

- the first one was delivered at the end of the second day, in order to investigate the level of satisfaction and some different aspects emerged, as well as the willingness to pay for such an experience, in case the cost should not be covered for a significant part by project funds; a member of the EGAPo *Healps2* team concluded the weekend by presenting the entire project and asking to fill out the questionnaire;
- the second was sent via email after two months, in order to understand whether the *Adventure Therapy* experience had actually produced any changes in the daily lives of participants.

4.3 Findings and insights on the pioneering project

In general, it is firstly possible to highlight the aspects that worked well in relation to the implementation of the pilot project². Two factors mainly contributed to the positive outcomes:

1. Professional skills needed to develop this type of innovative tourism product were already available in the Ossola mountain area: a working group had already discussed the possible application of the *Adventure Therapy* methodology in the Ossola area and was eager to experiment it in a bottom-up governance approach; therefore, *Healps2* constituted the right and favourable opportunity to develop and realise its idea.
2. Ossola region lends itself very well as a testing ground for *Adventure Therapy* methodology, as it allows a variety of outdoor experiences without requiring long transfers. As mentioned earlier, the Pilot Action was carried out in two of the most scenic locations in the Ossola Protected Areas, Alpe Devero and Alpe Veglia, already known to hikers, sports tourists, families, and others. Both areas proved to be perfect for hosting the initiative and testing a particular product such as health tourism related to outdoor psychology, both for the services available and the setting created.

² Evaluation report on implemented pilot actions, WP2, Deliverable D.T2.4.2, EGAPo Database documents 2022.

Even if the three-weekend test didn't have a relevant impact in terms of tourist flows, it nevertheless generated a significant added value for Ossola region, since:

- they proved that there is a relevant demand for initiatives which can combine enjoyment of nature with psychological well-being and that Ossola areas lends itself very well for the development of this kind of tourism offer;
- they allowed a group of professionals who were already motivated to explore this field of activity to carry out an initial hands-on trial, motivating them to develop new proposals;
- the communication activities carried out in connection with the pilot action and its results helped strengthen the image of Ossola as a destination for wellness tourism.

The questionnaires filled out by participants provided very positive feedbacks: all of them enjoyed the overall experience, the activities they were involved in and the relationship with the professionals and the other group members. Probably even more important, some respondents declared that the *Adventure Therapy* weekend stimulated some positive changes in their everyday life, which were still to be felt two months after participation.

The second implementation phase (June 2022) specifically aimed at assessing the market viability of the *Adventure Therapy* tourism product. While in 2021 the focus was on feasibility and visitors experience, so the price each participant had to pay was quite low and did not allow to cover all costs, in 2022 a price much closer to market value was tested. The response was good, but not as positive as expected basing on previous feedback and on the significant interest shown by the press in 2021. Anyway, extending the pilot action over just one weekend did not allow to understand if this not completely satisfactory response originated from the increased price, or if other factors were at play, such as, for example, the difficulties in identifying the best communication channels for such a new and peculiar tourism product or, perhaps, even the specific chosen dates.

This second part of the *Adventure Therapy* concept generated relevant additional value for the region, since:

- it confirmed that there is a demand for tourism products combining enjoyment of nature with psychological well-being and that Ossola lends itself very well for the development of this kind of offer;
- it allowed a group of motivated professionals to further experiment with this concept and bring their interprofessional cooperation one step further;
- it helped strengthen the image of Ossola as a destination for wellness tourism.

Further testing phases could be required, perhaps also in connection with additional specific targets such as companies, for team building activities, or health care facilities which provide treatment of psychological disorders.

Based on the participants' feedback, it emerges that this pilot action can definitely be recommended to other cities/regions, where the necessary skills - psychologists and mountain guides willing to try out themselves in an unusual professional setting - are

available. Especially after the Covid pandemic, which has strained the psychological well-being of many people, an initiative which allows participants to seek their own balance in contact with nature and with the support of qualified practitioners responds to a widespread need.

5. Final considerations

The Alps constitute a geographical area with unique natural and cultural features; they also have an economic role at a wider scale, providing goods and services – such as water, agricultural goods, handicrafts, and recreation – for all of Europe, as well as being a hotspot of biodiversity, and a dynamic region in the field of innovation.

Many approaches and challenges have recently emerged for the development of new forms of enjoyment that look beyond the mere tourist experience within the mountain areas, connecting to deeper needs and opportunities as: reconnecting with the environment, getting to know nature and oneself through practices of well-being in a broad sense, implementing practices that help territories to live and develop in sustainable terms. The awakening of a renewed consciousness can be observed, generating a more solid connection between nature, psychology and tourism, and giving rise to new needs and drives towards experientiality, giving boost to those types of tourism based on slow, healthy and participated activities, oriented towards the enhancement and protection of territories.

As concerns the Alps, prerequisites and services for health tourism practices in Alpine regions range from specialised tourism services on specific medical treatments to natural resources that function as a basic or fundamental element of psychophysical well-being. Within this frame new immersive hybrid practices between exercise and meditation, enabled by the natural elements of the context - or the Alpine environment - can actually contribute to its sustainability.

New scenarios, recognised by the local communities and co-constructed by the tourists themselves, take the form of new ways of proposing and enjoying tourism that make it possible to realise the chances for recovery and thus to banish the negative signs of the past, particularly evident in inland mountainous areas, resulting from phenomena of abandonment, marginality and overall impoverishment.

The case of the pilot action analysed with reference to the Heals2 project and based on the particular methodology of Adventure Therapy makes it possible to point out the unexplored and fruitful possibilities for practices concerning health and wellness tourism in the Ossola valleys. They need to be more structured in order to involve other local bodies and businesses to co-create a concrete experiential tourism chain related to the environmental energies.

The development of sustainable tourism practices that correspond to objectives of personal growth and measures to support the social, environmental and economic development of the Alpine region and its local communities, can at the same time make it possible to cope with post-pandemic issues and to seize possible territorial or strategic opportunities.

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