

## **THE ITALIAN MODEL OF “ALBERGO DIFFUSO”: A POSSIBLE WAY TO PRESERVE THE TRADITIONAL HERITAGE AND TO ENCOURAGE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE APUSENI NATURE PARK**

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**Abstract:** Many studies have shown that protected areas, if properly managed, can determine the economic development of the involved territory. The main goal is to ensure a tourist flow that meets the ideas and the objectives of preservation and conservation, able to produce the best cultural, social and economic results with really low ecological prices. In order to protect and preserve, in Italy new forms of accommodation have been recently created, one of them being albergo diffuso, which is a hotel composed of several old and restored buildings located within the historical centre and situated at different distances one from another. One of the best examples of this type of accommodation can be found in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Abruzzo region, in the National Park of Gran Sasso-Laga Mountains, where this kind of rehabilitation process was started for tourist purposes, so that the old abandoned borough could come back to life. Seeing the success of this new form of tourism accommodation infrastructure we propose the implementation of this model of tourism development in a group of old wooden houses from the Giurcuța de Sus village in Apuseni Nature Park (ANP). The Giurcuța de Sus houses have a great architectural potential, many of them being well preserved. Traditional local houses will also become tourist attractions once the project of creating an infrastructure that follows the albergo diffuso model will be implemented.

**Key words:** Abruzzo Region, Giurcuța de Sus village, architectural potential, protected areas

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Many studies have shown that protected areas, if properly managed, can determine the economic development of the involved territory. The integrity of the natural environment, of waters, air, cultural heritage and local products represents nowadays the quality product that tourism is interested in. The tourist flow is related

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to the economic opportunities, to the service offers and it has the capacity to help the local economic development.

A protected area can turn into a strategic point, capable of transforming peripheral and poor regions into dynamic and flourishing areas, all due to the new flow of economic, social and cultural resources. The most efficient endogenous mechanism is the natural and cultural attractiveness offered by a protected area that arouses interest and attracts funds from a wealthier area to a poorer one. Therefore, this kind of attractiveness can create new jobs and bring higher earnings for the locals by reinforcing the local economy through the rehabilitation of abandoned spaces and buildings (Brundtland, 1987; Pratesi & Tassi, 1998; Rossi, 2010).

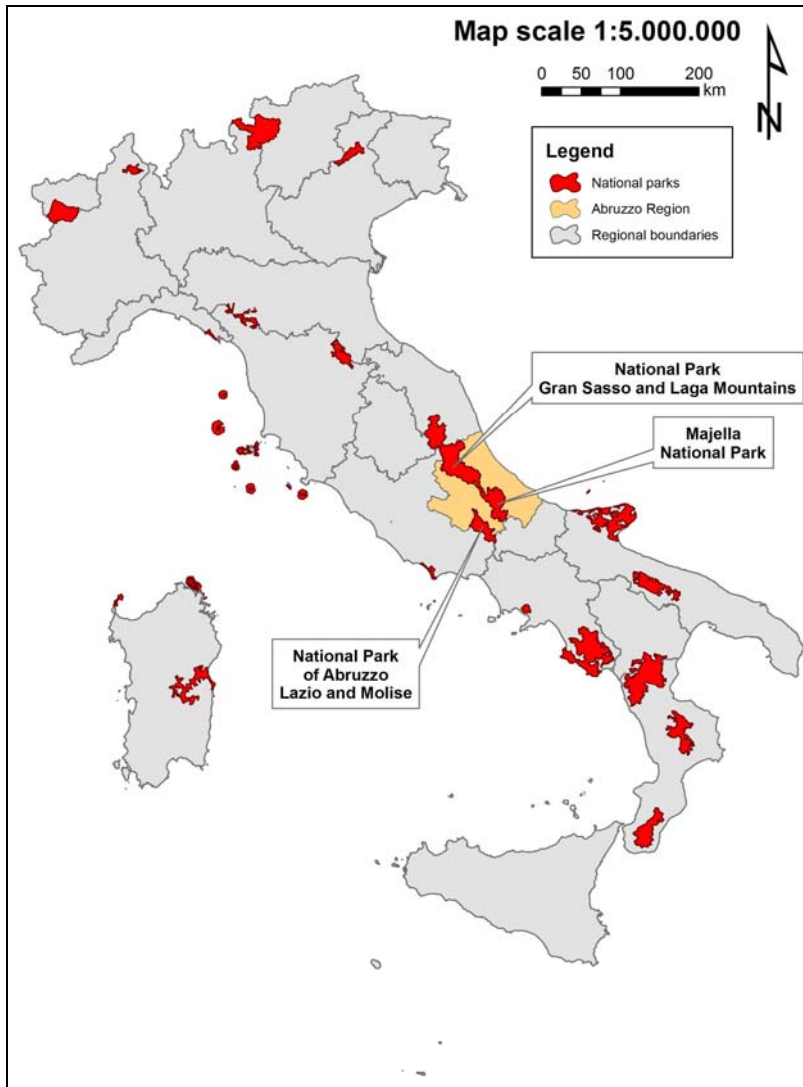
Ecotourism cannot be associated only with agro-tourism but also with every service, product and traditional or modern activity that has a preservation purpose. It is also important to maintain the authenticity of the local cultural and natural values. The main goal is to direct tourism towards the protected areas and to ensure a flow that meets the ideas and the objectives of preservation and conservation, able to produce the best cultural, social and economic results with really low ecological prices (Carta del turismo sostenibile, 1995; Smaranda, 2008).

For many parts of Europe, protected areas are already a real prospect of development and we can assert that a protected area represents a benefit in terms of economy. A National or Nature park with a well implemented development map can be the best form of long term investment for a territory. There are many examples of territories organized as protected areas and one emblematic example is the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise (Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise / PNALM), Italy, one of the oldest Italian Parks, that welcomes around 3.5 million visitors a year. This type of organization tries to protect and conserve the natural and cultural landscapes by transforming them into a worthy investment (Pratesi & Tassi, 1998; Rossi, 2010; Avram & Zarrilli, 2011; [www.parcobruzzo.it](http://www.parcobruzzo.it)). One of the positive effects of this park has been the creation of other parks on the regional territory of Abruzzo, such as the National Park of Gran Sasso-Laga Mountains (PNGS-ML) and the National Park of Majella (Figure 1). The establishment of other national parks in this side of the Apennines led to the declaration of this region as The Green Region of Europe and strengthened the idea of establishing other nationally protected areas.

The National Park of Gran Sasso-Laga Mountains (PNGS-ML) – The park, located in the heart of the Apennines, extends over three regions (Abruzzo, Lazio and Marche) and five provinces (L'Aquila, Teramo, Pescara, Rieti and Ascoli Piceno) 44 municipalities fall into its territory. In the PNGS-ML is located the highest mountain of the Apennines (Corno Grande, 2912 m), and the only glacier in southern Europe (Calderone). The geographical position, the height and the diversified geology of the mountains (limestones and dolomites on the Gran Sasso and Monti Gemelli, sandstone and marl on the Monti della Laga) determine a great variety of animal and plant species, as well as unique ecosystems and landscapes.

Nowadays, one of the main economic activities in PNGS-ML is tourism. In fact, the tertiary sector has advanced greatly recently. The tourist's holiday is organized in a modern ecological manner but there is also a number of traditional, agro-pastoral and artisanal activities that received an important touristic valence. Firstly, with the aim of transforming these activities into a tourist attraction, several research projects were conducted in order to rediscover the local traditions and customs, so they can be promoted. The initiation of these new activities has been caused not only by mass or traditional tourism, concentrated in two months a year, but also by the qualified sectors of tourism (i.e. naturalistic, school, business, sports and recreation tourism) and by the constant presence of more and more foreign tourists. These activities extend the tourist

season and determine a better distribution of resources. PNGS-ML produces, by protecting basic resources that are essential for life and development (water, air, soil, climate stability and biodiversity), a range of benefits that is difficult to express quantitatively. In this matter PNGS-ML represents a good opportunity for this part of the Apennines (Cavuta, 1995; Fuschi, Cavuta, 2004; [www.parconazionalegransasso.it](http://www.parconazionalegransasso.it)).



**Figure 1.** Abruzzo National Parks

A new form of accommodation: the *albergo diffuso*. In order to protect and preserve, in Italy new forms of accommodation have been recently created, one of them being *albergo diffuso*. *Albergo diffuso* is a hotel composed of several old and restored buildings located within the historical centre and situated at different distances one from another. Actually, it is called horizontal hotel precisely because it is not placed in a typical vertical building. Therefore, the rooms and the reception that compose this hotel can be found in different buildings, situated only few meters one from another (Bongiovanni, 2000, Dall’Ara, 2002).

It is a type of unitary accommodation infrastructure, created for the public that is interested in lodging in the vicinity of the villagers’ households, thus having direct contact with the residents while using the normal services of a hotel. The reception staff is also qualified to provide information regarding the history and the geography of the territory and also information regarding the tourist services, the organized activities and the possible itineraries.

Tourists can also find in the reception building a restaurant, a conference room and a bar (Figure 2), all available for the guests.



**Figure 2.** The conference room. Albergo diffuso Sextantio, from the borough of Santo Stefano di Sessanio (Italy)  
(Source: [www.sextantio.it](http://www.sextantio.it))

The Italian *albergo diffuso* confirms the idea of a tourist development that respects the territory, besides the fact that it successfully meets the market requirements. It perfectly fits the model of tourist sustainable development, based on local resources, careful with the quality of products and processes, aware of how important it is to preserve and enhance the local identity (Citarella, 1997; Carta, 1999; Toppan, 2003; Russo, 2006; Russo, 2007).

The idea of *albergo diffuso* appeared in Italy in the 80’s and it was used for the first time in Carnia, situated in the Friuli region, northern Italy, where, during the reconstruction process started after the earthquake that took place there, the first initiatives of using the destroyed historical centres for tourist purposes emerged.

In the establishment of this type of accommodation called “*widespread*”, Italy has been encouraged by the American model but also by the Portuguese *pousadas*, the Spanish *paradores*, and by the French *gîtes ruraux*. But Italy improves this tourist accommodation infrastructure by not only coming on the tourist market with a simple group of houses connected between them (just like in the American, Portuguese and Spanish case) but by creating a structure that provides normal hotel services. The guests of the *albergo diffuso* are indeed accommodated in separate rooms distributed in more or less populated historic centres but they receive the entire set of services of a normal hotel (Barazzutti, 1993; Dall’Ara, 2005; Russo, 2007; Cavuta, 2007).

In 2004, according to the statistics made for the “*First Conference on Albergo Diffuso*”, in Italy there were 60 tourist accommodation structures that proposed special forms of *widespread* accommodation. On the other hand, it is estimated that nowadays there are 200 communes in Italy that are interested in projects for this type of tourist accommodation infrastructure (Lovelock, 2005; Nadotti, 2005; Russo, 2007).

The number of this type of structures is increasing in Italy, especially in the central-southern part. Even the number of tourists who demand to be accommodated in this type of tourist structures keeps increasing.

The fact that *albergo diffuso* is known in other countries as a made in Italy concept proves that this kind of “*widespread hotel*” took the leading role in creating this kind of accommodation that respects the traditional landscape and represents a true reference point for those who want to move towards a sustainable development.

This type of accommodation structure is based on the recovering of the cultural heritage of small centres, proving that the incomes and the number of jobs can increase despite depopulation and without affecting the culture, the environment and the identity of the territory. At the same time, it helps to make the most of the local resources by reviving the artisanal activities, the traditional products and by encouraging the direct contact between tourists and village residents (Russo, 2009; Cavuta, 2009).

The *albergo diffuso* in Santo Stefano di Sessanio (Italy) – One of the best example of this type of can be found in the ancient borough of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, one of the 44 municipalities of the PNGS-ML. In 2001, in order to save it from abandonment, Daniele Kihlgren, a young business man of Italian and Swedish origins, bought a third of the village. He signed agreements with the regional administration and associations and submitted, based on these agreements, a restoration project that did not alter the traditional architecture of the old houses. The entire area, restored for touristic purposes, is under a preservation regime to the smallest details, including the everyday life with its traditions and customs that recreate the past in its entire picture. Still, it should be noted that updated technology devices are installed everywhere, like lightning sensors, electrically heated beds or hygienic services.



**Figure 3.** Authentic architectural element from Albergo Diffuso Sextantio, Santo Stefano di Sessanio (Italy) (Source: [www.sextanio.it](http://www.sextanio.it))



**Figure 4.** Authentic architectural element from Albergo Diffuso Sextantio, Santo Stefano di Sessanio (Italy) (Source: [www.sextanio.it](http://www.sextanio.it))

In order to protect the area each operation has carefully been studied and conducted by experts. New technologies have been used for the restoration of old boroughs made of stone, the Genti d’Abruzzo Museum being a great collaborator. This rehabilitation process was started for tourist purposes, so that the old abandoned borough could come back to life. The keywords that describe the *albergo diffuso* project are: sustainable development through the preservation of the local artistic and historical heritage, and quality of the offered conditions and services (Cavuta, 2007).

The buildings have been restored in a preservation regime, with a desire to recover every authentic architectural element (Figure 3 and 4), by eliminating all altering elements (layers of plaster or paint) in order to emphasize the stone walls.

The peasant houses returned to their former glory and their exterior and interior has been transformed into a space that brings to life the past centuries. The furniture is rustic and the beds and the sheets have a rustic appearance, as we can see in Figure 5. Following the most advanced models of the interactive era, technologic services have been added to the preserved rustic style: electrical equipment with diffuse light, central heating system, personal hygiene services (Figure 6 and 7), internet.



**Figure 5.** Rooms from Albergo diffuso Sextantio, Santo Stefano di Sesanio (Italy)  
(Source: [www.sextanio.it](http://www.sextanio.it))



**Figure 6.** Room from Albergo diffuso Sextantio, Santo Stefano di Sesanio (Italy)  
(Source: [www.sextanio.it](http://www.sextanio.it))



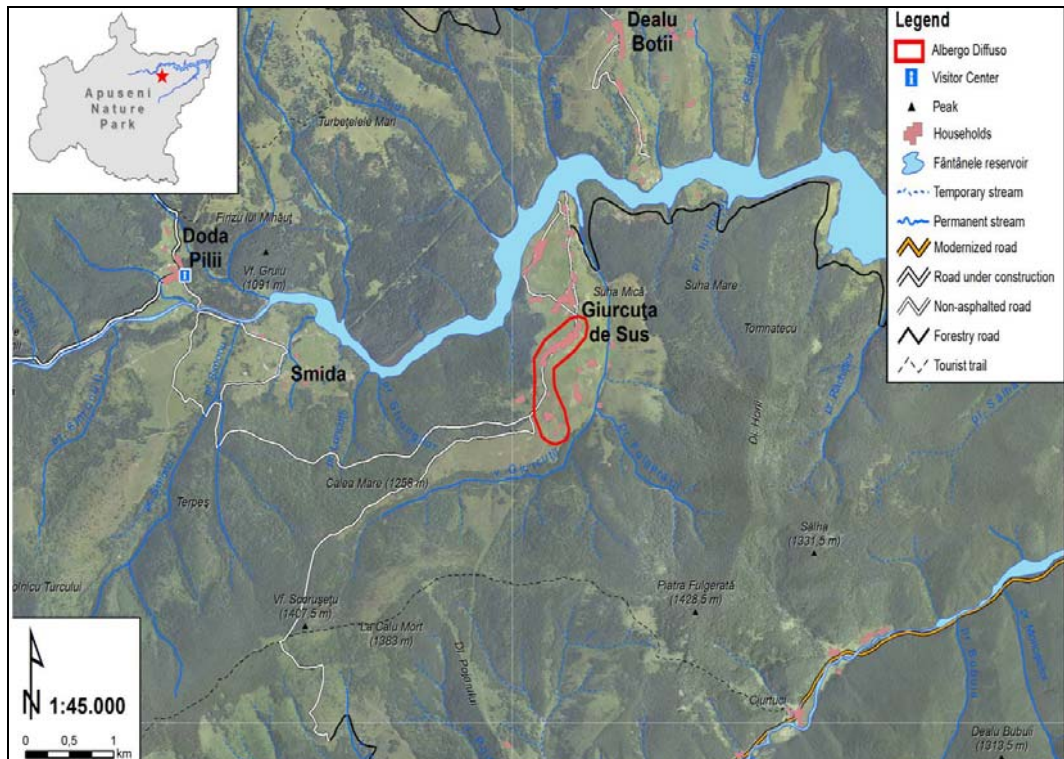
**Figure 7.** Bathroom from Albergo diffuso Sextantio, Santo Stefano di Sesanio (Italy)  
(Source: [www.sextanio.it](http://www.sextanio.it))

Besides constant accommodation and meals, the place also offers the possibility to organize weddings and banquets, concerts of classical music and opera. The local economy was enriched. The production of traditional products increased, the lentils from Santo Stefano di Sessanio and the saffron attained greater value once the borough opened towards tourism. It also got a lot of media attention (especially from the English and the American ones), and became a target for tourists looking for traditional and original environment.

It's also worth noting that environmental associations in Italy, such as Italian Parks Association, Italian Federation of Parks and Nature Reserves and Legambiente Association, promoted and promote this type of accommodation. This idea is also found

in European projects that deal with the protection, the preservation and the enhancement of the natural heritage for tourism, using peasant houses, old farms, mansions, refuges, sheepfolds and castles for the tourist infrastructure in protected areas .

A proposal of implementing the *albergo diffuso* model in the Apuseni Nature Park (ANP) - Seeing the success of this new form of tourism accommodation infrastructure we propose the implementation of this model of tourism development in a group of old wooden houses from the Giurcuța de Sus village (Figure 8 and 9) in Apuseni Nature Park (Pop, 2007; Moș, 2008; Planul de Management al Parcului Natural Apuseni, 2008; Linc et al., 2011).

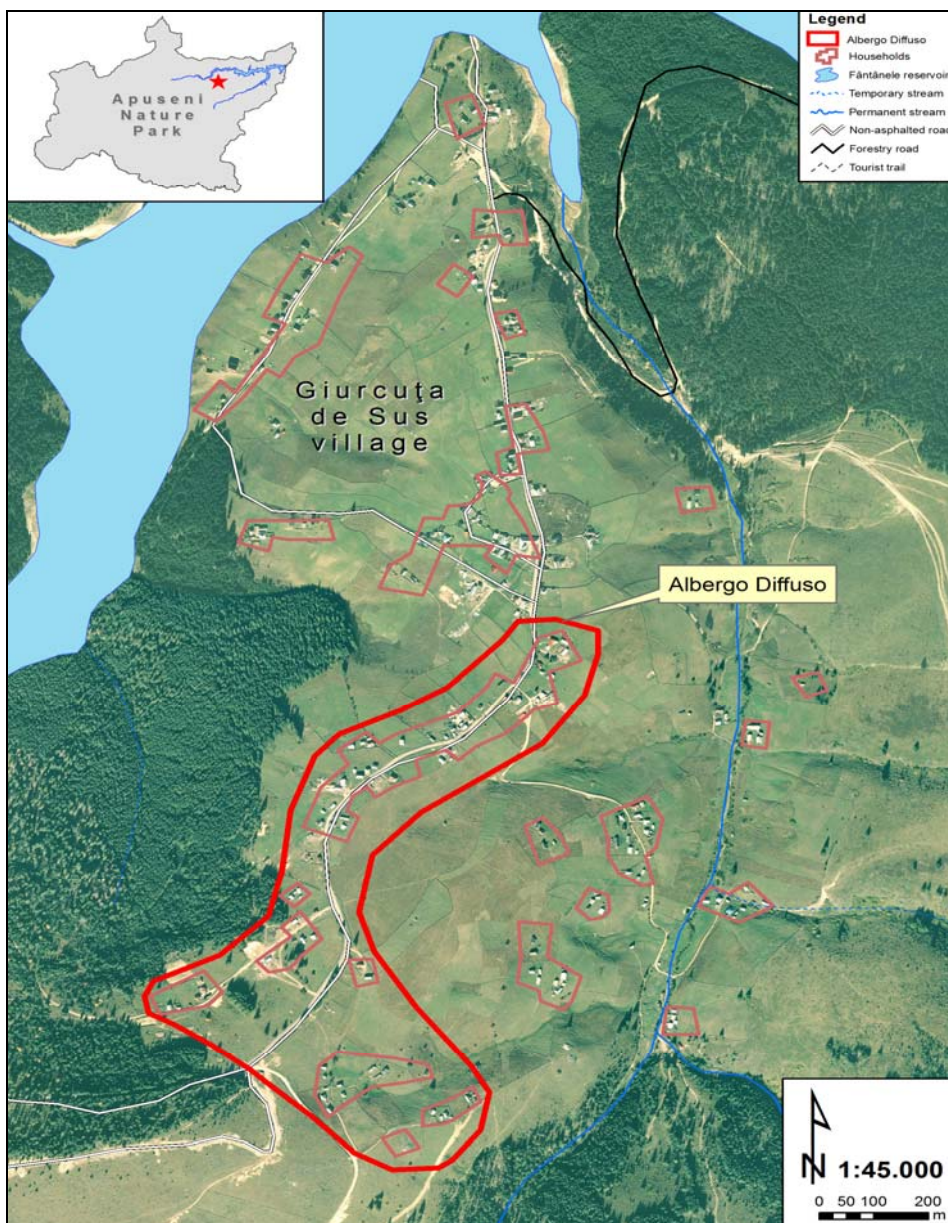


**Figure 8.** Giurcuța de Sus village in Apuseni Nature Park (ANP)

Giurcuța de Sus, situated in the quiet rustic landscape of the Apuseni Mountains in the Cluj county, is a village that registers a high percentage of depopulation and abandonment of old wooden houses (Netea, 1977; Surd & Turnock, 2000; Petrea, 2004). Nevertheless, the architectural potential of the Giurcuța de Sus houses is important for the traditional architecture of the Apuseni Mountains. The preservation of such architectural and cultural heritage can turn into an essential resource for the development of tourism in Giurcuța de Sus and it can also turn into an integrated part of the sustainable development, the only form of development accepted on the territory of a protected area (Surd, 1992; Abrudan & Turnock, 1998; Cocean & Dezsi, 2001; Linc et al., 2011).

The Giurcuța de Sus houses have a great architectural potential, many of them being well preserved. Traditional local houses would also become tourist attractions once the project of creating an infrastructure that follows the *albergo diffuso* model will be implemented. Specifically, the proposal supports the saving of the traditional wooden houses located in the northern part of the village, next to the forest (Figure 10). The house number 52 (Figure 11) would be used as a reception just like in the Italian example and would work as a reception place but also as a tourist information centre. The old school

(Figure 12) would be transformed into a conference room in order to keep the educational purpose of this place that is abandoned at the moment. The village shop (Figure 13) would be transformed into a restaurant called Restaurant Magazinul Sătesc (Restaurant Village Shop) and the old bar would become a bar called Birt (old name for bar in Romanian).



**Figure 9.** Giurcuța de Sus village

The conference room could be used for formal occasions and for organizing the “*dances*”, the famous dance evenings in the villages of the Apuseni Mountains. This could be a way to preserve the tradition of “*dances*” that used to represent a pretext for people of all ages to gather, listen to music and dance.





**Figure 10.** Group of houses suggested for Albergo diffuso



**Figure 11.** House number 52 from Giurcuța de Sus suggested for reception



**Figure 12.** The old school from Giurcuța de Sus (ANP)



**Figure 13.** The village shop and the Bar from Giurcuța de Sus (ANP)



**Figure 14.** Traditional house from Giurcuța de Sus (ANP)



**Figure 15.** Traditional house from Giurcuța de Sus (ANP)

This kind of meetings can help people to spend more time together and take them away from the television programs that keep them in their houses. Concerts of different genres can be organized in order to satisfy every category of public and also to stimulate music education and conservation of the cultural heritage. Students from the ANP area could also organize different concerts and performances, thereby stimulating the recovery of local folk tradition.

The whole project of creating an *albergo diffuso* should be done in collaboration with experts from the Village Museum in Cluj because putting these houses in a preservation regime requires careful studies on all conservation techniques.

## CONCLUSIONS

Following the Italian example of Santo Stefano di Sessanio (in the National Park of Gran Sasso-Monti della Laga), where a new form of accommodation – the *albergo diffuso*, which is a hotel composed of several old and restored buildings located within the historical centre and situated at different distances one from another – has been established, we propose here the preservation and the rehabilitation of the architectural and cultural heritage of Giurcuța de Sus, a village situated in the Apuseni Nature Park (ANP), in the Cluj county. The Giurcuța de Sus houses have a great architectural potential, many of them being well preserved. Therefore, these traditional local houses could be transformed into accommodation facilities and could also become tourist attractions once the project of creating an infrastructure that follows the *albergo diffuso* model would be implemented. Such a project could turn into an essential resource for the development of tourism in the region and become an integrated part of the sustainable development, the only form of development accepted on the territory of a protected area.

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