

## THE RURAL TOURISM CHALLENGE IN PESCARA'S HILLY LANDSCAPE, ITALY: AWARENESS, INTEGRATION, SUSTAINABILITY

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**Abstract:** The Pescara's hilly area encompasses 21 towns around the metropolitan area of Pescara (Abruzzo, Italy) and represents an interesting case study with which to analyse its unexpressed potential for rural tourism in the light of a growing interest in authentic, identity-focused and country tourism. After discussing emerging rural profiles from demographic, agricultural and morphological point of views, this paper aims to offer an overview of the current characteristics of tourism offer (accommodation, attractions, promotion and integration strategies) and tourist demand (arrivals and overnight stays). A fundamentally descriptive approach was implemented: carrying out a SWOT analysis strengths and weaknesses, potential opportunities and threats are analytically observed. Results shows that although rural tourism represents a clear opportunity for local development, the hilly landscape of Pescara suffers both of unawareness of its own potential and lack of offer's integration. Sustainability issues are also relevant. A 'systemic' view of rural tourism and potential in the overall regional tourism offer could better promote and valorize the local heritage of the Pescara's hilly landscape.

**Key words:** rural tourism, awareness, integration, sustainability, hilly landscape, Pescara

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### RURAL TOURISM: THE COMPLEXITY OF A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON

The understanding of 'rural' has undergone a radical transformation since the 1970s: from an undifferentiated perspective which accorded the countryside the exclusive function of food producing area, an increasingly differentiated vision of agriculture has taken shape (Wilson, 2007; 2008) which attributes it with roles involving reproducing and safeguarding the natural and human environment, as well as transforming and trading agricultural products (Belletti & Berti, 2011; Sun et al., 2011). At the same time changes have taken place in tourist demand with a growing interest in forms of tourism

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more distant from mass tourism, more responsible and attentive to sustainability, to farming life, and interested in authentic, identity-focused and local tourism experiences (Dincă, 2016; Fuschi, 2012; Fuschi & Di Fabio, 2012; Fuschi & Pascetta, 2015).

Rural tourism is therefore a complex phenomenon (Lane, 1994) as a result of the substantial difference between tourism in rural areas - characterised by a mere geographical coincidence between countryside and tourism - and rural tourism based on rural characteristics themselves, however subjective and indeterminate. This difference is made even more ambiguous by identification methodologies for 'rural' which vary not simply from nation to nation but also in literature. Deroi (1991) and Oppermann (1996), in particular, have defined rural tourism according to accommodation type, Sharpley & Roberts (2004) in terms of socio-cultural framework, and Lane (1993) in terms of 'rural character'. The significance of rural tourism as a fundamental component in territorial development is promoted at European level (Hjalager, 1996). The Leader initiative set the foundations for a new vision of agriculture as multi-functional and diversified, while the Cork Conference of 1996 identified the principles of rural development namely endogeneity (understood as traditional features, excellence and recognisability), inter-generational sustainability and product-countryside integration (Cawley et al., 2008). The Cork Declaration 2.0 (2016), emblematically entitled 'A Better Life in Rural Areas', identified 10 programmatic points including prosperity promotion in rural areas by means of innovation and integration of rural activities, enhanced accessibility, sponsoring the agricultural chain, safeguarding the environment and the countryside and improvements in development process governance.

In this paper authors adopt a fundamentally descriptive approach: after the geographical definition of the case study area (section 2), the overview of the characteristics of the Pescara's hilly landscape (section 3) and the reconstruction of the main features of the current rural tourism offer and demand (section 4), a SWOT analysis is carried out (section 5) in order to discuss awareness, integration and sustainability issues.

### THE RURAL CHARACTER OF THE PESCARA'S HILLY LANDSCAPE: CATEGORISATION CRITERIA FOR A SYNTHESIS

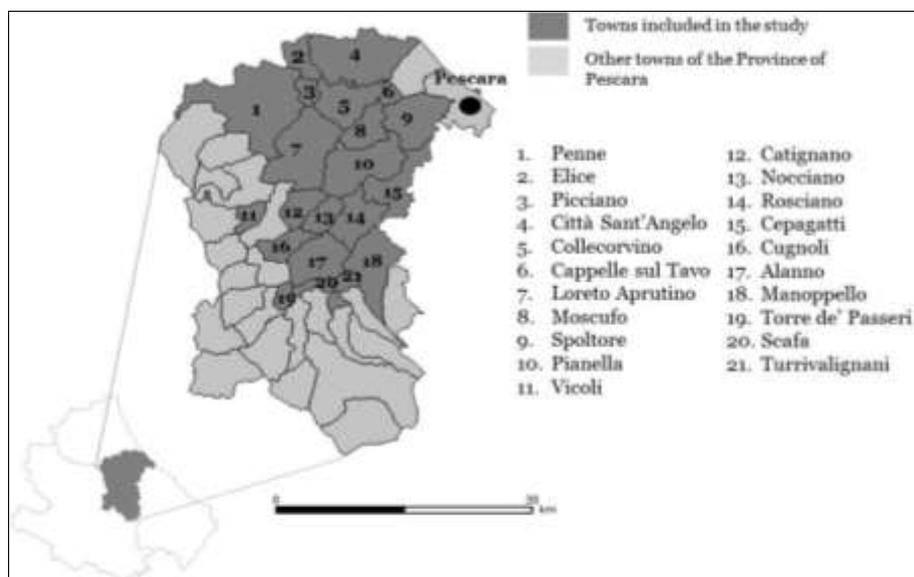


Figure 1. The hilly towns of Pescara's landscape, (Source: ISTAT)

In order to geographically circumscribe the case study, an altitude criterion was adopted defining as hilly those towns in the Pescara's Province which are not on the coast<sup>1</sup> and less than 600 above sea level in altitude, in line with the parameters of the Italy's National Statistics Institute. 21 towns were thus labelled hilly and encompassed (Figure 1).

Subsequently, to observe the rural dimensions of this circumscribed hilly context, two indicators were implemented, legitimated not solely by the literature (Tinacci Mossello et al., 2011; Randelli et al., 2014) but also by the National Rural Network<sup>2</sup>: the average population density and the agricultural specialisation. The general threshold adopted by average density is equal to or lower than 150 inhabitants per Km<sup>2</sup>. Beyond this threshold a town is no longer considered rural. We chose to use agricultural specialisation as a parameter in relation to the regional average. More specifically, agriculture's added value was calculated in relation to the added value of other activities in the same town, comparing them with the same ratio on a regional scale.

Formula (also adopted by CRESA)<sup>3</sup>:

$$\frac{AV(A)m}{AV(O)m} \times \frac{AV(O)r}{AV(A)r}$$

In which:

AV(A)m= added value of agriculture in every town

AV(O)m= added value of other activities in every town

AV(O)r= added value of other activities on a regional level

AV(A)r= added value of agriculture on a regional level

Simultaneously adopting the demographic criterion and the agricultural specialisation one, as many as 7 towns (Scafa, Turrivalignani, Torre de' Passeri, Città Sant'Angelo, Cappelle sul Tavo, Spoltore and Cepagatti) should be considered non-rural. We however included these towns in the study due to their geographical proximity and characteristics and also on the basis of the National Rural Network's classification which numbers them as intermediate rural and intensive agricultural towns (Figure 2).

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LANDSCAPE

The observed landscape falls within the 'sub-coastal clayey and sandy hilly landscape', morphologically characterised by flattish high ground, divided up by deep valleys and steep slopes in which flysch and equally landslide phenomena are commonplace. In functional terms this landscape falls within the agricultural regionalisation corresponding to the Pescara coastal hills (8 towns), Media Pescara (6 towns) and Penne hills (7 towns). Human settlement has undergone alternating fortunes here: from a high population in the 19th century, organised around the hill towns and sharecropping, to the depopulation resulting from long and short distance emigration, the latter towards the provincial capital and, in general, towards coastal towns and those along the roads being built in the valleys above all in the post- Second World War.

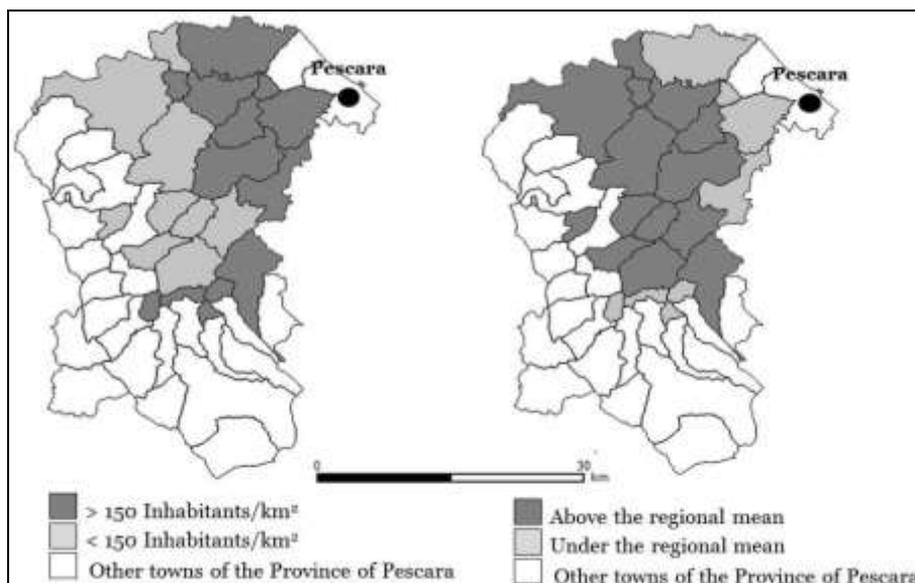
But already in the early 1980s this hilly country strip was the location of choice for those suburb building processes, initially, and then peri-urbanisation, later, starting from Pescara, redesigned the geography of the hilly country sites and redefined the urban-countryside relationship. In fact, the demographic growth of the hilly towns - sustained by a

<sup>1</sup> An exception was made for Città Sant'Angelo which, though encompassing a small coastal strip, stretches around 62 square kilometres inland and is strongly oriented in this direction

<sup>2</sup> This is the programme with which Italy has taken part in the 'European Rural Network Programme' whose objective is to facilitate exchanges of experience and know-how between those living and working in rural areas

<sup>3</sup> CRESA is the Center for Regional Studies on economic and social issues of Abruzzo Region. The Center periodically collects and elaborates data about occupation and economic trends.

parallel decentralisation process in economic-manufacturing activities and in part by a local entrepreneurial vocation - registered a population growth of around 32% and an increase in urban hill density with as many as 4 towns over the 10,000 inhabitant threshold (in 1981 there were only 2) while settlement characteristics showed an overall urban design deriving mainly from speculative real estate logics generally not consciously planned.



**Figure 2.** Rural character in the hilly towns of Pescara's landscape (average population density on the left, agricultural specialisation on the right), (Source: ISTAT and CRESA)

Therefore the residential framework represents the progressive adaptation of the local population to the changing processes at work on the hill strip, confirming a mixed structure revolving around 'centres, nuclear settlements and scattered houses' which, if on one hand reiterate the connection with the area's agricultural vocation, on the other they reflect the great transformations which have taken place guided by the extraordinary growth in industrial and tertiary sector activities principally located in the valley bottoms on a continuous network and in a succession of towns, manufacturing plants and large scale distribution retail outlets. Today the area is a mixed landscape: more compact and spatially continuous the sub-coastal hilly area, where greater population density is accompanied by a more marked co-penetration between urban and rural spaces -in all their physical, economic and social characteristics-, more diluted, fragmented and discontinuous the inland hilly areas where the breadth of agricultural space and more marked production specialisation is reflected by a higher added environmental value (despite the greater economic unbalances in the central, more congested central spaces).

### THE TOURISM OFFER AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOURIST DEMAND

In order to understand the characteristics of tourism in this area the special features of its accommodation, potential tourist attractions and promotion and integration strategies have been analysed. In the case study area there are overall a total of 164 accommodation facilities offering 2,569 beds. They are especially no strictly hotels accommodation typology (guest houses, holiday farmhouses, youth hostels, B&Bs) which

account for around 84% of the total accommodation facilities but with just 51% of total beds of the area. Holiday farmhouses and B&Bs merit a separate mention. The former are regulated nationally in Italy by Law no. 730 (1985), partially amended by Law no. 96 (2006). From a strictly legal perspective holiday farmhouse refers to accommodation offered by agricultural business people using their own business means and in an interconnected and complementary way (crops, forestry activities, cattle breeding) with agricultural activities which have to remain the main source of income. This type of accommodation - around 15% of the total Abruzzo holiday farmhouse offer - would appear to be especially well-suited to the rural tourism paradigm, in that it generally has a low environmental impact, preserves the area's agricultural and/or natural identity and can be brought to fruition the conservational restoration of pre-existing buildings. Furthermore, by eating home-made food and drink and participating to farmers' organized recreational or cultural activities, tourists can explore and experience local authenticity to the full and live the rural tourism life (Cianfalone & Cardile, 2014; Sims, 2009). B&Bs are also common (around 8% of the regional offer) and, whilst less structured than farm holiday hotels, enable the rural landscape and its attractions to be enjoyed in a way which is more independent from the tourist perspective but not necessarily less related to the area's rural characteristics. The area's holiday farmhouses and B&Bs, together with other non-hotel accommodation types, are decidedly widespread: with the exception of Città Sant'Angelo and Penne, whose provision is 22% and 15% of the total respectively, the average provision percentages are up to 9% (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Overall accommodation provision (Data source: Abruzzo Region, 2014)

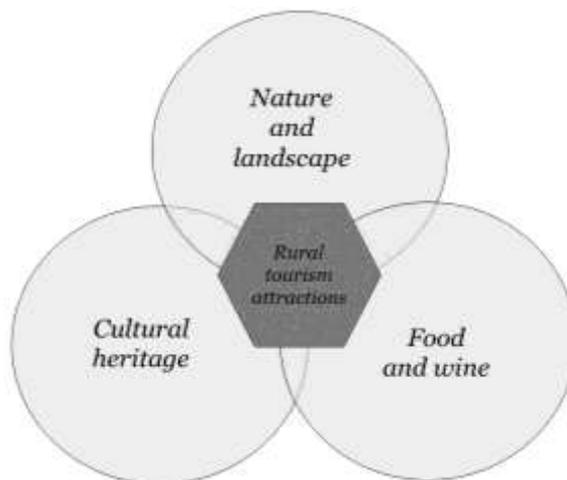
Type of accomodation	Number of facilities	Beds
Hotels	5 stars	1
	4 stars	6
	3 stars	10
	2 Stars	3
	1 stars	6
Others	Camp sites	0
	Holiday villages	0
	Guest houses	16
	Agritourisms	55
	Youth hostels	2
	B&Bs	65
Total	164	2569

The distribution of the 26 hotels is especially concentrated: Città Sant'Angelo contains more than 42% of the case study area's hotels, a capacity of 49% of beds. Next come Loreto Aprutino and Cepagatti which together constitute 18% of the overall available beds. In addition to tourist accommodation, rural tourism services also encompass attractions which, in the literature analysed (Fuschi & Pascetta, 2015; Garrod et al., 2006; Ilieş & Ilieş, 2015; MacDonald & Jolliffe 2003; Richards, 2002), can be grouped into three main types (landscape and nature, food and wine and cultural heritage), strictly interconnected and integrated from a tourist perspective (Figure 3).

The beauties of the landscape are attractions in themselves because they evoke the 'back to nature' ideal and satisfy the need for relaxation of an increasing tourist demand. In the case study the landscape's beauty and historic value has been confirmed by the Italian Department for Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policy which has inserted the Loreto Aprutino's olive groves into the Italian Historic Rural Landscapes list. In addition the high natural importance of this landscape is protected by the Regional Nature Reserve

'WWF Oasis' in Penne and the Natural Local Park in Vicoli. The range of wine and food attractions is especially wide. 'PDO Aprutino Pescaraese' safeguards one of Italy's most famous extra-virgin olive oils, made from the olive cultivars Dritta, Leccino and Toccolana. The variety of 'Colline Pescaresi' PGI wines (Montepulciano, Trebbiano, Pecorino, Cococciola, Passerina) is equally fine as is the food local specialities (charcuterie specialties, 'Pasta alla mugnaia'). A full analysis of the cultural heritage present in the 21 towns of the case study would be a complex matter. Limiting ourselves solely to material cultural heritage, there are 15 churches of historic and artistic interest, 4 archaeological sites, 6 castles and a noteworthy range of museums.

Furthermore Città Sant'Angelo and Penne have been included in the Most Beautiful Towns in Italy list<sup>4</sup> and Brittoli, Cappelle sul Tavo in the Authentic Italian Towns list<sup>5</sup>. Accommodation and attractions' availability do not in themselves lead to tourism and must be accompanied by effective promotion strategies in order to create tourist perceptions and images in peoples' minds and thus activate demand (Smith, 1994; Wilson et al., 2001; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Kotler et al., 2006; Shafiei et al., 2017).



**Figure 3.** The rural attraction 'cornerstones'

Lastly, the official internet sites of each town, the participation of individual towns in rural type tourist itineraries and being listed as Destination Management Companies (DMC)<sup>6</sup> have been analysed for an understanding of whether tourist promotion and integration strategies coherent with the area's emerging rural identity exist or otherwise (Hopkins, 1998). In-depth analysis shows that - at the moment - only 3 towns (Pianella, Città S. Angelo, Manoppello) have web pages entirely devoted to tourism in general, and these do not promote rural identity as their distinguishing characteristic. Others show sporadic and disorganised indications on restaurants, accommodation structures and local food and wine. This shows a limited awareness of the tourism potential more consistent with the area's landscape and historic characteristics, and in general an equally limited attention to the local development implications of tourism services.

<sup>4</sup> This is a nationwide association set up in 2001 enjoined by towns with high urban quality standards and the desire to promote their tangible and intangible cultural heritage

<sup>5</sup> Set up in 2007, it's a nationwide association of towns and organizations with the aim to promote responsible models of tourism respecting local traditions and the living standards of local people

<sup>6</sup> DMCs are organisations which perform local governance and tourist project management roles as well as networking between the interests, demands and activities of the public and private players involved, in accordance with regional, national and EC tourist planning objectives

As far as towns' participation in tourist itineraries is concerned: 7 towns (Alanno, Manoppello, Scafa, Città Sant'Angelo, Elice, Picciano, Penne) have signed up to the so-called 'Colline Aprutine' and 'Tremonti e Valle Peligna' Wine Roads project (Fuschi & Di Fabio, 2012) while Pianella, Moscufo, Loreto Aprutino, Città S. Angelo and Manoppello are part of 2 cultural itineraries (Romano, 2005). More recently (June 2016) 5 towns (Penne, Elice, Città S. Angelo, Catignano and Spoltore) have signed up to the DMC 'Terre del Piacere' while a further 6 (Scafa, Manoppello, Turrivalignani, Vicoli, Loreto Aprutino and Penne itself) have chosen the DMC 'Terre Pescaresi'. Moving on to an analysis of demand, it can be observed that in 2013 (latest available data) 47,388 tourist arrivals (134,137 overnights) were registered - around 3% of the regional arrivals and less than 2% of regional overnights. Around 87% of tourists are Italian (77% of overnights) while 13% are foreigners, well above the regional average of foreign tourists (4%). More than 86% of tourists prefer to stay at hotel accommodation. This indicates that tourists themselves are not aware of the 'rural' character of tourism they could experience in the area.

Demand is markedly concentrated into specific towns as a result of alternative tourism services provision which seems more attractive than a fully deniable rural offer.

Città Sant'Angelo, in particular, with its proximity to the seaside, registered 37,537 arrivals (approximately 79% of the case study's total) while Loreto Aprutino, famous for its cultural heritage and the availability of conference facilities, registered a total of 5,764 arrivals (around 12% of the case study). A further relatively successful destination (608 arrivals) is Manoppello, a well-known pilgrimage centre with its 'Basilica del Volto Santo'.

#### **A PERSPECTIVE INSIGHT VIA SWOT ANALYSIS: AWARENESS, INTEGRATION AND SUSTAINABILITY**

The special features of the tourism offer and demand prompt a series of considerations on the current rural tourism status quo in the Pescara's hilly landscape and give us a perspective vision of potential local tourism development trajectories. A useful tool, to this end, is so-called SWOT analysis, widely used in tourism studies (Kotler et al., 2006). The strengths of this case study include, first and foremost, good accommodation and attraction accessibility by means of a wide-ranging road network (provincial, state and motorway) and a regional airport nearby (Table 2). A second strength is the wealth and variety of attractions which typically connote the rural tourism paradigm and good natural environment conservation despite the previously cited suburbanisation and peri-urbanisation processes. On the demand side, the area is attractive to foreigners probably as a result of a certain renewed interest in the Abruzzo landscape in the international press.

Major weaknesses (Table 2) include the limited awareness of local tourist potential by institutions emerging both from scarce planning skills and a lack of fully integrated promotion strategies. If local areas are viewed as 'project' (Dematteis, 1995) and 'intent' (Miani, 2008) the development processes, especially in relation to external tourism factors, need to be agreed, shared, governed and integrated. In the case study's area institutional, network and strategy fragmentation weakens local social capital (Trigilia, 1999; Gastaldi, 2005) and deprives the admittedly limited co-operation processes of effectiveness (Jamal & Getz, 1995). In essence, as the absence of full awareness of specifically rural attractions and tourist choices shows, the case study area is more a question of tourism in rural areas than rural tourism *per se* (Pollice, 2012).

Rural tourism *per se* undoubtedly represents an autonomous and intrinsically heterogeneous development opportunity for this area. Demographic growth linked to suburbanisation and peri-urbanisation processes notwithstanding, the hilly towns still

show a clear economic and functional dependency from the proximate more developed urban area. It is thus by means of a self-aware rediscovery of the local area and its agricultural and artisan vocations that endogenous, shared and sustainable development trajectories can be identified (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

If in fact sustainability is to be understood not simply from an environmental but also from the social and cultural perspectives, rural tourism could represent an ideal opportunity for identity re-appropriation and thus sustainable development. Such a challenge, however, can only be taken on successfully if local players and institutions activate a bottom-up network perspective capable of bringing together the fragmentary and broken up tourist provision and attraction elements in a clearly recognisable tourist 'product' (Fanfani, 2001) accepted by the local community (Bramwell, 1994). Lastly, in a systematic vision of the regional development trajectory the Pescara's hilly landscape could, enrich the regional pre-existing tourism offer, somewhat frozen in the sea-mountain dualism and extend the tourist season.

The opportunities observed are not, however, risk free. The atavistic lack of governance which is such a historic feature of Abruzzo tourism could impact even more negatively on this territory, a complex and diversified landscape of great natural and historic value which requires safeguarding and management not simply in economic and functional terms but also as regards its symbolism, identity and attractiveness (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2007). The risk is that development 'at any cost' decisions are made which aren't coherent with a sustainability ideal, intimately bound up with an orthodox vision of rural tourism (Sun et al., 2011). Finally, the preciousity of the case study's landscape could be undermined by the wide-ranging suburbanisation processes currently underway.

**Table 2.** SWOT analysis results

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weakness</b>
Easy accessibility Wealth and variety of tourist attractions Good natural environment conservation Tourism demand from abroad	Limited awareness of local tourist potential Limited planning skills Lack of fully integrated tourist promotion strategies Weak social ties and cooperation strategies Tourism in rural areas rather than rural tourism
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
Autonomous development from powerful economic areas Heterogeneity of the potential development trajectories Chance to develop collateral activities (for example artisan crafts) Co-operation culture development Regional tourism provision enrichment Complementarity to other forms of tourism	Lack of governance Development 'at all costs' ideal Suburbanization processes Environmental sustainability problems

### CONCLUSIONS

For the Pescara's hilly landscape rural tourism represents a development perspective which has yet to be explored despite the fact that all the fundamental elements required for this type of tourism exist: amenities of landscape, 'low impact' accommodation (holiday farmhouses and B&Bs), good infrastructure, historic and cultural sites and attractions in line with post-modern tourist demand requirements. But currently the Pescara's hilly landscape is for the most part a mere label of an area in which 'other' forms of tourism are experienced. The marked tourism polarisation expressed by certain towns is revealing.

The case of Città Sant'Angelo is emblematic, with around 80% of visits attracted by its proximity to seaside tourism while Loreto Aprutino owes much to neighbourhood urban-conference centre tourism (Pescara-Chieti urban area). At a time in which rural areas are acquiring again a strategic value and rural spaces are taking pride of place in agricultural reorganisation and the wider re-composition of the landscape, the central role to be played by rural tourism in rediscovering and re-valuing shared local heritage is clear. In the case study area, rural tourism could play a decisive role favouring progressive re-appropriation - in awareness terms - of a rural substrata capable of:

- targeting and/or re-launching local development processes with employment opportunities (especially for the young and women);
- translating marginality of many inland hill towns into opportunity by means of a new understanding of the urban-countryside relationship;
- contributing to redesigning the urban shape of suburban and semi-urban developments;
- ensuring heritage status for the hilly landscape in terms of development sustainability and local long term survival.

The *raison d'être* for transforming this hilly landscape into an area with a rural tourism vocation is hindered by the reiterated inability to act on its varied potential revealing a serious social capital weakness, incapable of putting forward shared integrated projects and of involving the participation of the local area's many players.

The potential is there, however, as is a certain rural tourism attractiveness as expressed in a though slow-growing foreign tourist demand. The challenge, then, is to attempt a more wide-ranging approach within the whole regional tourist system (in terms of decongestion of the strongest areas, a longer season and greater integration) and also considering the role of rural tourism in the natural landscape conservation (just think to the hydrogeological instability issues).

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