

Nature-based and cultural tourism



RURACTIVE

RURACTIVE Forum
Background document



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This background document outlines key challenges and opportunities in rural areas related to nature-based and cultural tourism, drawing on policy research alongside evidence emerging from the RURACTIVE project and activities within the rural innovation hubs (Dynamos). It describes how the project approaches nature-based and cultural tourism as a thematic area (as a Rural Development Driver, RDD), and how locally grounded insights on landscapes, visitor flows and community involvement contribute to the wider policy debate.

As part of the four-session policy co-creation process, the RURACTIVE Forum – Third meeting invites participants to discuss emerging directions for rural tourism policy. Outputs from this session will be further refined and validated during the RURACTIVE Forum – Fourth meeting on 30 June 2026.

1. Introduction

Nature-based and cultural tourism have emerged as key drivers for rural revitalisation, **combining economic development with environmental stewardship, cultural heritage preservation, and social inclusion**. Rural territories across the European Union host a significant share of Europe’s natural landscapes and cultural assets, positioning them as central actors in delivering sustainable tourism aligned with climate and biodiversity objectives.

Within RURACTIVE, nature-based and cultural tourism is explored as a Rural Development Driver (RDD) with Dynamos examining how tourism **can enhance local wellbeing while safeguarding environmentally sensitive areas and cultural identities**. Across territories, evidence points to shared challenges (such as limited accessibility, unmanaged visitor flows, or fragile natural and cultural resources) and to opportunities for developing responsible, community-anchored tourism models.

2. Strategic EU policy context

Tourism policy in the European Union is primarily a Member State competence, with the EU playing a complementary and coordinating role under **Article 195 TFEU**. Despite this limited competence, tourism is increasingly shaped by a wide range of EU policies related to sustainability, climate, digitalisation, and regional development. Key EU frameworks influencing nature-based and cultural tourism include:

- **EU Tourism Agenda 2030 and Transition Pathway for Tourism** - these frameworks aim to support the green and digital transition of the tourism sector, promoting resilience, sustainability, circular practices, and data-driven tourism services.
- **European Green Deal and Fit for 55** - these initiatives set binding targets for climate neutrality and emissions reduction, directly affecting tourism through requirements for decarbonisation, sustainable mobility, and environmentally responsible business models.
- **EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030** - the strategy aims to protect and restore ecosystems, including expanding protected areas and restoring degraded habitats, which directly shape nature-based tourism landscapes and activities.
- **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)** - this framework recognises tourism as a key pillar for rural economic diversification, cultural preservation, and territorial cohesion.
- **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy** - supports accessible, low-carbon transport systems, which are essential for improving connectivity to rural tourism destinations.

2.1 Evolving EU policy instruments and opportunities

Recent and emerging EU initiatives provide new opportunities for sustainable tourism development:

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- **Upcoming EU Tourism Strategy (expected 2026)** – aims to build a more sustainable and competitive EU tourism sector, addressing climate change, regional imbalances, geopolitical tensions, and fragmentation.
 - **New European Bauhaus** - supports place-based cultural, architectural and landscape-driven tourism experiences.
 - **Digital and AI initiatives** - enhance visitor experience, improve interpretation, and support smart visitor flow management.

3. RURACTIVE integrated approach to nature-based and cultural tourism

Within RURACTIVE, local services, health and wellbeing are approached through a **participatory and place-based process that connects healthcare, social inclusion, digitalisation and community resilience**. Across Dynamos, stakeholders engage in identifying challenges related to service access, demographics, mobility and digital inclusion, and explore ideas for locally grounded solutions.

This collaborative process helps ensure that **emerging solutions are adapted to real territorial needs** and remain compatible with existing policy and service landscapes. RURACTIVE's participatory, multi-actor methodology plays a central role in this process. Stakeholder engagement includes:

- local and regional authorities
- healthcare providers and social service organisations
- community groups and NGOs
- digital and innovation actors
- cultural organisations and education providers
- end-users, including elderly populations and vulnerable groups

This multi-level and cross-sectoral engagement reflects **the complexity of rural service provision, where health outcomes are shaped by social, economic, environmental, and infrastructural factors**. Continuous co-creation ensures that solutions are accessible, inclusive, and tailored to local contexts, while remaining aligned with broader EU policy priorities.

3.1 Cross-cutting priority considerations

These wider priorities are considered when communities identify their main challenges related to nature-based and cultural tourism, when ideas for solutions are co-developed, and when these are refined into practical plans:

- **Climate mitigation and adaptation:** development of low-carbon tourism models, climate-resilient infrastructure, and adaptation strategies for vulnerable landscapes.
- **Biodiversity protection:** integration of conservation principles into tourism design, including sustainable trail development and protection of sensitive ecosystems.
- **Social justice and inclusion:** ensuring equitable access to tourism opportunities and participation for women, youth, elderly populations, migrants, and vulnerable groups.

4. Structural nature-based and cultural tourism challenges in rural territories

Evidence from RURACTIVE project activities highlights persistent structural barriers affecting nature-based and cultural tourism across rural regions.

4.1 Infrastructure and accessibility gaps

Rural tourism systems often suffer from underdeveloped infrastructure:

- fragmented or poorly maintained cultural and nature routes
- insufficient signage, interpretation tools, and visitor facilities
- limited connectivity and accessibility in remote or mountainous areas

4.2 Loss of cultural heritage and knowledge

Depopulation and ageing populations threaten the continuity of cultural assets essential for tourism:

- decline of traditional practices, crafts, and local narratives
- weakening of cultural identity and community-based tourism potential

4.3 Weak integration of tourism with sustainability objectives

Tourism development is often insufficiently aligned with environmental and climate goals:

- limited coordination between tourism, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation
- risks of environmental degradation in sensitive areas

4.4 Limited visibility and market positioning

Rural destinations frequently struggle to position themselves within broader tourism markets:

- underdeveloped branding and promotion of local assets
- limited access to digital platforms and marketing tools

4.5 Social and participation inequalities

Barriers to participation persist across rural tourism systems:

- underrepresentation of women, youth, and vulnerable groups in tourism activities
- limited opportunities for local communities to co-create tourism offers

The examples presented in Table 1 illustrate some of the challenges collaboratively identified in two different rural innovation hubs (Dynamos) as well as various proposed solutions to address them.

Table 1 Nature-based and cultural tourism Examples from RURACTIVE Dynamos

Dynamo 8 – Fiastra Valley, Italy		Dynamo 4 – North-East Scotland, UK	
Identified challenges	Solutions developed	Identified challenges	Solutions developed
<p>Degraded and inaccessible slow-tourism infrastructure: erosion, landslide risks and missing trail markers reduce safety, accessibility and attractiveness of local routes.</p> <p>Limited community capacity and fragmented visitor information: depopulation and lack of coordination hinder path maintenance, signage updates and visibility of natural and cultural assets.</p>	<p>Fiastra Valley Ring Management Programme: coordinated maintenance and monitoring of slow-tourism routes, involving municipalities, associations and volunteers.</p> <p>Inclusive routes and nature interpretation: adapted trail segments, accessible signage and guided biodiversity activities enhancing inclusiveness and environmental awareness.</p>	<p>Uneven distribution of tourist flows and weak visibility of rural assets: visitor pressure concentrates in a few locations while smaller communities and enterprises remain under-recognised.</p> <p>Fragmented tourism information and lack of coordination: dispersed communication limits sustainable route planning and consistent visitor guidance.</p>	<p>Perthshire Passport (Digital & Physical Guide): a coordinated visitor tool promoting under-visited areas, local enterprises and low-impact travel patterns.</p> <p>Co-created rural tourism routes and storytelling: integrated trails and community-led cultural interpretation linking heritage, landscapes and climate-friendly mobility.</p>

5. Emerging innovation pathways and local responses

Across the territories involved in RURACTIVE, several innovative responses for nature-based and cultural tourism are emerging:

<p>Digital and smart tourism</p> <p>Digital tools are increasingly used to enhance visitor experience and management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interactive cultural mapping and digital storytelling • visitor management systems and feedback platforms 	<p>Nature-based tourism linked to ecosystem management</p> <p>Tourism initiatives are closely connected to environmental protection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • biodiversity-sensitive trail development • integration of tourism with conservation and restoration activities
<p>Cultural infrastructure and route revitalisation</p> <p>Regions focus on enhancing cultural and natural assets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restoration of heritage paths and landscapes • reuse of buildings as cultural and community hubs 	<p>Community-led tourism governance</p> <p>Participatory approaches strengthen local ownership and sustainability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • volunteer networks and local associations co-managing tourism initiatives • inclusive programmes engaging youth, women, and vulnerable groups

6. Persistent gaps in EU funding and Performance Framework

There are persistent structural weaknesses in EU tourism funding and monitoring systems. Current frameworks remain largely focused on quantitative indicators, such as visitor numbers and job creation, while insufficiently capturing sustainability and resilience outcomes. Shortcomings in current EU monitoring and funding frameworks include:

- overemphasis on **visitor numbers and economic outputs** rather than environmental and social impacts;
- **lack of indicators** for carrying capacity, carbon footprint, and ecosystem resilience;
- **limited measurement of benefits** for local communities and social inclusion;
- **fragmentation** across tourism, cultural, environmental, and regional funding instruments;
- **risk of promoting volume-based tourism models** over quality-driven, place-sensitive approaches.

7. Implications for proto-policy development

Evidence from RURACTIVE suggests that advancing nature-based and cultural tourism requires a shift from growth-oriented models **toward integrated, sustainability-driven territorial approaches**. Rural tourism has the potential to act as a stabilising force for local economies while supporting biodiversity, cultural heritage, and community resilience. Key strategic considerations for policymaking include:

- How can EU **policies support a shift** from tourism-growth models toward sustainable, place-based tourism ecosystems that strengthen local wellbeing?
- What **mechanisms can help embed biodiversity and climate objectives directly into rural tourism** planning and value chains?
- How can **digital tools improve** smart visitor management, accessibility, and the visibility of lesser-known rural destinations while safeguarding cultural authenticity?
- How can **EU initiatives strengthen community participation** in co-designing tourism strategies, ensuring local ownership and equitable benefit-sharing?
- How can **monitoring frameworks move beyond** volume-based indicators toward metrics capturing sustainability, inclusiveness and territorial resilience?

8. ADDITIONAL READING

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