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Title: Rural tourism creative innovations in Italy and in Kazakhstan as response to the COVID-19 pandemics: re-visiting rural leisure and travel

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Abstract

This chapter presents the results of qualitative research exploring innovative developments by rural tourism sites in Italy and Kazakhstan in response to disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter aims to draw attention to the quintessential components of tourism such as leisure and recreation, distance, and associated travel experience as being important determinants of innovative developments of rural tourism during the pandemic. The authors conceptualize the model of rural tourism creative innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic and use it to explore the ways in which rural tourist sites in two countries, Italy and Kazakhstan, revisited their tourism resources during the pandemic. The authors found that despite differing tourism resources and differences in established forms of rural tourism in these two countries, the rural sites studied applied creative means to underscore rurality as a source and enabler of human wellbeing. The resilience of rural tourism sites in the pandemic has emanated from the rural sites' embeddedness in nature and in the propensity of rurality to be linked with profound human needs for physical and mental recreation. Acknowledging many inherent sustainability values that are at the core of rural tourism's appeal and tourism products, the chapter concludes that the pandemic revealed new perspectives on both the strength and fragility of rural tourism as a sustainable form of tourism, calling for practitioners and scholars to re-assess understanding of rurality in sustainable tourism development.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has massively impacted the tourism sector through the disruption of tourism and the loss of millions of jobs worldwide (UNWTO, 2020). At the same time, the

pandemic brought new perspectives on specific facets of tourism. The protracted restrictions on travel, business uncertainty, and tourist anxiety prompted innovative ways for tourism destinations to adjust. The capacity of rural tourism destinations to meet health and safety requirements has served to their advantage to sustain their functioning during the pandemic as compared to city-based sites with indoor recreation and sightseeing (Vaishar and Štastná 2022; Cvijanović et al. 2021; Chin 2022; Marques et al. 2022). Furthermore, the strong role of rural tourism in human well-being, and physical and mental health has been rethought and reconfirmed (Li et al. 2021; Grandi et al. 2022; Sharma et al. 2022, Lane et al. 2022). In particular, rurality, when seen as a psycho-cultural frame, is well-attuned for delivering a sense of refreshment and authentic living (Jyotsna and Maurya 2019), spirituality (Sharpley and Jepson 2011), escape from social pressure and business of city life (Pesonen and Komppula 2010), immersion in nature (Ohe et al 2017; Garrod et al 2006; Kastenholz and Lima 2012) and reconnection with self that human beings crave (Cai et al. 2018; Jepson and Sharpley 2015). In this chapter, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic caused rural sites to reinvent their tourism products by innovating in constrained mobility - a situation paradoxical to the essence of tourism and touristic leisure.

While creativity as an innovative process by tourism enterprises is not completely new in research (Ratten et al 2019; Tejada and Moreno 2013; Yachin 2019;) we offer a perspective on innovating by rural tourism in a highly interrupted operating environment. In a situation of almost ubiquitous immobility, high anxiety, and uncertainty, not all rural tourism sites engage in innovative behavior. However, those subjects of our study who undertook creative efforts had to find unconventional ways to meet unconventional demands. We found that rural tourism sites have created certain material and immaterial settings that unleash human feelings of health, safety, and security following a rejuvenated sense of recreation and leisure.

Rural tourism is a universal phenomenon despite its large variety of forms. In this chapter, we examine the dimensions of human experience that quintessentially define tourism: leisure, recreation, travel experience, and travel distance. We analyze the cases of Italy and Kazakhstan to explore, in particular, two innovative developments that rural tourism has undertaken as a response to COVID-19. The chapter is organized as an analytical narrative presenting the results of exploratory case studies conducted by qualitative case study methodology (Cochrane 2010; Creswell and Poth 2016). The argument is built by analysis of interviews with rural tourism sites and sector experts. First, we argue that in response to the pandemic rural tourism has revalorized its links with human well-being. While doing so, rural tourism has been innovating in three differing spheres: reconceptualizing the notion of leisure and recreation, the notion of rurality, and the character of human-nature interplay. Second, we further suggest that adjustment strategies by rural sites applied 'recreativity', as a means of producing the value of rural tourism in a new pandemic-constrained setting. Recreativity in this context denotes the human faculty for imagination, creativity, and the assigning of nonmaterial meanings to the physical environment. Literature has recognized creative thinking as a driver of the innovative capability of enterprises. Creative thinking and outcomes are at the core of sustainably-oriented innovations too whilst sustainable innovations foster tourism transformation to meet social, environmental, and economic objectives (Souto 2021; Awan et al. 2019; Fazlagić and Skikiewicz 2019; Quaranta et al. 2016). The post-pandemics trajectories of tourism and rural tourism in particular are being discussed in the research with vigorous interest (Gowreesunkar et al. 2021; Lew et al. 2020; Ioannides and Gyimóthy 2020; Brouder 2020). The evidence construction and theorizing have not reached any conclusive point as post-pandemic tourism is only evolving. In this light, the chapter has

incorporated the exploration of the implications and possible effects of innovative efforts by rural tourism sites toward the present and future sustainability of rural tourism development.

Rural tourism defined

Countries and destinations may have various forms of rural tourism, even having similar resource endowments. The various forms of rural tourism include agritourism (Lupi et al. 2017; Piñeiro et al. 2019; Chiodo et al. 2019; Nilsson, 2002), ethno-cultural and heritage tourism (Huang et al. 2016; Matei 2015; Bel et al. 2015; Pesonen and Komppula 2010), outdoor wellness and recreation (Frochot 2005; Romão et al. 2018; Pan et al. 2019; Broegaard 2020), nature-based tourism (Daugstad 2008; Winter et al. 2019; Fredman and Tyrväinen 2010; Hall and Boyd 2005; Bramwell, 1994), ecotourism (Nugroho et al. 2016; Valaoras et al. 2002; Ghazali and Sirat 2014; Tuohino and Hynonen 2001; Campbell, 1999), among many variations (Lane and Kastenholtz 2015; Lane 2009; Helgadóttir and Dashper 2021). X.

Of special interest to this chapter is defining ‘rural’ features of tourism due to its central role in distinguishing rural forms of tourism from other types (Lane 2009). There is no single recognized definition of ‘rural’ in tourism literature. Rural tourism is defined based on forms of tourist activity, location, type of tourism resources, and tourist experience (Lane and Kastenholtz 2015; Roberts et al. 2017, Ana 2017) which helps to identify the notion of ‘rural’ and its role in shaping the trajectories of rural tourism development. As a geographical or spatial concept, a socio-economic or sociocultural descriptor, ‘rural’ is a functional concept related simply to “not urban” (Brown and Hall 2006). From a socio-economic perspective, it is generally used to model rural tourism by identifying differences in rural and urban linkages as a function of the distance of a rural place from an urban agglomeration (Tribe 2016; OECD 2019). Although many rural areas are characterized by a low population density, the rural regions have a significant share of the population and contain the vast majority of the land, water, and other natural resources (Anderson 2000; UNWTO 2022). From a geographical perspective, the experience of rural tourism is embedded in nature - universally rural tourism products have been based on natural and geographical resources of the locality. Landscapes and scenery, agricultural products as well as pastime activities based on participating in the production process, and various outdoor activities with and without reference to the ethnocultural heritage of the locality are all created through the interpretation and use of natural resources (Carneiro et al. 2015; Daugstad 2008; Garrod et al. 2006).

There is often a tendency to conflate agritourism with rural tourism, but this is problematic (Phillip et al, 2010). Traditionally, rural areas form bases for agricultural production varying from mass production to small agricultural farms with crafted products. Tourism leisure activities that emerged from this closeness with agriculture have become centered around their testing or participation in production (Piñeiro et al, 2019; Butler, 2004). Agricultural production sites and farms have received support from government-led development policies in many countries, therefore it is not surprising that agritourism emerged as a frequently encountered form of rural tourism leisure activities.. However, more recent debates (Roberts et al. 2017; Lane and Kastenholtz 2015; Cawley and Gillmor 2008) consider that within rural tourism leisure is a concept that is subject to greater diversity and variation. Rural destinations, however, offer a wide spectrum of leisure activities for visitors, the tourism experience of which is shaped by both material and immaterial settings. The material endowments play an important role in shaping the rural tourist experience (natural sceneries, landscapes, appliances and decorations, clothes) and

often act as a resource base defining the forms of rural tourism in specific locations. However, it is important to emphasize that the tourist experience is not purely material (Maclaren and Philip 2021; Kastenholz and Lima 2012). In the vocabulary of tourism practitioners and tourists themselves, the combinations of material and immaterial features comprise the entire tourist experience and are often referred to as ‘rural vibes’. The promotional materials of rural sites often refer to ‘taste’, ‘touch’, ‘immersion’, and ‘sense’ of rural life when offering rural tourism experience. Rural tourism is a multi-dimensional concept, which is represented by various tourism forms centered around experiencing rural leisure activities (Blapp and Mitas 2019). UNWTO (2022), not surprisingly, suggests an activity-based definition of rural tourism, linking tourist experience with natural and lifestyle endowments of rural areas: It is an ‘a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling, and sightseeing.’ In line with the UNWTO (2022), Nilsson (2002) this chapter understands rural tourism as tourism to sites in non-urbanized, rural areas, with special emphasis, however, on its leisure and distance constituents (Butler 2004; Pearce 1987).

Leisure as a driver for rural tourism innovation

It is important to recognize that rural tourism is a form of general tourism, therefore its conceptualization would certainly stem from the general definition of tourism. While the definition of tourism is contested, three constituents quintessentially identify a distinct tourist experience: travel, time away from home, and leisure and recreation (Tribe 2016; Mulet-Forteza et al. 2017). Traditionally, leisure in tourism is defined as a time free from work, and recreation is defined as the activities undertaken during leisure. Both have been associated with pleasure or hedonistic experience; and with discretionary time which tourists possess and are willing to allocate for leisure and recreation. This conceptualization largely informed the development of tourism offerings and destinations - the sites and destinations have aimed to capture the demands for pleasure in various forms of tourist products while their content and enabling infrastructure were designed with an emphasis on how people decide and use their discretionary time.

The relationship and the boundaries among leisure, recreation, and tourism concepts are not obviously fixed; these are interconnected. Rosalina (2019) identified ‘tourist experience’ as one of the four main themes defining rural tourism in the extant literature. Although the emphasis on experience suggests that tourism is a form of recreation, the extant scholarship on rural tourism appears not to explicitly consider leisure as a derivative of discretionary time.

The scholarship on rural tourism has a noticeable stream of cultural and heritage tourism research conceptually framed around the concept of authenticity. This chapter, however, suggests that it is the changes in the notion of leisure that have driven innovative developments in rural tourism in response to COVID-19 pandemics. The pandemic has revealed that the notion of authenticity is a relative construct too - the perceived authenticity of a site varies depending on tourists' perceptions of rurality and their definition of authentic experience (Mura et al. 2017; Blapp and Mitas 2019; Safaaa et al. 2017; Lunchaprasith and Macleod 2018). Blapp and Mitas (2019) emphasized this fluid nature of authenticity as a source of creative forms of rural tourism. The ‘recreativity’ as a way of innovating means modifying the concept of authenticity attached to a certain site for unconventional situations like this pandemic. Authenticity therefore can be used as a source for innovative ideas about what makes a site appealing for tourists.

Rural tourism, even before the pandemic, has developed a certain tourism model where leisure becomes less a result of discretionary time and more acts as an expansionary frame that incorporates elements of pleasure and recreation into non-discretionary activities. Such forms of tourism as ‘Bleisure’ and ‘staycation’ manifest the innovative forms of rural tourism caused by the changing notion of leisure. The ‘bleisure’ describes the movement of business and work activity and time to take in non-work settings, including rural ones. ‘Staycation’, meaning tourist activity taking place at home or within close vicinity of home, can refer to the relocation of activity from rural to urban settings. While full reproduction of the rural experience is hardly possible, we argue that this form is induced for ‘recreativity’ as an experiential tool for tourist providers. For example, home-based cooking and gardening classes, sewing, and food-tasting can be regarded as creative means for reproducing authentic rural experiences. In some instances, the pandemic has further fostered the use of recreational means due to social isolating and distance requirements leaving rural sites to design self-help and self-catering activities for home-based tourists. In the context of the pandemic, we suggest that the notion of leisure has become more accentuated toward wellbeing: leisure has become seen as an essential enabler of mental and physical health, meditation, stress- and anxiety-relief. Hedonistic motives remain but become more conflated with an appreciation of human security, mediation, and unity with nature.

It is interesting to note, that the most recent definition of tourism offered by the UNWTO does not refer to leisure and recreation, however it emphasizes that tourism is an activity of visitors outside their usual environment ‘for personal or business/professional purpose’ (IRTS, 2008, 2.9). The broadening view on tourism does not, as one may think, exclude leisure and recreation - furthermore the developments in tourism illustrate the central role of leisure and recreation in distinguishing tourism. A sense of leisure and recreation is important for work-related and study-related travel as much as it is important for vocational travel, excursions, adventure, gastronomic, and any other type of tourism. Leisure and recreation have not ceased to form the essence of tourism, instead, it has acquired new facets to reflect the changing notion and manifestations of tourism in human life (Kang et al. 2021; De la Barre 2020). Leisure and recreation has been loosening its discretionary component, however, it does retain its central role in distinguishing tourism, including rural tourism, from other forms of travel.

Travel distance as a tourist experience

Building on OECD conceptualization, Figure 1 depicts the relative position of a rural tourism destination from the city. Tourism literature recognizes distance as both a factor enabling certain types of tourism and preventing others (Kah et al. 2016; Wong et al. 2021; Cheung and Wong 2022). Nonetheless, the extant research seems to be inclined to view long distance as a challenge to tourism sites’ development particularly in contexts where tourism infrastructure has not been established (for instance, distance decay theory, McKercher 2018). McKercher (2018; 2008) and Kirillova and Lehto (2015) analyze ‘distance’ as not only a spatial relation - the research explores distance as a tourism’s socio-psychological construct. Urry (2009) presented a multiplane conception of mobility including dimensions such as corporeal travel, imaginative travel, communicative travel, and virtual travel. The corporeal dimension is related to the physical moving of humans in space, the imaginative is a travel experience making sense to a traveler via visualizations and imagination, and the communicative reflected the travel as an information-receiving and exchanging experience. Furthermore, a travel experience can be understood as an individual and social activity in which a traveler participates and express themselves in social

situations (Urry 2009; Scuttari et al. 2021). The reviewed literature suggests evidence that tourist sites tend to account for the distance when creating their tourism offering. An essential research stream explores the relationship between the physical distance and functionality of areas for tourism purposes. Figure 2, for instance, presents the conventional approach of many tourism textbooks' models of the recreational potential of tourist sites regarding their distance from home destination: more distant destinations are conventionally deemed more possible for longer stays, while zones within time- and distance- proximity are associated with short-term recreational activities. Further, as the literature suggests, the accessibility of a tourist site is one of the most important considerations in the decision-making of both tourists and tourism sites (Nyaupane and Graefe 2008; Fredman 2008; Juschten and Hössinger 2021). For instance, rural sites in proximity to the urban agglomerations tend to be more flexible with accommodation and allow tourist activity without staying options. More remote sites have to consider tourist needs for a more diverse range of amenities and safety of transportation. With the development of transport, however, the tourist product has become even more complex. More varied transport options allowed for an increase in traveling time, simultaneously enhancing service levels, thus diversifying tourist preferences and tourism offerings. The disruption to the tourism sector disrupted the entire industry, bringing new perspectives on travel and distance for both proximal and remote sites (Yang et al. 2022; Fatmi et al. 2021).

In particular, COVID-19, not surprisingly, uncovered new and exacerbated extant vulnerability of remote sites. Those sites that complied with the health and safety requirements but have been out of reasonable reach could not utilize this emerging advantage. Although COVID-19 also underscored the importance of travel at a distance as a realization of human mobility and its importance for human well-being - the remote sites had become even more detached from habitual travel connections (Lebrun et al. 2021). Prior to the pandemic, long-distance travel was rather a niche for adventure and scientific tourism. For other purposes, most tourist destinations attempt to enhance long-distance travel with faster transition itineraries and comfortable service (Cai and Li 2009; Pesonen 2012;).

The pandemic allowed for greater attention to the appreciation of mobility as a human experience: travel as the realization of mobility, essential human rights, and freedom (Husseain et al. 2021; Hopkins 2021). For rural tourism sites, this development has induced more creative and innovative thinking: Indeed, long-distance travel can create a sense of adventure, nomadism, mastery over distance and even time, and other associations and sensations depending on how the distances are being overcome (Cheung and Wong 2022;). One effect is that practical challenges in ensuring reachability of rural sites have been more severe during the pandemic: mobility restriction, disruption of operation of transport, and lack of infrastructure could not be overcome simply by accepting the value of distant traveling.

The mobility restrictions have made long-distance travelers turn more attention to short-term and short-distance recreations like excursions, leisure and recreation activities that are done in the hometown or a nearby location, generally without getting involved with accommodation (Fatmi et al. 2021; Romagosa 2020; Lashua et al. 2021; Jacobsen et al. 2021). These activities during COVID-19 have been significantly revitalized by peoples' choices to better cope with the pandemic restrictions. This has diverted some of the conventional tourism flows from rural areas and in effect, resulted in some active and resourceful rural tourism sites having moved themselves closer to the tourists. The innovative developments by rural tourism sites, for example, included virtual tours and visits, sending agricultural products or do-it-yourself packs to tourists, and offering visits to local homes with masterclasses or workshops related to rural craft-making and

product-making. While not valorizing the value of long-distance travel per se, the developments allow rural tourism sites to diversify their innovative approaches for tourism product development and tourist engagement. Long-distance rural tourism sites can potentially expand the use of such in post-pandemic times, thus lessons from these creative efforts need to be captured and further analyzed.

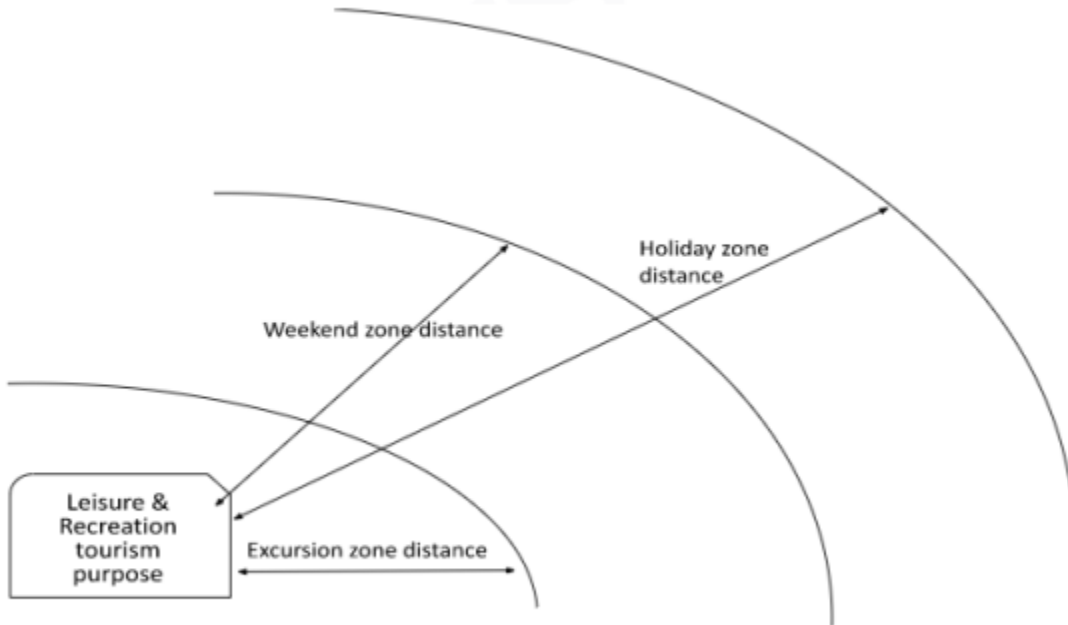
Figure 1 -OECD Variation of rural tourism relative to urban area (2019):

○ within the city functional area, ○ outside city functional area, but in close proximity, * remote rural tourism



Source: compiled by authors

Figure 2 - Distance model for tourism and recreation



Source: adjusted from Pearce, D. (1987) Flognfeldt Jr, T. (2005)

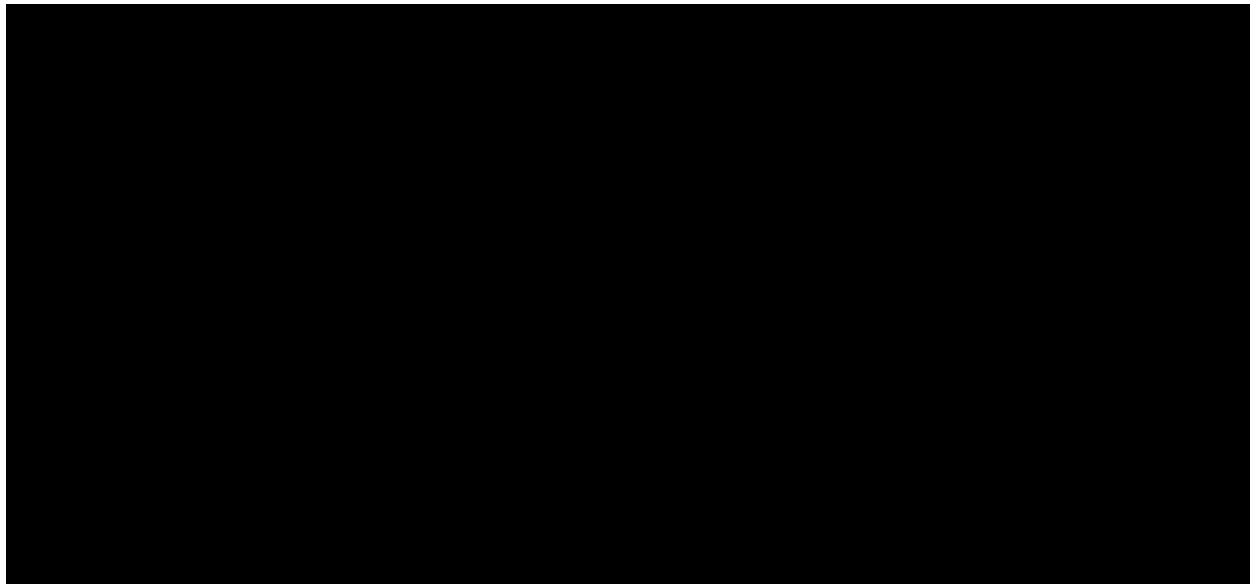
Creativity, resilience and sustainable rural tourism innovation

There is a growing research focus on exploring rural tourism as a form of sustainable tourism, which is a tourism goal in both developed and developing countries. Palacios-Florencio et al. (2021), Marek (2021), Kantar and Svržnjak (2017), Garau (2015), An and Alarcón (2020) look at characteristics of rural tourism that ensure its sustainability, as well as the role that rural tourism plays in multiple facets of sustainable development (Martínez et al. 2021; Kim and Jamal 2015; Jones and Comfort 2020). Rural areas can serve as bases for nature conservation as well as maintenance of cultural heritage ensuring access to them for future generations. Rural areas have made a strong showing as places of resilience in face of the Covid-19. Sustainable innovation in rural tourism, as in any other form of tourism, aims to transfer to a new practice involving such use of resources that minimizes the current and present environmental harm and creates stable, equitable, and inclusive socioeconomic benefits. We are cautious, however, that the sustainability of innovative developments in rural tourism as a response to a pandemic is not easily understood. In this chapter cases in Italy and Kazakhstan are analyzed about the effects of the pandemic on rural sites' creative adjustment. The analysis revealed that rural tourism innovations were possible due to the potential of rural areas to operationalize diverse forms of tourism, many of which have the potential to develop into sustainable forms of tourism. The adjustments have utilized the nature-based and spatial capacity of rural sites to accommodate social distancing requirements and the needs of tourists. However, the creative forms of adjustments used other types of rural resources too - those not straightforwardly utilizing physical and geographical resources of sites. Instead, these forms of creative adjustments were based on the human need for pastimes, leisure, and engaging in some creative activities. In these terms, rural tourism represents a psychosocial dimension of sustainable development. The pandemic has revealed the potential of rural areas to add to the well-being and experiential richness of human living. We further suggest that the changes in social perception of the importance of rural areas created a strong momentum for strengthening both the environmental and psycho-social dimensions of rural tourism.

The resilience of rural tourism sites in pandemics has emanated from the rural sites' embeddedness in nature and in property of rurality to be linked with profound human needs for physical and mental recreation. The resilience of rural tourist sites has been conventionally associated with their ability to operate tourism activity while overcoming their exposure to socioeconomic, business, and nature-related risks (Amir et al. 2015; Biggs 2011; Hall et al. 2017). Cochrane (2010), Calgaro et al. (2014), and Luthe and Wyss (2014) point out that in conditions of uncertainty, resilience is defined as a mode of operations of tourist sites that enable them to sustain change, as well as strengthen their adaptive, transformative and renewal capacity. The resilience of rural sites during pandemics is conceptualized as a set of measures taken by rural sites to sustain their operations and recover from crises in conditions of uncertainty, multiple risks, and constraints (Romagosa 2020; Fountain et al. 2021). Due to its role in ensuring certain stability of rural site operation, it can be seen as an enabler of sustainable innovations, when the latter are designed to meet sustainability objectives (Lew and Cheer 2018; Romagosa 2020)

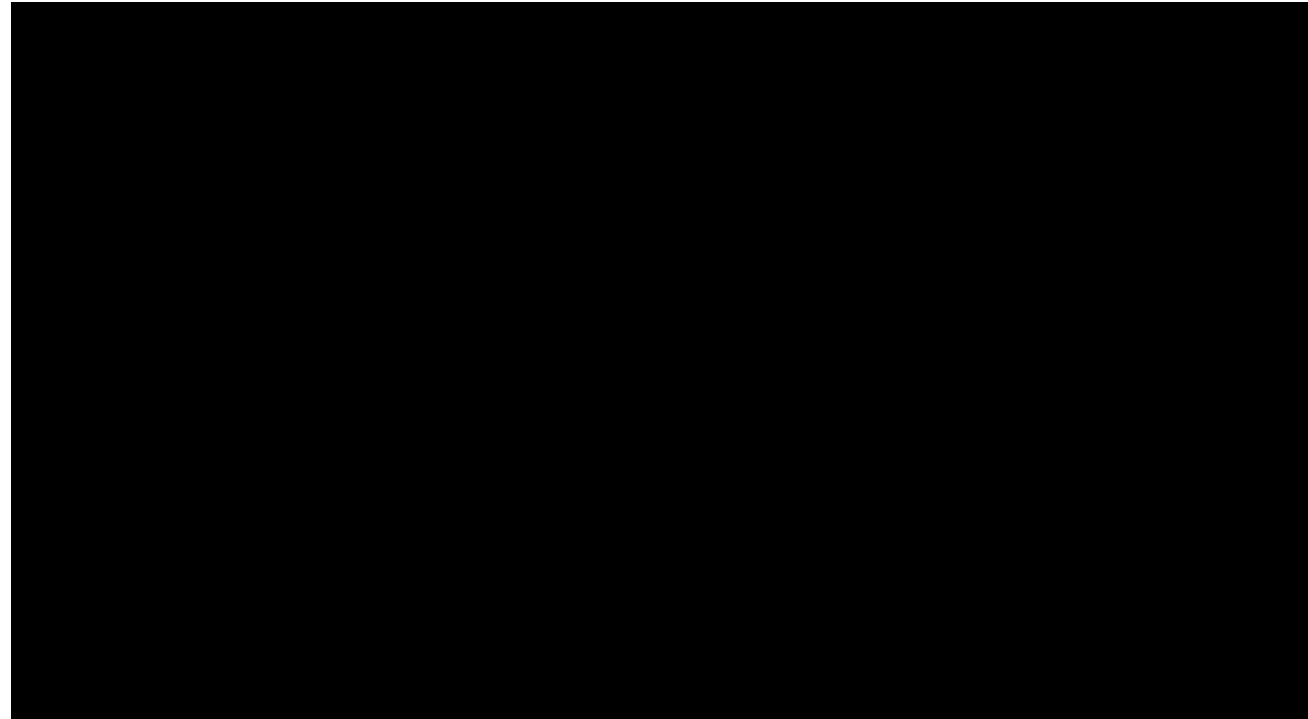
Resilience has become the driver of innovation for tourism sites during the pandemic, whereas a creative approach to the mobilization of material and immaterial resources has been the main enabler of innovation for resilience. Based on the exploratory study of rural tourism response in two countries, we propose the conceptual framework of sustainable innovation in rural tourism during the pandemic. This framework describes how rural tourism sites have addressed the changing notion of leisure and recreation due to pandemics in the conditions of uncertainty, sanitary requirements, mobility restrictions, disrupted supply chains, and little idle capacity:

Figure 3: Model of rural tourism creative innovation in COVID-19 pandemic



Although creativity (i.e. the generation and use of imagination or original ideas to create something) is often linked with innovation (i.e. new ideas set in practice), the pandemic has pointed at the existence of more space and more need for creativity in rural tourism. Mutually reinforcing links between the creativity of firms and sustainability become increasingly a focus of research interest. Souto (2021) suggests that ‘.... innovation and creativity contribute – in an interconnected way – to sustainable development, as well as overcoming sustainability challenges and firms’ barriers to sustainability’. Awan et al (2019) consider creativity as the main enabler of green products and processes, seconded by Fazlagić and Skikiewicz (2019), and Ratten et al. (2019). The character of rural tourism innovation in the face of pandemic restrictions can be conceptualized as creative innovation (Richards 2014; Ateljevic 2009; Joppe and Brooker 2013). Unlike technological-driven innovation, efficiency-seeking innovation, or innovation based on the adoption of existing blueprints in the industry,- the rural tourism innovation, especially in remote areas, was mainly based on inventing new approaches to deliver rural tourism experience, including choices on tourism activity and modes of delivery (Ateljevic and Doorne 2000). The sector downturn has also conditioned the application of various forms of meaning-making. We refer to this as innovation by ‘recreativity’ implying that sites often had to creatively use the notion of rurality in non-rural or non-conventional settings. This also applies to the technique of sites to mold the unconventional needs of visitors to be accommodated in rural settings. (Textbox 1)

Textbox 1: Examples of creative innovations



As noted above, not all rural tourism sites could innovate: in addition to objective constraints such as lack of capacity and inability to adjust, the pandemic has been a shocking and exhausting experience for rural tourism providers. Protracted uncertainty and insecurity have not necessarily been fostering rural tourism creativity. UNWTO designated 2020 as the Year of Tourism and Rural Development, calling for more research and action to ensure that rural tourism recovery will make more varied use of opportunities inherent to rural tourism as well as make rural tourism more sustainable socially, economically, and environmentally. At the time of writing, it is not clear whether the ongoing innovative developments will translate into sustained forms of rural tourism, however, the creative response of tourism rural sites in pandemics can be a fruitful ground for a more nuanced view of the potential of rural areas for sustainable tourism.

Methodology

Our research draws on two case studies (Stake 1995; Cresswell and Poth 2016) which are based on qualitative data received from multiple data sources (Table 1). This gives the analysis of the two cases a comparative element from which some tentative conclusions can be drawn and which can point the way for future research. The qualitative data predominates in these cases because as Cochrane (2010,185) points out although quantitative measures are useful in research on tourism resilience there is a need for more qualitative approaches as they are more suited to what she describes as “a richer interpretation of human systems such as tourism”. In our cases, we draw on interviews with stakeholders: rural sites, and visitors to rural sites; as well as triangulate their direct voices by cross-checking their answers with commentaries from the tourism sector experts. In the study of rural tourism innovative developments in Italy, we applied the results of interviews with rural tourism sites and an expert in tourism provision. In the study of rural tourism innovative developments in Kazakhstan, we applied results of the survey with visitors of 15 tourist sites in Almaty conducted before and at the early stage of the pandemic throughout December 2019 -

March 2020; interviews with four tourist sites were taken about approximately a year after the pandemic roll-out in January 2021, as well as interviews with two experts in two years after the roll-out in March 2022. The 15 sites for survey distribution comprise nature-based tourist attractions within 24-hour reach from Almaty. For surveyed visitors (Kazakhstan case) and selection of rural tourism sites, convenience sampling was used as the main purpose was to conduct an exploratory study. Researchers were constrained by mobility restrictions, however, aimed to develop comparable samples from each country. The purposive sample was used to ensure inclusion in the sample of the short-distance and long-distance sites from major cities, where each category of sites was also represented by sites specializing in domestic or both domestic and international visitors. The sample sites carried out different rural tourism activities, which helped to elicit insights about reinventing leisure offerings as a response to the pandemic’s restrictions rather than based on specific types of leisure. The qualitative data analysis was conducted in the form of identifying and eliciting main themes and recurrent patterns in data about the main research question: *how does rural tourism innovate itself in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* The data was analyzed to find out the innovative modalities of rural tourism sites in response to the pandemic-induced conditions. Both country cases were analyzed with the help of supplementary data from research and analytical literature; and media coverage. The adopted method is in line with Mik-Meyer (2020), Rishi and Gaur (2012), and Datta et al. (1997) a multi-sourced qualitative approach for data collection and analysis, appropriate for, in particular, exploratory studies like this one.

Table 1: Profile of data sources for qualitative approach (Mik-Meyer 2020)

| Italy | Kazakhstan |
|---|--|
| Interviews with 1 expert <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● scholar and ministerial official | Interviews with 2 experts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expert A: Owner of tourism agency specializing in nature-based and rural tourism ● Expert B: practitioner and policy advisor in tourism destination development, sustainable tourism |
| 4 rural tourism sites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Day trip host in agrifarm (international visitors’ focus) ● Day trip host in agrifarm (domestic visitors’ focus) ● Horse riding and rural life (proximal to urban centers) ● Food and wine tourism, rural living tourism (remote site from urban centers) | 4 rural tourism sites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apiary with day-trips and special events services (focus on both domestic and international visitors) ● Ethno-village in remote area from urban centers (focus on both domestic and international visitors) ● Horse riding in natural settings (proximal to urban centers) ● Glamping provider (several locations in both remote and proximal areas to urban centers) |
| | Survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● convenience sample of 40 visitors to 15 nature-based and cultural sites in Almaty region |
| Desk Research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal and regulatory documents ● OECD reports ● Media coverage | Desk research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal and regulatory documents ● Reports from tourism development agency ‘Kazakh Tourism’ and association ‘Kazakh Tourism Association’ ● Media coverage |

Case Study: Kazakhstan

Rural tourism context. In terms of the normative framework, rural tourism in Kazakhstan is in the process of conceptualization, exploration, and experimentation. *The Tourism Strategic Development Plan for 2019-2025* outlines the goal of developing definitions for ‘rural tourism’ and ‘agritourism products’ and exploring viable models for tourists and rural destinations. In practice, rural tourism in Kazakhstan is not a new phenomenon. The social value of rural areas is defined by a traditional appreciation of nature, linkage of rural areas as ancestors’ origins, and locales of events with historic significance. In the nomadic lifestyle, where families migrating over long distances could meet occasionally, a guest-hosting culture became a prominent cultural norm (Tleubayeva 2019; Tiberghien and Xie 2018). Tourism to rural areas has mainly formed as visits to family or extended family, therefore a tourist infrastructure has not developed at a mass scale. Agricultural specialization of rural areas varies: large agri-firms are mainly engaged in crop production; simultaneously medium- and small-holder farms are dispersed all over the country, engaging in livestock (staple and pastoral), kitchen gardening, and agroforestry (Iskakova et al. 2021a;). Nonetheless, tourist infrastructure in rural areas is scarce: the resort areas are more equipped and established, while only a minor share of agro-sites are equipped to regularly offer tourism services (Iskakova et al. 2021b). Traditional crafts and cuisine have strong links with historical lifestyles, however, their production recently is practiced in rural areas as well as in cities (Tiberghien and Xie 2018; Tiberghien et al. 2015).

The nature-based and ethnocultural tourism in Kazakhstan has a more elaborate policy framework. The existing policy includes regulations regarding tourism in protected areas and heritage sites. In addition, the domestic tourism sector mainly comprises nature-based tourism packages and self-organized visits to nature-based sites. Indeed, geographical endowments of rural areas in Kazakhstan are very diverse: varied natural landscapes with mountains are on the south, south-east and some central parts, steppes (24%) stretching from center to north, deserts (24%), and semi-deserts (44%) on the west and west-north (Orexca 2022). Kazakhstan has established 13 state national natural parks, 10 state nature protected areas, more than 50 state nature reserves, 127 geological, 58 geomorphological, and 19 hydrogeological objects of national significance located in suburban and rural areas (The Strategic Plan 2019-2025). Vast territories (2,724,900 sq. km) and long distances between major cities to an extent explain why many nature-based tourist sites are concentrated close to cities. Adventure tourism, ethnocultural expeditions, and tours, as well as event-based tourism, have developed some niche tourism products where long distances are an essential part of tourist recreation.

Tourism’s contribution to GDP was 4,9% in 2014 and 5.6% in 2019 (knoema.com), decreasing by about 49% in 2020 (WTTC 2021). Despite the slowdown in tourist activities due to COVID-19, tourism development continues to be one of the key national priorities. The tourism strategic development plan for 2019-2025 adopted by the Government announced priorities for comprehensive tourism development, targeting at least 8% of tourism share in GDP by 2025. The main priority areas of tourism: agritourism, ecological tourism, ethnographic tourism, youth tourism, medical tourism, and MICE tourism, each have the potential to be developed in rural areas.

The pandemic’s impact on leisure needs. Before the pandemic, the perceived attractiveness of visits to the rural countryside was quite high (Shaken et al. 2020). In their survey conducted in 2018, almost 60% of respondents expressed interest in spending leisure time in the countryside. The majority of those interested in visits to the countryside focused on the provision of clean air

and natural and organic food (72%), with significantly lower interest in closeness or unity with nature (27%) as well as in learning and experiencing rural lifestyle (25%). It is important to clarify that buying agricultural products directly from farms or via farmers' markets is quite a conventional form of behavior. However, staying on farms (other than those of relatives and friends) and taking part in production processes has been quite novel both for farmers and for visitors.

In our survey during the first lockdown, those domestic and international visitors who visited one or several of the 15 nature-based sites in Almaty region - the most attractive factor for their visit was the uniqueness of the place and its natural sceneries. The second most attractive factor was financial affordability. For domestic visitors proximity to the city was the third most attractive followed by the representation of national history and culture by a site; whereas for international visitors history and culture appeared as the third most attractive factor, followed by the level of comfort offered by the site.

Table 2: Ranking of factors attracting and preventing the visit; sample size =40.X) (1-most influence to 6 -least influence).

| | Domestic tourists to nature-based sites in Almaty region | Mean rank (of 6) | Inbound tourists in Almaty region | Mean rank (of 6) |
|---|---|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Factors that are perceived attractive | Nature Financial affordability Near to the city (Almaty) History and culture | 1.34 3.48 4 4.41 | Nature Financial affordability History and culture Comfort | 1.33 3.41 4 4.42 |
| Factors that are perceived as preventing from visit | No information/no awareness No regular transport Unsatisfactory level of service No unique sites | 2.93 3.72 5.13 5.75 | No information/no awareness No regular transport Language barriers | 2.17 2.67 3.92 3.92 |

The data presented at the Kazakh Tourism portal (survey of 2018; Action Media /Media Gurus) indicated similar interests and similar challenges: 56% of domestic tourism seek cultural and historical values when traveling, 56% seek active recreation; 81% of foreign respondents expect learning about interesting culture and history, 66% are interested in adventure tourism and 53% in mountain tourism. The difficulties for travel are reported as a lack of infrastructure by domestic respondents (81%) and difficult logistics by international (36%).

The pandemic has certainly re-emphasized the potential of rural areas for nature-based recreation: the public discussion of rural sites as bases for nature-embedded stays has been very vivid. The links between human well-being and planetary health have been popular in the media and among tourists. The discourse about the value of rural life seemed to be less vivid, however, the rise in social interest in more varied forms of rural tourism was observed: such media intensified coverage of rural places of interest and presented itineraries and useful travel tips.

The real effects of changing perceptions are rather complex: immediately after the end of the strict lockdown in 2020, the rural and nature-based sites received a large demand from visitors. Not all

sites were able to accommodate the increased demand either due to insufficient regular capacity or sanitary requirements. About 30% of visitors, according to the interview answers of tourist sites in our study, choose the visit in pursuit of reducing their anxiety or because of no preferred alternatives. Moreover, not all visitors were happy with their tourist experience because of the lack of awareness of and interest in the type of pastime offered. As the pandemic situation unfolded, the impulse visitors from the first wave have fallen away, but it can be observed that some more sustained and innovative forms of rural tourism have taken place: There has been interest in nature-based and farm-based stays, which have led to the creation of ‘glamping tourism’, ‘eco-hotels’, ‘guesthouses’, ‘ethno-villages’, ‘agro-settlement’ and other forms of accommodation. The initial interest in such innovative forms appeared before the pandemic from the side of tourism enthusiasts' experiments to innovate in tourism (Katenov 2021). The pandemic has accelerated their adoption and redirected support from both public and private investments. In addition to being well-received by visitors, these forms showed multiple configurations adequate for adoption by rural site operators of various sizes and directed at various tourist audiences (Shaikenova 2022). According to the Kazakh Tourist Association (KTA 2022), the number of guest houses from 2008 to 2021 increased by 95 units (107%), and the number of community-based tourism communities more than doubled - by 13 units. (118%). The most well-known CBT with guesthouses (also those that appeared first) are nature-based (Saty village) and combined nature-based and ethnocultural (Altyn-Emel).

The impact of the pandemic on travel and mobility needs. Conventionally, the travel distance and transport options are important considerations for tourist sites and national and international tourists. Two factors that visitors expressed as preventing them from visiting a site are the absence of clear and accurate information about the site and the absence of regular and reliable transportation.

The pandemic underscored both the difficulties and opportunities of long-distance tourism. The Kazakhstan Association of Camping Tourism and caravanning held the Second Rally of Caravanning Tourists in October 2021. In September 2020, the auto- and moto-caravanning expedition "Caravanning - tourism of real nomads" took place along the route of the Great Silk Road. The initiators of the project ‘Kazakh Tourism’ together with the "Kazakhstan Association of Camping Tourism and Caravanning" aimed to cover 3500 kilometers over 15 days to explore the potential of remote areas for various types of long-distance tourism. The development of caravanning is compatible with the development of on-farm tourism and the development of rural settlements overall, such as there is a need for water and medical infrastructure, which makes expedient development of settlements along the tourist routes. The development of rural small-scale accommodation is seen as a good alternative for making long-distance travel affordable for people not equipped with suitable transport - people can walk from location to location with a minimum amount of luggage.

The effects of restrictions on travel have revealed the patterns in short-distance tourism too. Rural areas proximal to cities also have essential untapped potential for diversifying types of rural tourism forms in post-pandemic times. Despite good connectivity and accessibility of rural sites, the most visited were those most popular - although some of them are difficult to reach. Some popular and proximal sites to the cities have almost doubled the number of visitors in two years; respectively increasing recreational loads on natural ecosystems. For instance, the resort areas were visited by 1.7 mln tourism in 2020, 1.2 mln in 2019, and 1.1 mln in 2018 (Kazakh Tourism 2021). At the same time, many areas with public awareness but well-connected and within proximal (weekend or even excursion) zones received essentially fewer visitors. In our survey

(2019-2020) among 15 nature-based rural sites in the Almaty region, the most visited were quite distant and difficult to reach but unique and popular; whereas the least visited were those with unclear leisure and recreation components, despite being easily accessible (table 3). The insights are important for developing more sustainable tourism and more viable regional and local economies.

Table 3: Tourist perceptions on distance and intention to visit (Kazakhstan)

| Nature based sites | % of visitors | Travel time (distance) from Almaty | Leisure and recreation | Representative themes |
|----------------------------|---------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Most visited | | | | |
| Charyn Canyon | 74 | 2 hour 50 minute (220km) | Nature-related, outdoor | 'Unique place in central Asia, not recommended to go there in hot summer', 'a lot to do there, from camping to exploring the canyon, 'Fee for entrance is not appropriate and expensive', 'Need sanitary facilities', 'Somewhere in between this walking course there should be some rest stop.', 'Should be visited at least once' |
| Big Almaty lake | 67 | 53 minutes (32 km) | Mountain tourism, not a resort | 'Close to city, easy to reach', 'Dangerous road', 'I walked to Almaty Lake and the tour was one of my hardest walking tours. But the Lake itself is very beautiful and should be visited.', 'Overcrowded on weekends'' |
| Least visited | | | | |
| Huuns Ethnic Aul (village) | 18 | 1 hour (5km) | Cultural, heritage | 'Nice place to spend your day with your friends, colleagues or family and interesting activities in site', 'Entrance needs to be more affordable', 'National cuisine should be better represented' |
| Burundai Saka mounds | 10.7 | By car less than an hour (suburban site) | Nature, cultural, heritage | 'Nothing to see and no promotion so far, lack of transport', 'Need more information about site's natural and historical value' |

Creativity in rural tourism innovations. Rural tourism in Kazakhstan has reacted differently. Given that during pre-pandemic rural tourism was mainly practiced as nature-based tourism and family visits, these forms have received enhanced attention due to their capacity to accommodate needs for pleasure in conditions of social distancing. The sites, however, had to apply creativity to meet the novel, emergent needs for health, as well as forms of entertainment appropriate in the situation: raising the level of service and providing health-enhancing leisure activities. Rural sites in proximity to cities showed a more varied range of innovative developments, many of which were implemented with the help of non-material resources and/or restructuring creatively the existing resource bases. The creative efforts have been organized to address the highlighted needs for health safety and simultaneously for physical and mental recreation, and interesting pastime:

'We see that visitors appreciate the positive effect of natural products on their health, with such an attitude they are more willing to come to us despite difficulties and uncertainties' (Owner of apiary).

'Recently we have received more local visitors who are interested in nomadic life and traditions. They like our stylized show programs and national games.' (Manager of ethnocultural nature park).

Rural tourism sites increased the application of digital tools for their product presentation and communication with visitors. It is not necessarily that the rural sites make use of advanced data management and analytics but they certainly turned their attention to visitor engagement. Remote rural sites were more dependent on disruption of supply chain and transportation unless they could be reached by car. However, remote rural sites were able to raise their public image and appeal to visitors by offering a choice of their sites for further vacations. It appears that in the first year of the pandemic, most of the sites had to use the only resources available. Those sites lacking access to additional investments expressed a shift in providing creative activities too and especially in modifying their offers to their regular visitors:

'Now, because people are not very mobile we try to keep in touch with them anyway. Here is a pack of seasonal vegetables and cooking guidance, so we sell them at affordable prices to our customers to remind them to come to us after the pandemic is over.' (Owner of apiary and agro farm).

At the same time, the pandemic has fostered creative developments of travel to rural areas in non-conventional forms and purposes. The forms of gastronomic leisure with both participating in food harvesting and food tasting have emerged as relatively novel forms of activity for rural farms. The formation of these types of leisure activities occurs not only due to the pandemic restrictions but in relatively unrestricted pre-existing agri- and gastronomic tourism products, therefore tourist sites have shown great diversity in what they offer and how they make the offerings financially viable. In pre-pandemic times, craft-based tourism usually was carried out in the form of trade fairs accompanying special events and craftsman centers or villages - an assembly of sites offering trade, workshops, or exhibitions in the designated outlets in urban and rural tourist areas. During the pandemic participation in traditional arts and craft-making has moved into the workshops and sites of craft-makers. The creative shifts have been similar to other forms of rural tourism in terms that the sites having to think of more explicit links between craft-making and health. The craft-makers also looked for creative ways to deliver the value of craft as well as to find innovative outlets for hosting visitors. One outcome of their creative efforts is certainly the changing perspective about forms of visits and attitude to co-staying and accommodating visitors at farmers' sites.

The creative offerings have been incremental for all types of sites in the first year, however, in the second year after the continuation of the pandemic, some of the creative initiatives have turned into more established innovative developments with the potential to turn into viable tourist products. For instance, expanding the network of glamping (i.e. a variation of nature-based stay in rural and suburban areas with enhanced comfortability) reflects the mixture of hedonistic, recreational, and utilitarian demands that were rather characteristic for urban residents/city tourists:

'We understand that tourists have different needs. Glamping is intended for those who love outdoor recreation and at the same time do not want to compromise comfort. They plan to come to us for a combination of beauty, wildness and comfort, and healing. Therefore in our glamping, they can choose to prepare meals for themselves, do horse-riding, walk, sports, take recreational baths and spas, do meditation, or take sports classes.' (Owner of glamping).

The creative means for enhancing the value of the conventional rural experiences were also observed. In such cases, creative efforts were undertaken to capture and communicate the conventional values for new types of tourists:

'The demand has increased, however, we need more trainers and develop other types of materials for novice riders; we hope that more people will appreciate the importance of preservation of horse-riding heritage' (Owner of sport and recreational horse-riding site).

In general, the response of rural tourism sites to pandemic situations was varied and creative. The sector appears to be in the process of probing and transformation:

'Tourism is becoming more creative, and more professional. During the quarantine period, the tourism sector suffered a lot. The market weeded out weak players, strong ones remained, and new ones appeared' (Owner of Glamping).

In the pandemic, the creative and innovative competence of rural sites turned out to be a decisive factor in a site's functioning. Two independent tourism experts agreed that rural sites have to think about the available resources more creatively:

'In my opinion, rural tourism 'products' are already there: beautiful landscapes, charming villages, and auls with traditional culture. The biggest challenges are the transport infrastructure and lack of information about what they offer. Tourists need to know that these "products" exist and there is an opportunity to reach them.' (Expert A).

The experts and scholars appeared to be in consensus that tourism in rural areas in Kazakhstan would be invigorated if there was a more vivid presentation about the sites and their offerings and designing more varied tourist experiences at new and existing sites.

Implications to sustainable rural tourism. It is premature to make clear-cut projections about the sustainability and continuity of innovations in the long term. However, our research makes it possible to suggest that current decisions about two rural tourism features, choice of physical infrastructure (roads, etc.) and rural tourism value orientations, will have a significant influence on the sustainability of rural areas. As discussed above, sustainable development of long-distance travel would require both social inclusion and environmental sustainability, therefore development of light infrastructure and distances manageable by walking with minimal luggage is a reasonable direction for sustainable rural tourism development. The innovative developments in rural tourism have been driven mainly by the sites' need for resilience and tourists' need for wellbeing. This however produced an intensive and vivid public consensus about the value of rural areas, rurality, and nature per se and as factors of the overall sustainable development of the country. Indeed, participation in creative activities related to rural life has increased, as well as appreciation of links between rural features and the psychological wellbeing of people.

Case study: Italy

Rural tourism context: Rural tourism can be considered one of the oldest forms of tourism in Italy. It has developed in the Mediterranean area with a history of tourism dating back to Roman times when villas in the "coolest" countryside were used by patrician families as places of leisure and relaxation time against an escape from the chaotic urban life (Battilani, 2001). Other forms of hospitality in rural areas can be recognized in the tradition of pilgrimages and the genesis of rural tourism can be seen in both as well as that of the Middle, and also in the Renaissance when the embryonic form of rural tourism could be said to have begun. The need to find a refuge outside of the city for relaxation or recreation increased its importance from the 16th to the 18th Century. With the Romantic period, rurality and nature started again to represent strong positive values, however, in those days free time and vacation were only reserved for a stringent very limited number of people, largely drawn from the aristocracy and high-bourgeoisie (Di Muzio et al 2000). Modern rural tourism originated in the late 19th century (Battilani 2001). In 1991, Bernardi

observed that, despite the hospitality culture being seen as part of the tradition of farmers' families in most of the Italian regions, it was still developed only in a few places (Alto Adige and Tuscany). However, this perspective has changed significantly since the 90s due to the joint initiatives of agri firms and governments. At that time Italy adopted a particular law relating to agritourism (Legge Quadro Nazionale sull'Agriturismo n. 730/1985), followed by the amended one in 2006 more in line with the current trend of a mature form of tourism. Indeed, in the first decade of the 20th century: agritourism was one of the highest-growing tourism sectors in Italy. As stated by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (2017), in 2016 there were 22,661 agritourism farms (agritourism farms licensed to provide accommodation with tourists' accommodation in agri-farms amounted to 12.1 million).

Agritourism in Italy mainly comprises forms of agricultural farms offering food-tasting experiences and short stays with various types of experience related to rural or farm life. The agritourism in Italy comprises 19 agritourism districts, each with its characteristic gastronomic specialty. The agritourism farms can vary in their offering of accommodation, food serving or food tasting, edu-informational services, active pastimes, creative pastimes, as well as other activities related to rural production and rural living. Agritourism is particularly defined by law as a form of tourism where each farm offers tourism products based on a farm's production. In this way, the policy of rural tourism facilitates the development of sustainable rural tourism in two ways: by supporting the farms' income (economic and social sustainability) and by maintaining diversity and uniqueness of agricultural production which also prevents excessive commodification of agriculture in rural areas (environmental and socio-cultural sustainability). Indeed, Italy, as of 2016 counted 863 IG appellations - 299 IG food and 526 IG wine geographical indications (Pineiro et al. 2019) with some agrifarms specializing in food production, some in wine, and some in both.

Other than agritourism, rural tourism sites offer 'sun and beach tourism', nature and historical architecture sightseeing, hiking and trekking, and visiting national parks. These types of tourism are directly linked with the sustainability of nature-based resources. As noted by Pineiro et al. (2019) the boom of 'sun and beach tourism' was in the 1960s, however over five decades since then rural tourism has diversified to offer a more varied range of tourism based on rural features - culture, living, production, etc. Most of the agri districts in Italy have good road connectivity within and among the districts, which in pre-pandemic times allowed for the creation of multi-destination routes and tour packages (such as the "Roads of flavors" or '*I borghi più belli d'Italia*' (the most beautiful villages of Italy)' and numerous associations of small towns and villages to introduce food, architectural and cultural heritage across a network of semi-urban and rural sites). Other thematic routes dedicated to olive oil, pasta, wine, and flavors, walking and trekking tours covering multiple locations create a network of tourist rural sites and ensure interest in more than one rural location, thus supporting the vitality of remote rural areas.

The pandemic's impact on leisure needs. Free time, *otium* – as the Romans used to call it – has been the historical ground on which travel for leisure and recreation began for the Roman *élite*. The availability of free time from work, days off paid, and agreed-upon job contracts, are a more recent phenomenon. They have been negotiated by trade unions since the beginning of the '900. In addition, extra free time is the result of households' technological improved efficiency (especially for women). All these can be recognized to be the determinants of the development of travel for leisure and recreation (Battilani 2001). Excluding obligations, work, and tasks required for pure existence such as sleeping or eating, according to statistical data, in Italy in pre-pandemic

times, according to the multipurpose survey on household time use (Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2013), the average time usage of people of 15 years old and over is concentrated in personal care (including mainly tasks required for existing such as eating, sleeping) social life and entertainment, sport and outdoors activities, hobbies, using computer, reading, watching TV and radio. For most of the ages, these hours are, on average, very comparable to those in employment, and this shows how important this part of the day can be in people's lives.

Leisure time, therefore, as a working definition, can be defined as the discretionary time that is remaining after working, commuting, sleeping, and doing necessary household and personal care, which can be used in a chosen way (Tribe 2016; Figure 4). The activities done during these hours are general recreation activities either at home, in nearby places i.e. in the hometown, or a few hours' distance from it. When home-based, examples of activities are listening to music and radio, watching television or video, playing games, *bricolage* and do-it-yourself, reading, writing, use of computer for leisure, hobbies such as collections, modeling, cookery, painting, decorating, exercising, etc. and other home entertainment activities, including socialization with friends and relatives when done for leisure. Similarly, but even more extensive can be the list of activities engaged in outside watching or practicing sports, dancing, arts and crafts, travels, wild gaming, cultural visits (museums, exhibitions, seminars, public reading, labs, etc.), eating and drinking fine food, and so on. It is clear that leisure is substantially subjective, i.e. what may be a leisure experience for one person may not be for another. In analogy, many activities may be work for one person and recreation for another, or, at an individual level, over time recreational activity may become work, and vice versa. This is the case for artists: a musician, playing an instrument may be at one time a profession, and at another a recreation. Similarly, it may be hard to distinguish education from recreation as in the case of recreational mathematics or scientific edu-entertaining experiments in a science museum. However, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a significant selector in people's choices according to lockdown rules and possibilities. A shrinking set of opportunities has been the dominant thought, however, the need and the wish to enjoy recreation and tourism has started to drive behavior directed at creative solutions both in terms of demand and supply.

Figure 4. Organization of time in peoples' life pre-pandemic and in pandemic phases

The educational and social role of playing and recreational activities are also often highlighted and featured by recreation providers from municipalities to nonprofits such as, in the Anglo-Saxon countries the YMCA, YWCA, Boy and Girls Scouts other clubs; summer camps, green and Sports Week, theater and creative entertaining weeks to care for children and teenagers in non-schooling periods while parents are at work; or initiatives organized by Italian social centers to entertain the elderly providing occasions for recreation and socialization when on a pension. Yet, in recent years the European Commission, directly or indirectly, recognized a significant profile to sports and other recreation activities in several European strategies and programs that reflect the multidisciplinary nature of recreation activities trying to take into account its importance in various fields such as employment, trade, social cohesion and personal well-being. Among these examples are the EU Work Plan for Sport 2011–2014 and; the EU Work Plan for Sport for 2014–2017 (Statistical Office of the European Union 2017). For instance, the report highlights that – despite the statistics still lagging to enable a sound comparable analysis in economic and social significance - in 2015, the sports sector employed more than 1.6 million people in the EU-28 and that in most EU Member States, employment in sport rose between 2011 and 2015 (Statistical Office of the European Union 2017). Thus, recreation in rural tourism is also growing as it is interlinked with the entertainment industry, fitness centers, spas, sports clubs, etc.

During the pandemic, both recreational demands and demands for conventional offers of rural tourism (rural living, horse riding, food tourism) became pronounced. The rural sites analyzed in our sample suggested that the share of domestic tourists has increased during the period of restricted international travel. Three tendencies can be seen: 1) sites have been booked for a-day trips; 2) new requests appeared for internet connectivity as tourists intended to work while visiting; 3) recreation and health-related services were important for tourists:

Table 4: Innovating by Italian rural tourism enterprises

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Changes in demand</i> | <i>'In Summer (when open) even more requests but 95% domestic, vs 50% of previous years' (Agriturismo site with international target)</i> |
|--------------------------|---|

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| | <p><i>In summer even more requests, all very concentrated in July and August (International only in case of returning customer) (Agritourism site close to urban area)</i></p> <p><i>'In summer even more request, all very concentrated and domestic' (Agritourism site in remote area - More 1,5 hr drive from a major city – Milan/Rome)</i></p> |
| <i>Changes in leisure</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demand for adjustment to remote work: <i>'Request of powerful wifi for teleworking' was the most difficult situation for a site to satisfy (Agritourism close to urban area - max 1,5 hr drive from a major city - Rome)</i> ● Demand for recreational leisure <i>'Horse riding and rural life' (Agritourism site close to urban area)</i> <i>'Having the swimming-pool made a difference' (Agritourism site with domestic target)</i> |
| <i>Predictions on time horizon</i> | <p><i>'Some updates on tourism booking platform. Domestic vs International, but seems only temporary' (Agritourism site with international target)</i></p> <p><i>'No' (Agritourism site with domestic target)</i></p> <p><i>'No significant changes. The need for more powerful wi-fi' (Agritourism site close to urban area)</i></p> <p><i>'Not significant in long-term' (Agritourism site in remote area - More 1,5 hr drive from a major city – Milan/Rome)</i></p> |

T It should be noted that all types of surveyed rural tourism sites (those with a focus on domestic visitors or international sites with proximity to urban centers and remote sites) foresaw no significant changes in the way they run their business models. The agritourism site with proximity to urban centers, however, expressed the view that the need for a powerful internet connection will likely remain. The sites suggested that as compared to other forms of tourism (except the site focusing on international visitors) rural tourism has been less affected by the pandemic, however, all sites mentioned operational challenges that they had to overcome in response to the changing situation (hygiene requirements, suspension in operations due to lockdowns, adjustments to changes in demand). The section on creative innovation contains an analysis of site response strategies.

The pandemic's impact on travel and mobility needs. According to the *OECD Regional Outlook* (2019,7), 20% of rural people of the total OECD population live in rural regions close to cities, which are defined as territories less than 60 minutes of driving time from urban centers, a distance that is generally used also to define weekend tourism locations or excursion places. The remaining 6% of the total OECD population lives in remote rural regions. There is, however, a significant variability between countries and in the distribution of the population. In Italy, where total land used for agriculture makes up about 43%, about 60% of the population lives in rural areas (Summary for 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme ENRD 2016). However, its spatial distribution is that a larger share of the rural population lives close to cities, whilst a significantly smaller share lives in remote areas. This is reflected in the visiting numbers to rural agrifarms, with more tourists going to rural sites in proximity to the cities, while more remote sites are attended less frequently and by fewer people.

In the surveyed sample of agritourism sites, the site with proximity to urban areas noted that as a result of the pandemic situation the domestic share increased essentially and visitors tended to

have longer stays even within the nearer cities. The remote site noticed an effect on its operations due to increased volatility of planning behaviors: visitors were reluctant to make advance payments, and were inclined to last-minute confirmation and cancellations, although the overwhelming majority were domestic tourists. In one instance this trend can be reflective of visitors' challenges associated with overcoming physical distance. Visitors wanted to make sure that they eventually arrived where intended and in conditions of uncertainty their perception of long-distance travel challenges became more accentuated. Nonetheless, the remote site in the survey noted the increased demand as compared to that of pre-pandemic time, suggesting that remoteness may have both potential for creative tourism as well as specific challenges.

Another effect on the perception of the distance and travel over distance caused by the pandemic was an enhanced appreciation of travel as a relational activity. In the study of 874 guests visiting the Italian region of South Tyrol, including rural tourist sites during the pandemic, Scuttari et al. (2021) found that travel approaches varied from cautious to adventurous, however, relational components of travel were found to be strong overall. In particular, for visitors, it was important with whom they travel and how supportive and empathetic a host is. Imaginative long-distance travel appears less appealing and this can be seen in the tendency of visitors to undertake proximity travel (Travel and Holidays in Italy and Abroad, Italian National Institute of Statistics 2019). Italy, indeed, was experiencing several prolonged lockdowns, various lengths, and intensities of travel restrictions, as well as accommodating visitors' preferences - all of which could be a factor in the ability of visitors to undertake travel. With the increased interest increased appreciation of local sites could also be noted - for example, media coverage and visitors' reviews captioned their visits as 'reinventing the culture and beauty of known sites'(Ferraretto 2020), 'paving a new way of travel' and 'rediscovery the places that were close and familiar', etc. However, the concerns about overcrowding of proximal sites and diluting their cultural and aesthetic value due to the conducting of more unconventional tourist recreations were also expressed. The pandemic thus showed the resilience of domestic tourism, as well as indicated areas where a sustainable approach should be set up to maintain the cultural and environmental integrity of rural sites.

Creativity in rural tourism innovations. The rural sites' creative efforts in Italy appeared to be driven by the need for resilience in situations of restricted mobility and uncertainty too. The sites focused their creative efforts on innovations within existing forms of tourism. As noted above, there was more emphasis on health-related and recreational activities as induced by both health and safety regulations and visitors' preferences. The new and conventional forms of leisure had to be delivered in a new operational environment. The rural tourism sites had to modify their strategies in managing the booking of visits and communicating with customers. The surveyed rural sites had needed to adjust: reducing offers either due to hygiene conditions or due to excessive demand, thus finding themselves in a somewhat paradoxical situation where despite excessive demand the sites may have ended up with unfilled capacity due to volatile booking and last-minute cancellations. The sites had to adjust sensibly to retain the appeal and satisfaction of visitors:

'In summer had even more requests, all very concentrated in July and August' while acknowledging that the most difficult when adjusting was '...volatility in reservation, booking platforms cancellations management. Stopped using booking platform, only used for last-minute reservations' (Agritourism site in proximity to urban area)

The results of the survey suggest that for all sites the online booking platforms played an important role in visit planning and communication. During the pandemic, sites have modified their use of

booking platforms differently. While in the example above the sites reduced their use of booking platforms, some others had to amplify their presence online and use the booking systems creatively to attract visitors and continue operations.

For the agritourism site with a focus on international visitors, the most difficulty was resolving low demands *'In general only 35% of room occupancy compared to before (due to strong lockdown')*, even though about 40% of the international visitors were replaced by domestic tourists. In this situation the site implemented 'Some updates on tourism booking platforms', the use of which the site believes will be a permanent trend after the pandemic. At the same time, other innovative developments were observed where the application of 'recreativity' innovative means was caused by the need to maintain the type of rural experience that is conventionally valued and sought by tourists:

The site in our sample specializing in horse riding and rural life stated that they *'Stopped the restaurant and moved to B&B only for the time being'*. There are economic rationales for that, however, offering B&B appears to be more in line with the values of rural living as compared to restaurant services. Another site specializing in offering wine and food as part of rural living chose to hire new personnel *'to satisfy the need to serve instead of using a self-service buffet'*. Although contrary to the first example, this adjustment seems to also represent the features of rurality by continuing to offer food and wine experiences to visitors. Barcaccia et al (2020) observed another creative trend regarding rural products - they concluded that there was a change in buying preferences toward purchasing more primary products such as flour, oil, eggs, and cheese. While the change was somewhat expedient due to the desire to have better products and eat healthier, another motivation and effect from this was the desire to organize some creative pastime with the participation of family members. In the pandemic situation, not all rural sites could find this type of creative or physical way to reach tourists at home, however, those who could diversify their tourist offers and shorten their supply and delivery chains were more resilient (Mastronardi et al. 2021; Peira et al. 2021; Barcaccia et al. 2020).

Implications for sustainable rural tourism. In general, tourism to agrifarms in the way established in Italy contains many sustainability mechanisms - it aims to support local livelihood and production and maintain its cultural heritage. The response of rural sites to tourism, in general, has not induced intensive construction of new physical infrastructure with many adjustment measures focused on adjustment in tourist experiences. The form of agritourism promotes diversification and preservation of local specialties. The increased interest in recreational activities and pastimes at rural sites, especially in proximity to urban areas, raised concerns about the effects of increased loads on the natural and heritage resources of rural areas (Manganelli et al. 2019). The remote areas have shown a greater need for connectivity, with the pandemic revealing their vulnerability to disruption in travel. The innovations by the rural tourism sites mainly mitigated the sector disruption effects, however, areas for sustainable development of rural tourism should be further explored and promoted.

Conclusions

The study aimed to identify and analyze the creative efforts of rural tourism sites to sustain or reinvent their operations in conditions contrary to the essence of tourism: travel restrictions and adverse impact on the leisure-seeking behavior of tourists. It was found that despite rural tourism

being at different stages of development and comprising different tourism forms, the response of rural tourism sites in both countries to the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was similar. In particular, the rural sites reassessed the tourist needs for rural leisure directed toward more safety and well-being although still rooted in the conventional experience of rural pastimes. There have been both differences and similarities in the ways that rural sites in each country approach innovation to overcome travel restrictions: while proximity tourism has appeared to be both more resilient and creative in Italy; Kazakhstan showed the rise of various innovative forms of tourism based on long-distance travel experience, the appeal of mobility and staying in mobile accommodation. Rural sites in both countries, nonetheless, had to act in a situation of travel and supply chain disruption and therefore invented and applied various creative ways of meaning-making to interpret restricted or lack of mobility as part of the rural tourism experience and deliver their practical solutions.

The link between creative innovation was observed in terms of rural site resilience, however, the link between creative responses to the pandemic and sustainable development of rural tourism is yet not clear. One apparent conclusion is that the creative potential of rural areas for sustainable rural tourism is high. The link between creativity, resilience, and sustainable forms of rural tourism should be explored further and rural tourism sites and destination management organizations should be equipped with the knowledge to facilitate this. The impact of COVID-19 restrictions has been to invigorate the creative behavior of some rural sites. Not all rural sites engaged in innovative behavior, however the creative efforts of those who did so have allowed the identification of new means of creating tourism experiences in rural areas. It is important to understand that the pandemic has created serious challenges for the tourism sector, including the rural tourism sector.

In the face of the restrictions on mobility and health and safety requirements, the rural areas turned out to be more resilient relative to urban areas. Although creative efforts by rural sites were mainly driven by the need for resilience, their innovations revealed the potential of rural areas for sustainable rural tourism development, as well as existing and possible vulnerabilities. Rural tourism emanating from the rural resources and societal conception of rurality can satisfy a wider range of needs comprising physical and mental well-being. Notably, creative developments in response to the pandemic aimed to reconfigure the type of leisure and recreation offered and to readjust the business model of communication with customers and the use of digital technologies. The emergence of unconventional travel patterns and unconventional demand showed that remote areas can be invigorated when rural sites couple their offerings with appealing ways to overcome distance. The potential of travel as experience appeared to be linked to a number of contextual contingencies: culture, societal interpretation of long-distance travel, and readiness to undertake creative development of long-distance travel.

Pointers for future studies.

It is premature to conclude the continuity and sustainability of innovative developments of rural tourism sites in the long term. The results of case studies captured major trends in creative resilient adjustments of rural sites in response to COVID-19, while future research is needed to identify the effects on long-term sustainable rural tourism development. The response to the pandemic effects was mainly driven by the rural sites' need to continue operations in situations of travel restrictions, while the adjustment efforts suggest that rural tourism entails many pathways for sustainable development of tourism: values of tourism to rural areas can align well with environmental, socioeconomic and cultural sustainability. The accommodative capacity of rural areas for human

needs of physical and psychological well-being needs to be operationalized concerning various forms of tourism and the specific circumstances of their peculiar societal contexts. Future studies are needed to conceptualize and theorize lessons from the application of creative innovations to rural sites' enterprise models capable of coping with challenges in sustainable ways. The momentum is right for scholars together with policy-makers, practitioners, and tourists to make sense of innovative developments and direct them toward good practice in the sustainable development of rural tourism.

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