

TERRACENTRIC VISIONS AND THE DOMESTICATION OF AQUATIC SPACES:

A case study of fishers' huts in the Venetian and Caorle lagoons

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Rita Vianello

University of Bergamo <rita.vianello@unibg.it>

ABSTRACT: This article aims to reconstruct the origins and evolution of the different types of fishing huts, commonly called *casoni*, which are widespread in Italy in the lagoon areas of the Upper Adriatic. The focus is on the role played by the *casoni* in the domestication of these lagoon spaces and on their evolution towards patrimonialisation. The first part of the article analyses the polysemic nature of the concept of aquatic space and proposes insights into different viewpoints and perceptions: from the terracentric vision to the recognition of indigenous knowledge; from the sphere of emotion, to the legislative arena. The second part argues how, in recent years, this emblematic example of human adaptation to a potentially hazardous space is evolving towards a new phase. In a period characterised by a crisis in the fishing sector, the simple fishers' huts are gradually being transformed into tourist facilities. Paradoxically, this element of the local cultural landscape owes its survival to the 'marketing of tradition' often carried out personally by the fishers who have transformed themselves into tourism operators.

KEYWORDS: Venetian lagoon, Caorle lagoon, fishers' huts, terracentric perception, tourism, patrimonial assets.

Introduction

From a geographic point of view, the Venetian Lagoon is a hybrid environment located between the sea and the mainland (Figure 1). Within the lagoon there are numerous islands, some uninhabited and others not, such as the 100 or more islets joined by bridges upon which the city of Venice is built. This is one of the largest coastal lagoons in the Mediterranean Sea: it is about 50 km long and 10 to 12 km wide, with a total area of about 550 square km (Ghetti, 1990). Its average depth is just 2 metres, although in some areas it measures up to 20 metres. Water is the dominant element and covers 67% of the total area. Only 8% of the lagoon's surface is taken up by the islands. The lagoon is connected to the sea through three natural inlets called *bocche* (mouths) and two elongated islands, that extend from north to south, separate the sea from the lagoon: the island of Lido, in the north, and the island of Pellestrina, in the south.

Over the centuries, the currents generated by tidal flows on the sea coast and the sediment-loaded outflows of rivers on the other, have shaped lagoon morphology by creating a vast network of canals. Like the roots of a tree, these canals become smaller and smaller as they

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develop from the point where sea water enters the brackish lagoon. As Cavallo, Vallerani and Visentin assert, the Venetian Lagoon can be interpreted as a socio-natural hybrid system because it is the result of complex environmental processes involving a variety of human and non-human actions (Cavallo, Vallerani & Visentin, 2021). This system, characterised by human-non-human-nature coexistence, has experienced numerous territorial transformations. Over the last hundred years human activities have contributed as never before to profoundly changing the lagoon. The lagoon has been increasingly subjected to invasive anthropic interventions in the name of progress and modernity. Among these, the construction of the industrial area Porto Marghera between 1917 and 1925 and the so-called *Canale dei Petroli* from the Malamocco inlet to Porto Marghera. This man-made canal was dug between 1961 and 1969 to allow large oil tankers and container ships to reach the industrial area more easily. The consequences included increases in both water level and water salinity in the southern basin of the lagoon (Fortibuoni *et al.*, 2009). The building of the MoSE (*Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico* - 'Experimental Electromechanical Module'), a system of mobile dams to prevent flooding in the lagoon, is the most recent invasive anthropic intervention (Vianello, 2021). Processes of modernisation have led to a real 'breakwater' for the lagoon environment and for fishing activities (Mezzetti, 1995, pp. 47-79; Caniato *et al.*, 1995).

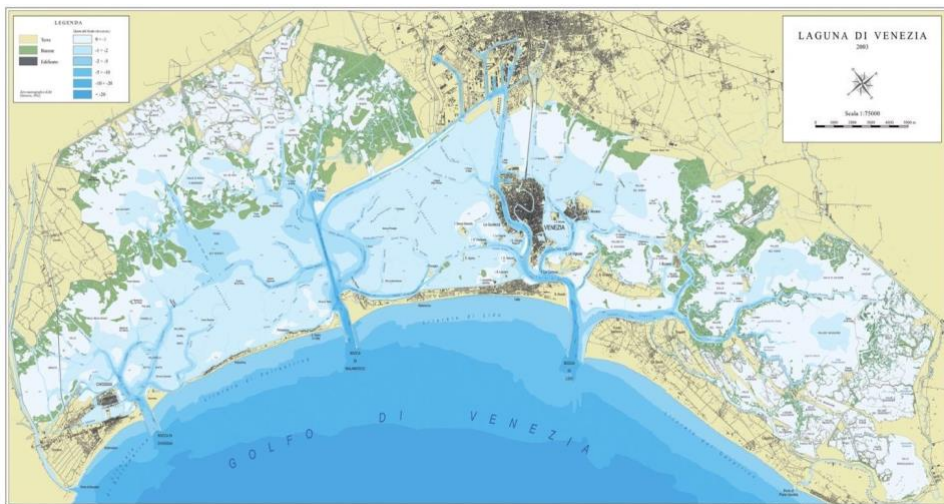


Figure 1 – Map of the Venetian Lagoon (*Magistrato alle Acque*, 2003).

There are numerous lagoons in the rich system of rivers, deltas and estuaries that characterise the coastal strips of the regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia, in north-eastern Italy. In the past, the morphology of the eastern hinterland was dominated by the presence of large marshes and lagoons. Caorle Lagoon together with the lagoons of Venice and Marano-Grado (in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region) represent what remains of an ancient and vast lagoon belt, dating from the post-glacial era. Within this geographical area, Caorle Lagoon (Figure 2) is located north of the Venetian Lagoon. It is bordered by the Adriatic coast and the lower courses of the Livenza and Tagliamento rivers. The materials deposited by the rivers have formed a conspicuous floodplain degrading towards the south-west (Vallerani 2004, p. 17). Less famous, less known (and less studied) than the nearby Venetian Lagoon, in the Caorle Lagoon the human actions have influenced the spontaneous evolution

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processes of the lagoon system more than elsewhere. Indeed, Michele Zanetti contends that it is improper to define it as a lagoon because the presence of lagoon dynamics and physiognomy are today very limited (Zanetti 2009, p. 35).

The formation of the Caorle Lagoon is linked to the advance of the mouth of the Tagliamento river, whose sands were deposited by sea currents along the coast (near the towns of Bibione and Brussa). This sandy strip separated the original, vast, complex system of brackish water marshes and canals from the sea.



Figure 2 – Map of Caorle Lagoon (Bing Maps, 2023).

This stretch of low sub-coastal plain was a well-defined geographical area in Roman times. In this period, we have records of permanent settlements, facilitated by the series of port-canal, created by the rivers flowing into the Adriatic (Vallerani 2004, p. 18). These permanently inhabited localities exploited the resources offered by the amphibious environment and fishing is considered to have been the main livelihood activity (Soncin *et al.*, 2009). From the Roman era, we begin to see the first reclamation works which took place in what was once a lagoon that extended over a much larger area than the one we can observe today (Salerno, 2002, p. 13). However, it was from the Middle Ages that a large part of the original lagoon began to undergo increasingly incisive reclamation works to obtain arable

land, to the detriment of its aquatic dimension (Associazione per la Laguna di Caorle e Bibione).

Today the Caorle Lagoon has a smaller surface area than the Venetian Lagoon. Shaped like an "L", it extends about 5000 hectares, is approximately 10km long and a maximum of 3km wide. Its depth varies from 0.5 to 1.5 metres but can reach a depth of 8 metres in reclamation channels (Zanetti 2009, p. 41). The lagoon communicates with the sea through the entrance of Falconera to the south and the Baseleghe inlet to the north. Having lost its original lagoon nature over time, nowadays it is divided into six water basins, connected to each other by canals, locally called *valli* (the original definition is probably from the Latin *vallum*, i.e., barrier). These six *valli* are what currently remain of the original lagoon. Valle Zignago is the section of the lagoon furthest from the Adriatic Sea and the largest of the six (about 8 km²) and Valle Pererai is the smallest area of the lagoon (about 1.5 km²), located south of Valle Zignago. Valle Grande is also known as Valle Franchetti, as it was owned by the homonymous family in the 20th century (until the 1960s). It has an area of about 6 km² and retains the original marshy character, unlike the other *valli*. In the period between 1948 and 1954, the writer Ernest Hemingway went to this marshland valley to go duck hunting. The experience of staying in the lagoon led to the writing of the novel *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950). Many pages of the book depict the lagoon environment and its charm with mastery, helping to raise awareness about the lagoon and the people's lives. Up until the novel they were unknown to most¹. Vallenova, is the fourth with an area of about 6 km² and the last two are Vallegrande and Vallesina di Bibione, with a total area of about 5 km².

In the particular contexts of the Venetian and Caorle lagoons, we find the so-called *casoni* (*cason* singular), literally 'huts' in the Venetian dialect. A *cason* is a typical dwelling and located not only in aquatic environments. There are different types and they are widespread in the southern Venetian Lagoon, in the Caorle Lagoon and in general throughout the Northern Adriatic lagoons. Due to their original nature and use, these huts are often linked to wet areas.

The concept of 'aquatic space' is polysemic and its interpretation is often elusive due to the problematic dimension of water for humans. Lagoons in particular are still poorly studied places because they are often assimilated with marine environments. Despite this, they are easily distinguished thanks to their own geomorphological characteristics and to the fact that unique cultural expressions have developed over time. Among the cultural characteristics of lagoons, we find the practices adopted for their domestication. Fishing huts are an integral part of this domestication process.

Local people do not perceive the aquatic space of lagoons as liquid surfaces that separate the various emerged lands. They do not perceive their lagoon homes as merely a container of resources to be exploited; for them water is a 'dense' space. Here the visible and invisible

¹ Among the evocative pages of his novel, the writer conveys the atmosphere of the lagoon during a winter hunting trip. He writes: "They started two hours before daylight, and at first, it was not necessary to break the ice across the canal as other boats had gone on ahead. In each boat, in the darkness, so you could not see, but only hear him; the poler stood in the stern, with his long oar. [...] Four of the boats went on up the main canal toward the big lagoon to the north. A fifth boat had already turned off into a side canal. Now, the sixth boat turned south into a shallow lagoon, and there was no broken water. It was all ice, new-frozen during the sudden, windless cold of the night. It was rubbery and bending against the thrust of the boatman's oar. Then it would break as sharply as a pane of glass, but the boat made little forward progress" (p. 4).

intertwine, humans and non-humans meet, and every place is part of the lived history of the people. It is a space linked to human emotions too. It is a place of myths, legends and in-depth indigenous knowledge.

Born from humble origins, the *casoni* are now being used in new ways because of an ever-increasing demand for new spaces and innovation from the tourism industry². From the beginning of the 21st century, the use of these traditional fishing huts has rapidly evolved to satisfy processes of capitalisation wherein local heritage itself is commodified (Harvey, 2015, pp. 319-338). The patrimonial asset in this case can be identified with the contemporary conceptual category indicated by Satta. He explores 'typicalness' and its relationship with places now loaded with cultural meanings. This new concept extends from the category of 'uniqueness' reserved for artistic works (Satta, 2013, pp. 4-5). In this way, typical features of local cultures are rediscovered, sometimes reinvented, and re-evaluated as cultural assets. Unfortunately, the reason for this is too often linked to the economy of tourism. (Dei, 2018, p. 145). It should be remembered that heritage and landscape are permanent social constructions, they are parts of a process or a human condition rather than a single movement or personal project (Harvey, 2015). For this reason, Harvey states, heritage processes "can be explored within a very long temporal framework and should not be described simply as a product of post-modern economic and social tendencies" (2001, p. 91).

In this case study of the Caorle and Venetian lagoons, I document an important factor included in the heritage process. In these territories the *casoni* are built on hybrid spaces between water and solid ground. Because of a complex system of local regulatory institutions, the laws are incomplete. Regulations are unclear about how to manage potential heritage sites in purely aquatic places.

Lack of knowledge about aquatic places in the decision-making process creates conflict with those who claim ownership of one of these huts. In the Caorle Lagoon (and in the Venetian Lagoon more recently) a new heritage process, focused on the enhancement of what were originally humble huts synonymous with poverty, has led these constructions to be discovered and appreciated by the general public. This new interest is stimulating 'watery gentrification' that is affecting a large number of *casoni* in Caorle Lagoon and we expect to see a similar evolution in Venice. Consequent to the development of a previously unknown tourist economy, fishers see the possibility of new earnings in the face of the fishing sector crisis. New types of tourism, generally defined as 'alternatives', increasingly attract visitors to practices linked to local folklore and the supposedly pristine nature of the places they visit. Among the different facets that alternative tourism can assume, Bourdieu talks about the "class pursuit mechanism," the search by *élites* for ever new destinations uncontaminated by the masses, places capable of conveying high levels of symbolic capital, and whose exclusivity is guaranteed by remoteness or by high service costs (D'Eramo, 2017, pp. 94).

In the midst of the different forces at play, the *casoni* are presented to the public as an element of what is (commonly called) local 'tradition'. Actually, what is often presented to the casual visitor is a vision based on an idyllic image of fishers' life which is distant from the processes that gave rise to local cultural capital over time. It is an image that is based on the expropriation of symbols or on their adulteration. Over time the fantastic image can also be unconsciously legitimised by the inhabitants themselves (Boros, 2013, p. 67; Padiglione, 2018, p. 22; Meloni, 2014). The huts, now scarcely used for fishing work purposes, turn out to be an

² Today, the influence of tourism on socio-economics is so great that D'Eramo proposes the definition 'age of tourism' (D'Eramo, 2017, p. 2).

interesting case study on how local culture, paradoxically, ends up surviving thanks to its commercialisation (Simonicca, 2016, pp. 478-480).

The research presented here is based on a qualitative anthropological methodology, using semi-structured interviews with residents, fishers, environmentalists, opposition groups, researchers and experts in hydraulic engineering. All quotations from these sources in the text are translations by the author. The article is also informed by the critical reading of various texts on the topic (social media content, newspaper articles, blogs, videos and television programmes) and is informed by auto-ethnography – a comparatively recent approach to anthropological studies in which the experience of a scholar herself becomes an object and part of the analysis – in which my individual engagement with the specific local socio-cultural and political context is analysed.

II. Terracentric visions and indigenous perceptions of aquatic spaces

Although water is necessary for life and is the element that arguably most involves the deepest emotional sphere (Vallerani, 2019, pp. 108-110; Strang, 2004), this special element has no boundaries and does not have its own defined shape. Thanks to recent theoretical debates about the new hydrophilic turn, the geography of health critically examines the relationships between water, health and wellbeing. In contrast to hydrophobic dimensions, the focus of hydrophilia is on the aspects of water which are simultaneously effective, life-enhancing and health-enabling (Foley *et al.*, 2019). This new term *hydrophilia*, as Vallerani explains, emphasises the attraction of aquatic environments for humans as compared to other environments without the presence of visible water surfaces (2019, p. 59).

Blue spaces have often been perceived by humans as foreign and potentially dangerous. This awe is strongly felt when water assumes its most violent dimension transforming itself into catastrophic floods, which in medieval times were attributed to divine wrath (Galtarossa and Genovese, 2016; Hidiroglou, 2007). For example, in many mythical-religious systems there are great flood events where water “constitutes a conceptualisation of physical evil attributable to some form of moral evil committed by humanity” (Ligi, 2011, pp. 119; Ligi, 2016).

In the most recent scientific literature, our relationship with water – in its many forms: seas, oceans, lagoons, rivers and lakes – has suffered from a vision that we can define as ‘terracentric’. I note that the land-water contrast belongs to a purely Western vision. Aquatic space is generally perceived as homogeneous and undifferentiated, extraneous to humans, resistant to domestication and dangerous, ultimately the ‘other’ space par excellence. For example, Giordana, in several articles, defines Westerners as “continentals” in order to underline the cultural distance between blue spaces and we humans who perceive water as an alien environment (Giordana, 2022)³. These other and unknown aquatic worlds can be perceived as extra-terrestrial spaces, that host forms of life which are invisible and mysterious to us (Helmreich, 2009). We can extend this vision to the lagoons’ ‘transitional waterscapes.

³ In the ‘non-Western’ visions the aquatic spaces have different perceptions. For example, in the Belep Islands (Kanaky New Caledonia) studied by Giordana: “the ocean is much more than a surface to cross to reach other islands or the container of important economic resources. The ocean is a dense space: visible and invisible intertwine in its opaque depth; past and present, life and death touch each other; human and non-human meet” (Giordana, 2022, p. 4).

In their interesting *Ocean of Wetness* platform, Mathur and da Cunha (2019) report that people “experience water on the other side of a line that allegedly separates it from land”. By extending the hypothesis on the terracentric perception of the world with the broader concept of “wetness”, they explain in their research that water is everywhere to some degree. Water is everywhere before it is somewhere and we can find it in the seas, but also in clouds, rain, dew, air, soils, minerals, plants, and animals (Mathur and da Cunha, 2014). The reason for this, they add, is because water is ephemeral, transient, uncertain, interstitial, chaotic, omnipresent. Because of these characteristics, it is necessary to develop new approaches and to re-invent our relationship with water. Mathur and da Cunha advocate for new relationships that take these aspects into account and definitively abandon old theoretical approaches that read blue spaces as foreign territory. According to da Cunha (2019), this interpretation dates back to ancient Greece.

Considering that for a long time water spaces were understood as something that separates and distances one emerged land from another, Philip Hayward has proposed the new socio-cultural concept of *aquapelago* where:

a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social groups' habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging (2012, pp. 5).

This involves an “aquapelagic imaginary” – a term that indicates a complex interweaving, and the mutual interpenetration of figures, symbols, myths, narratives and other icons that are generated by human relationships with these aquatic assemblages. These relationships can also be extended to everything that falls within the definition of non-human.

In light of recent literature, water is seen as an element that unites communities and cultures. However, Barlow adds that “the aquapelago concept draws attention to watery attachments and envelopments” while “water and land remain always two separate material entities” (2022, p. 31). Perhaps it is precisely the concept of wetness, understood as omnipresent water, which can help us to overcome what appears to be a wicked dichotomy.

Meanwhile, in the still predominant Western vision, aquatic spaces continue to be perceived as a dangerous *terra nullius* (or rather, *aqua nullius*) in which the mainland legitimises its sovereignty over the sea⁴. This vision is the result of a historical, cartographic and juridical process that began in the 18th century. It is in this historical period that stable definitions of the marine world were established (Braverman and Johnson, 2020, pp. 1-24). As Krause reports, this vision may have been stimulated by a “terrestrial angle” widespread in our cultures because a watery or terrestrial point of view shifts people's points of reference around. To correct our terrestrial angle, he suggests the concept of “hydro-perspectivism”, that is when we look at terrestrial life from a watery point of view (Krause, 2019, pp. 93-101).

⁴ Nowadays the official perception of liquid territories and their inhabitants is slowly changing. They begin to be experienced as a ‘common good’ and the consequent gradual passage towards the recognition of the rights of the sea and of the reciprocal relationship with humans ensures that aquatic spaces are no longer passive objects but are active subjects who interact (Braverman and Johnson, 2020, pp. 1-24). For further information on the concept of subjectivity I suggest: Gordon (2018), Charpleix (2018) and Page & Pellizzon (2022).

Within the persistent reductive vision of water spaces, lagoons are generally neglected. The exception to this is the Venetian Lagoon which, due to its particularities, is one of the most studied urban and environmental systems in the world. Lagoons in general have been considered places of little interest and, similarly to river deltas, have been regarded as unhealthy environments used by poor fishers and hunters. Excluding the obvious physical-geographical reading transmitted by maps and what our eyes show us (i.e. a flat surface of water), these hybrid spaces, suspended between the terrestrial and the aquatic dimensions, possess deeper and overlapping readings. If we consider, for example, fishers' perception, we discover that they are able to see these spaces through detailed three-dimensional mental maps which also include what lies beneath the surface. The acquisition of knowledge about the water space takes place among the fishers thanks to a network of interactions that they build with other human components but also with the non-human ones that coexist here (Vianello, 2021)⁵.

People are in relationship with places. Places are fragments of shared history because every environment is connected to an emotional, socio-spatial dimension of people's life (Davidson and Bondi, 2006). Places can be shared by people who use the same spaces, gestures, language, practices, and daily relationships. For this reason, any given place is not merely a geographical space, but also a contoured set of relationships between people and the contexts in which social practices develop (Ligi, 2016, pp. 1-25). As stated by Cavallo, Vallerani & Visentin:

to appreciate the multiplicity of meanings and knowledge production drawn from these spaces, we need to comprehend not only politics and grand narratives but also personal memories, reflections, local traditions and vernacular practices. It's a multiplicity of meanings and knowledge that in a complex water system like lagoons play a key role in personal memories, and the imaginary, as well as in everyday practices, experiences and biographies of both inhabitants and visitors too. (2021, p. 2).

It is in the light of these theoretical approaches that I approached my survey of the *casoni*. In what follows, they are not construed as a simple element of the landscape, but rather as an expression of human practices of adaptation to the environment which later became a component of lagoon waterscapes.

III. *The Casoni*: An example of the domestication of the aquatic environment

The documentation on the existence and recovery of peasant and fishing huts has been largely ignored in waterways literature. Only recently have researchers begun to examine the heritage of the *casoni* spread across the lagoon areas of Comacchio, Caorle, Bibione and Grado, and along the hydraulic network connected to them. The geographer Francesco Vallerani explains that the historical cartography of the lower Po river-valley dates to the first half of the 16th century. It shows us a very particular morphological and anthropic structure developed by the intertwining of the coastal strip, inland wetlands, rivers, and woods. It is a complex territory, subject to an unstable balance between land and water.

⁵ This rich baggage of knowledge is generally not recognised by official science, which dismisses it as the beliefs of ignorant people. Official science tends to present itself as the bearer of a rigid vision that neglects local knowledge and the understanding of the inhabitants' experiences.

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Because of its formation, it required particular and precarious settlement typologies. In a map by Angelo dal Cortivo dated 1527, depicting the low plain and the stretch of coast between Livenza and Tagliamento, human settlements already appear dominated by the presence of thatched huts referred to as "fishers' huts". These were numerous along the lower Livenza and in the Caorle lagoon and constituted the most characteristic anthropic element of this amphibious landscape (Vallerani, 2004, pp. 20-21).

In the 19th century, in the northern Adriatic regions, the dialectal name *casoni* referred to the poor huts in which peasants sheltered (Figure 3). Giuseppe Boerio in his *Dizionario del dialetto veneziano* ('Dictionary of Venetian dialect'), writes that a *cason* is: "[a] hut, hovel, small house, poor house... made of wood poles, covered with straw or other similar material, which serves as a poor habitation to peasants" (1827, p. 139). There are many types of common buildings that in the plains of the upper Adriatic Sea are called *casoni*. Until the beginning of the last century, peasant *casoni* were still widespread within the inland low plains surrounding the north Adriatic wetlands, contributing to the characterisation of the landscape (Da Villa, 2004, pp. 11-16).



Figure 3 - A peasant house (Renato Roverato, in Franzin, 2004, p. 24).

Their dwellings' structures were characterised by a quadrangular plan and very pointed roofs made of straw or reeds. The interior spaces could be divided into several rooms: generally, there was a kitchen, a bedroom and the stable. Their decline began in the first decades of the 20th century when, following the reclamation works of the marshy areas of the Po Valley, these huts were considered an icon of social decay and economic precariousness (Tieto, 2015). Furthermore, they were identified with the practice of usurpation (the abusive enclosure, by poor peasants, of small parts of communal land). According to Vallerani, it was in this period that the rapid decline of the huts began, accompanied by the definitive disappearance of the centuries-long prevalence of marshes and lagoons in favour of agricultural colonisation. An orderly landscape and a new concept of nature "beautiful because it is productive" won over the precedent one (Vallerani, 2004, p. 22). Very few of these huts remain today.

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In 2004, a census by the Department of Environmental Policies of the Province of Venice estimated that just over a hundred fishing huts still existed between the Piave and Tagliamento rivers. They are unique in the Italian anthropological panorama. At one time, these huts were found as far south as the Po River delta, between the Veneto and Emilia-Romagna regions, and were immortalised by the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni in the 1947 neo-realist documentary film *Gente del Po*. Others still stand today in the lagoons of Grado and Caorle (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - Casoni in Caorle Lagoon (author's photo, summer 2022).

Casoni were used by fishers as shelter and storage for fishing gear. They were also a seasonal home during the fishing periods known as *fraima*, the autumn period which runs roughly from September to December. However, there were some fishing families who used the huts as a permanent home. In their original form, the *casoni* of Caorle were generally composed of a single room with an elliptical plan which measured approximately 8 metres in length, by 6 metres in width. The main feature was the high pointed roof that ran down towards the ground, transforming itself into walls. There was a single entrance door, usually located to the west. The floor was sand or clay and in the centre there was a circular hearth without a chimney. Around the hearth were sleeping pallets on wooden benches⁶. The huts were built by the fishers themselves in the saltmarshes on the higher islands and on the *mote*, a local dialect word referring to a kind of small circular muddy artificial mound. According to Boerio's Venetian dialect dictionary, the *mote* are areas that remain dry (Boerio, 1827-29, p. 424). Fishers built on these elevated areas to protect the structure and its inhabitants from flooding. Bricks were not used to build perimeter walls in the original buildings as in the peasant huts. People used what the surrounding environment offered, like marsh reeds and

⁶ The description was mainly taken from the visitor center of Vallevicchia, Brussa-Caorle, Veneto region and from the interview with the concessionaire Roberto (August 7, 2022). For further information on the structure and construction of the huts, see Lomoriello (2004).

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wood. The characteristics of these constructions remained unchanged for centuries until their decline which began with the severe flood of 1966⁷, when most of them were destroyed.

Today in the Venetian Lagoon, the buildings that are the so-called *casoni* are different, but historically we can find evidence of wood huts. Starting from the 16th and 17th centuries, ancient decrees preserved in the archives of the *Magistrato alle Acque*, Venice Water Authority⁸ were aimed at eliminating any impediment to the free movement of the tide within the lagoon and mention poles, barriers and huts (Caniato, 2009, pp. 1-33). Traces of huts called *casoni* can also be found in the ancient Venetian censuses of the stretches of lagoon delimited for fish breeding, called *valli da pesca*⁹ where shelters for fishers are listed next to manor houses. We do not have detailed information regarding how the ancient huts were built. Fortunately, it is possible to find detailed visual evidence in Vittore Carpaccio's *Caccia in Laguna* (1490-95) (Figure 5). The materials used for the huts' construction are wood and marsh reeds for the roof, which can be clearly seen in the painting.



Figure 5 – *Caccia in Laguna* ('Hunting in the Lagoon') (1490-95) by Vittore Carpaccio (Getty Museum, Los Angeles).

After the fall of the Republic of Venice in 1797 there was a period of regulatory silence in the area of water management and when the new land register became operational in 1841, only general prohibitions on building which impeded the free circulation of water were indicated

⁷ The 1966 flood involved the main rivers of northern Italy and in particular the marshy areas of the Veneto region. The same flood caused serious damage to the city of Venice where there was the great *acqua alta*, high tide. For more details see: Vianello (2021).

⁸ It was abolished in 2014 and replaced by the *Provveditorato Interregionale per le Opere Pubbliche per il Veneto, Trentino Alto Adige e Friuli Venezia Giulia*. In this article I have chosen to use the old original name because it is the one that everyone I interviewed, still commonly uses in the lagoon.

⁹ As a rule, farming took place within enclosures created using common reeds along the mainland edge of the lagoon. Traditionally, the fry were caught in the spring by specialised fishers who then sold them to farms. Today, this type of fishing has almost disappeared. It persists only in the very northern part of the lagoon.

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(Caniato, 2009, p. 31). References to fishing huts seem to disappear. We have to wait over a century to see the fishers' huts re-appear, this time built on stilts.

During my research on lagoon mussel farming (carried out between 2010 and 2013) I discovered that the huts on stilts, called *casoni*¹⁰ by fishers, which we can see today in the southern lagoon facing the island of Pellestrina or near the city of Chioggia (Figure 6), are of recent origin. These buildings are now considered traditional elements of the lagoon landscape, however their spread in the middle of the 20th century was for work purposes.



Figure 6 – One of the first examples of a Venetian *cason* used for mussel farming, circ.1969 (Busetto private family archive).

Da Cunha highlights how the wetland environments typical of river ecosystems have been culturally created and play a special role in defining both human habitation and everyday practice (2019). This special role can be extended to the lagoons that, like rivers, are hybrid ecosystems, suspended between land and water. In the lagoons, huts are a clearly visible example of the domestication of space and adaptation to the environment. These peculiar buildings were built with poles and planks of recycled wood by the mussel farmers themselves. They used them not only to store their equipment, but to carry out many phases of processing the mussels¹¹. Originally their purpose was also to provide shelter from the sun and rain. Furthermore, it was also possible to cook a quick hot meal with gas stoves (Vianello 2018). The mussel farmer Giannino recalled that thanks to the *cason*: “I was finally able to eat a hot meal every day. How much pasta with tuna I ate! But it was a quick meal, and it was very cheap” (February 12th, 2013).

¹⁰ During an interview carried out in September 2021 Enrico Marchesan, an elderly fisher from Chioggia, explained that this denomination in the lagoon is also extended to the drop-nets huts. These are wooden huts on stilts built on breakwaters and equipped with a drop network. Under different names, these buildings equipped with diving nets and winches are widespread throughout Italy and Western Europe, even along rivers. See for example the *trabocchi* of the Abruzzo region and the *carrelets* of the French Atlantic coast. For further information see: Carrère, Costa, Danto, A, & Danto, J (2021).

¹¹ A confirmation of the fact that before the development of mussel farming the huts on stilts were not widespread in the Venetian lagoon can be found in documents conserved at the *Magistrato alla Acque* archive, dating back to 1914. No concession for the construction of huts is ever mentioned here. From an interview with Andrea Siega, captain of the Lagoon Police (May 7th, 2022).

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These new hybrid typologies of buildings, exclusively determined by practical reasons and opportunities, were very successful and many people started building their own. Thanks to their success, within a few years they spread throughout the southern lagoon. The construction of huts by the mussel farmers was a forced choice dictated by the limited space available on their island homes. The lagoon became an extension of their own Pellestrina island and later also of Chioggia. At that time, during the 1960s and 1970s, the *casoni* were illegal constructions because no fishers believed they had to ask for a permit to build something in an area they already considered as their own territory.

Emilio Ballarin, an inhabitant of the island of Pellestrina, recalls that when he was a boy in the 1960s, the huts on stilts “were always built in the highest places of the lagoon, for safety” (12th June 2022). A similar construction choice was made in Caorle. The mussel farmer Giannino told me that the *cason* was like a second home to him. Only on Sundays did he dine in his island home, but after a brief rest he returned to the *cason*, with the whole family, to prepare for the new week's work. Going to the *casoni* all together on Sundays was both a way for the family to spend time together and to get young children used to the work environment. During an interview, Giannino's wife recalls – with a touch of bitterness and a good dose of irony – the boring summer Sunday afternoons spent at the *cason*:

on Sundays my husband always took me on a cruise. And do you know where we went on that cruise? To the cason! And there I used to fish with a fishing rod to pass the time while he worked. (February 12th, 2013).

With the growing success of mussel farming, the stilt huts began to be equipped with noisy generators. Thanks to this innovation, from the mid-1970s it was possible to use machinery for processing mussels and the huts began to look more and more like small factories suspended over the water. Later, in the early 1990s, with the new success of clam gathering, and in the early 2000s with innovative mussel farming plants in the open sea, the huts were abandoned and began a phase of slow decline until their recent rediscovery.

IV. A complex issue: the jurisdiction of the Venetian Lagoon between legislation and customs

During an interview, Captain Andrea Siega of the Venice Lagoon Police told me: “there are many lagoons but only the Venice Lagoon has a city inside” (interview, 4th May 2022). His intent was to make me notice that the complexity of the lagoon is not only due to its hybrid character nor to it being one of the largest in the Mediterranean, but to the fact that it houses an urban centre inside. Despite today's small number of inhabitants, Venice is a city that we can define as densely inhabited if we consider its large number of annual visitors¹². Because of this, special legal organisation is needed. Even in 1866¹³, when Venice was annexed to the kingdom of Italy, the need to establish laws that regulate management and navigation was felt. In this period there was much confusion. Between the various institutions responsible

¹² Venice suffers from overtourism which is gradually eroding space for the inhabitants in favour of the visitors. On 10th August 2022, the number of inhabitants dropped to 49,997 when they were 52,988 in 2019 and 53,835 in 2017. On the other hand, visitors have progressively increased, reaching 3,156,000 visitors (7,862,000 overnights) and 17,500,000 day trippers in 2018, i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic. For further information on the subject, see: Bertocchi & Visentin (2019) and Visentin & Bertocchi, (2019).

¹³ The Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed on 17th March 1861.

for the lagoon there was no shared vision about how to manage ecosystem equilibrium. In 1906 the municipality of Venice, under mayor Filippo Grimani, requested a review of a document dated 1885 on the management of ports, beaches and lighthouses¹⁴ From the updated legislation, the foundations of the current lagoon jurisdictions were laid.

The lagoon is a *Demanio Marittimo*, ('Maritime State Property'), and today it is legally divided between three different entities: the *Capitaneria di Porto* (Harbour Office) of Chioggia and Venice, the *Magistrato alle Acque* (Water Magistrate) and the municipalities bordering the lagoon. The latter are, from south to north: Chioggia, Codevigo Campagna Lupia, Mira, Venice, Quarto d'Altino, San Donà di Piave, Musile di Piave, Jesolo, Cavallino Treponti. While Codevigo municipality is in the province of Padova, all the others are in the province of Venice. The Harbour Office has jurisdiction over the maritime canals, which are the network of canals that connect the harbour mouths to the ports of Venice and Chioggia, shown in blue in Figure 7. The *Magistrato* has jurisdiction over the lagoon canals and the lagoon area in general which is about 90% of the water surface. The municipality of Venice has legal jurisdiction over the so-called municipal canals: the canals within the city, shown in green in Figure 7. This multiplicity of institutions, the specificity of the place and the overlapping of competencies make the management of the lagoon time-consuming and complex, in the past as today. Consequently, the construction of a 'wharf-shed' – the term used in official documents – falls within a cumbersome bureaucratic process.

We have already seen that with the rapid development of mussel farming, driven by work priorities, the fishers built their huts illegally. For this reason, the building of lagoon huts was based exclusively on customary agreements for the subdivision of the spaces. Since the 1980s, due to the great proliferation of modern-day *casoni*, the relevant authorities have deemed it necessary to intervene. The number of huts had to be limited in order to prevent the natural circulation of the tide from being interrupted. Some huts were decommissioned and dismantled, while others began the long road to legality. The *Magistrato alle Acque* chose to side with the fishers and to help obtain state concessions because these buildings were used for work. A long and complex bureaucratic-administrative procedure began for the fishers. *Cason* builders seeking ownership found themselves in communication with overlapping offices. Depending on the municipality in which their hut had been built, legalisation would be more or less difficult. This factor, as we will see, influences the process of requesting authorisations and the time required to receive them.

What if a fisher wants to build a new *Cason* from scratch? Let's take for example the standard procedure for requesting a building concession, which Captain Siega explained to me during our interview, when describing a building process that would take place under the jurisdiction of the municipality of Chioggia. The very first thing to do is to address the concession application to the *Magistrato delle Acque*, citing the correct municipality, which depends on the specific building location chosen. Once the request has been received, a preliminary examination of environmental impact including hydraulics and eventual interference with navigation is conducted based on the proposed dimensions of the fishing hut. Once this first evaluation has been approved, a preliminary authorisation is issued and made public, giving a window of time for objections from citizens.¹⁵ If no objections are

¹⁴ *Atti acquisizione canali e rivi*, Acts of acquisition of canals and streams, 1906, courtesy of the Admiral of the Italian Navy Cristiano Patrese.

¹⁵ Law 5th March 1963, n. 366, 'New regulations relating to the lagoons of Venice and Marano-Grado.' For further details on the content of the law, see: www.insula.it

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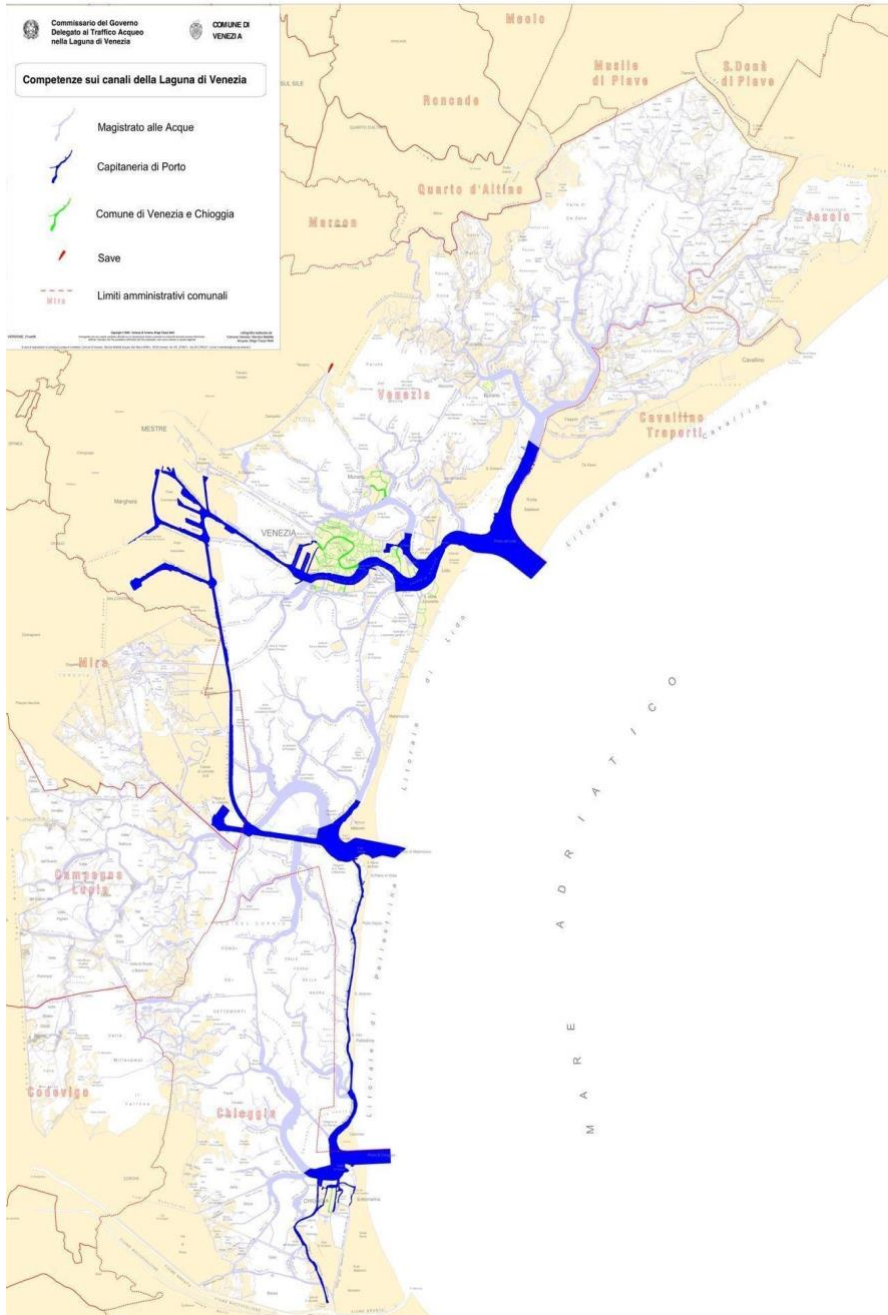


Figure 7 - Areas of jurisdiction divided between three authorities in the Venetian lagoon. Port Authority in blue; Water Magistrate in light blue; Municipalities of Venice and Chioggia in green. Red dotted lines are municipal administrative boundaries (Comune di Venezia, Diego Tiozzo Netti, 2006).

tabled, the actual operational phase can begin with a request to the municipality of Chioggia for a *Segnalazione Certificata di Inizio Attività* authorisation (S.C.I.A.) ('Certification for the start of activities'). The request, accompanied by a detailed project, must be presented by an architect. The Municipal Planning Office then conducts another environmental impact assessment carried out by their own professionals. When the S.C.I.A. is issued, the Ministry of Economy and Finance calculates the taxes that the concessionaire will have to pay. After this last step, the concession is assigned to the applicant. In general, fishers turn to cooperatives for support during the process.

In 1983, the municipality of Venice decided to extend the same building regulations for the existing land buildings to the areas of the Maritime State property¹⁶. From that moment all the works located in the lagoon that fell under Venetian jurisdiction required a building permit. Furthermore, they had to be foreseen in the Regulatory Plan. Unlike Chioggia, to date, the municipality of Venice has never envisaged the possibility of building in the aquatic areas in its town plan. As shown in Figure 7, there is a thin stretch of lagoon, running along the island of Pellestrina, south to the Chioggia inlet which falls under Venetian municipal jurisdiction. The fishing huts in this territory are illegal constructions. Despite support from the *Magistrato alle Acque*, any attempts to legalise these *casoni* have been denied *a priori*. This is a serious situation for fishers because the abusive occupation of the Maritime State property is a crime. As Captain Siega explains, in Chioggia the process for the regularisation of the huts is unfurling, while in Venice the fishers have made no progress towards a legal solution even after years of struggle.

The impression is that Venice continues to negate her aquatic dimension in favour of her modern terracentric vision. As identified by Suwa, many aquatic places continue to be treated as simply a group of islands and not as "an assemblage of canals, lagoons, tides and transportation as well as rhizomatic cultural networking" (2022, p. 1). Furthermore, we know that aquatic lagoon spaces are also subject to the increasingly accelerated and uncertain evolution of society which is under pressure from globalisation and anthropogenic environmental change.

Denying the aquatic dimension of Venetian places is equivalent to denying the culture and history of the city. Historically and culturally, the lagoon is characterised by an essentially aquatic and insular kind of life. The very close relationship with water – which has always been a privileged space for the daily practices of the population – is today put at risk while water spaces are becoming deliberately folklorised and reduced to scenographic backgrounds for tourist events. While other water cities characterised by insularity, such as Copenhagen and Amsterdam, have been able to modernise and take advantage of their isolation; from the 20th century on, Venetians began to see the insular nature of their city as an obstacle to the mercantile and industrial economy, in brief, to modernity. Every time it was necessary to extend urban space (for example to build the industrial centre of Porto Marghera) it was the lagoon surface area that was diminished (Zanetto, 1992; Cavallo, 2015; Vianello, 2017). The modernisation process began with the construction of the railway bridge that transformed the city of Venice into a peninsula in the second half of the 19th century, during the period of Austrian domination.

¹⁶ Today it is the Law D.P.R. 380/2001 on building regulations (www.comune.venezia.it).

V. Tourism, local identities or commodification of culture?

A rediscovery of the lagoons' environment is taking place today thanks to the emerging types of tourism commonly defined as 'alternative' (often confused with 'sustainable') tourism. These forms of tourism experienced both by tourists and by those who propose them are considered to be superior to mass tourism. In recent times, the union of tourism, with naturalistic and ethnographic elements of the territory has acquired increasing importance for travellers seeking an alternative holiday experience (Furlan and Manente, 2004, p. 151). Conradson writes:

For many people in the western world, spending time in scenic natural surroundings is a valued counterpoint to the demands of work and home life. Whether undertaking a particular activity – such as walking, gardening or cycling – or simply 'being present' in a less directed fashion, these environmental encounters are in part appreciated for their capacity to move us to think and feel differently. In coming close to other ecologies and rhythms of life, we may obtain distance from everyday routines, whilst perhaps also experiencing renewed energy and finding different perspectives upon our circumstances. These emotional gains are one reason why such environmental encounters are both prized and the focus of significant commodification. They are feelings which arguably help sustain particular traditions of self-landscape engagement. (2006, p. 103).

In this perspective, the modest fishers' huts have become an idealised symbol of the harmonious symbiosis between humans and environment. It is a process in which cultural aspects become an essential resource for the innovation of tourist offerings. Simultaneously, tourism becomes a channel for financing and disseminating the culture itself (Battilani, 2017). Among the most sought-after destinations are places and cultures perceived as not yet contaminated by modernity. Among these, even the lagoons of the Northern Adriatic – with their peculiar traditional amphibious cultures and their valuable ecological functions – are experienced as exclusive places of escape from polluted cities, culturally authentic and natural (Cavallo, 2014).

According to Nadia Breda, the concept of nature saw its birth between the 1960s and 1970s when it became disconnected from the meaning of the physical place (2019). In recent years this tendency has spread, first with the media and secondly with the tourism industry itself. Using the word 'nature' as a synonym for the natural environment, landscapes shaped by humans and anthropised through modifications are also included (Vianello, 2021a, p. 99). It is the culturalisation of nature, whereby nature is transformed into something increasingly artificial. This is an anthropocentric vision that is widespread in Western cultures¹⁷.

Based on the reading that Woods proposes, the concept of 'nature' referring to the landscape has more distant origins in time and derives from the old romantic idea of preserved and uncontaminated nature (Woods, 2011, p. 21). Other scholars point out that since the last decades of the 20th century new and deeper meanings have been attributed to the term nature: it has become a word that announces a sort of ecological prophecy where the intensive exploitation of territories is replaced by the search for a renewed balance between

¹⁷ As Ingold (2015) asserts, we all live immersed in a human-environment-nature 'entanglement' wherein humans and non-humans are all equally active subjects.

human and the environment (Lanternari, 2003; Padiglione, 2018, p. 17). Especially in Europe there is a tendency to represent the landscape as purged of human presence and as an exclusive work of nature. This is an obsolete concept still exploited by the tourist industry for the use and consumption of a category of travellers in search of a nostalgic old world as opposed to progress and modernity. Willems-Braun adds about the representation of nature that it is considered to be built as a realm separate from culture where people locate the capability for contemporary practices to abstract and displace an element from its cultural surrounds and relocate it within the abstract spaces of the market, the nation, and, in recent ecological rhetorics, of the biosphere and the global community (1997, p. 3).

These new representations of nature have an aesthetic and health appeal to the collective imagination. The *casoni* which are spread across the Adriatic lagoon environments share this appeal. It was during this process that fishers have become aware of the value of practices related to the environment and local folklore. They have begun to organise themselves as touristic operators. On the island of Pellestrina, inhabitants have a preference for the development of 'alternative' tourism because it is seen to be more sustainable. This concept is favoured by the fishers and inhabitants who are unaware that alternative tourism may nonetheless bring about unwanted lasting changes to their specific environmental and cultural context¹⁸.

The transformation of fishing huts for touristic purposes began in Caorle where many of these typical buildings have been restored and equipped with every comfort. From the early 2000s, these *casoni* have been transformed from peasant huts into restaurants, bars, second homes and charming holiday homes advertised on Airbnb. The structures have been adapted to the modern needs of the new users with the use of non-original materials, the insertion of windows and skylights. In some cases, floors have been raised, and extensions added to provide more rooms. Even if these changes have profoundly transformed the original use and structure of these *casoni*, in favour of visitors' expectations, at the same time they have prolonged their very existence.¹⁹ Within a few decades these huts have become one of the main local attractions. Modern tourists and inhabitants are attracted to folklore and tradition, and to having contact with a mythologised local identity from the past which they associate with the fishing huts.

Let's reconstruct the process of enhancing the Caorle and Venetian hut to deepen our understanding. Are we looking at a 'process of traditionalization' (Dei, 2017, pp. 281-290), that is, a series of continuous hybridisations, of which today's huts are the result? Are we looking at an example of the commodification of a cultural object? The famous and admired huts of the Caorle Lagoon are built on maritime state territory and, from a normative point of view, they are illegal buildings paradoxically protected by the *Soprintendenza* (Tamiello, 2022). The fishers' huts, which had already survived the land reclamations carried out in the early 1900s, have now fallen victim to a perverse bureaucratic mechanism. Since 2005, the management of the area has passed from the Water State Property²⁰ to the Maritime State Property Office. This transfer of jurisdiction meant that people using the huts were obliged to pay an annual fee in the same way that bathing establishments are expected to. At that

¹⁸ According to the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations, tourism is the most polluting industry in the world including 'sustainable tourism' which, according to D'Eramo, turns out to be an oxymoron of sustainable development politics (D'Eramo 2017, p. 7).

¹⁹ There are also examples of successful public restructuring by the institutions for the purpose of enhancing the territory, including the the *Casone della Rivola Vecchia* and that of *Valle Millecampi*.

²⁰ The *Demanio Idrico*, State Property, for water includes all public assets relating to watercourses.

time, on a legal-administrative level, these buildings, originally created as an expression of local culture, were without an institutionally recognised owner. In the past the huts were passed down from father to son, sold with a handshake, or released through a private deed which was never registered in the land office. Because of this these buildings often have no cadastral record and, therefore, do not officially exist (Brichese, October 18th, 2022). Despite an ambiguous legal status, many of them have been sold, rented as holiday homes, or used as fish restaurants for the emerging tourist industry. The original biodegradable materials have been replaced with bricks and concrete, the land has been fenced off to create private gardens, paving has been added along with bathrooms and kitchens which are not always connected to the sewer system. In some cases, the wastewater is discharged directly into the lagoon (Coppo, 2020). Michelangelo Brichese reports in his blog that a long-term conflict between citizens and institutions has begun. He describes a series of complaints, investigations, and overlapping responsibilities. Stakeholders include state and regional urban planning and technical offices, the military, environmental groups, the judiciary and forest rangers. Citizens have received injunctions to demolish or hand over the *casoni* (Coppo, 2020; Tamiello, 2022; Brichese, 2022). As a result, hospitality activities are interrupted, and the huts are closed to the public. The conflict is unresolved to date. Local political parties have become involved, eager to exploit the issue for electoral purposes²¹.

Despite the complex situation, the Venetian Lagoon fishers express their admiration for the successful conversion of the Caorle huts for tourist use and consider this a valid example of economic development. Visitors to Venice cannot escape the charm of the huts suspended on stilts above the water. In their eyes these dwellings represent the authentic folk culture of a (presumed) uncontaminated territory. These are often perceived as idyllic places found only in the collective imagination. The dynamics related to modern tourism are complex and extremely varied, which makes the phenomenon difficult to analyse and fully understand, but we can try to examine its socio-cultural evolution as suggested by Simonicca (2016, pp. 478-480). Nowadays tourism appears to be a force capable of changing and determining, or rather taming, uses, practices and functions, by transforming any (tangible) element or (intangible) act into cultural heritage, that is, into something that can be told and sold. It is the heritage *industry*. In addition, we have to consider a newer phenomenon. The digitisation processes underway in our society spread and amplify new imageries that do not always correspond to reality through social media such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. As D'Eramo notes, places begin to be exploited mainly as a frame for 'selfies' (2017), especially those perceived as more evocative or original.

Visitors know what they want to find and see, sometimes in spite of the evidence, and this puts them in the category of tourism that Aime and Papotti define as 'exotic', namely that tourism which "gives more space to the imagination because it travels through spaces usually left empty by our daily thoughts" (2012, p. 21). People interested in 'alternative' tourism seek a type of cultural distance and spatial exoticism where they can find that fulfilment and authenticity that has been missing from a daily life perceived as alienating. This modern myth of touristic exoticism drives visitors to contribute to the creation of stereotypes, which, in turn, influence the perspectives of what they come into contact with.

What could be more exotic and folkloric than a fishers' hut suspended over the water of the lagoon? This is the sentiment that the fishers of the southern lagoon have perceived and that they are trying to exploit to their own advantage. In this way the huts, by now rarely used for

²¹ For example, the mayor of Caorle asked the Veneto Region for specific legislation to protect the huts similarly to what happened with the mountain huts.

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work, have been transformed (more or less legally) into bars and restaurants for about ten years. They are often snubbed by Venetian residents who do not trust the quality of the fish cuisine. Emilio Zennaro, resident of Mestre and originally from Pellestrina, explains that the tourists are attracted more by the charm of the location than by the quality of the food.²²

Difficulties aside, fishers are not discouraged and have been trying to formalise their new activities. As we have already seen, the Municipality of Chioggia, over time, has established specific parameters to allow the huts that fall under its jurisdiction to emerge from unauthorised use. For the Pellestrina fisher there are greater difficulties because the Municipality of Venice has not done the same. This situation did not prevent the Pellestrina fishing cooperative from developing a project for the conversion of huts on stilts into tourist apartments about ten years ago²³. The project proposal is still stacked in the *Magistrato alle Acque* offices amid the City of Venice's bureaucratic paradoxes. This administration has persisted over the years in denying Venice's aquatic dimension.

Even though the cooperative's project is blocked, an island family of fishers has chosen to start a fishing tourism business which also includes their *cason* located under the jurisdiction of Chioggia²⁴. A fisher from the Gorin family expresses his expectations:

*we hope for a niche tourism that knows how to appreciate alternative proposals on a still spartan island, where the beach is free and devoid of services, people don't dress elegantly and, in the evening, still meet on the shore to chat (8th June 2022)*²⁵.

The Gorin family renovated their old fishing hut to transform it into tourist accommodation. It is located about 35 minutes by boat in the direction of the Chioggia inlet and is comfortably fitted out.

In the same area there are numerous huts and many of these were damaged by the severe flooding of November 2019. For some fishers the flood was the opportunity to start a radical restructuring of the *casoni* with special attention to the new tourist market (Figures 8 & 9). In these years of crisis for the fishing industry, alternative tourism comes as a salvation to fishers. It offers a way to go on living in the most remote lagoon islands otherwise destined to progressive depopulation. The ecological aspects linked to the new business do not seem to be taken into consideration. To give a simple example: the support posts are no longer

²² Interview with Emilio Zennaro from Mestre, but originally from Pellestrina, on 22nd March 2022.

²³ Interview with Domenico, president of the *Piccola Pesca* cooperative on the island of Pellestrina, on 15th January 2016.

²⁴ The phenomenon of fishing tourism is booming in various Mediterranean contexts. Fishing tourism is configured as a possibility of income integration for fishermen. According to Furla and Manente, we can speak of fish tourism when we add the overnight stay in the huts themselves to sea excursions aimed at fishing (Furlan and Manente, 2004, p. 150). The Community Fisheries Policy (CFP), introduced for the first time in the 1970s and updated several times, introduced a series of rules for the common management of European fishing fleets and the conservation of fish stocks. The goal is to manage a natural resource while guaranteeing an income for fishing companies, through shared rules that allow both the protection of fish stocks and fair competition between fishing companies. The tourist, cultural and didactic aspect of the culture of fishing can transmit new perspectives to others and enhance a unique territory such as that of the coastal strip. For more information see: https://www.venetoagricoltura.org/upload/pubblicazioni/Ititurismo_%20Pescaturismo.pdf

²⁵ Interview carried out with the Gorin family during the visit to their *cason*.

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Figure 8 - A *cason* used for fishing, tourism in the Venetian lagoon (author's photo, June 2022).



Figure 9 - The modern equipped kitchen inside a Venetian *cason* used for fishing tourism, (author's photo, June 2022).

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made of wood, but of more resistant, and more polluting materials, such as concrete or plastic. Houses and restaurants on stilts attract more and more motorboats, and diesel generators are used for electricity. Waste disposal is also difficult to control. The danger is that the desire for an alternative holiday immersed in pristine landscapes will transform these places into their exact opposite over time. Unfortunately, our planet is increasingly witnessing similar examples.



Figure 10 - A *cason* in the Venetian lagoon still used by local fishers (author's photo, June 2022).

Conclusion

The history of the *casoni* is the story of an entanglement of practices, trades and a special environment made up of lagoons, rivers, canals, waters and lands. *Casoni* are the testimony of the domestication of a hybrid, liminal territory and of a culture capable of establishing a symbiotic balance with the natural elements of the context in which it developed. Nowadays, the original functions of the huts have been made redundant by the modernisation of fishing which has moved towards the open sea, and by new economies with a strong local impact such as tourism which has highlighted their value.

From the moment when mass commercialisation of leisure time spread, starting from the post-WW2 period, the problem of the impact of tourism on the chosen places arises. Technological transformation in the tourism sector spurred the problem and shortened spatial distances which are no longer perceived through the temporal experience of a voyage to elsewhere (Aime and Papotti, 2012, p. 32). Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the experience of this once-perceived travelling time in the pages of *Tristes tropiques* (1955). In today's

globalised world, it is estimated that over 50% of the human population lives in cities, where culture, production and the market assume universal characteristics to the detriment of diversity, and a large percentage of residents are in search of experiences related to local culture and nature. Local culture and nature are dimensions that have been lost to city life (Bonato, 2019, p. 371). The number of tourist destinations is growing. They are idealised as places of good fortune and happiness, where the worries of daily life are left behind (Dlabaja, 2021).

Motivators for the modern desire to travel include local culture which becomes an indispensable product and a distinctive sign for a location. The consequences of the expansion of the tourist industry are many, among which one of the best known is the phenomenon of gentrification. Gentrification can be read as a worldwide process that has different causes and characteristics. As Bertocchi and Ferri explain, it manifests itself as a form of urban colonialism and involves a profound economic, social and spatial restructuring of the urban space and its dynamics (Bertocchi and Ferri, 2023, p. 254). Although gentrification is a theme widely explored by contemporary academic research, little has been said about its growth and affirmation in the islands (Clark, Johnson, Lundholm & Malmberg, 2007). Atkinson & Bridge (2004) have highlighted how gentrification can affect large cities, neighbourhoods, rural areas, historic centres and islands. The interest that lagoon territories are attracting inside the mechanisms of modern tourism threatens to accelerate and expand the gentrification process that is already well established in Venice in particular, and that Caorle is also starting to experience. In addition to gentrification, new types of tourism are also linked to an increase in pollution. Every visitor, even those deemed 'eco-friendly', needs transport and roads to move around, along with services such as electricity, water, food, and supplies. Every single traveller changes the climate as well as the landscape to some extent, despite their best intentions, while the human presence of a tourist influences and transforms the very culture of a place. Sometimes folklore that is presented by the locals is the result of deliberate reinterpretations aimed at attracting visitors and satisfying their desires and expectations. The *casoni* provide a good example of this. With the fishing sector in crisis, they are being transformed from the original working-class fishing huts into comfortable modern apartments and restaurants equipped. It is a process that leads to a new paradox: that same culture perceived as traditional by the visitor ends up surviving thanks to its commercialisation (Simonica, 2016, p. 480), or better, commodification. The touristification processes can become the driving force for support actions which restore territories and practices, and a stimulus towards the correct use of cultural resources. At the same time, however, these processes can empty a cultural testimony of its vitality and transform local culture into a museum piece for the use and consumption of visitors and the imagery that these feed on (Boros, 2013). Local institutions are not extraneous to this evolution, as they are sometimes the first to be interested in economic returns and a rhetorical use of traditions. Today the challenge is to develop careful management policies to regulate tourist flows which are designed to enhance and safeguard both local culture and environment at the same time. It is vital that modern economic development models do not lead to concrete problems but rather guarantee opportunities for communities and their territories.

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