



Periodico bimestrale dell'Istituto Euroarabo di Mazara del Vallo

ISSN 2384-9010

Direttore editoriale: *Antonino Cusumano*

Direttore responsabile: *Piero Di Giorgi*

Redazione: *Giovanni Isgro', Rosario Lentini, Silvia Mazzucchelli, Gaetano Sabato, Orietta Sorgi, Sergio Todesco, Maurizio Tosco, Luigi Tumbarello.*

Comitato Scientifico:

CESARE AJROLDI

Università di Palermo

FRANCESCO AZZARELLO

Università di Friburgo

LETIZIA BINDI

Università del Molise

ROSOLINO BUCCHERI

Università di Palermo

PIETRO CLEMENTE

Università di Firenze

FRANCESCA CORRAO

Università La Sapienza di Roma

MARI D'AGOSTINO

Università di Palermo

MERIEH DHOUB

Università La Manouba di Tunisi

FRANCESCO FAETA

Università La Sapienza di Roma

LAURA FARANDA

Università La Sapienza di Roma

MARIO GIACOMARRA

Università di Palermo

VINCENZO GUARRASI

Università di Palermo

ANTONIETTA I. LIMA

Università di Palermo

STEFANO MONTES

Università di Palermo

VALENTINA NAPOLITANO

University of Toronto

DAVID NAPIER

University College London

OLIMPIA NIGLIO

Hokkaido University

ANTONIO PIOLETTI

Università di Catania

GIOVANNI RUFFINO

Università di Palermo

FLAVIA SCHIAVO

Università di Palermo

SALVATORE SPEZIALE

Università di Messina

PAUL STOLLER

West Chester University

CIRCE STURM

The University of Texas at Austin

VITO TETI

Università della Calabria

DIALOGHI MEDITERRANEI

N. 73 Maggio-Giugno 2025

Stilness in imaginaries through time. Cultural perception and social interactions in high-altitude: anthropological considerations



Val Camonica (ph. Paolo Carera)

CIP

di *Paolo Carera* [*]

[*] Abstract

Nel dibattito contemporaneo, i processi di elaborazione culturale dell'immaginario rappresentano senza dubbio un'importante cornice teorica per riflettere sulle pratiche di frequentazione sociale dell'ambiente; aspetti fondamentali per poter indagare il legame costitutivo, costrittivo e contraddittorio che fonda l'esperienza soggettiva nei più ampi processi storico-culturali che interessano l'ambiente. Partendo da contributi scientifici di matrice storica, etnoantropologica e patrimoniale, il presente articolo si propone di esplorare quali dinamiche socioculturali concorrono nel plasmare l'esperienza soggettiva nelle pratiche di frequentazione contemporanea della Riserva della Biosfera "Valle Camonica – Alto Sebino". Uno degli aspetti su cui si concentrerà l'analisi sarà mettere in luce in che modo alcuni contesti di alta quota possano proporre degli elementi chiave per la sensibilizzazione a tematiche ecologiche di natura globale, promuovendo comportamenti riflessivi per la fruizione del patrimonio bioculturale locale.

Introduction

In contemporary discussions, the concept of the cultural invention of the Alps serves as a crucial theoretical framework for understanding mountain tourism in Valle Camonica. Originally rooted in historical and artistic studies (De Rossi, 2017; De Rossi, 2020), this concept has transcended its initial disciplinary boundaries, becoming essential for exploring the complex, often contradictory relationship between individual experiences and the broader historical-cultural processes that shape our understanding of the high-altitude landscapes. Contrary to the notion of mountains as purely natural elements within a specific environmental context, they are, in fact, the result of centuries of historical and cultural recognition. Valle Camonica itself has been shaped by the active and creative influence of human beings, through the anthropic transformation of the Alpine landscape and the development of scientific and artistic knowledge that has given rise to a distinct imagination, representation, and presentation of its unique characteristics. These theoretical frameworks reveal high-altitude tourism in Valle Camonica as a profoundly sociocultural phenomenon. This perspective underscores the importance of challenging the notion of nature as separate from human influence (Remotti, 2008) in order to fully grasp the processes that define what we culturally understand as ‘Alpine’. The concept of the cultural construction of the Alps has been instrumental in demonstrating the extent to which human action is involved in producing, organizing, and experiencing the mountains, particularly in the context of Valle Camonica.

In this context, the construction of Alpine refuges— high-altitude lodgings designed to shelter mountaineers and hikers— has been instrumental in shaping the cultural construction of mountains and the collective imagination surrounding them (Gibello, 2011). These structures have played a pivotal role not only in maintaining a human presence in remote locations but also in influencing how landscapes are perceived and how people interact with the environment. High-altitude architecture, encompassing refuges, scientific observatories, and cableways, is a testament to human ingenuity in architectural techniques. More importantly, it offers valuable insights into the interdependent relationship between humans, the environment, and tourism.

Despite this significance, the current academic discourse lacks substantial scientific research on Alpine refuges, with most studies confined to fields such as architecture and construction. There is a noticeable gap in social science research, particularly in its application to tourism. This study aims not only to emphasize the importance of Alpine refuges in the development of sustainable mountain tourism but also to highlight their cultural and historical value as heritage sites.

The focus of this research is to explore the social dynamics that emerge from the creation of collective imaginaries and how these dynamics intersect with tourism in the Alpine refuges of Valle Camonica. As this work will demonstrate, Alpine refuges serve as unique social spaces that facilitate the development of genuinely sustainable tourism. Understanding this requires bridging the gap between the historical-collective dynamics— stemming from the cultural construction of the Alps— and the individual experiences associated with engaging with the Alpine environment.

The research that forms the foundation of this article unfolded in two distinct phases. The first phase, initiated in the summer of 2019, involved a series of qualitative interviews with managers of Alpine refuges in Valle Camonica and the Central Alps. These interviews explored various topics, including the unique characteristics of current tourism, facility management, relationships with visitors, and the specific challenges of operating at high altitudes.

The second phase consisted of ethnographic research conducted at Alpine refuges on the slopes of Mount Adamello. This phase focused on uncovering the implicit sociocultural factors that shape the imaginaries, expectations, and experiences of tourists in high-altitude settings. These two phases of

research now converge in this article, which examines the sociocultural dimensions in the Alpine refuges in high altitude.

1. The cultural invention of the Alps and Valle Camonica: a cultural history of alpine tourism

Valle Camonica stands today as a prime example of sustainable mountain tourism within the Biosphere Reserve. This region, which was the first Italian site to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1979 (site no. 94, “Rock Drawings in Valcamonica”), is renowned for its extensive rock art heritage, the exceptional preservation of these artifacts, and the significant scientific insights they have provided at an international level. Valle Camonica is more than just a historical site; it is an environmental complex rich in biodiversity, diverse landscapes, and a wealth of artistic and cultural elements.

Nestled in the central Alps, this valley is home to around 121,000 inhabitants and is traversed by the River Oglio, which serves as its ecological backbone. The territory stretches from Lake Iseo to the summit of Mount Adamello, which, at 3,539 meters above sea level, boasts the Pian di Neve glacier—the largest in the Italian Alps, covering over 18 square kilometers and including numerous smaller glacial basins.

Tourism infrastructure in Valle Camonica is well-developed, with a strong focus on both service provision and international promotion (Turismo Valle Camonica; Official Portal of Tourism in Valle Camonica; Valle Camonica Unesco). To balance environmental conservation with economic and tourism development, the establishment of biosphere reserves has been a key strategy. This approach seeks to enhance the coexistence of human activities, the natural environment, and tourism by experimenting with multidisciplinary methods aimed at protecting the region’s ecological and socio-economic dynamics.

Alpine refuges within this landscape are emerging as vital centers for sustainable and responsible tourism management, offering unique opportunities to explore the area’s cultural heritage, care for the environment, and protect ecosystems. Currently, Valle Camonica hosts 34 alpine refuges, with 24 located within the Adamello Park (Parco dell’Adamello). These numbers, which are already significant compared to other Italian provinces, only account for structures managed by “Rifugi di Lombardia” and the “Italian Alpine Club”. The total number of refuges could potentially double if privately-owned structures were included (Dini, Gibello & Girodo, 2018).

The use and preservation of these refuges necessitate ongoing scientific studies to identify their unique characteristics, strengths, and challenges. The history of alpine refuge construction is poorly documented, with information often scattered across architectural and travel literature (Gibello, 2011), highlighting the need for further research in this area.

1.1 From ominous imagery to sublime beauty: a cultural history of the alpine tourism

To thoroughly understand mountain tourism in the “Valle Camonica – Alto Sebino” Biosphere Reserve, it is essential to explore the anthropological, ethnographic, social, and historical dimensions of the region. Beginning with the historical context, this chapter aims to trace the development of current tourism practices in Alpine refuges, revealing how these practices are deeply rooted in significant historical processes. These processes continue to shape the experiences of those who observe, approach, and engage with the mountains as tourists today.

The historical and symbolic mechanisms through which tourism in the Alps is conceptualized often operate subtly, embedded in the traditions and narratives that have evolved over time. The notion of

the “cultural invention of the Alps” is particularly valuable for understanding these dynamics. By deconstructing the historical, social, and cultural processes that have shaped Alpine tourism, we can better situate our awareness and approach to these practices in the present day.

In Valle Camonica, the role of alpine refuges has evolved significantly over time, mirroring changes in how people engage with the mountains as tourists. Originally serving as simple shelters, these refuges have adapted to accommodate a growing number of visitors with diverse needs, leading to a transformation in what they offer. Today, they provide a kind of “exotic retreat”, offering a traditional and welcoming experience that contrasts with the urbanized, industrialized world of cities (Dini, Gibello & Girodo, 2020). This shift reflects broader cultural representations rooted in the idealizations of the picturesque and the sublime (Camanni, 2017).

The history of alpine refuge construction and the exploration and tourism of the mountains is part of a larger historical narrative concerning the cultural invention of the Italian mountains. The Valle Camonica and the Italian Alps, as we know them today, are not natural givens but rather cultural constructs, shaped through a dual process: the transformation of the landscape through human activity and the creation of an imaginary through scientific and artistic knowledge (De Rossi, 2014).

Before the 19th century, mountains were often seen as terrifying and were depicted through dark, ominous imagery. Glaciers and snow-capped peaks were thought to be the inviolable realms of all kinds of legendary creatures, creating a foreboding and cursed environment (Fleming, 2000; Camanni, 2010; Dall’Ò, 2019). For the native populations, the Alpine environment was divided into ‘domesticated space,’ where human activities took place, and ‘wild space,’ filled with superstitions and believed to be the domain of sinister, otherworldly powers (Salsa, 2007).

The perception of the mountains began to change when the European urban bourgeoisie, driven by a new scientific curiosity and the Romantic spirit, started to explore them. This Enlightenment-inspired shift in perspective led to a reversal in the experience of wild landscapes, transforming them into places valued for their authenticity, purity, and inherent beauty (Camanni, 2002).

To grasp this shift in perception, it is crucial to examine how the discovery of the mountains was communicated to urban societies – how the emotions tied to this discovery were conveyed, and how the narratives of contemporary scholars were translated. On one hand, scientists embarked on explorations of the Alpine region to unravel the origins of geological formations and the legends of the territory. On the other, writers and artists began to challenge the prevailing 17th-century view of the mountains, introducing a new sentimental paradigm that framed the Alps as a sublime refuge from the neuroses of modern cities (Camanni, 2017).

As Enlightenment critiques of society gained traction, the mountains increasingly became symbols of emancipation, with the association between the Alps and freedom becoming a classic and enduring theme. This sentiment can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings (1761), where he suggested that life in the high mountains acquires a sublime quality, elevating emotions to ethereal heights and imbuing the soul with purity. This idea resonated deeply, creating a lasting sentimental echo. Immanuel Kant also celebrated the love of freedom among mountain dwellers (Kant, 1790), and thanks to contributions from numerous artists and writers (De Rossi, 2014), the Alps were soon revered as both the subject of Enlightenment experimentation and the cradle of Romanticism.

By the mid-19th century, the Alps had become a terrain of conquest and exploration. The allure of discovery and the challenge of summiting peaks captivated travelers, driven by a passion for the Alpine picturesque and the sublime-aesthetic experiences defined by the mystery and overwhelming

power of nature (Burke, 1757). Mountain life came to symbolize a retreat from the chaos of urban existence, a place of sublime beauty where one could escape the world's turbulence and seek a vanishing way of life, glimpsed only in these lofty heights (Forbes, 1843).

The contrast between the Alpine world and the urban landscape played a crucial role in the literary sphere, complemented by a vibrant graphic production that captured and illustrated these themes. This visual representation adorned magazines, brochures, tourist promotional materials, novels, and various texts, effectively creating a powerful iconography that defined the essential characteristics of the 'alpine' landscape (Brevini, 2017).

This figurative and literary representation of the mountains coincided with a broader process of folklorization, which sought to celebrate indigenous societies and traditions. As a result, we can now trace the geographic and temporal patterns of urban encroachment into the Alpine regions (De Rossi, 2014; Camanni, 2017). It is important to note that this typification of local traditions has had lasting implications for the representation of the Alpine landscape, with distinct environments often reduced to mere backdrops for superficial tourism (De Rossi, 2017).

The rise of Alpine tourism has significantly shaped the territory, reflecting the dialectic between the picturesque and the sublime and framing the region as a place of tradition, authenticity, and cultural richness. However, the transformations brought about by urbanization – driven by tourism and the development of railways, roads, and urban infrastructure – have created a tension between modernity and the enduring values of rural life. This contrast serves to symbolize the traditional essence of the mountains, highlighting the challenges of preserving their cultural identity amidst rapid change. In the European imagination, the mountains have become the quintessential landscape of otherness, prompting a rapid spread of typification across the Alpine arc. This phenomenon reflects a complex interplay between archaization and modernization (Salsa, 2007). The processes of selection, assembly, and preservation of Alpine images have led to the creation of a cultural landscape and the production of a socialized nature. This has resulted in a collective imagery of the mountains, shaping perceptions according to specific cultural models that continue to influence how the Alps are viewed and experienced today.

Contemporary tourist aspirations are rooted in this cultural invention of the Alps, which has generated enduring representations that form long-lasting collective imaginaries. The tourism industry still relies on these representations, offering a narrative that depicts the mountains as traditional, romantic, invigorating, and a refuge from urban chaos. Among these representations, the ideal of the purifying heights significantly influences collective consciousness. The perception of alpine harmony, first articulated by early Romantic poets, is now echoed in tourist imagery that evokes archaic elements within modern contexts (Viazzo, 1999; Salsa, 2019).

Critics often highlight the problem of clichéd representations that trivialize or stereotype the mountains, detaching them from their original context and producing an idealized typology. Examples include the picturesque landscapes found on postcards, cartoons, brochures, road maps, posters, and ski passes – all of which have contributed to the proliferation of specific Alpine images (Salsa, 2006; Brevini, 2017). Moreover, the rise of the internet has further propagated these standardized visual narratives, leading to an even greater abstraction of the mountains. Today, the major producers of Alpine imagery often adhere to economic models that prioritize the commodification of cultural and landscape panoramas, shaping public perception and tourism in ways that reflect a commercialized view of the Alpine experience (Ferrari, 2023).

What unites the production of these narratives is an idyllic portrayal of the mountains, emphasizing a tranquil environmental atmosphere and an idealized lifestyle marked by serenity and the absence of drama. This vision of immersion in nature—encompassing its landscapes, flora, and fauna—conveys a common belief derived from the cultural invention of the Alps: that this harmonious Alpine life can serve as a refuge from the stresses and conflicts inherent in urban living.

The simplicity and nobility of Alpine values are often depicted as a means to reclaim a lost sense of existence overshadowed by the complexities of city life. However, these narratives tend to oversimplify the relationship between the Alpine and urban worlds, creating an artificial distinction that celebrates diversity while overlooking the interconnectedness between the two. This perspective also fails to recognize the internal diversities within the Alpine context itself (Barbera, De Rossi, 2021).

1.2. Alpine refuges as a cultural concept

Building on these ideas, it is essential to view Alpine refuges as cultural constructs shaped by significant historical and social developments. The concept of refuges can be traced back to medieval hospices, which transformed the wild profiles of mountain passes into welcoming spaces. The early refuges, as we understand them today, emerged in response to the growing cultural practice of mountaineering, gradually easing the fear associated with the heights and enabling access to regions once deemed inhospitable to human activity (Camanni, 2005).

The design and construction of these refuges became vital for promoting exploration of uncharted territories, ensuring human presence in higher altitudes (Gibello, 2011). Over time, refuges have acquired new meanings, influenced by the idealizations inherent in the imagery of the picturesque and sublime associated with the Alps and their inhabitants. The visual models of these refuges often drew on folkloric images of chalets, popularized by the writings of Rousseau (1761), which infused mountain imagery with romantic sentiment (De Rossi, 2014; Salsa, 2019). By the twentieth century, mountaineering evolved from an elite pastime reserved for the wealthy into a widespread activity, with the Camuni mountains serving as key sites in this cultural transformation. The proliferation of refuges during this period became emblematic of this shift (De Rossi, 2017).

Today, Alpine refuges epitomize gentle and mindful tourism. Their accessibility is limited to foot traffic, blending effort and curiosity with the reward of a warm meal or the comforting glow of a fire. Additionally, these refuges are often energy self-sufficient and boast breathtaking views from their elevated locations. Situated in less urbanized environments, they provide an escape from the noise and light pollution of city life, allowing visitors to reconnect with nature and the serenity it offers.

Refuges are seen as spaces to rediscover lost sociability amidst the chaos of urban existence, embodying an enchanted and timeless atmosphere that the term “refuge” evokes in an increasingly disenchanting society (Camanni, 2015). In this enchanting context, the allure of these mountain shelters continues to captivate both first-time visitors and seasoned hikers alike, eliciting a sense of nostalgia and wonder (Dini, Gibello & Girodo, 2020). In Valle Camonica, Alpine refuges are recognized not only as sites of social interaction and solidarity but also as tools for local economic development, fostering moments of engagement that facilitate an ideal exploration of the region’s culture, history, and ecosystems.

2. Mountain huts, mountaineering, and ecotourism as key drivers for biosphere reserve development

As global warming and other environmental challenges increasingly impact quality of life worldwide, an important question arises: how can tourism be made more environmentally respectful while still providing an engaging and appealing experience for visitors? While the preservation of ecosystems should be a top priority – both to safeguard the heritage of the “Valle Camonica – Alto Sebino” Biosphere Reserve and to ensure future generations can enjoy mountain environments– it is essential to explore and promote genuinely sustainable tourism practices.

In today’s context, where there is a growing emphasis on responsible management of natural resources, many scholars advocate for ecologically sustainable tourism, commonly referred to as ecotourism. This approach focuses on enhancing the experience of natural areas while fostering environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and conservation.

Ecotourism, particularly as it relates to the use of alpine refuges, presents a valuable model and a strategic tool for successful economic development at both local and national levels within the Biosphere Reserve. In this section, we will explore how visiting the alpine refuges of Valle Camonica – through hiking and mountaineering– embodies one of the most effective and concrete examples of contemporary ecotourism.

2.1 Social meaning and cultural reasons of reaching alpine refuges

Ecotourism, derived from the term “ecological tourism” (Fennell, 2004), has emerged as one of the most extensively discussed concepts in tourism geography (Orams, 1995; Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Blamey, 1997; Weaver & Lawton, 2002; Kiper, 2013). Initially defined in the late 1980s as travel to pristine areas for the purpose of observing, studying, and appreciating the landscape and its natural features (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1987; Gössling, 1999), ecotourism has evolved significantly over the years. The International Ecotourism Society (2022) now characterizes ecotourism as a responsible form of tourism in natural environments that prioritizes the well-being of both the environment and local communities. This approach emphasizes minimizing physical and social impacts while fostering awareness of biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage preservation. Significant attention is paid to the cultural dynamics between visitors and native populations, a factor that can create unique experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere. This interaction can enhance non-natives’ awareness of the environmental, social, and political contexts of their host locations (International Ecotourism Society, 2022). At the core of ecotourism lies the commitment to conserving and promoting biocultural diversity, which aims to protect cultural, natural, and community heritage.

Yet, one might wonder: what drives individuals to climb mountains? This frequently posed question often suggests, from a practical and common-sense perspective, that such pursuits may seem trivial (Terry, 1961), except for the personal significance they hold for those who engage in them. In the context of the Italian Alps, particularly in Valle Camonica, mountaineering has inspired a rich and diverse body of literature that invites continual exploration into the roots of this activity. This practice resembles exploratory tourism but resists strict categorization. Scientific research, light tourism, extreme sports, and exploration are just a few frameworks that attempt to contextualize the phenomenon of striving for the peaks (Causarano, 2020; Causarano, 2021).

Despite various attempts at classification, it is clear that the emergence of mountaineering was shaped by the intersection of two cultural paradigms: the Alpine culture, which is rooted in the rural and anthropogenic aspects of mountain life, and the urban tourist and exploratory culture, often viewed through an Enlightenment lens as a desecration of sacred spaces once deemed off-limits for recreation – areas that held significant cultural and spiritual value, protected by prohibitions and taboos (Motti, 2016).

Research on mountain ecotourism in the Alps underscores the environmental concerns that motivate various social actors (Strobl, Teichmann, Peters, 2015). In the mountain refuges of Valle Camonica, contemporary ecotourism practices demonstrate how this sector can enhance economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Notably, this phenomenon has experienced significant growth in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, mountain tourism capitalized on new development opportunities, driven by an increasing interest in high-altitude destinations and a growing awareness of the potential for the mountain landscape to serve as a venue for alternative tourism (Varotto, 2020; Giudici et al., 2022). The use of mountain refuges, a topic explored in international ecotourism studies (Stubelj Ars, Bohanec, 2010), focuses on activities rooted in nature and biodiversity. This approach allows for the sustainable enhancement of Valle Camonica, benefiting its interior regions, environmental resources, and local communities. It promotes low-impact practices through hiking, trekking, mountaineering, ski touring, climbing, and high-altitude hospitality. By engaging local operators – such as refuge owners, mountain guides, and hiking instructors – these experiences are enriched by the region’s traditional mountaineering and exploratory culture. This collaboration fosters a deeper awareness among tourists regarding the reduction of ecological impacts and effective local strategies for biodiversity conservation (Palli et al., 2022).

Reaching the alpine refuges, which can only be accessed on foot by climbing without the aid of motor vehicles or mechanical lifts, encourages social actors to actively engage in ecotourism. This approach fosters a deep connection with the places visited, emphasizing a slow and mindful relationship with the territory that enhances geographical awareness through movement.

In Valle Camonica, hiking and mountaineering have emerged as vital means of supporting small-scale economic development, particularly in an era marked by the challenges of global warming. This form of slow tourism prioritizes the physical experience of high-altitude natural environments while promoting education on biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage.

Traveling on foot allows for sustainable interaction with natural resources. At high altitudes, the infrastructure consists of simple paths and tracks, compelling visitors to rely solely on their physical strength and the resources their bodies can provide. This mode of tourism promotes a degree of simplicity, encouraging participants to carry only essential clothing and personal items in a backpack. Walking, once a fundamental survival skill, is now framed as a means of seeking well-being and awareness amid the stunning landscapes of the Camonica Valley. In a world where faster modes of transport are readily available, embarking on this journey signifies a commitment to returning to the most basic human condition, one that soothes the mind and helps individuals escape the relentless pace of urban life.

According to Le Breton (2012), embarking on a journey is an act of resistance that allows individuals to shed their personal roles and detach from a fast-paced context defined by performance, efficiency, and comfort. In this sense, walking becomes a conscious choice to slow down and engage with the world from a more mindful perspective.

From an ethnographic standpoint, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s reflections (1972), participation in refuge activities facilitates a transformation from a typically urban lifestyle to a temporary embrace of a *habitus montagnarde* (Rossi 2014). This transformation occurs because *habitus*, as a shared social space, fosters coherent actions and behaviors that resonate with the socio-cultural environment. It materializes through immersion in the context, subtly incorporating a new set of values.

This specific *habitus* allows tourists to express their behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes in relation to the complex web of relationships that define the social reality of the refuge and the surrounding mountains. Thus, the *habitus montagnarde* becomes a crucial element in reproducing practices that generate regulated and disciplined behaviors, shaping tourists' perceptions in relation to their origins. If practices stem from a non-cognitive orchestration of social fields, and if engagement in certain fields generates distinct types of *habitus*, then the alpine refuges – through their geographical settings, furnishings, and internal dynamics – facilitate a transformative experience for hikers and mountaineers. Visitors often find themselves unconsciously setting aside their urban identities to fully engage in the social environment around them.

Entering the refuge becomes a performative act – a moment of shared life at high altitude, fostering social integration and exchange. This unique experience enriches participants' connection to Alpine life, quickly immersing them in cultural traits that have evolved through the historical invention of the Alps.

2.2 Main forms of ecotourism in the mountain refuges of Valle Camonica

In Valle Camonica, ecotourism primarily manifests in two seasonal periods: summer and winter. During the summer, which sees the highest number of visitors, activities such as hiking, trekking, and trail running draw crowds to the mountain refuges. These refuges are accessible via a network of paths and trails that connect the valley's villages to high-altitude accommodations.

A significant influx of hikers is noted along the “Alta Via dell'Adamello” trail, as well as the interconnected paths linking the various refuges and support points at altitude, creating a high-altitude route with multiple stages. The Alta Via dell'Adamello is a remarkable mountain trekking route spanning nearly 85 km across the Adamello group, connecting 11 alpine refuges. This trail allows adventurers to traverse diverse high-altitude landscapes of great natural significance, moving from one refuge to the next within Adamello Park.

The refuges along this route serve as both strategic logistical support points and information hubs, offering visitors insights into local activities, attractions, and knowledge about the surrounding area. The relationship with the refuge managers is essential, as they are the local authorities and experts on the region. Living in and promoting the area, they uphold the principles of respect and protection for both the refuges and the mountains themselves. They also share stories and historical insights that enrich the mountaineering narrative of the region.

Furthermore, all refuges participate in initiatives coordinated by Adamello Park that raise awareness of ecological issues. This includes the “Different Refuges” project, which promotes waste separation, and the Territorial Brand project, engaging refuges in promoting local traditions, culinary products, and environmental conservation.

Climbing is also a popular activity in Valle Camonica, particularly in Val Miller, an alpine valley within the Adamello group and a tributary of Val Malga, which itself is an eastern lateral branch of Val Camonica. Many climbers rely on the alpine refuges in this area to tackle the challenging vertical terrain. Mount Adamello, standing at 3,539 meters above sea level, serves as a major attraction for alpinists. This region is home to two significant natural parks: the Adamello Natural Park, managed by the Mountain Community of Valle Camonica, and the Adamello Brenta Natural Park, overseen by the Autonomous Province of Trento.

The central part of the Adamello group features glaciers that surround the highest peaks, including the largest glacier in the Italian Alps. One unique form of ecotourism in this area involves historical

and mountaineering excursions to Pian di Neve on Mount Adamello. This location was the site of significant events during the First World War between Italian and Austrian forces, known at the time as the “White War” (Soregaroli 2006; Camanni 2016b; Flores 2021). As the glaciers melt, numerous war relics are being revealed, and these artifacts are carefully collected and exhibited at the Museum of the White War in Adamello, located in Temù (Valle Camonica, Brescia).

In terms of winter ecotourism, the tourism industry has traditionally focused on the monoculture of alpine skiing (De Rossi, 2017). However, the practice of ski touring, or skialp, is gaining increasing popularity. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the significant decrease in winter snowfall and the growing awareness of the unsustainability associated with downhill skiing. Ski touring offers a compelling alternative to mass skiing, promoting a less intrusive and more dispersed experience within the natural winter landscape. The presence of alpine refuges provides essential support and shelter from harsh winter conditions (Crovella, 2023).

The frequentation of the alpine refuges in Valle Camonica highlights the potential to preserve and protect the valley’s integrity and biodiversity. These refuges offer visitors unique environmental, ecological, and cultural experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of the region’s distinctive characteristics (Kiper, 2013).

Walking towards an alpine refuge invites individuals to reconnect with the humbling awareness of their smallness in the vastness of nature. This journey allows hikers to marvel at the breathtaking landscapes and discover shapes and colors found nowhere else. The slow-paced exploration of these sparsely populated areas enables visitors to experience pristine natural environments, where they can observe flora and fauna in their natural habitats.

Inside the alpine refuges, guests engage in vibrant social and cultural experiences facilitated by the refuge guardians, fellow hikers, and mountaineers. These interactions provide new perspectives on environmental knowledge through cultural exchange and discussions with those dedicated to the protection of high-altitude ecosystems. Many mountain professionals collaborate with the refuges and their managers, including alpine guides, medium mountain guides, companions, members of the Italian Alpine Club, alpine rescue teams, and park rangers.

2.3 Encouraging ecotourism in the alpine refuges of Valle Camonica

The frequentation of alpine refuges, along with activities such as trekking and mountaineering, significantly contributes to the enjoyment and conservation of the mountainous landscapes of Valle Camonica for future generations. To enhance these forms of ecotourism, as suggested by Das and Chatterjee (2015), it is essential to implement monitoring activities, including academic research, to ensure effective long-term management and protection of the territory.

However, promoting increased visitation to alpine refuges poses challenges, as an uncontrolled influx of visitors can lead to environmental and social implications in these minimally urbanized areas. Exceeding the carrying capacity of alpine refuges can create social pressures on high-altitude facilities, which may be ill-equipped to handle disproportionate numbers of guests. This situation can also exert direct environmental stress on local ecosystems (Rodolphe, 2019). Practical issues arising from overcrowding include habitat disturbance, wildlife displacement, noise pollution, and waste management problems.

To effectively raise awareness about Biosphere Reserves and attract responsible tourists to alpine refuges, targeted promotional activities are necessary. While significant strides have been made in highlighting the uniqueness of the natural heritage, it is vital, as Diamantis (2018) suggests, to develop

strategic planning for sustainable ecotourism that is grounded in dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders.

In the case of the alpine refuges in Valle Camonica, involving local stakeholders is crucial. These stakeholders include refuge managers (especially those from private ownership who currently lack a voice in decision-making), mountaineering associations, indigenous communities, and local government representatives. Their participation is essential for identifying needs and limitations, as well as for engaging in decision-making processes that enhance local capacities for sustainable tourism development.

From a scientific perspective, it is essential to continue exploring the frequentation of alpine refuges, the social activities conducted within them, and the associated pressures and benefits in the academic field. This research should deepen our understanding of the intricate relationships among individuals, the environment, and cultural expectations.

To achieve this, the development of ecotourism should not focus solely on improving services. As proposed by Sharpley (2006), it should also emphasize raising awareness and providing training for responsible and sustainable environmental behavior. This can be accomplished through various socio-environmental education initiatives.

Potential activities may include organizing cultural and sports events, conducting targeted school workshops, offering training days at altitude, arranging educational excursions, and facilitating volunteer opportunities for local residents and youth.

Conclusions and perspectives

This case study focuses on the main forms of ecotourism present in the alpine refuges of the Valle Camonica – Alto Sebino Biosphere Reserve, highlighting their emergence as historical and social products stemming from the broader cultural evolution of the Alps. Historically, the practice of mountaineering has served as one of the earliest forms of ecotourism, rooted in a cultural narrative that fosters a profound relationship between humans and their environment. This relationship has cultivated environmental awareness and shaped diverse interpretations of nature and its transformations.

Today, these practices offer a compelling alternative to mass tourism. They represent some of the most effective forms of sustainable tourism, emphasizing personal enrichment and enhancing geographical awareness through meaningful engagement with the landscape. By promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of nature, local society, and culture, these practices also provide direct support to local economies.

Moreover, the social implications of tourism sustainability in the context of the alpine refuges in Valle Camonica – Alto Sebino offer valuable insights for future research. This includes exploring the transition to sustainability in peripheral mountain regions and enhancing awareness-raising initiatives aimed at fostering environmental consciousness.

Currently, the primary challenges in these contexts are to enhance mutual cooperation, foster participation, and build partnerships with relevant stakeholders. Raising awareness and promoting on-site training activities are essential steps toward addressing these challenges. By co-designing sustainable tourism initiatives in high-altitude regions, we can ensure that these efforts respect the local environment, protect biodiversity, and support small-scale economic development.

This approach will lead to sustainable improvements in these geographical areas, while also safeguarding the significance and value of both the territory and the communities that inhabit it.

Dialoghi Mediterranei, n. 73, maggio 2025

References

- Barbera, F. & De Rossi, A. (2021). *Metromontagna: un progetto per riabitare l'Italia* (Eds). Roma: Donzelli.
- Belotti, W. (2000). *La Grande Guerra sulle montagne lombarde della Valle Camonica*. Bormio: Alpina.
- Blamey, R. K. (1997). Ecotourism: The Search for an Operational Definition. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 5(2): 109-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669589708667280>
- Bourdieu, P. (1972). *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Genève: Droz.
- Brevini, F. (2017). *Simboli della montagna*, Bologna: il Mulino.
- Burke, E. (1757). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London: R. and J. Dodsley.
- Camanni, E. (1985). *La letteratura dell'alpinismo*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Camanni, E. (2002). *La nuova vita delle Alpi*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Camanni, E. (2010a). *Ghiaccio vivo. Storia e antropologia dei ghiacciai alpini*. Scarmagno: Priuli & Verlucca.
- Camanni, E. (2010b). *La metafora dell'alpinismo*. Courmayeur: Liaison.
- Camanni, E. (2015). *L'incanto del rifugio: piccolo elogio della notte in montagna*. Portogruaro: Ediciclo.
- Camanni, E. (2016a). *Alpi ribelli. Storie di montagna, resistenza e utopia*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Camanni, E. (2016b). *Il fuoco e il gelo. La grande guerra sulle montagne*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Camanni, E. (2017). *Storia delle Alpi: le più belle montagne del mondo raccontate*. Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'immagine.
- Camanni, E. (2018). *Alpi ribelli. Storie di montagna, resistenza e utopia*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Causarano, P. (2020). Uno sport popolare che non è uno sport: l'alpinismo. *Passato e presente: rivista di storia contemporanea*, 111, 3: 161-181.
- Causarano, P. (2021), La soggettività dell'alpinista: modelli sociali e personalità individuale nell'evoluzione storica di una pratica culturale. In Lentin, S. & Scandurra, S. A. (Eds), *Quamdiu cras, cur non hodie? Studi in onore di Antonia Criscenti Grassi*, Roma: Aracne: 269-281.
- Ceballos-Lascuráin, H. (1987). The future of ecotourism. *Mexico Journal*, January, 13-14.
- Ceballos-Lascuráin, H. (1996). Tourism, Ecotourism and Protected Areas: the state of nature-based tourism around the world and guidelines for its development. Gland: International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. <https://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.1996.7.en>
- Crovella, C (2023). *Scialpinismo*. Milano: RCS MediaGroup.
- Dall'Ò, E. (2019). I draghi delle Alpi. Cambiamenti climatici, Antropocene e immaginari di ghiaccio. In Gugg, G., Dall'Ò & Borriello, D. (Eds), *Disasters in Popular Cultures*. Rende: Geographies of the Anthropocene, Vol. 2, Il Sileno Edizioni: 197-222.
- Das, M., & Chatterjee, B. (2015). *Ecotourism: A panacea or a predicament?* *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 14, 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.01.002>
- Diamantis, D. (2018). Stakeholder ecotourism management: exchanges, coordination's and adaptations. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 17 (3): 203-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2018.1502122>
- Dini, R., Gibello, L. & Girodo, S. (2020). *Andare per rifugi*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Fennell, D. A. (2004). *Ecotourism: An Introduction (2nd ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505434>
- Fiora, M. (2011). *Storia dei camuni della Valle Camonica*. Costa Volpino: Crea.
- Fleming, F. (2000). *Killing dragons: the conquest of the Alps*. London: Granta books.
- Flores, I. (2021). *La guerra in alta montagna*. Milano: Ugo Mursia Editore.
- Forbes, J. D. (1843), *Travels Through the Alps of Savoy and Other Parts of the Pennine Chain: With Observations on the Phenomena of Glaciers*. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black.
- Gibello, L. (2011). *Cantieri d'alta quota: breve storia della costruzione dei rifugi sulle Alpi*. Biella: Lineadaria.
- Giudici, D., Dezio, C., Donadoni, E. & Fera, A. (2022). Un modello di ripartenza post Covid per i territori fragili di montagna. Il caso di twin. *Territorio – Sezione Open Access*, (97-Supplemento). <https://doi.org/10.3280/tr2021-097-Supplementooa12933>

- Gössling, S. (1999). Ecotourism: a means to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem functions?. *Ecological Economics*, *Volume 29, Issue 2*, May 1999: 303-320.
- International Ecotourism Society (2022). *What is ecotourism*. <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>
- Kant, I. (1790). *Kritik der Urteilkraft*. Berlin und Libau: Lagarde und Friedrich.
- Kiper, T. (2013). Role of Ecotourism in Sustainable Development. *Journal of Geoscience and Environment Protection*, 10 (4). <https://doi.org/10.5772/55749>
- Le Breton, D. (2012). *Marcher: éloge des chemins et de la lenteur*. Paris: Métailié.
- Motti, G. P. (2016). *Storia dell'alpinismo*. Milano: RCS MediaGroup.
- Orams, M. B. (1995). Towards a more desirable form of ecotourism. *Tourism Management*, 16(1): 3-8.
- Palli, J., Cagnetti, C., Emanuel, C., Ferrari, S., Filibeck, G., Forte, T. G. W., Franceschini, C, Giorgi, A., Leoni, V., Poponi, S., Ruggeri, A. & Piovesan, G. (2022). The environmental dimension of ecotourism in Italian protected areas: a comparison of two bio-geographical regions based on the assessment of accredited hiking guides. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 22(1): 164–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2022.2080215>
- Remotti, F. (2008). *Contro natura: una lettera al Papa*. Laterza: Roma-Bari.
- Rodolphe, R. (2019). *Turismo di massa e usura del mondo*. Milano: Elèuthera.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1761). *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey.
- Salsa, A., (2006). *Viaggio alle Alpi. Alle origini del turismo alpino*. Torino: Museo nazionale della montagna Duca degli Abruzzi, Cahier Museomontagna.
- Salsa, A., (2007). *Il tramonto delle identità tradizionali. Spaesamento e disagio esistenziale nelle Alpi*. Scarmagno: Priuli & Verlucca.
- Salsa, A., (2019). *I paesaggi delle Alpi. Un viaggio nelle terre alte tra filosofia, natura e storia*. Roma: Donzelli Editore.
- Sharpley, R. (2006). Ecotourism: A Consumption Perspective. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 5(1–2), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040608668444>
- Soregaroli, P. (2006). *Adamello Vol. I. Guida escursionistica e alpinistica. Val Camonica, Passo del Tonale, Val Narcanello, Val d'Avio, Val Paghera, Val Miller, Val Salarno, Valle di Adamè, Val Dois, Valle del Caffaro*. Chiari: Nordpress Edizioni.
- Stephen, L. (1871). *The Playground of Europe*. London: Longman, Green and Co.
- Strobl, A., Teichmann, K. i Peters, M. (2015). Do mountain tourists demand ecotourism? Examining moderating influences in an Alpine tourism context. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 63 (3), 383-398. Preuzeto s <https://hrcak.srce.hr/145692>
- Stubelj Ars, M. & Bohanec, M. (2010). Towards the ecotourism: A decision support model for the assessment of sustainability of mountain huts in the Alps. *Journal of Environmental Management*, *Volume 91, Issue 12*, December 2010: 2554-2564.
- Tarpino, A., & Marson, A. (2020). Dalla crisi pandemica il ritorno ai territori. *Scienze Del Territorio*, 6–12. <https://doi.org/10.13128/sdt-12369>
- Terray, L. (1961). *Les conquérants de l'inutile: des Alpes à l'Annapurna*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Varotto, M. (2020). *Montagne di mezzo: una nuova geografia*. Torino, Einaudi
- Viazzo, P. P. (1999). Il paradosso alpino. *L'Alpe*, n. 1, 30.
- Weaver, D. B. & Lawton, L. J. (2002). Overnight Ecotourist Market Segmentation in the Gold Coast Hinterland of Australia. *Journal of Travel Research*, 40(3): 270-280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728750204000305>
- Whymper, E. (1871). *Scrambles amongst the Alps in the year 1860-1869*. London: J. Murray.

Website

Parco dell'Adamello, <https://www.parcoadamello.it/home> (last access: 19/07/2024).

Rifugi di Lombardia, <https://www.rifugi.lombardia.it/> (last access: 02/08/2024).

Turismo Valle Camonica. Portale ufficiale del turismo in Valle Camonica. <https://www.turismovallecamonica.it/> (last access: 14/07/2024).

Valle Camonica Unesco. <https://www.vallecamonicaunesco.it/> (last access: 02/08/2024).

Paolo Carera, laureato magistrale in Antropologia culturale ed etnologia, è specializzato nell'ambito dell'antropologia alpina. Membro fondatore del Festival dell'Antropologia – Bologna, ha partecipato a progetti di ricerca Spin-Off in Emilia-Romagna in strutture di riabilitazione. Attualmente è cultore della materia e membro delle commissioni d'esame per il settore scientifico disciplinare M-DEA/01 presso l'Università degli studi di Bergamo, dove lavora ad un progetto di ricerca dedicato alla promozione della salute in valle.