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Abstract

Thinking ethnographically with the work of Alberto Magnaghi, this paper explores the tensions and nuances embedded in the process of ‘constructing territory’ through the making of an ecomuseum in the Simeto River Valley in southern Italy. Conceptualised by Hugues de Varine and Henri Rivière, ecomuseums are community-based processes for reconstructing the material and immaterial signs of the past to revive a shared sense of territorial heritage. Based on our engagement in a long-term action research process, interviews and focus groups, participation in itineraries, and coordination activities, we trace how the group of actors involved in the Simeto Ecomuseum (SiEco) frame different relationships to the territory and articulations of heritage to nurture futures in the Simeto Valley. We explore the insurgent potential of this form of environmental heritagisation and local cultural transmission through an examination of diverse expressions of place attachment and political consciousness threaded through this process. We suggest that for ecomuseums to act as “territorial glue,” meaning a site of social cohesion, they must generate a shared understanding and care of territory. This process, however, is complicated by diverse relationships to physical and cultural spaces made visible in the ways in which boundaries - between cities, ecologies and places, humans and non-humans - are (re)made and unmade in sometimes irreconcilable ways and in the difficulties of maintaining an ongoing and inclusive collective process over time. We call for the problematization of the meanings and actions of “territory”, community, and inclusion in processes of cultural heritage-making.

Keywords: action research; applied anthropology; ecomueums, community-based planning, cultural heritage making

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Introduction

In March 2022, international students enrolled in “Environmental Anthropology in the Mediterranean” at University of Catania participated in a 2-day pilot itinerary of the Simeto Ecomuseum (SiEco). The itinerary, which explored key environmental, historical, and cultural sites in the Simeto River Valleyⁱ was organized by the Coordinating Committee of the SiEco, in conjunction with members of the Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Valleyⁱⁱ. In keeping with the themes of the course, it emphasized environmentalism and heritage conservation. Local residents, activists, and members of associations led the excursions, offering histories, memories, and interpretations that highlighted human-nature entanglements especially in relationship to water, landscape, and environmental heritage in inland eastern Sicily around the Simeto River (see Fig.1). Our ethnographic diary describes the first stop of the itinerary:

We follow Vito, a volunteer from the association ProLoco, from our meeting point at Piazza Dante to the terrace behind the castle. As we walk, he explains “This valley was created by the passage of the Sieli torrent [a tributary of the Simeto river], which creates a specific shape of the hills which are called Calanchi, an important feature of the area’s heritage. The Norman castle at Motta S. Anastasia was built in the 11th century by Ruggero d’Altavilla for defense and communication. From here you can see both the sea and Mt. Etna...The castle is unique because it is built on a ‘neck’ of an ancient volcano. This is one of the few places in the world that you can see this type of geological feature.” The group looks out across the Calanchi as Vito points to examples. I look in the direction of his hand and notice hills dotted with light green grass of early spring. At this distance, it offers a striking contrast to the outcrops of large brown-grey rocks. Vito continues, “among these Calanchi, unfortunately, there is a landfill authorized in the 80s and that continues to be used today.” I lean forward, scanning the

landscape to try to detect which hills are made from trash and which ones come from nature (from first author's fieldnotes March 26, 2022).

During the itinerary (see Fig. 2), representatives of a local association and/or interpreters from the SiEco Coordinating Committee wove together the distant past and the recent present, animating the ecological and cultural heritage of the area. In Motta, described above, we glimpsed 500,000 years – from the volcanic eruption that created the neck, to the nobleman behind the 11th century castle, to the woes of 20th century waste disposal. At Ponte Barca Oasis, a nature reserve for birds migrating north from Africa, our guide interspersed the story of water management with bird identification. In Biancavilla, we traced the entangled story of streams and mills-along a now paved street. In Regalbuto, we learned of the difficult phases in the life of Lake of Pozzillo, an human-made lake where algal blooms, a product of eutrophication, have threatened both biodiversity and human activities. We followed a steep rutted path in Centuripe to identify springs that sustained land, animals, and the town's residents for much of the previous century. At the last stop, the late Pippo Bonomo, a longtime activist, explained his view of the ecomusem, explaining

“[SiEco] holds together communities and helps them walk united, each one with his or her own peculiarities, they act as the glue” (from second author's fieldnotes March 30, 2022).

Inspired by Pippo's interpretation, this article explores the adhesive and cohesive tensions of community, territory, and environmental consciousness in the SiEco.

Thinking ethnographically with the work of Alberto Magnaghi (2020), a prominent member of the territorialist school of planning, we explore the genesis of the “Simeto River Valley” as a geo-social construct connected to the Simeto River Agreement and the Participatory Presidium, where the idea of SiEco originated. We then turn to the SiEco to examine how participants negotiate their sense and definition of territory through the ties

created within local associations, as well as expressions of “living the territory” and defending it. These constructions, we argue, have implications for the SiEco and, more generally, for the debate concerned with the role of ecomuseums in the care of territories. On one hand, the ecomuseum is strengthened by individuals’ strong sense of place-based attachment and the commitments they have made to learning, preserving, and sharing cultural knowledge. On the other hand, as seen in the Simeto case, a narrowly focused sense of place, like a single municipality or type of place (e.g., churches), may preclude building a broader territorial consciousness and sense of interconnection. The absence of a collectively constructed understanding of territory is also reflected in challenges related to scale, leadership, and the organizing structure, all of which can undermine this collective effort, and the broader political work behind it.

Theoretical framework

Ecomuseums, community, and memory

The term ecomuseum appears for the first time in the 1970s in France as the result of a debate in those years about the centrality of living environments, the educational processes, collective heritage, and the active participation of the various components of the so-called ‘local communities’ in the interpretation of territories (Rivière 1985). Specifically, the first ecomuseum related to the urban community of Le Creusot et Montceau-les-Mines. The significant presence of mining, metallurgical, and manufacturing industries, posed a series of questions, in the museology field, on the relationship between industrial and environmental heritage (de Varine 1978). In this forerunner ecomuseum experience, the underlying question was concerned with the type of collections that an ecomuseum has (or does not have), and how various forms of heritage, like the industrial one, can be collectively reinterpreted in the present, to offer new future perspectives for the residents dealing with it (Bellaigue, 1999).

The term ecomuseum manifests itself in various forms, as a connecting, perceptive,

systemic, and relational device, within a large territory, expressing and interpreting the relations between people and the landscapes. The prefix eco- (intended as *oikos*, the Greek word for *house*), added to the word museum, tried to express the very concept of the relationship. More recently, Davis (2023) framed ecomuseums as “community-led museum or heritage projectⁱⁱⁱ that supports social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability” (Davis, 2023, p. 147). In Davis’s words, and in the pivotal founding references for this stream of practice (de Varine, 1978; Rivière 1985; Bellaigue, 1999), the expression “community-led” takes for granted the existence of a coherent sense of ‘community’; however, this is rarely the case. Rather, as Brennan et. al (2008) suggest, the concept of ‘community’ is multifaceted and evolving. Communities are not necessarily people living in the same place, but groups connected by ties, sharing identities, having something in common. At the same time, these commonalities can conceal different meanings and be deployed from different political positions. In extreme cases, this can lead to exclusionary and contentious dynamics (Jullien, 2017; Lijster, 2022). Defining community is thus a battleground and, we argue, is also a central space of construction and tension in making an ecomuseum. Such communities tend to come together voluntarily around the goals of sharing collective memories (Olick, 2008; Mascheroni et al., 2012) and caring for what they consider to be heritage; this recognition and sharing is the process of heritagisation (Davallon, 2010). Thus, ecomuseums are not regulatory planning instruments, but instead they can be understood as citizen mobilization platforms for reclaiming and monitoring heritage. In this framework, ‘heritage’ is not a datum, but is shaped according to the perceptions that can sometimes generate conflicting and contested dynamics (Weiglhofer, 2023). Therefore, the use of the concept of ‘community’ in ecomuseum processes needs to be problematised (Dicks, 2000; Berger et al., 2020) and explored in relation to the specific conditions under which each ecomuseum is formed.

Besides a body of literature that recalls the potentialities of ecomuseums, as they arose in the 1970s, scholars have pointed to a variety of pitfalls that have emerged from various practical experiences on the ground. One of the first challenges is related to the same processual dimension of ecomuseums as evolving bodies (de Varine, 2017): they do not rely on rigid rules

and operating mechanisms; their organisational structure is constantly constructed and reconstructed by the individuals involved; and require people that contribute to the ongoing advancement of the process. Thus, they are not always able to withstand the test of time. After the initial and enthusiastic phase, in many cases ecomuseums collapse when there is a change in leadership or in the contextual political conditions (Hauenschild, 1988; Chang et al., 2015, Filipe, 2020). Thus, after an initial phase of 'seduction' (Grasseni, 2014), residents can disengage and/or public institutions withdraw from the process. In other cases, ecomuseums can collapse due to "financial problems, insufficient staff expertise and lack of strategic planning" (Corsane et al., 2007a, p. 234).

Some scholars point out that in many cases ecomuseums fail to guarantee the implementation of a genuine and inclusive democratic process (Norman, 1993; Davis, 2004), generating mechanisms that tend to involve only a few privileged groups, thus confirming the dynamics of dominant power structures. Although, in some cases, ecomuseums have acted as means to give voice to underrepresented groups or minorities (Delgado 2001), some ecomuseums have also played a controversial role in exalting myths and serving as rhetorical discourses that do not allow for truly emancipatory processes (Hubert, 1985). Others have faced the memory-dilemma – choosing the histories and memories an ecomuseum recalls, while omitting others (Debary, 2004). From another perspective, scholars have also reported uneven effects of socio-economic mechanisms generated by ecomuseum projects, specifically in relation to tourism. In many cases, ecomuseums end up being more beneficial to visitors than to residents, generating unintended consequences on local dynamics (Howard, 2002).

Despite such critiques, there is a general agreement that the concept and practices of ecomuseums have generated experimental ways of making and caring for territories (Brown et al., 2024). This raises two important questions: How is territory constructed within the context of ecomuseums? What tensions arise from the continuous framing and transmission of territorial heritage?

Ecomuseums as territory-making

Some scholars argue that ecomuseums are territories themselves (Rivard, 1988; Boylan, 1992; Reina, 2014; Fernández and Moshenska, 2017), premised on a shared understanding of local heritage (González et al 2017) and reflecting a collective frame of the nexus between nature, culture, and local development (Terzić et al. 2014; Riva et al., 2022). Although other scholars have been critical about the use of the word ‘territory’ for ecomuseums (Bowden, 2018), there is a general agreement in the literature that an ecomuseum is not contained in the walls of single building, but represents a plurality of spaces, stories, and people that constitute an interpretative tool kit for reimagining the relationship of anthropic communities with their living environments. In contrast to traditional museums, ecomuseums do not focus on a collection of objects that can be stored and preserved in cabinets, but on systems of heritage that are embedded in territories (Bellaigue, 2000; Duarte Cândido and Pappalardo, 2022). In other words, ecomuseums are intended as devices for reconnecting people with their places of life (Davis, 1999), whether public or private places, through endogenous perspectives on heritage (Coughlin 2012).

Ecomuseums rely on strategies that make it possible to visualize the environmental history of a territory through exhibition spaces and experiences like itineraries. Unlike expert-driven interpretation centers (Canavese et al. 2018), ecomuseum exhibits are community-based, often produced by the community and open to the community, offering collective recognition and interpretation of the places and people who live there. Thus, their contents evolve based on the various knowledge making practices, such as parish and landscape maps, participatory heritage inventories (Dal Santo et al. 2017), that are used in specific contexts.

Additionally, ecomuseums are governed in a variety of ways, often through public-private agreements (Celi et al. 2015; Bowden and Ciesielska 2016, Kincaid et al. 2019) mostly aimed at applying the principles expressed by the 2003 *UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the 2000 *Europe, the European Landscape Convention*, and the 2004 *Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*. They have also become a way to contribute to the International Council of Museum declarations on museums’

responsibility toward landscapes (Garlandini 2017; Sturani 2022). According to Magliacani (2014) and González et al. (2017), they are experiments in local governance that can ignite new trajectories of development (Corsane et al. 2008; Garlandini 2015; Chiapparino and Galli 2016). They have also been experimented with as collaborative devices in the co-management of social-ecological systems such as wetlands (Olsson et al. 2004). Recently ecomuseums have been at the core of research and practices related to climate action, acquiring a growing significance in the discourse about ecological transition (Borrelli et al. 2022).

The field of urban, landscape, and territorial planning are deeply connected with Ecomuseums. Alberto Magnaghi, known for his contributions to the Italian territorialist school of planning, defines ecomuseums as:

Cultural interpretations of the territory and the landscape, in articulated and interactive forms between residents and outsiders [...], mobilization of active citizenship are leading these structures to become effective tools for the care of the identity of places, between historical memory and the future; in many cases they become promoters of the activation and co-generation of new forms of integrated territorial-based economies, focused on the self-sustainable valorization of environmental and landscape territorial resources (Magnaghi 2020, 222; translated by the authors).

In this definition, ecomuseums are intertwined with “interpretation,” and heritage-based identity, and valorization. This echoes the ideas behind the most recent UNESCO and EU Conventions, including the widely debated definition of Cultural Landscapes (Riva 2017): local communities’ perceptions are key to promoting actions of care and self-sustainable valorization. Further, central to Magnaghi’s rendering, territorial heritage is understood as a complex and dynamic integrated system of nature-culture containing both tangible and intangible elements that evolve over time. For example, in the case of *Ecomuseo dei terrazzamenti e della vite* (see Murtas and Davis 2009) the terraced landscapes and people taking care of them represent the co-evolutionary character of material and immaterial heritage – nature, culture, and human labor – embedded in the terraces. Thus, it is impossible to unravel what is natural from what is

cultural, like in the path of a Mobius strip (Latour 2014, 59) that represents the natural-cultural continuum.

Finally, in Magnaghi's definition, ecomuseums are recognized as intersubjective, interconnected places where new knowledge and meanings can be collectively built and consciousnesses of care can be fostered. Likewise, Peter Davis (1999) suggests that strengthening a sense of place and renewing community-environment connections are key objectives of ecomuseums. Place, according to Altman and Low, "is space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes" (2012, 5). "Place" and "place-consciousness" are closely tied to the construction of heritage-based identities and valorization, and in the Italian context this applies to the concept of territory, as Bonesio explains:

The territorialist definition of the concept of territory maps out a constellation of concepts that define its specificity and difference: it is understood as a cultural construct (historic, social), a living and dynamic dimension of interaction between nature and culture, a place or a constellation of places, and expression and construction of identity that is manifest in the local specificity (2012, 63).

Significantly, Maghaghi calls for a "return to territory", a "re-founding of synergistic relationships between 'places' and 'flows; between human settlement and the environment, between concrete communities and institutions" (2020, 12).

Territory has been central to the construction of the SiEco; rather than a "community-led museum" (Davis 2023), the SiEco has been envisioned as the territory itself (Rivard 1988; Boylan 1992; Reina 2014; Fernández and Moshenska 2017) where relations, and socio-ecological dynamics are understood and enacted in the interplay between what is nearby and what is far away (Bellaigue 1999). In what follows, we examine how a group of actors clustered around the SiEco actively reimagine 'their territory' as an ecomuseum. We consider the varied understandings of territory that emerge, paying specific attention to the aspects of their lived and associative experiences that shape their understanding of territory. We also point to the political and organizational effects of these constructions for the SiEco.

Methodological approach

This article relies on an epistemology grounded in the paradigm of action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001), based on partnerships between scholars and social actors inspired by an ethos of reciprocity (Reardon 2006) and ethnographic methods. Action research (AR) means doing research with co-researchers that are both from inside and outside the academic boundaries, with the aim of catalyzing transformations on the ground, and advancing theoretical knowledge in a transdisciplinary manner (Hadorn, 2008; Saija and Lambert-Pennington, 2020). We have substantiated this approach using qualitative data collection techniques generally practiced by ethnographers, including focus groups, interviews, and participant-observation (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016), as well as through the use of spatial data in an open and collaborative manner (Mugerauer, 2000).

Collectively, we spent 4 years (2019-23) engaging with the SiEco's activities, drawing on our anthropological (first author) and urban planning (second author) methodological practices to collaboratively design our methodology. Our research is part of a broader and long-term process, in which a group of AR co-researchers in the Simeto River Valley shifted from an initial stage of a community mapping (Saija et al., 2017) to the creation of a River Agreement and a Participatory Presidium (Saija and Pappalardo 2022) to the creation of an Ecomuseum in the Simeto Valley. Our contributions to the SiEco process were twofold: on one side, we actively engaged with the SiEco Coordinating Committee; on the other side, we undertook a critical examination of the early stage of the process, conducting a focus group with the broad group of activists involved in planning and launching the Ecomuseum. Additionally, we followed up the focus group with one-on-one interviews and participant observation in 4 SiEco itineraries between 2022-2023, including the one with international students from University of Catania (introduced above). The institutional review board at the University of Memphis approved this research, and likewise we followed the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. We obtained informed consent during the focus group (verbal consent to recording the online session), and prior to each interview participants reviewed and signed a consent form.

Interviewees and speakers quoted in this article have been assigned pseudonyms, as is common practice in anthropology to protect individuals' anonymity.

At the end of the planning period (Dec 2020), we conducted a 90-minute focus-group online with Ecomuseum participants (n=20), using google jamboard to track and organize responses in real time in an interactive fashion. The prompts were aimed at getting participants' perspectives on how the SiEco planning process advanced over time, as well their perspectives on governance and challenges in the context of an action-research approach. In 2022 we conducted 27 in-depth interviews. We developed the interview protocol by adapting Corsane et al.'s (2007b) key elements for assessing ecomuseums into open-ended queries and vetted the interview protocol with the Coordinating Committee (included in the appendix). We recruited interviewees from among people involved in the Ecomuseum planning process, with an eye to ensuring they represented the geographic diversity of the Simeto Valley, encompassed varying levels of participation, and ages. Our sample included 3 people who were not active in the SiEco, 8 people who were initially active in the planning and pilot project phases, but then disengaged; and 14 that were involved at the time of the interview. The questions focused on interviewees involvement in SiEco, their motivation for doing so, governance of the SiEco, impacts of participating (attachment, affection, collective identity, activism), and perspectives on the future of the SiEco.

To analyze the data, we developed a codebook and the first author coded interviews in MaxQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. Three rounds of coding were completed: the first focused on places and features of the landscape or river ecosystem, interviewees involvement in SiEco, and the ways they used the language of territory and references to places, to contribute (or not) cultural and/or historical knowledge to the work of the Ecomuseum. The second round of coding focused on expressions of affection or dislike, activism, and knowledge of cultural practices and history. The final round focused on governance and management practices and further oriented ideas and suggestions. Fieldnotes made during participation observation and notes from the focus group were coded by hand for primary themes and crossed referenced with interview codes. We shared our preliminary results with the Coordination Committee of SiEco

and with a group of activists from the Participatory Presidium, to collectively evaluate our joint work.

MEETING THE SIECO: EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF THE ECOMUSEUM

In the SiEco case, the wide portion of territory identified as the ecomuseum – about 1.100 Km² involving 11 municipalities – is one of the broadest extensions of existing ecomuseums, Fig. 1). It was designed to be “kept together” through a polycentric form of governance (Ostrom 2010) based on *antennae*: that is, different centers scattered over a large territory where bottom-up initiatives take place in the vicinity of a group of people living there. In the case of SiEco, the 11 municipalities involved in the project were considered as 6 different *antennae* (see Fig.3), with their own local specificities (different geomorphological configurations, different socio-economic activities, different local initiatives taking place, etc.). Recalling Bellaigue, antennae are local heritage nuclei, with their specificities, that exist *nearby* for a group of residents, and have connections with other heritage nuclei that can be far away. Thus, ecomuseums are meant to be the glue between the dimensions of proximity and a wider picture (like a watershed, for example).

In what follows, we explore how the dynamics of proximity inform SiEco participants’ conceptualization and enactment of territory. In the Sicilian context, the word “territory” is a widely used frame for talking about space and place. Among research participants, references to “my territory” and “the territory” refer to geographic spaces as small as a farm and as large as the region. The nebulous and context dependent character of SiEco also raises important questions about how the construction of territory shapes heritage-making and collective action. In the next few sections, we focus on the varied ways that contributors and participants in SiEco conceptualize and act on diverse expressions of territory, specifically through affiliations with voluntary association in defense of the territory, and as everyday acts of living and experiencing the territory.

The origins of the SiEco and the making of the Simeto Valley

The SiEco emerged in the context of a long-term action-research (AR) community-university partnership between residents in the Simeto River Valley and the University of Catania. After 5 years of successful community activism against the placement of waste incinerators in several locations along the banks of the Simeto River (see Saija 2014, and Armiero et al. 2020), a core group of activists and newly founded cultural and environmental associations began working with faculty and graduate students in the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture (including the second author). Between 2009 and 2010, the AR partnership generated a community mapping initiative (Saija and Pappalardo 2022). The community mapping process created spaces for residents of municipalities touched by the Simeto River or its tributaries to build relationships to build common knowledge and enact change (Saija et al. 2017). Significantly, these connections and initiatives crossed political (municipal or regional) boundaries and were codified through the Simeto River Agreement, a framework for the collaboration between public institutions and the Participatory Presidium (Pappalardo and Gravagno 2018). Developed through a voluntary, bottom-up process, the Agreement identified the values (inclusion, legality, democracy/shared governance, and interspecies solidarity) and priorities (water, waste, mobility, culture, and agriculture) around which residents and other associations based in 11 Municipalities (see Fig. 1) organized in a coordinated manner to guide local development.

Significantly, these activities raised environmental consciousness among many residents, which was exemplified in various initiatives, such as clean-up days, adoption of abandoned public spaces and planting new trees (Schauwecker et al., 2018), built a sense of collective political influence, and helped to construct a new socio-geography, the Simeto Valley. Although not on the official maps, “the Simeto Valley” entered the everyday discourse of the people engaged in these processes. Importantly, these activities offered the opportunity to experiment with a shared governance structure (the Simeto River Agreement) that focused on applying and reinforcing mechanisms of deliberative democracy, putting administrators, members of civic organizations grouped in the Participatory Presidium, and researchers at the

363 same decision-making table in open and transparent public assemblies. Finally, residents that
364 formed the Participatory Presidium (February 2015) and signed the Simeto River Agreement
365 with administrators and the University of Catania (May 2015) signaled a collective recognition
366 of and identification with the Simeto Valley. This geo-social construction embodied the idea
367 behind the River Agreement – for civil society, municipalities, and researchers to work together
368 across geo-political boundaries to address common challenges and collectively care for the
369 environment. This groundwork was essential for the organization of SiEco and underscores the
370 broader political significance of territory, and the potential role of SiEco as a device for
371 territorial cohesion.

372 The SiEco began to take shape in 2019, when a network of about 100 people –
373 including, but not limited to, the activists of the Participatory Presidium – transformed a nascent
374 idea proposed during the community mapping initiative in 2009 (Saija and Pappalardo 2022)
375 into a system of knowledge and structure for action. Participants collectively analyzed and
376 translated monuments, stories, landscapes, and ways of life into web of antennas, pilot projects,
377 and community-based itineraries. Significantly, this process re-substantiated the socio-
378 geographic construction of the Simeto Valley, showing a new cartography of the territory made
379 of elements perceived as significant by the people involved, adding further content like
380 memories, explanations, and aspirations, as well as songs, artistic practices, and books.

381 At the same time, the Coordinating Committee of the SiEco also garnered criticism
382 from some participants who felt frustrated by the time that had elapsed between planning
383 activities and specific actions to make the SiEco more than an ecomuseum “on paper”, or
384 occasional itineraries. A teacher reflected on this saying, “we need to find a balance between all
385 those people who have approached the ecomuseum because they want to do concrete things ...
386 and the so-called strategic planning dimension of coordination within a larger territorial and
387 strategic framework.” Others raised questions about the scale and feasibility of the SiEco. As
388 one twenty-something activist declared, I am very worried about the geographic scale of the
389 valley, because it is not only ambitious, it is on the verge of madness, this thing here on the edge
390 of sustainability due to its geographic breadth.” Here the question of proximity and distance is

clearly articulated, and begins to suggest, the difficulties of keeping all be pieces and places together, both from a governance and operational point of view, as well in terms of people and content. Finally, others suggested that perhaps the ecomuseum was too abstract. A film maker and co-founder of a music focused association explained, “During the planning tables we talked of creating itineraries along the Valley that you can do on foot. But then, how would people arrive there? By car, right? And this can upset the beauty of the place. Thus, the perception of people is that the ecomuseum is always “this abstract thing.” These sentiments speak to the ways the ecomuseum project was somewhat idealized and struggled to concretize both its goals and the operational logistics connected to carrying out activities.

While the complex, transversal structure of the SiEco was built on the polycentric organization of the Simeto River Agreement and reinforced the socio-cultural, natural, and environmental connections across the Valley, these links did not necessarily translate into a shared sense of heritage, territory, nor a collective identity. Rather, as we discuss below, participants defined territory in various ways: through bodies and flows of water, associations, defense of nature, and “living the territory,” from their own biographical, geographic, and knowledge of particular places, and experiences of the heritage.

The River flows, with or without an ecomuseum

Water, especially the Simeto River, is key to the way the Simeto River Agreement and the Participatory Presidium are organized; it is also at the center of SiEco one pilot project, “The River Exists.” It aims to raise awareness of the existence and the importance of the River. The widest watershed of the Sicilian island (4186 km²), it has been almost forgotten by “both old and young people living in the Municipalities it crosses”, as one older activist emphasized during a public meeting. Significantly, across both the River Agreement and the SiEco projects, the river represents both an ecological resource and a protagonist in the history and heritage of the region. Specifically, this focus reflects the history of environmental activism against a large waste incinerator sited along the bank of the Simeto River and the involvement of organizations like an association of ecological activists called “ViviSimeto” (Living Simeto) in the SiEco.

418 The river is also a source of cultural heritage and history during community itineraries.

419 Several interview participants pointed to the centrality of the river to the settlement of the area.

420 One farmer we interviewed explained the river's role in where towns were established, saying:

421 The river is a landmark. That's why these villages exist around the river, this is the
422 reason why there is a castle in Paternò, Adrano and Motta Sant'Anastasia, to be in
423 control of water. Why? Through the water yes, they did the trade. Through the water
424 they entered inside the territories. It all starts from Simeto.

425 Here the river is described as geographic, historical, and proximal to the story of human
426 settlement in the Valley (Collura 2019; Lamagna 2009) and eventually the creation of towns, as
427 people moved up and down the Simeto. This appreciation of the river highlights why it is a
428 significant symbol and transversal focal point of the Simeto River Agreement. One of the more
429 senior and less active SiEco contributors, Maria, elaborated this point, saying:

430 The river network is not a metaphor. Because I network with you, with you, with you,
431 across a river. The Simeto Ecomuseum would not be such if it were not around the
432 Simeto. But we are becoming less and less interested in the Simeto. We used to go to
433 make complaints first. Now, there are some complaints about Ponte Barca and that's it.

434 Maria expresses a frustration shared by many people that have remained external to the SiEco's
435 circle, that the river has not been effectively at the center of recent actions by River Agreement,
436 the Participatory Presidium or the same SiEco. Moreover, Maria's reflection suggests
437 networking across the river, making boundaries and relationships in ways that transgress
438 municipal and social lines, is a fraught process; it can wax and wane over time.

439 The Simeto River and places like Ponta Barca figure into the emphasis that many SiEco
440 contributors place on "Living the territory". In this context, living the territory refers to doing
441 things on the land to activate it and know it in a first-hand way. This can be spending time in
442 nature enjoying the beauty of the Simeto River, as well as serving as stewards of the
443 environment, experiencing nature, or participating in cultural activities or cultivating the land.

444 For example, Lana, a very active SiEco participant and teacher described taking her children on
445 Sunday drives to explore the River and other places around the Valley. She said:

446 This is a widespread culture, of going outside and not knowing what is behind or in
447 front of the house. But I always tell my children, we go, sometimes on Sundays ... we
448 get in the car after lunch and go to the gates of Enna. That is, we do the whole country
449 road trip. Roads obviously passable by car. And here I tell them "let's look at the
450 landscape" ... "how beautiful it is" ... We stop on purpose, and, in fact, the road never
451 ends. And my kids love these things. Just as they love it, all children will love it, if they
452 are brought by their parents or in any case by educators.

453 In Lana's experience the territory emerges as a system of "never ending roads" that cross
454 landscapes, and derives from the immersion in spaces, from *knowing* them through the physical
455 experience of crossing them. Significantly, Lana also suggests that young people have little
456 knowledge and experience of the territory. This sentiment held true during mapping activities
457 with middle and high schools in the Simeto Valley in 2022 (attended by first author), as they
458 noted a few local monuments on the maps and frequently lamented the absence of movie
459 theaters, shopping malls and places to hang out with their friends. For Lana and other teachers
460 that we interviewed, the SiEco offers the opportunity to generate a community of affection for
461 the territory, to create (or recreate) community ties.

462

463 ***Associative practices of territory making: a constellation of ties***

464 When asked how they define territory, most interviewees expressed a personal sense of
465 connection to place that is primarily linked to being born there and building a life in the region,
466 including choosing educational, professional, and voluntary paths that directly contribute to
467 their municipal communities. SiEco contributors' involvement in voluntary associations
468 profoundly shaped the way they conceptualized territory *and* the ways they engaged with the
469 SiEco. Among the 25 people we interviewed, all but one identified as being part of associations
470 outside of the Participatory Presidium or the SiEco. They named 25 unique associations they are

part of, and most had an affiliation with more than one association. The types of associations range from environmental groups (activists, ecologists, and conservationists), groups focused on culture and history, as well as women's organizations and professional organizations. Importantly, participation in groups or associations that work on issues related to defending or protecting plant, animals, ecosystems, and/or recovering archaeological, architectural, and human-made manufactures, align with ecomuseums' dual foci on natural-cultural heritage, which characterizes territorial heritage (as in Magnaghi 2020).

Territory, for most of these participants is rooted in specific places and their personal and/or professional commitment to those places. Associations like SiciliAntica, a voluntary cultural heritage group, operates in cities across Sicily to promote educational, research, and preservation of historical assets. As Sergio, member of SiciliAntica chapter in Paternò, explained why his city serves as the focal point of his sense of territory:

I love it because Paternò is a beautiful area. Why? Because its territory is the meeting point between the volcanic soils of Etna and the lands, let's say more clayey than the plain. Here, various springs were born. It was the city of 100 springs, each spring is a place of historical settlement.

Sergio constructs territory in a geographically narrow and ecologically specific – Paternò, and in multiplicity of 100 springs. Sergio's focus on a particular part of the natural environment highlights the ways that nature, human activity and geographies, and personal affection contribute to both his sense of territory and territorial heritage. Moreover, the movement of water from Mt. Etna, underground, and to the surface as springs suggests the ways that nature not only expands place attachment to the territory in the present, but also expanded human presence in territory in the past (a view that echoes the farmer in the previous section).

Cultural associations' educational activities are important to building a sense of collectivity or commoning, a key element of ecomuseums and their role in making/constructing territory. Gianni, another member of SiciliAntica explained: "Here, starting from the area that perhaps I know best, activities like 'open churches,' are also a way to bring the citizens

themselves closer to the knowledge of their own, of their own territory.” “Open Churches” are periodic initiatives to open unused churches to the public. During 2022, the first author attended three of these events in Paternò (March, May, and December). They were led by local experts and amateur historians affiliated with SiciliAntica; each drew about 25-30 people, primarily curious residents and members of the SiEco organizing committee. Churches, and more generally sacred places in the Valley, are examples of both tangible and intangible heritage. For some attendees, visiting these ancient churches, some built on top of walls and containing artifacts that date back to the ancient Greek settlement, was about connecting with memories, family stories, as well as ancestors and old rituals that, as one attendee from Paternò explained, “keep living in those stones.”

While supported, but not organized by SiEco, Open Church events offered attendees an opportunity to connect with specific physical places and histories and learn about the SiEco. At the same time, cultural associations, like SiciliAntica, also act as gate keepers, opening certain sites to the public in connection with the antennas of the SiEco, while maintaining “control” of knowledge flows about certain places. By acting as coordinating docents or spokespersons, SiciliAntica shapes the stories of the territory in a specific place-bound way.

In contrast to SiciliAntica, organizations like ViviSimeto stem less from specific places than from a sense of the environment and ecosystems as inheritance. Members of this association focus on building awareness of the Simeto River and environmental protection, which are not bound by municipal geographies or necessarily limited to specific types of physical structures or places. Rita, a teacher from Paternò explained, the “Ecomuseum is only a branch of a larger movement that started many many years ago...For twenty years we have been working on the enhancement of the areas of the Simeto Valley....” Here, Rita is referencing the community’s fight against the “waste-to-energy plant” which gave rise to ViviSimeto. The association’s work to enhance the territory has included small acts like picking up trash along the riverbanks, planting trees to slow erosion and deter illegal dumping, as well as larger initiatives like promoting and monitoring Ponta Barca nature reserve for protection of migratory birds.

For Martina, a farmer who grew up in Paternò but now cultivates family land near the town of Belpasso, her daily work on the land generates a deep sense of attachment to a specific place. At the same time, her sense of territory and responsibility for territory was rooted in her experiences as an activist at Ponte Barca. She explained: “the Ponte Barca Oasis, it's something I've always known. I mean I've been there my whole life, always to the bridge there, but it's beautiful and I realized it not at five, not at ten, but maybe at 16/17 years old, when I started wanting to defend that place.” For Martina “living the territory” is about tending to the plants that take root on her farm and a personal commitment to protecting and conserving the Oasis at Ponte Barca, a place and bird ecosystem about 15 km away. Thus, for her, living the territory is proximal, while defending the territory is about caring for an ecological resource that flows through many places in the Valley, some quite far way.

For some SiEco participants, like members of SiciliAntica, territory and heritage-making are bound to transmitting the history and memories of specific places. For others, like members of ViviSimeto, territory equates with the environment and is constructed through their activism against businesses and activities that cause environmental harm. Across these interviewees, deep knowledge of and commitment to specific towns and aspects of the landscape have energized them to engage in activities that promote local history and cultural heritage - in classrooms through school projects, in local tours of sites in Paterno, by writing books, and cultivating land. Nonetheless, some participants' hyperlocal focus limits their perceptions of the broader territory - as a system of towns, as an ecosystem, and as a site of shared history and current conditions. Key, however, is the way that collective actions reinforced people's consciousness of the environmental challenges facing the territory, in its two dimensions: the dimension of proximity, and a larger picture.

Territories nearby and far away

During the March 2022 itinerary, our group and a few members of ViviSimeto gathered next to the large rocks at Ponte Barca that protect the bank from erosion to listen as Vincenzo, an ecologist, gave a brief history of the River and the “Oasis,” saying. “[It] was created in 2009

553 due to pressure from LIPU and ViviSimeto...” Periodically interrupting himself to name and
554 point to bird species as they moved from branches in the water to the tall grasses along the bank,
555 Vincenzo explained:

556 Water is rich in resources for birds. We can observe heron, polaga, ducks, teal,
557 cormorants, purple gallinule. This is the most important site in Sicily for the purple
558 gallinule, which after many years of migrating between here and Africa, has made its
559 home here... [from first author’s fieldnotes]

560 For Vincenzo and other members of LIPU (the Italian League for Birds Protection) that monitor
561 the water levels and birds at the Oasis, this is not only a stop on the SiEco itinerary, but it is also
562 an embodiment of territory not as a single place, but as the intersection of human and more than
563 human processes that tie places and processes near and far together. During our visit Vincenzo
564 emphasized both the ecological system – the importance of water levels, which are controlled
565 locally by the power company, and create the marsh-like conditions in the Oasis. He explained
566 the role of the SiEco, saying “It is necessary to bring city people to the river and to recall the
567 work to make this Reserve (in reference to the Oasis) in order not to have these historical sites
568 dragged away.” Thus, SiEco can aid in LIPU and ViviSimeto members’ defense of the territory,
569 through engagements with people outside the Valley.

570 While Vincenzo was focused on preserving the entangled human-nature history and
571 protecting the new, winged residents of the Oasis, other SiEco contributors saw the river, and
572 Ponte Barca specifically, as more than sites located in one town or another. During a visit to his
573 farm, Nino, a farmer, explained it this way, “my property sits on several springs. From here I
574 can see the River. I can see Ponta Barca. So, I don’t say my farm is in this town or that town,
575 but I say it is in the Simeto Valley.” Territory for Nino, then, is the confluence of water and the
576 practice of cultivation. More than 20 years ago he rehabilitated the house and the land and
577 committed to being presence in the community. He explained, “We [farmers] are a lookout on
578 territory, we are a stable presence on territory. We have made a pole of attraction for others’

579 reality that one can come to settle around here. Together we create a network of new subjects
580 and more awareness of nature.”

581 While residents and farmers like Nino, Vincenzo, Martina, and Lana embraced the
582 river, and water more generally, and maintained a wide sense of territory, other SiEco’
583 participants did not see the Simeto River or its ecology as synonymous with territory or the
584 SiEco. For example, Alessia, an activist from Troina, the most northern town in the Simeto
585 River Valley, explained that her work with SiEco, helped her understand that inhabitants from
586 Troina do not necessarily share the same understanding of territory. She reflected:

587 I realize, however, that perhaps it is a limit for us [Troinesi]. The fact that we entered
588 the Ecomuseum as something in the Valley, in the defense of the Simeto River, but
589 probably in Troina there is not this feeling of community with the Simeto River,
590 perhaps we feel more Nebrodenesi than part of the Simeto Valley, because there is more
591 territorial continuity...In other words, we have never referred to Simeto as a territory,
592 rather to Ancipa, or the Nebrodi or Cesarò... [The Ecomuseum] has broadened my
593 vision of this part of the territory, because I did not see it, in fact, as mine.

594 Alessia, like other people we interviewed, makes a distinction between her territory and the
595 Simeto territory. Here both geographic distance and lack of knowledge and/or experience of the
596 Simeto River, illuminates the difficulties the SiEco faces in working across municipal and
597 landscape boundaries. As Alessia notes, territorial continuity between Troina and other towns
598 (like Cesarò) and the Nebrodi mountain range, serve as her reference points for her
599 understanding of territory. Interestingly, however, the lower plains of the Nebrodi mountains are
600 the origin point of the Simeto River, thus, like Sergio suggested above, water has a way of
601 connecting people, places, and environments even when SiEco participants do not experience
602 them as connected. Significantly, Alessia’s experience with the SiEco has generated a new
603 consciousness of territory and suggests the ways that ecomuseums can serve to integrate what is
604 nearby and far away (Bellaigue 1999).

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Recalling Pippo's metaphor of 'ecomuseums as the glue', as quoted in the Introduction, such metaphor speaks to importance of defining an organizational structure (governance) to provide certain degree of coherence and consistency to the ecomuseum. While the SiEco embraced these ideas in its design, understandings of territory in the context of natural-cultural heritage are not a priori. Rather, territory is constructed, and sometimes in a conflicting manner. Considering the fluid and dynamic nature of ecomuseums, they change and flow like the river's waters, depending on the actors involved in each stage of the process. However, such evolving dimension is also related to at least three main insights that have emerged from our ethnographic journey.

- First, in ecomuseum processes, the "territory" is not something static or pre-determined. Rather, it is the result of a process of recognition and meaning given by individuals participating in a collective process.
- From another side, the same "territory" exists independently of the existence of an ecomuseum: what ecomuseums should add is meaning, affection, care and ties between people that recognize it as their places of life.
- Finally, associations play a key role in facilitating the construction of ties, although they are not always able to guarantee inclusive processes.

Specifically, the SiEco was envisioned, at the Valley-wide scale, as an organizational device for the collective manage and care of territorial heritage. However, this focus is challenged by residents and participants' various perceptions of and ways of engaging with "their territory." The degree to which participants' affection for the territory takes them outside of specific locations and geographies is reflected in the types of associations they are part of and their participation in activist and/or consciousness raising activities. At the same time, our analysis suggests that the SiEco has offered participants opportunities for discovery of, and sensitization to places, and sites, that can generate new territorial imaginaries. In part, this process is assisted by the role of associations in the Simeto Valley, particularly for those people whose practices of "living the territory" is part of caring for or defending the environment. Associations enable

stable ties (the glue) among people expressing their sense of territory at the broadest level. Nevertheless, the question of inclusivity remains open for those “living the territory” but who are not privileged enough to be part of a voluntary association or part of the Coordination Committee. As it emerges from the field, in the current phase of the SiEco, the challenge of inclusivity, adhesion and cohesion, between hyper-local ties and larger territorial connections requires organizational and political work, including reconsidering boundaries and confronting large-scale, long-run visions, governance, and leadership. This is a demanding effort, mostly because the shared governance structure created by the Simeto River Agreement did not provide the stability and organisation necessary for SiEco to hold the geographically diverse pieces of the territory together. By the time SiEco was established, the public meetings of the River Agreement with administrators, Presidium members and engaged scholars had ceased. To continue, the SiEco requires a solid organisational map to support the efforts of those leading the process, including economic resources to make this complex machine work. As such, the SiEco had the potential to be an inclusive collective effort to recognize and care for the territorial heritage, although this potential has not yet been fully expressed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our examination of the SiEco reveals a few key lessons that can be extended to the debate on Ecomuseums more generally. First, when the scale of work is wide and various understandings of the territory are difficult to keep together, it is key to go back to the “museology” nature of ecomuseums and their centers of interpretations, as places where it is possible to keep learning together what “territory” means from an endogenous perspective (Coughlin 2012). Secondly, the existence of a constellation of associations and participants requires a cohesive leadership capable of opening up the process and not to underestimating the challenge of inclusion. A cohesive leadership is also necessary to navigate the complex process of adhering the ‘nearby and far-away’ scales of ecomuseums (Bellaigue, 1999). This is a

challenge corroborated by several cases that have faced pitfalls in sustaining long-term community-based experiences (Hauenschild 1988; Corsane et al. 2007a; Chang et al. 2015, Filipe 2020). Finally, without a clear and functioning governance structure (Corsane et al. 2008; Garlandini 2015; Chiapparino and Galli 2016), the ecomusems cannot hold the pieces of territory and heritage together.

Although a shared understanding of the territory may not be the ultimate goal of ecomuseums, it seems to be a key precondition for collective heritage making (Davallon, 2010), especially environmental heritage. In other words, ecomuseums attempt to interpret and give common meanings to what Mathilde Bellaigue (2020) has identified as a different type of ‘collection’ that is not made up of objects and it is not acquired by a museum, but is widespread in the territory; it is what Alberto Magnaghi (2020) refers to as territorial heritage. However, in our direct engagement with the recalled experience, “territory” varies depending on who is framing it, and these varied constructions of territory are, as Magnaghi suggests, a “dynamic product of a long-term co-evolutionary process between human settlements and life’s environment” (2020, 44; translated by the authors). Thus, territory, is not a datum; rather it is a framework for understanding evolving socioecological relations, and ecomuseums can act as ‘glue’ if the stickiness is intentional, visible, democratic, and *in common*.

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ⁱ The course was co-taught by Dr. Mara Benadusi (Professor, Department of Political and Social Sciences) and the first author. Both authors provided the link to the Simeto Valley Ecomuseum through their long-term engagement with local actors in the Simeto Valley.

ⁱⁱ An umbrella association whose statutory purpose is to group and organize other associations and individuals living and working in the Municipalities along the Simeto River and its tributaries, with the aim of facilitating a wide process of participation to both public policies and grassroots initiatives, to foster socio-economic development and to improve living ecosystems.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the 2023 *Routledge Dictionary of Museology*, Peter Davis uses the term “project”. However, it is important to note that ecomuseums might have different connotations. For example, in de Varine (1978), ecomuseums are identified as “institutions”. Others (Clifford et al. 2006; Pidello 2004) state that the ecomuseum is a “popular initiative supported by a community of residents” (Grasseni 2014, 59). In his recent work, de Varine (2017) frames the ecomuseum as “singular and plural”, i.e., variously qualified. Following de Varine, in the SiEco’s experience, it emerges that the ecomuseum is a “process” where a variety of connotations might blend together differently, depending on the stage of evolution of the process.