

THE EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM (ECST) AS A MODEL OF BEST PRACTICES AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE. THE CASE STUDY OF THE ASINARA NATIONAL PARK

Mario Gesuino Masia, Vittorio Gazale, Sonia Malvica, Nicoletta Pinna, Donatella Carboni

Abstract: The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) represents a voluntary management tool for protected areas that promotes the implementation of sustainable tourism for both the environment and local communities, as well as for all the stakeholders (e.g., firms, tourists); its principles emerge as an essential guide for designing policies respecting the environment and actively involving the local community. The present work focuses on the Asinara National Park (Porto Torres, Sardinia-Italy) as a case study of the ongoing application of the ECST (i.e., renewal phase of Phase I and initiation of Phase II). The aims were: (1) to identify the strengths and weaknesses related to confirming Phase I; (2) to isolate the motivations leading a firm to obtain the ECST certificate. Through a methodology involving official documentation analysis and the Park's entrepreneurial landscape, results suggested a systemic vision of stakeholder engagement in creating a model for best practices to qualify the socio-economic network. Promoting participatory and inclusive governance could ensure a balance between sustainable tourism and environmental conservation on the Asinara island.

Keywords: Protected Areas; Governance; ECST, Stakeholder; Asinara.

Mario Gesuino Masia, University of Sassari, Italy, m.masia6@phd.uniss.it, 0009-0001-0797-4946

Vittorio Gazale, Asinara National Park, Italy, gazale@asinara.org

Sonia Malvica, University of Sassari, Italy, smalvica@uniss.it, 0000-0003-0350-7459

Nicoletta Pinna, University of Sassari, Italy, n.pinna1@phd.uniss.it, 0009-0009-1920-1674

Donatella Carboni, University of Sassari, Italy, carbonid@uniss.it, 0000-0002-1050-3344

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1. Introduction

Recent irreversible changes to the ecosystem [1; 2] led to the identification of effective environmental protection strategies [3; 4]: accordingly, certifications (i.e., certificates with international validity) attest compliance with specific criteria for environment management. The attention to sustainability and respect for the environment promoted by the 2030 Agenda [5] translates into the conservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity, reflecting a global commitment towards more responsible practices. In Italy, the System of Protected Natural Areas and Parks was introduced with Law 394/91, which defined their classification and established the official list; nature conservation is also intended as an ever-increasing number of people interacting with it in harmony [6]. In Italy, there are 25 national parks [7] and 2646 sites belonging to the Natura 2000 (on December 2023), which is identified by the Italian Regions as an ecological network spread across the entire territory of the European Union aiming at guaranteeing the long-term survival of the most threatened species and habitats [8]. In particular, it can be distinguished 2364 Sites of Community Importance (SCI), 2302 of which have been designated as Special Conservation Areas, and 643 Special Protection Areas (SPAs), 361 of which are type C sites, i.e. SPAs coinciding with SCI/SAC [9].

European laws support the protection of the ecosystem and high-quality services within the protected areas. Such a quality represents a key element of competition and competition, as well as ethical incentives [10; 11]. The certifications are produced by an organism independent from the applicant and constitutes the final result of a procedure, which aims to verify whether a product, a process, a system or an organization meets certain specifications [10; 12].

Among the numerous certifications present today in various sectors, quality brands play a crucial role in reducing the environmental impact of products and services [13]: assigned based on a system of selective criteria, they attest that the practices adopted by operating companies in protected areas are sustainable and eco-friendly [10]. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) stands out among the European certifications, as it promotes a working method based on partnership and the sharing of fundamental principles. The heart of the Charter lies in the collaboration between all interested parties, whether public or private. Through a participatory process, these parties create a forum or an equivalent body and, in collaboration with the park, develop a common strategy and a five-year action plan that is shared, co-responsible, and renewable [14].

The Asinara National Park is included within Sardinia's Network of Parks and Protected Areas established in 2002 and represents a site of extraordinary beauty and ecological and cultural value [15; 16; 17], whose sustainable development is a priority not only for local communities but also for the national and international scene [18]. The Park affects a vast area, including all the municipalities in the gulf of the same name [19]. The Asinara Park owns the ECST, which allows the granting of the Environmental Quality Mark of the Asinara National Park to requesting firms [20] and contribute to the improvement of environmental quality in the territory [21]. It also promotes partnerships between the various stakeholders to create a tourist offer compatible with protecting and safeguarding natural heritage [23; 24]. Its adoption represents a fundamental step to ensure that tourism activities in the Park

are managed in such a way as to preserve and enhance this unique heritage [25].

However, ECST certification alone is insufficient to guarantee sustainable tourism, economic growth and environmental protection: collaboration between stakeholders (i.e., businesses) is pivotal, combining the best resources of the territory in a coordinated initiative with a medium-long strategy [14]. To paint a clear picture of lessons learned and aspects that need improvement, active participation and involvement of stakeholders are crucial for the success of the certification process and the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives within the ECST. Analyzing their motivations, expectations, and concerns helps make practical recommendations to facilitate and promote their engagement. Considering the case study of the Asinara National Park [25], the aims of the present study were: (1) To identify the strengths and weaknesses related to confirming Phase I; (2) To analyze the motivations leading an enterprise to obtain the ECST certification.

2. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST)

The Action Plan developed by each Protected Area in Phase I of the ECST follows ten key themes [28]: Protect valuable landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage; Support conservation through tourism; Reduce carbon dioxide emissions, pollution and waste of resources; Ensure safe accessibility, quality services and unique experiences for all visitors; Communicate the area to visitors effectively; Guarantee social cohesion; Improve the well-being of the local community; Provide training and strengthen skills (capacity building); Monitor tourism performance and impacts; Communicate actions and commit to the Charter [28]. Adherence to the ECST is divided into three sequential phases: (1) Phase I, directed to European Protected Areas and local stakeholders to develop an Action Plan for sustainable tourism; (2) Phase II, which is a certification for local operators; (3) Phase III, for tour operators. The Asinara National Park (Sardinia) started the ECST process in 2019 and was approved in 2020.

The protected area is therefore required to create and manage forums and working tables with the various players in the tourism sector, create a diagnostic report that includes an analysis of the tourism market in the area, the strategies already in place, the opportunities and impacts of tourism from an environmental, economic and social point of view. Together with the Forum, the protected area then develops a final Strategy and Action Plan document, which includes specific actions of the park and the other actors of the Forum. This document must obtain a positive evaluation from EUROPARC, which subsequently awards the Diploma of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. Once recognition has been obtained, the protected area and all the actors involved must implement the Action Plan in a co-responsibility relationship. Furthermore, the method can further deepen relations between the park authority, local operators and tour operators through bilateral cooperation agreements and mutual support.

The ECST network has experienced significant growth, now comprising 87 sustainable destinations from 12 countries. This network involves a wide range of stakeholders, including local tourism businesses, local and regional government authorities, NGOs, and many others. In Italy, the network includes 21 National Parks, 16 Regional Parks, 4 Marine Protected Areas, and 4 other areas. Notably, 7

National Parks, 5 Regional Parks, 1 MPA (joining in 2021), and 1 other area (joining in 2021) are actively participating in Phase II. Among these, the Asinara National Park is a key participant.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The case study of Asinara National Park

The Asinara National Park (Porto Torres, Italy) formally initiated the process of joining the ECST in 2019, achieving the first Phase I certification in 2020. In June 2023, the Park officially commenced Phase II of the ECST, a path approved by Federparchi and ratified with a resolution in November 2022. The primary objective of this phase is to offer companies operating in the Park the opportunity to obtain ECST certification. This initiative, promoting a shared path of environmental sustainability under the aegis of the EUROPARC Federation, underscores the Park's unwavering commitment to environmental preservation. The Park is currently in the process of renewing Phase I and implementing Phase II, further solidifying its dedication to sustainability.

About Asinara's entrepreneurial landscape distributed and operating in the Park Vast Area (Figure 1), 24 % offer Park Visit Services, on foot, by bicycle, by off-road vehicle, tourist train and bus, representing the largest category; 22 % own sailing pleasure craft (charter); 14% offer motorboat services (internal combustion engine); 12 % deal with fishing tourism; 8 % are involved in transportation services (tourist transport, Stintino - Asinara route); 6 % are dedicated to catering and accommodation services; 4 % own electric motor pleasure craft or organize underwater guided tours; 2 % are engaged in Park-brand craft activities and services or offer bicycle and electric vehicle rental services; 1 % deals with mooring field services or with public transport (territorial continuity from Porto Torres to Cala Reale - Asinara Island).

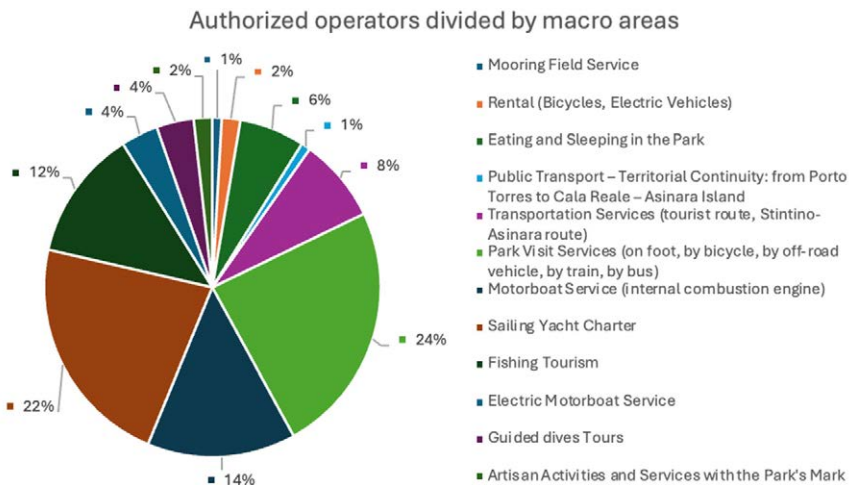


Figure 1 – Authorized firms of the Asinara National Park and Marine Protected Area, year 2024. Source: Authors' elaboration from Asinara National Park.

Some of the firms have certifications, i.e., the ECST or Park and Protected Areas Network Quality Label (Figure 2). Considering the economic activity code (i.e., Ateco), the 29 % of certified operators offer Park Visit Services, on foot, by bicycle, with off-road vehicles, trains and buses, representing the largest category (Ateco 77.11; 77.21; 77.39; 49.31; 49.32; 49.39; 79.9; 50.1; 52.22); 25 % own sailing pleasure craft (charter) (Ateco 50.1; 52.22; 55.20.51; 77.21; 77.34; 85.32.01; 85.51); 12 % offer motorboat services (internal combustion engine), (Ateco 13.92.2; 50.1; 55.1; 79.90.2; 49.32.2; 49.39.09; 77.21.02; 47.19.9; 47.64.1; 47.78.32); 10 % are involved in transportation services (tourist transport, Stintino - Asinara route) (Ateco 79.9; 50.1; 52.22; 49.31; 77.21); 7 % own electric motor pleasure craft (Ateco 50.1); 5 % organize underwater guided tours (Ateco 85.51; 93.11; 93.29.9); 3 % are engaged in craft activities and services that use the Park brand (Ateco 52.29.21; 52.22.09); 2 % deal with mooring field services (Ateco 52.22) or offer bicycle and electric vehicle rental services (Ateco 52.22). There are no certified operators dedicated to catering and accommodation services (Ateco 55; 56) or deals with public transport (territorial continuity from Porto Torres to Cala Reale - Asinara Island) (Ateco 50).

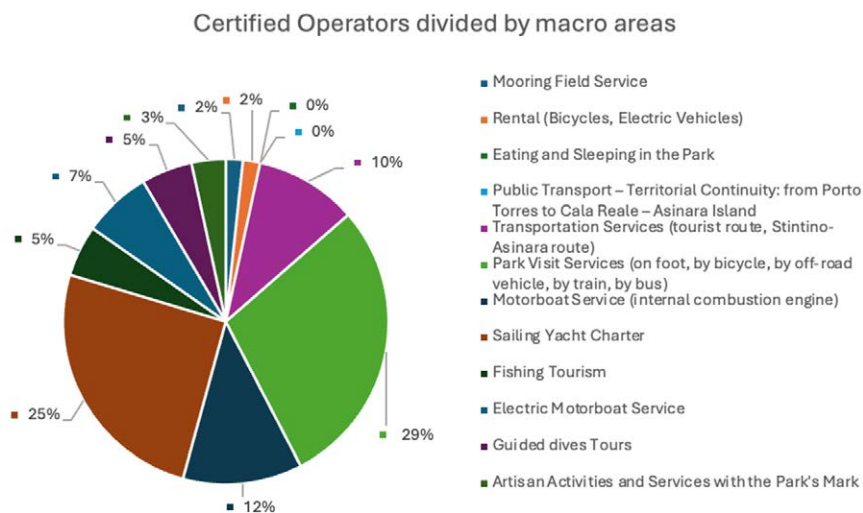


Figure 2 – Certified firms of the Asinara National Park and Marine Protected Area, year 2024. Source: Authors' elaboration from Asinara National Park.

3.2. Asinara's ECST Application

The official documentation produced by the EUROPARC Federation, and the Asinara National Park was analysed to identify strengths, weaknesses, and best practices, focusing mainly on the Verifier Evaluation Report drawn up by a representative of EUROPARC during the Park accreditation. The report comprises five sections: A) General information; B) Sustainable tourism FORUM; C) Sustainable tourism strategy and action plan; D) Addressing the key topics; E)

Experience and final comments. The evaluation expressed by the Verifier is on an X-3* scale where X corresponds to an irrelevant action and 3* to an excellent one, considered as best practice. To identify the best practices and the pros and cons linked to the renewal of Phase I of the CETS, the evaluations with a score of 3-3* were considered as pro / best practices due to their effectiveness, while an evaluation of X-0-1 represented deficient points.

3.3. Stakeholders' perception of ECST-related benefits and issues

An online ad hoc Google Forms-hosted questionnaire was used to investigate entrepreneurial stakeholders' perception of ECST (Table 1). Data collection took place in May 2024. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18 years, to represent an entrepreneurial reality operating in the Gulf of Asinara, to be already certified with the Park and Protected Areas Network Quality Label, and to possess the ECST certification/desire to obtain it in the future. Overall, 16 entrepreneurial stakeholders took part in the study. Before starting the questionnaire, participants were required to read a brief overview of the study, and then they were asked if they would like to continue, thereby implying consent. After giving consent, participants were directed to the first section to provide ratings for 9 ECST-related benefits (i.e., BE items). A Likert-type scale ranging from "Totally disagree" (1) to "Totally agree" (5) was used for responses. Then, the ECST-related issues (i.e., IS items) were investigated through a six item-scale to evaluate the level of difficulty perceived by firms to obtain the ECST certification; the same Likert-type scale already used for BE was also provided. The last questionnaire session allowed participants to insert the enterprise's general information. Finally, participants were debriefed. The study was conducted in accordance with the Italian Psychological Society code of ethics.

Table 1 – Recovery rate and percentage of displaced tracers after the first (6 h) and second (24 h) surveys at Barbarossa beach as a function of the injection position of the pebbles.

General information	ECST-related benefits	ECST-related issues (scale)
Category of work activity	BE1. Greater visibility	IS1. The entry requirements are excessive
Certifications (i.e. Park and Protected Areas Network Quality Label; ECST)	BE2. International recognition	IS2. The entry requirements require too high and/or specific skills
	BE3. Marketing strategy	IS3. The bureaucratic requirements are excessive
	BE4. Sustainability	IS4. The forms are very understandable (R)
	BE5. Building business networks	IS5. Keeping requirements met over time requires considerable effort
	BE6. Improvement of the tourist offer	IS6. Internal monitoring demands take up excessive time and energy from the company
	BE7. Access to training courses	
	BE8. Support for the local economy	
	BE9. New business opportunity	

Note. (R) = reversed item.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. ECST Application

From the analyzes conducted on the documentation relating to the renewal of Phase I and from the evaluation reports drawn up by EUROPARC Federation during the ECST membership process, the following points emerged:

- *Strengths*: (1) Consistency and continuity: Actions and projects are in line with the park's past and present policies, contributing to conservation and sustainable development; (2) Planning and financing: Strong planning and design capacity, accompanied by effective fundraising, ensuring financial and administrative support; (3) Qualified staff: The park is managed by highly motivated and qualified staff; (4) Dialogue and involvement: Continuous communication with local actors, stakeholders, businesses, private organizations and citizens, with particular attention to the education sector; (5) Advisory role: The park is recognized as an expert partner and environmental advisor in local and regional networks; (6) Management and monitoring: Management and monitoring system linked to the Action Plan with various indicators.
- *Weaknesses*: (1) Promotion: Weakness in promotion and marketing activities, lacking an assessment of future visitor markets; (2) Lodging Opportunities: Poor and limited lodging opportunities on the island, despite the presence of public real estate; (3) Coordination of actions: Sharing of actions among many actors, increasing the risk of failure due to coordination difficulties and conflicts.
- *Best practices*: (1) Governance: Strong commitment to governance, with the full involvement of local communities and their socioeconomic categories; (2) Institutional collaboration: Fertile institutional relationship with the municipalities of the Gulf of Asinara and other public bodies, facilitating the planning and approval of management plans; (3) Research on ecosystem services: Funded by the Ministry of the Environment, it made it possible to evaluate the biological capacities of ecosystems and habitats; (4) Skills and abilities: Growth in skills through participation in international networks, strengthening the ability to manage complex projects. Among the actions of the Charter that stand out for their originality and innovation, two initiatives stand out: *Asinara plastic free*, which combines active conservation, public awareness, stakeholder's volunteer work, and the expertise of the Park's technical staff ("Spazzamare" boat); *Fish & Cheap*, which integrates conservation efforts and offers fishing-tourist clients an authentic fisherman experience while promoting lesser-known fish species.

4.2. ECST-related benefits and issues

The 66.7 % of participants stated to possess both Park and Protected Areas Network Quality Label and ECST certification. Regarding the tourist activity, the 66.7 % of the sample corresponded to tourism services (e.g., excursions), 26.7 % to guides, and 6.7 % to fishing tourism. Formal analyses were performed using SPSS-29 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). A one-sample t-test was run to assess the

significance for each BE item (normative value = 3, benefit for values > 3; two-sided critical value $p = .05$). Overall, BE items were confirmed as significant, positive benefits (BE1: $t = 6.57, p < .001$; BE2: $t = 7.78, p < .001$; BE3 = 7.39, $p < .001$; BE4 = 13.00, $p < .001$; BE5 = 4.36, $p < .001$; BE6 = 3.80, $p = .002$; BE7 = 3.47, $p = .004$; BE8 = 3.80, $p = .002$; BE9 = 3.98, $p = .002$) (Figure 3). For the IS items, Cronbach's alpha confirmed the internal consistency of the scale ($\alpha = .83$). The one-sample t-test was applied to the scale mean value (normative value = 18, benefit for values < 18; two-sided critical value $p = .05$), confirming that participants did not perceive issues related to the ECST (IS_TOTAL: $t = -3.61, p = .003$) (Figure 4).

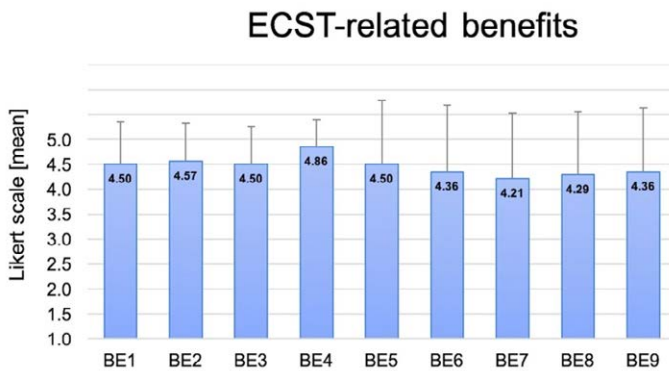


Figure 3 – Mean results of ECST-related benefits (i.e., BE items).
Notes. All $p < .05$. Error bars indicate standard deviations.

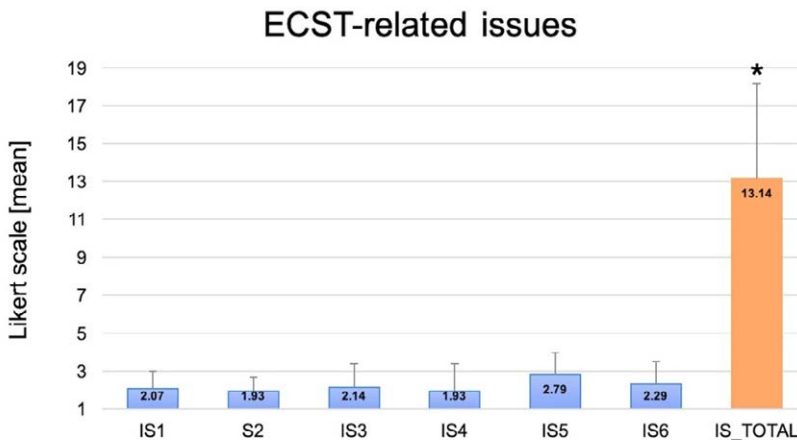


Figure 4 – Mean results of ECST-related issues (i.e., IS items). The total obtained for the scale (i.e., IS_TOTAL) is highlighted in orange.
Notes. * $p < .05$, indicated only for IS_TOTAL. Error bars indicate standard deviations.

5. Conclusions

Parks and other stakeholders identify the creation or strengthening of a territorial network as the main result of the ECST. The certification provides a general framework for developing specific projects and initiatives, facilitating access to funding through coordinated, long-term planning. The participation and dialogue established during the ECST process can form a solid basis for further activities in the area. The official external recognition of the participatory planning methodology and the membership of an Italian and European network of protected areas allow the comparison and carrying out of integrated promotion activities. Finally, the activities envisaged by the Charter's action plans are part of the Green Economy, offering businesses opportunities for growth and promotion thanks to the ECST brand and the alliance pact established with the protected area [14; 28; 32].

Overall, Asinara National Park has demonstrated significant strengths, including excellent planning capacity, considerable fundraising ability, and effective local community involvement, reflecting solid governance and sustainable resource management. The park still faces challenges in the field of tourism promotion and management of accommodation opportunities, which are currently insufficient. However, the best practices adopted and the constant commitment to governance and fruitful institutional collaboration constitute a successful model for the sustainable management of protected area. This successful model should reassure stakeholders about the future of the park, as it is well on its way to becoming an example of excellence in sustainable tourism, with further improvements needed in promotion strategies and coordination of shared actions. The results suggested a systemic vision of stakeholder involvement in creating a model for best practices to qualify the socio-economic network. Also, firms could recognize ECST certification as an affordable source of benefits. Thus, promoting participatory and inclusive governance could ensure a balance between sustainable tourism and environmental conservation in the delicate Mediterranean coastal landscape and on the island of Asinara.

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. First, the small sample of participants in the questionnaire should be considered —mainly due to the overlap of the survey with the tourist season. Also, Asinara National Park's Phase I renewal operations application is ongoing.

Further research is crucial to update and expand the audience, not only to operators in possession of the Parks Network Quality Mark but to all companies within the Vast Area that have the requirements to access it. This emphasis on the need for further research should make stakeholders feel involved in the ongoing development of the ECST certification.

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7. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization: VG, SM, DC; *Methodology:* MGM, SM, DC; *Investigation:* MGM, NP; *Visualization:* MGM (Materials), NP (Materials), SM (Results); *Formal analysis:* SM; *Writing (original draft):* MGM, NP; *Writing-review and Editing:* SM, DC; *Supervision:* VG, DC.

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