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TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Iole Di Simone

*Dipartimento di Scienze Ambientali e Territoriali, Università di Reggio Calabria
Facoltà di Architettura, Feo di Vito, Reggio Calabria, Italia
idisimon@mbbox.fagr.unict.it*

1. Introduction

This work has its roots in a study¹ carried out in 1990 for the Sicilian Regional Government in the field of a regional development plan for the Etnean region. At the same time it aims to contribute to research into methodological instruments for the solution of problems involving the use of territorial resources.

The Etnean region offers a wide range of possibilities for enjoying a new way of relaxing and communing with nature, called Rural Tourism. The geographical features of the Etnean region make it something of an “Eden” for discovering the Mount Etna, the highest volcano of Europe with its shades of green, lava, forests and agricultural areas, together with festival and religious customs upholding ancient traditions.

Rural tourism could be an important element for the Etnean economy and a key factor for the Etnean image projected overseas. But we have to consider also two global processes:

- the increasing importance of rural tourism and recreation as one of the fastest growing elements of tourism;

- the rural restructuring, and the emergence of the post-productivist countryside.

The role of tourism as a potentially important element of the restructuring process is a consistent theme that requires appropriate tools for the sustainability of tourism-related rural development. In fact, rural tourism development is hampered both by the false perceptions held of the countryside as a romantic rural Arcadia, and by inappropriate development, pursued, without professional advice, on the false assumption that it is easy to generate income and jobs².

The object of the study are the rural areas located between the Etnean towns and cities and the borders of the Etna Park (see Fig. 1). The use of agricultural space within the park, however, is already governed by the specific regulations contained in the founding decree and by regional legislation on parks and natural reserves (L.R. [regional law] no.98/81, modified by L.R. no.14/88), as well as by the outline scheme of the Territorial Plan of the Etna Park, drawn up in February 1994, which the final master plan is becoming in the last time.

The study, although concerning the external rural areas at the edges of the park, loses sight neither of the connection between them and the agricultural spaces within the park,

¹ Regione Siciliana (1990), Progetto regionale integrato di sviluppo dell'area centro orientale, Definizione delle linee progettuali d'intervento nell'area - Relazione generale - Tomo V, Parte II, Palermo, Presidenza della Regione

² Butler D., Hall M., *Tourism and recreation in rural areas: myth and reality*, International Conference “Rural Tourism Management: Sustainable Option” at SAC, Auchincruive, UK, 9-12 September 1998.

nor of the need to interrelate their development with that already regulated by the founding decree that established the park.

2. Rural tourism and development

The theme of the rural development and conservation in the case-study is organized according to the conceptual plan illustrated in Figure 2. The two theses that aim to resolve the problem posed by the theme and on which the approach of the project hypothesis is founded are:

- the first, which has been brought to the attention of the Council of Europe ever since the European campaign for the rural world in 1988 and which has indicated in *rural tourism* one of the activities that can make a contribution towards a solution for the revitalization of that world and its space³;
- the second, which was born out of the strategy formed in the Regional Development Project for the Central-Eastern Area of Sicily and which, for agricultural and rural areas, concentrates on the adoption of development models that hinge on the dynamics that production factors manage to express within the area (*endogenous development*)⁴.

The development of tourism in rural areas has accelerated in recent years, and there is nothing to suggest it will not continue. As with any export activity, tourism is a source of income and employment. Because it requires upstream goods and services, tourism serves as a lever for a whole series of activities. The vital question then is how can the services rendered and products offered be made as varied as possible, so as to be able to attract an increasing number of tourists and maximize the amount they spend locally⁵.

The term rural tourism is not synonymous with farm tourism, agri/agrotourism for many countries. This situation generates comparative studies which can enhance our understanding of similar processes in different circumstances. The Author is studying since one of her works⁶ this theme to better understand the motivations, aspirations, and profile and behavior of rural tourists and farm visitors, that in particular stay in farm accommodation to experience farm attractions.

The nature of human-animal interaction on farms, particularly for children, has undergone change following widespread publicity of potential threats to human health. The significance of these crisis-induced changes to the nature and impact of farm visit tourism requires other investigations. The wider role of animals in the consumption of rural tourism and questions of animal welfare may raise important ethical questions.

The gendered nature of rural tourism development and its impact is no better seen than in tourism-related farm households. Power relations, the permanence or otherwise of tourism enterprise, reinvestment questions, the division of labor and relative host roles, are all

³ Thibal S., Le tourisme rural en Europe, Europe Council 2.5.1988

⁴ Di Simone I., Papale S., *Integrated Rural Routes: a Methodological Model of Rural Planning*, XII CIGR Congress and AgEng '94 Conference on Agricultural Engineering, ref. 94-B-013, Milan, 29 August - 1 September 1994.

⁵ Greffe X., "Is Rural Tourism a Lever for Economic and Social Development?", *Journal of Sustainable Development*, vol. 2, No. 1&2, 1994, p. 22-40.

⁶ Di Simone I., *Turismo rurale: dalla realtà europea alle prospettive per la Sicilia*, Atti del Convegno Nazionale A.I.G.R. (Associazione Italiana Genio Rurale), Maratea 7-11 June 1993.

issue which are highly gendered in the rural enterprise and its socio-economic context and which represent an important element for a social science research agenda.

During a recent international conference at SAC (the Scottish Agricultural College) Auchincruive, (9th-12th September 1998) about "*Rural Tourism Management: Sustainable Options*", explicitly dedicated to assisting the formulation of a rural tourism research agenda, a wide range of research approaches to rural tourism and question of sustainability was presented by a relatively young, global community of researchers. According with this Agenda for Rural Tourism Research, rural tourism needs to be embedded within local and global economic, social and political linkages.

Linkages with the local and regional economy, whether the stimulation of organic food production, the raising of wine quality or the enhancement of craft production, may be essential for the successful embedding of a rural tourism enterprise within an appropriate economic context, whereby tourism development can complement and enhance existing activities.

Naturally, there are positive and negative externalities of rural tourism and recreation activity. Rural recreation and tourism often acts as the interface between the rural and the urban; the context may be rural, but the market is usually predominantly urban; hosts may be recent ex-urban arrivals, differentiated from their fellows rural dwellers by their values, income and lifestyles. The traditional rural dwellers often are losing their identity and/or are being marginalised in national decision making processes which are perceived to be increasingly urban based and oriented. The rural second home owners may be otherwise urban based, and there is in extension the urban to rural migration. Then a comparative cross-cultural analytical framework is needed.

The tourism sustainability consists essentially to equate the aspirations and needs of both visitors and the local community.

It is essential for local populations' interests to have a vested interest in the sustainability of developments in order that future generations may benefit from the heritage trails, for example. Yet models of best practice which can be applied cross-culturally are still relatively few.

3. The project hypothesis

The two theses above-discussed converge in the project hypothesis of *integrated rural routes*, having the aim of making compatible and reconcilable two requirements that are only apparently in conflict:

- a) the protection of the ever larger and less compromised territorial resources of the area, maintaining their role in agricultural production;
- b) satisfaction of the ever increasing demand for free space and contact not only with nature, but also with the historic-cultural and ethno-anthropological aspects, which Etnean rural areas are particularly rich in.

The objectives of the project hypothesis, listed in the figure, fully *integrate* the two departure theses and reconcile the two requirements.

The integration of the itineraries with accommodation facilities highlights their link with the tourist-reception structure of the Etna Park, envisioned in the C zones, and with departure points for excursions envisioned in the agricultural areas included in the B zones (see Fig. 3). In this way integration between the park's internal and external rural areas is achieved, which can make the park an emerging node in a continuous system of development of the economy of the entire northeastern area.

As for the contents listed in the plan in Figure 2, the proposed links should be realized, above all, along road routes through populated centers initially, centers in which the presence of significant historic-cultural and/or ethno-anthropological features has been identified, together with equipped parking areas that constitute access to the routes in the real sense⁷.

These itineraries, in their turn, could be footpaths, bridle-paths and cycle paths and could provide food and recreational services along the way, perhaps housed in rural buildings and their dependent structures. Offering these routes to tourists might coincide with seasonal events in the cities and town of the area, such as religious feasts, produce festivals, agricultural fairs, and they could provide opportunities for cultural meetings such as courses on local cuisine, flora and fauna, agriculture, history, Etnean speleology, and so on. Meetings of this type could take place in the tourist-reception structures of the park's C zones, in those cases where the itineraries allow for a link.

It is clear that rural tourism activities are not relatively passive, such as viewing landscape and gentle hill walking, but active, such as mountain biking, hung-gliding or free climbing. This situation depends from nature of the new rural users that are a reflection of changing (urban/global) society, and are one of cause of change in rural society.

4. Methodological approach

The lines of project intervention proceed through the methodological plan illustrated in Figure 2.

4.1. Structural analysis of the area and evaluations

The analysis is carried out subdividing the area studied into five sub-areas, homogeneous as far as populations centers, historical, orographical and climatic characteristics are concerned (see Figure 3):

- the hill towns bordering the provincial capital (city of Catania);
- the southeastern hilly slope;
- the southwestern slope;
- the northern slope;
- the Ionic coastal strip.

For each of the sub-areas a complex evaluation is made, regarding the possibility of fulfilling the project hypothesis while respecting the initial theses: potentiality of rural tourism and an economic development of the endogenous type as far as the agricultural space is concerned⁸.

There is not enough space here to provide a synthesis of all the evaluations carried out. It is easy, however, to understand the exclusion of the hypothesis of the sub-area made up of the towns bordering Catania due to their virtual integration with the urbanization of the capital. As for the exclusion of the southwestern hilly slope, apart from the town of Belpasso, the most significant reason lies in the widespread urbanization and in the scarce presence of residual rural areas between its urbanized strips.

⁷ Di Simone I., Papale S., *Integrated Rural Routes: a Methodological Model of Rural Planning*, XII CIGR Congress and AgEng '94 Conference on Agricultural Engineering, ref. 94-B-013, Milan, 29 August - 1 September 1994.

⁸ Ibidem.

The next step is therefore the classification of the towns able to receive the project hypothesis as well as the definition of the way in which it should be implemented and managed.

4.2. Classification of the potentiality

Regarding the classification of potentiality, initially the criteria governing this potentiality are identified: they are based on the presence of a series of factors that are subdivided into *essential* and *reinforcing*.

The former relate to the realization of the objectives of the hypothesis (see the conceptual plan in Figure 2) through the presence of significant agricultural values, typical of the area, as well as the necessity for the link with the C zones of the park and with the base points for excursions in the B zones, with the aim of integrating the hypothesis with the fruition of tourism in the protected area. These are considered essential for the realization of the hypothesis in as much as in the absence of just one of them, the hypothesis itself loses that strategic meaning that initial theses express, especially in terms of the overall framework of the revitalization of the total area studied, where the Etna Park assumes a leading role.

The latter, the reinforcing factors, are made up of the more significant historic-cultural and ethno-anthropological values present in the towns and already brought to light by the preliminary analyses on the towns in the sub-areas. These are considered reinforcing as values that add to the agricultural values, which are still essential, but which give greater strength to the basic project idea with the aim of the fruition and the revitalization of all the resources in the area.

Through an orientational record card (Figure 4) the evaluation of the towns' potentiality for receiving the project idea is carried out and they are classified according to a scale of four values that take into account, above all, the greater or lesser presence of the former factor, in the co-presence in any case of the latter, as well as the presence of the two factors considered as reinforcing the former.

The classification, also in figure 4, is also displayed on a map of the area studied.

4.3. Modes of implementation

How do we do? There are indispensable:

- assistance with and protection of the development of a quality tourism product (niche market);
- implementation of a marketing strategy for each of the distinct marketable sub-region within the area of operations;
- achievement of economies of scale through effective use of cooperative marketing;
- targeting of higher spending and/or longer stay visitors from identified source markets in order to optimize use of facilities and services;
- achieving a balance between the demand of the local community with the competing interests of external investors and tourism operators.

The modes of implementation of the project hypothesis are listed in the methodological plan of Figure 2. These are project elements that are not only indispensable for its implementation, but are most significant in terms of the objectives that the hypothesis sets.

Among these elements, the restoration and/or rehabilitation of the infrastructures of the rural road network should be emphasized - ranging from supporting and boundary walls

in lava stone to the characteristic paving in strips of basalt, to weeding the roads, freeing land of stones, and so on.

The same is true for the possible restoration and/or rehabilitation of rural buildings and their dependent buildings along the itineraries, with the aim of reusing them for accommodation⁹.

4.4. Management modes

The indication in the methodological plan of four parties for the management of the itineraries - the towns, the regional government, the park board, and individuals - is coherent with the total project of the Regional Development Program, which tends towards involving several parties, including individuals, in completing the works necessary in order to reach its social and economic objectives.

In our case the towns should provide the financial resources for bringing into being the means of implementing the itineraries, directly taking charge of the works and acquiring the buildings to be rehabilitated or, in this last case, involving private individuals with contributions towards the rehabilitation expenses.

The presence of the regional government among the parties comes from the legislative disposition (art. 34 of the Regional Law [L.R.] no. 14/88) on the priority that is given to regional aid to towns whose territory is all or in part within the confines of the park for the rehabilitation of traditional rural buildings, for the rural road network, for nature excursions.

The presence of the park board, instead, comes from the text of the same article of law that states that the pluriannual economic-social plan and the annual action plans of the board can include the realization of works and intervention aimed at adding value to the protected area in the territories of the towns interested in the park, even those outside the perimeter of the park itself.

There is a clear desire on the part of the region at a legislative level to involve the park board in the financing and the coordination of the town initiatives that are outside the protected area, but are aimed at adding value to the land around it, seen in its entirety as a landscape value related to the agricultural spaces to be protected and rehabilitated.

5. Considerations and conclusion

The study, beyond the case-study examined, seeks to be a contribution, albeit a modest one, to understanding the process that must govern policies of territorial organization and development, represented in the following diagram:

PROBLEM → THESIS → HYPOTHESIS → VERIFICATION → PROPOSAL

Once the theme-cum-problem is established, one or more theses for its solution are formulated. The hypothesis that realizes the thesis is considered as the condition the verification of which controls the validity of the theses; it must have objectives and contents that are coherent with the theses.

The formulation of the hypothesis functions to create further research (verification) from which the hypothesis itself can more or less be confirmed. This research must be con-

⁹ Ibidem.

cerned, in particular, with territorial analysis, the evaluation of adherence to the objectives of the hypothesis, the criteria and the choices regarding the site of the hypothesis, the modes under which its implementation and management will be run.

The project proposal is the last phase in the process.

The study case examined can be configured as an application of the conceptual process that has already been outlined. Indeed, this case, as well as hoping to provide a useful instrument for learning about the Etnean area, has the objective of providing some useful indications for starting, certainly together with other and associated public and private action, a minimum of revitalization of rural space in the area itself.

Gathering such indications and implementing them is the competence of the institutions named above - they should encourage private action in their work as land managers.

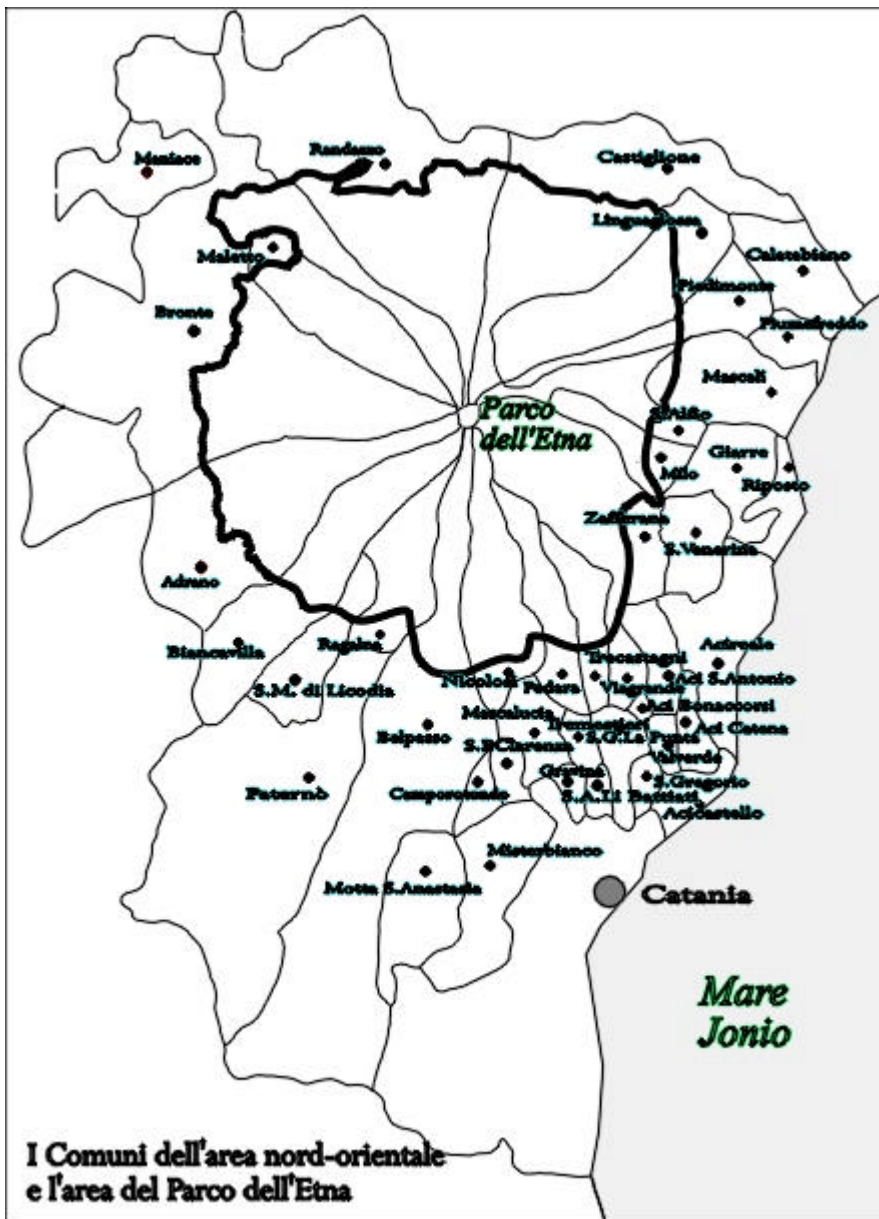
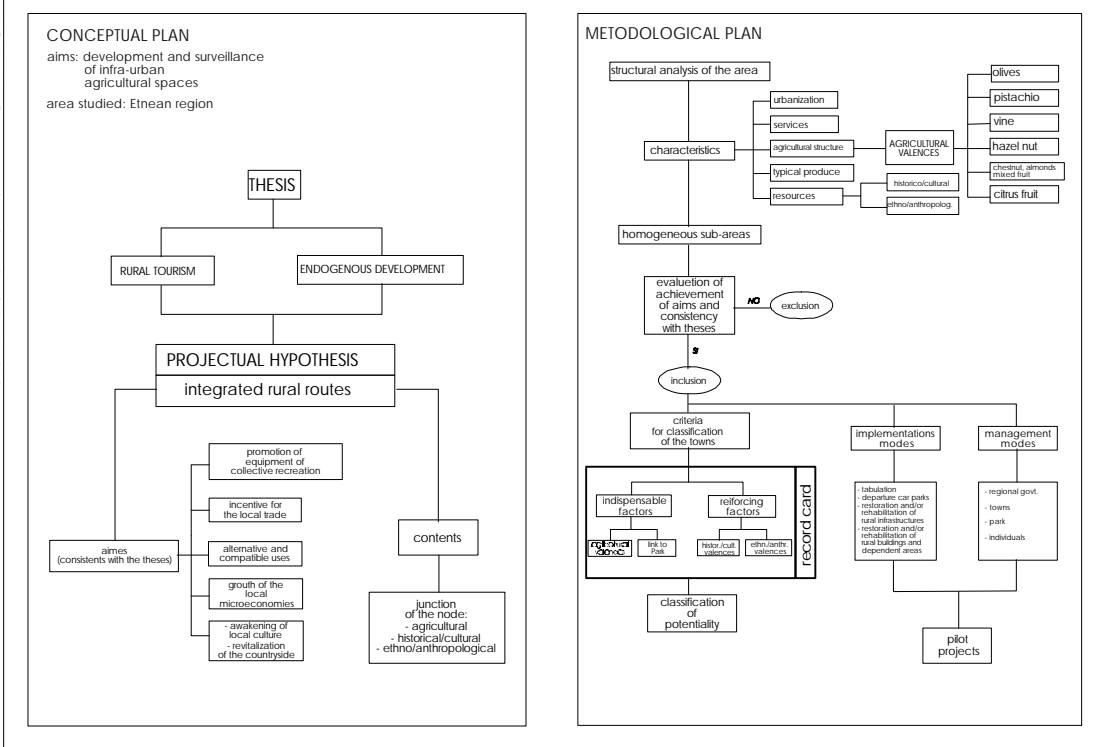


FIGURA 1

FIGURA 2 - Conceptual and methodological plans



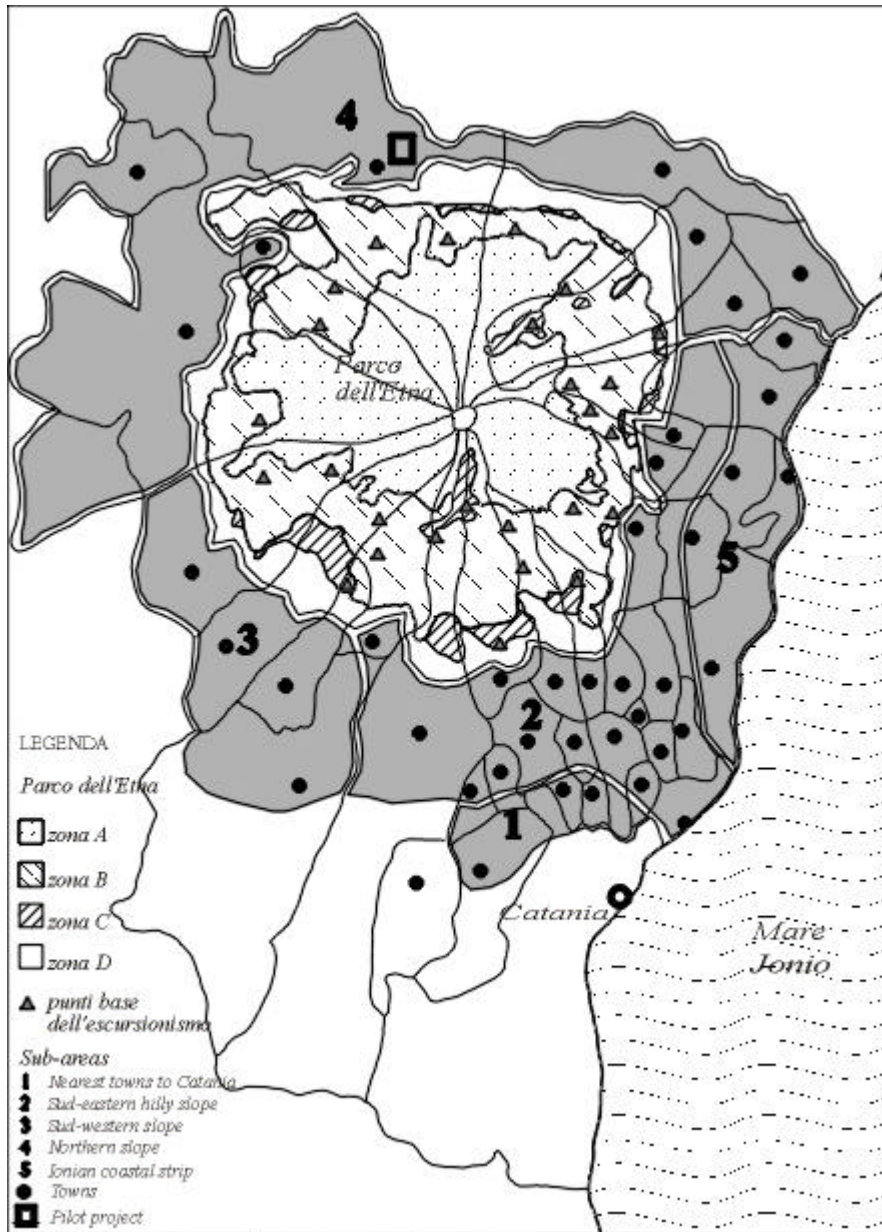


FIGURA 3 - Zonin o n nR lan n lo o

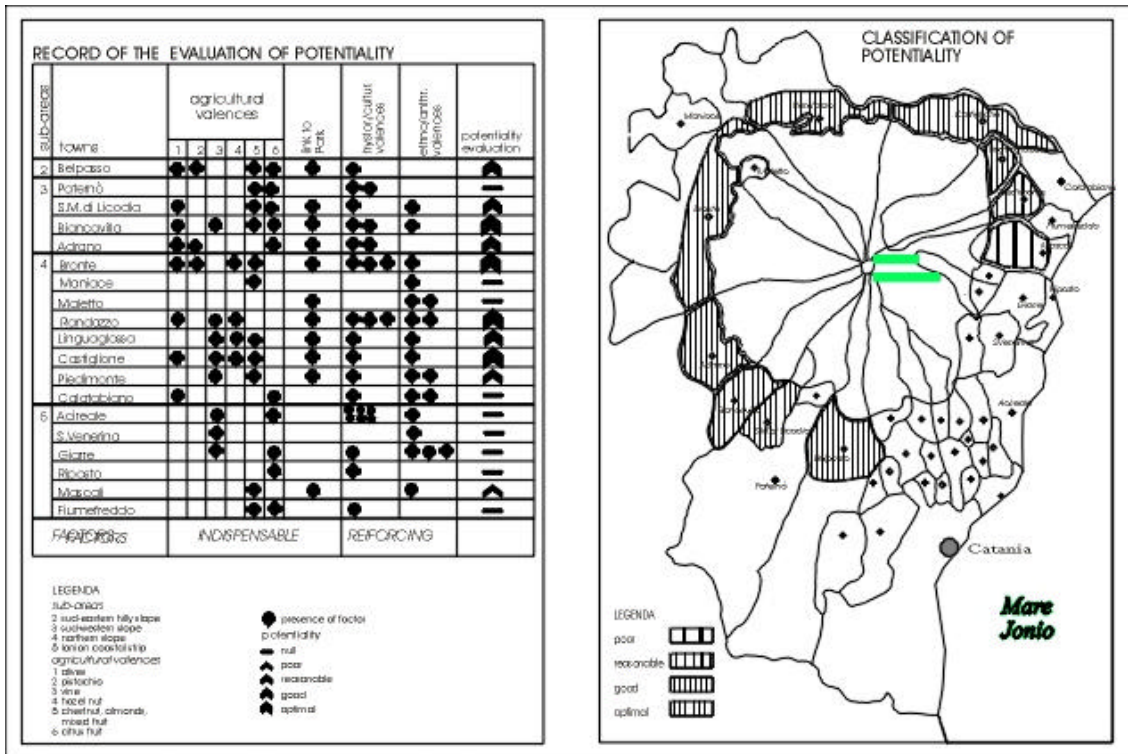


FIGURA 4 - Record card and classification of potentiality