

## Article

# Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of Šibenik-Knin County

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## Abstract

Cultural heritage is increasingly recognized as a pivotal driver of sustainable rural tourism, helping destinations diversify their offerings, reduce seasonality, strengthen local identity, and bring socio-economic benefits to depopulating communities. This study investigates its role in Šibenik-Knin County (Croatia), a Mediterranean region characterized by abundant tangible heritage (archaeological sites, medieval fortresses, sacral monuments, dry-stone architecture) and rich intangible traditions (gastronomic practices, klapa and ojkanje singing, local customs), yet still affected by a pronounced coastal–hinterland tourism imbalance. Through semi-structured interviews with ten key stakeholders from museums, tourist boards, academia, cultural institutions, and rural entrepreneurship organizations, complemented by literature review and analysis of policy and statistical data, the research reveals unanimous agreement that cultural heritage constitutes the county's strongest competitive advantage and the most authentic foundation for year-round rural tourism products. However, systematic under-valorization persists due to chronic underfunding, weak cross-sectoral cooperation, limited professional capacity, and the absence of dedicated hinterland destination-management structures. The findings indicate that targeted investment, high-quality interpretation, and genuine community engagement can rapidly transform heritage resources into viable tourism assets, as demonstrated by existing successful cases. Realizing this potential requires coordinated governance, improved interpretive and digital infrastructure, and active resident involvement.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; rural tourism; sustainable development; stakeholder collaboration; heritage valorization; Mediterranean region

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism has gained increasing prominence over the past two decades as travelers deliberately move away from the standardized products of mass coastal tourism and crowded urban destination [1–3]. What draws them to rural areas is no longer simply the promise of open space or lower prices, but a deeper search for authenticity, tranquility, meaningful contact with nature, and the chance to engage with living local cultures, traditions, and gastronomic practices. This evolution reflects broader shifts in traveler decision-making: people increasingly allocate their discretionary income and time to experiences that promise emotional resonance, identity reinforcement, and narrative richness

rather than mere relaxation [4,5]. In policy terms, sustainable rural tourism has therefore become one of the most promising tools available to peripheral regions for stimulating local economic activity, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and building greater community resilience through diversified income sources [3,6,7].

Cultural heritage—whether tangible monuments, intangible practices, or the cultural landscape itself—lies at the very heart of this transformation. It is the primary resource that lends rural destinations their distinctive character, enhances the perceived authenticity of the visitor experience, and enables meaningful differentiation in an otherwise saturated global market. At the same time, heritage is deeply embedded in community identity, providing a sense of continuity between past and present that residents themselves often draw upon when evaluating development options [8–10]. Contemporary sustainable development frameworks no longer view cultural heritage solely as something to be passively preserved; they treat it as an active resource capable of generating economic, social, and cultural returns when strategically mobilized [11–13]. When heritage is deliberately integrated into rural tourism offerings, a virtuous circle is formed: traditions are kept alive, local economies receive new impulses, and visitors encounter experiences that feel genuinely distinctive and memorable.

The link between rural tourism and cultural heritage is especially powerful because it directly addresses some of the most pressing structural challenges facing rural Europe [14–16]. Depopulation, ageing populations, inadequate infrastructure, and chronically limited employment opportunities have become defining features of many inland regions. These problems are especially acute in Croatia's Adriatic hinterland, where the extreme seasonality and spatial concentration of coastal tourism generate impressive aggregate statistics yet leave rural municipalities with only marginal trickle-down benefits. In such contexts, heritage-based rural tourism can serve as a real counterbalance—encouraging longer stays, generating year-round demand, supporting local entrepreneurship, and fostering cooperation among actors who might otherwise remain isolated [2,13,17]. Sana-gustin-Fons et al. [18] argue that when rural tourism strategies are supported by coordinated policies and genuine stakeholder collaboration, they can simultaneously enhance economic vitality and social well-being.

Effective sustainable development, however, requires far more than goodwill or scattered projects. Geng et al. [6] show that success depends on comprehensive strategic planning, ongoing stakeholder dialogue, and the ability to balance short-term revenue goals with long-term cultural and environmental integrity. Within this broader framework, cultural heritage emerges as one of the most powerful differentiating assets available to rural destinations. Its capacity to support off-season visitation, attract high-value niche segments, and create a strong, recognizable place identity makes it essential for regions pursuing resilient and inclusive growth [3,19,20]. Failure to capitalize on this resource effectively traps many rural areas in a downward spiral of decline, out-migration, and fading cultural vitality.

Šibenik-Knin County illustrates both the opportunity and the challenge. The county possesses an extraordinary density of cultural and historical resources—archaeological sites, medieval fortresses, sacral architecture, protected intangible practices such as ožkanje singing, vernacular dry-stone structures (bunje), and a rich gastronomic tradition anchored by EU-protected products like Driš prosciutto—yet its rural hinterland remains largely absent from mainstream tourism flows. Limited promotion, fragmented governance, insufficient horizontal and vertical coordination, and the continued dominance of coastal-oriented strategies all contribute to this underperformance. Mzembe et al. [21] have noted that, despite a growing body of work on sustainable cultural heritage tourism, empirical studies that systematically examine stakeholder perceptions at the regional level remain surprisingly scarce, particularly in South-East Europe.

The existing research on Croatia tends to focus either on national-level policy or on individual flagship attractions, leaving county-scale dynamics largely unexplored [22–24]. We could not identify any papers that integrate cultural heritage management, stakeholder perspectives, and practical tourism development into a single analytical framework. This gap is particularly problematic given how rapidly traveler expectations and competitive conditions are changing. Without a clearer understanding of local realities—of which heritage elements stakeholders consider most valuable, how these resources are currently interpreted and presented, and what concrete obstacles block more effective valorization—strategic interventions risk remaining generic and ineffective.

The present study therefore seeks to address these gaps by investigating the role of cultural heritage in rural tourism development in Šibenik-Knin County. Through a combination of literature review, secondary data analysis, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with key local stakeholders, the research aims to identify the most promising heritage resources, assess their current integration into the tourism offer, and pinpoint the main institutional, behavioral, and infrastructural barriers to further progress. To guide this exploration, the study is framed by the following research questions:

1. How do key stakeholders perceive the role of cultural heritage authenticity in differentiating rural tourism from mass coastal tourism?
2. What are the main institutional and financial barriers limiting the systematic valorization of cultural heritage in the rural areas of Šibenik-Knin County?
3. In what ways can enhanced cross-sectoral collaboration and local community engagement support the use of cultural heritage for rural revitalization?

The ultimate goal is to provide evidence-based insights that can inform more coherent strategies, strengthen community involvement, and contribute to policy debates on sustainable rural revitalization in Croatia and similar Mediterranean contexts.

## 2. Theoretical Divagations: Cultural Heritage and Tourism

Cultural heritage is a multidimensional, socially constructed phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a mere list of monuments or traditions [25–27]. It comprises the material traces, immaterial practices, and landscape configurations through which communities articulate their identity and negotiate their relationship with the past. Heritage only acquires significance when it is socially recognized, interpreted, and continually re-enacted; it is never a static reflection of history but a living resource that evolves in response to contemporary needs, values, and power relations. Ashworth and Howard [28] already pointed out a quarter-century ago that what becomes “heritage” at any given moment is ultimately decided by contemporary cultural attitudes rather than by objective historical importance.

The traditional distinction between tangible and intangible heritage, though increasingly criticized for being overly rigid, still offers a useful analytical lens. Tangible heritage includes buildings, monuments, archaeological sites, museum collections, cultural landscapes, and vernacular architecture—elements that typically serve as the most visible anchors of destination identity [29–31]. Intangible heritage, by contrast, includes oral traditions, performing arts, ritual practices, gastronomic knowledge, craftsmanship, and social customs that are transmitted across generations and continue to structure everyday life [9,26,27]. In reality, the two dimensions are inseparable [27,31,32]: a dry-stone bunja or a medieval fortress derives much of its emotional power from the stories, techniques, and seasonal rhythms that surround it.

Within tourism development, cultural heritage has moved from being a peripheral attraction to a core competitive resource. Kumar [33] emphasized that historical and cultural assets form fundamental pillars of tourism growth and, when responsibly managed,

become powerful instruments of long-term sustainability. Modern traveler behavior strongly supports this view: visitors no longer settle for superficial sightseeing but actively seek experiences that provide learning, emotional involvement, and a real sense of connection with local ways of life [34–36]. Such preferences align closely with findings that tourists often prioritize anticipated affective rewards and symbolic value over purely functional or hedonic considerations when choosing destinations [37–39]. Empirical studies from varied geographical contexts confirm that well-preserved and well-interpreted heritage significantly boosts perceived authenticity and overall visitor satisfaction [40–42].

Destination-management literature further highlights the central place of heritage in effective governance frameworks. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [43,44] has long stressed that sustainable success depends on coordinated multi-stakeholder action to create offers that are simultaneously attractive, competitive, and respectful of local carrying capacities. Cultural heritage, precisely because of its uniqueness and emotional resonance, enjoys a privileged position in such strategies—especially in rural areas where living traditions are still embedded in daily practice.

Rural and cultural tourism development is driven by both demand-side and supply-side forces, yet it faces remarkably consistent obstacles across regions. Key drivers include growing consumer demand for authentic and experiential travel, heightened environmental awareness, the search for less crowded destinations, and policy support for diversification away from coastal mass tourism. The most common barriers, in turn, are inadequate transport and digital infrastructure, extreme seasonality, insufficient professional training, fragmented products, weak branding, and—crucially—the lack of integrated destination-management organizations able to connect coastal and hinterland visitor flows [2,45,46]. Overcoming these barriers requires not only investment but also behavioral shifts among both residents and public institutions.

Rural areas possess comparative advantages that urbanized destinations find hard to replicate [2,47,48]. Intangible heritage is often still actively performed rather than merely exhibited, making possible the immersive, co-created experiences that today's travelers increasingly demand. These experiences generate multiple benefits: new income from craft sales, culinary tourism, guided interpretive tours, and cultural events, while simultaneously reinforcing community pride and helping safeguard practices at risk of disappearing [49].

Effective valorization and promotion of cultural heritage for tourism therefore require deliberate, multi-channel strategies that go well beyond standard marketing [50–52]. These include thematic routes and clusters, professional storytelling and interpretation training for local guides, systematic digitization and virtual presentation, co-branded gastronomy-and-music events, and slow-tourism products that encourage multi-day stays in the hinterland. Without such targeted efforts, even the richest heritage endowment risks remaining invisible to wider markets and under-appreciated by residents themselves.

Significant obstacles nevertheless remain. Inadequate infrastructure, fragmented product development, weak inter-institutional cooperation, low digital visibility, and the frequent absence of professional interpretation all constrain the effectiveness of heritage valorization [53–55]. Behavioral factors add further complexity: local communities sometimes undervalue their own heritage because of over-familiarity, while visitors may arrive with idealized or stereotypical expectations that clash with reality. Overcoming these challenges calls for sustained investment, improved coordination, and deliberate programs to raise local awareness of heritage's economic and symbolic potential—efforts that are strong predictors of lasting community support for tourism development.

In regions such as Šibenik-Knin County, where extraordinary cultural richness coexists with pronounced underuse in rural tourism, understanding these dynamics from the

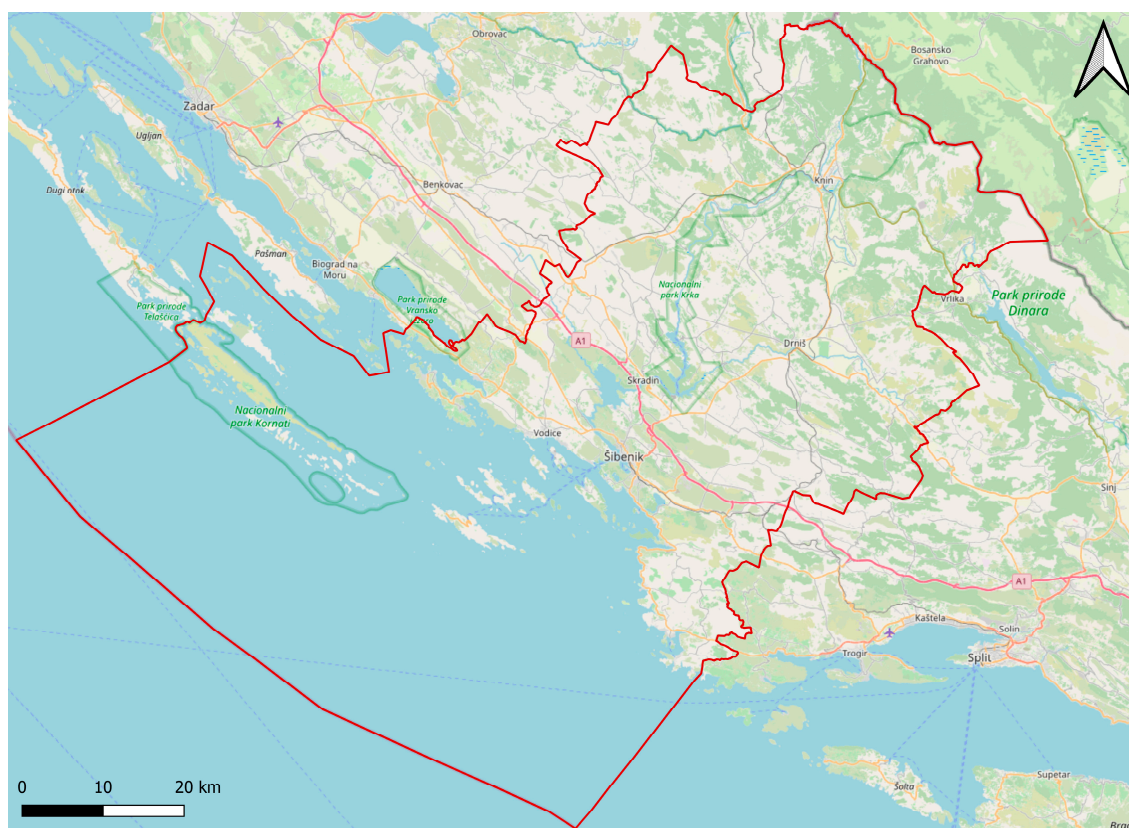
viewpoint of local actors becomes essential. Identifying which tangible and intangible elements stakeholders themselves regard as most promising, how they believe these resources should be interpreted and presented, and what concrete barriers they face in practice provides the foundation for more focused and effective strategies.

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above—and aware of the research gaps noted in the introduction—the remainder of this paper presents an empirical examination of cultural heritage valorization in Šibenik-Knin County. The next section describes the methodological approach, followed by the presentation of findings and a discussion of their implications for theory, policy, and practice.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Study Area

The research focuses on Šibenik-Knin County (Figure 1), which is located in southern Croatia along the central Adriatic coast and consists of three distinct geographical zones: a narrow coastal strip with the cities of Šibenik and Vodice, an island zone that includes Murter, Zlarin, Prvić, and Kaprije, and a large rural hinterland of mountainous terrain and flatter valleys near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Knin and Drniš serve as the main inland centers surrounded by dozens of small rural settlements. The county enjoys a classic Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, creating favorable conditions for both seaside and inland tourism. This combination of climate, landscape variety, and historical depth provides an excellent platform for sustainable tourism that links cultural heritage with nature-based and rural products.



**Figure 1.** Map of Šibenik-Knin County [56]. Source: Data source: © OpenStreetMap contributors. Note: The map was created using the QGIS 3.44.5 software, which uses OpenStreetMap (OSM) as its base layer. OSM and QGIS are open-data platforms and are publicly available to everyone free of charge.

The county's historical legacy is exceptionally rich and multilayered, shaped by Illyrian, Roman, early Croatian, Venetian, Ottoman-influenced, and Habsburg periods, as well as twentieth-century transformations. These successive layers have produced a remarkable concentration of architectural, archaeological, and intangible cultural assets spread across both coastal and inland areas, making the county's heritage portfolio a highly valuable resource for heritage-led and rural tourism [57]. Although it contains urban centers, most notably the city of Šibenik, the county is spatially and functionally dominated by its extensive rural hinterland and numerous remote villages, and is therefore classified as a predominantly rural region according to the OECD typology [58]. The 2021 Census recorded approximately 96,722 inhabitants, with a continuing downward trend that is especially severe in rural areas [59]. Like many rural parts of Mediterranean Europe, the county faces ageing populations, youth out-migration, depopulation of remote settlements, and limited infrastructural development in the interior—challenges that threaten community sustainability yet also create opportunities for tourism-driven revitalization.

Key attractions include natural heritage including protected sites such as Krka National Park with its waterfalls, monasteries, and historic mills (including Skradinski Buk, Roški Slap, and the Franciscan monastery on Visovac Island); the medieval town of Skradin and its waterfront old town; Topoljski Buk (Krčić Waterfall) near Knin as a scenic natural site; Kornati National Park; cultural heritage including the restored fortresses of Šibenik (Barone, St. Michael's, and St. Nicholas) together with UNESCO-listed sacral monuments; Knin Fortress on Mount Spas, one of the largest fortified structures in Croatia offering panoramic views; the Cathedral of St James in Šibenik (UNESCO World Heritage Site); extensive dry-stone architecture (bunje and dry-stone walls); historic archaeological sites such as the Roman ruins at Burnum and the Gradina viewpoint in Drniš; protected intangible heritage such as traditional Dalmatian a cappella singing (klapa singing) and ožkanje singing; maritime and local traditions on the island of Krapanj, known for its historic sponge-diving culture; or EU-protected gastronomic products, most notably Drniš prosciutto and its associated international festival [60]. In 2024 the county recorded more than 5.1 million overnight stays [61]. Yet tourist activity remains overwhelmingly concentrated along the coast, while the rural hinterland continues to show substantial untapped potential.

Rural tourism in Šibenik-Knin County is still in its infancy despite the region's extraordinary cultural, historical, landscape, and gastronomic richness. The Šibenik-Knin County's Development Plan for 2021–2027 explicitly identifies, in the county's development vision high potential for selective forms of tourism, including rural and cultural tourism [62]. Most hinterland municipalities, however, still lack organized tourist infrastructure, interpretation centers, thematic routes, and systematic heritage management. Successful heritage-based projects remain largely limited to the coastal zone—notably the EU-funded revitalization of Šibenik's fortresses—while rural areas suffer from weak stakeholder cooperation, the absence of a dedicated destination-management organization linking hinterland products to coastal flows, low digital visibility, and insufficient training of local residents in tourism and heritage valorization. This mix of abundant yet underutilized resources, stark spatial imbalances in tourism development, and persistent rural socio-economic difficulties made Šibenik-Knin County an ideal case for studying how cultural heritage can drive sustainable rural tourism.

### 3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

The study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design [63,64], in which primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Appendixes A1 and A2) supplemented by a thorough analysis of secondary sources (national and

county tourism strategies, statistical reports, heritage inventories, policy documents, academic literature, and grey literature) and the authors' direct field observations conducted repeatedly throughout 2024–2025.

Ten key informants were purposively selected to represent the main stakeholder groups actively involved in culture, heritage preservation, tourism promotion, education, and rural entrepreneurship across Šibenik-Knin County.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on strategic and governance-related perspectives, priority was given to actors involved in policy formulation, heritage interpretation, destination management, and development support rather than to individual market actors. Final participation was also influenced by stakeholder availability and willingness to participate within the research timeframe, which is common in qualitative fieldwork

All participants held senior managerial or expert positions, possessed relevant academic qualifications, and had accumulated extensive practical experience in their respective fields (Table 1). They were chosen based on their direct engagement in cultural tourism development and cultural heritage preservation. Because no single institution or individual in the county formally bears responsibility for rural tourism development, the sample deliberately included respondents with deep expertise in closely related areas of cultural tourism and rural development, ensuring they were best positioned to provide authoritative and well-informed insights on the research topic.

In line with this methodological approach, and considering the emphasis on institutional and expert stakeholders, a relatively small sample size was deemed appropriate, as qualitative research prioritizes analytical depth and information richness over numerical representativeness [65–67].

**Table 1.** Profiles of research participants.

| No. | Gender | Position                                         | Experience                                                                                                                                |
|-----|--------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | M      | Director of a local city museum                  | Director of a local city museum                                                                                                           |
| 2   | W      | Director of the local Tourist Board              | Organization of cultural and tourism events; destination promotion with emphasis on gastronomy and heritage                               |
| 3   | M      | Director of a local city museum                  | Museum management; archaeological research; heritage collection interpretation                                                            |
| 4   | W      | Professor at the local Polytechnic               | Understanding of traditional food products as elements of cultural heritage in rural tourism                                              |
| 5   | W      | Representative of the County Tourist Board       | Strategic development of tourism projects; rural tourism certification; promotion of eno-gastro and rural tourism products                |
| 6   | W      | Representative of a local city Tourist Board     | Strategic planning; coordination of cultural and gastronomic events; digital promotion; sustainable tourism development                   |
| 7   | W      | Senior Lecturer at Šibenik Polytechnic           | Teaching marketing and tourism management; involvement in professional workshops and conferences                                          |
| 8   | W      | Director of a Public Cultural Institution        | Management of cultural programs; participation in international projects; development of sustainable cultural tourism                     |
| 9   | W      | Director of the Rural Entrepreneurship Incubator | Management of incubator operations; support to local producers; organization of educational workshops related to local agri-food products |

|    |   |                            |                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10 | W | Director of a Kindergarten | Coordination of educational programs; participation in cultural activities; preservation of local traditions through the ethnogames program for kindergarten children |
|----|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online between July and September 2025 and were audio-recorded with prior verbal informed consent. Full anonymity and confidentiality of individual contributions were guaranteed in all research outputs. A flexible semi-structured interview protocol was employed, with the question guide carefully adapted to each respondent's institutional role and specific area of expertise. Respondents were systematically asked about the most important tangible and intangible cultural resources capable of attracting rural tourists and enhancing rural tourism development in Šibenik-Knin County, the current role of cultural heritage in rural tourism development in the county, the present state of cultural heritage valorization in rural areas, the biggest challenges and obstacles (administrative, financial, infrastructural, and social) in using cultural heritage for rural tourism development, the degree to which local stakeholders recognize cultural heritage as an important factor in rural tourism, concrete activities needed to better promote and valorize cultural heritage for tourism purposes, current institutional activities aimed at promoting cultural heritage in rural tourism as well as planned future projects, and specific elements of cultural heritage that should be prioritized together with broader visions for the future development of rural tourism based on cultural heritage in Šibenik-Knin County over the next five to ten years.

Based on the semi-structured interview protocol, a set of core analytical themes was defined *ex ante* and addressed consistently across all interviews. These themes were derived from the research objectives. Table 2 presents the main analytical themes, their focus within the interview guide. In addition to these core themes, each respondent was asked two additional questions tailored to their specific institutional role, area of expertise, or ongoing projects, in order to capture context-specific insights.

**Table 2.** Core analytical themes and focus of the semi-structured interview guide.

| Core Analytical Theme                                                 | Focus of Interview Questions                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Identification of tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources | Types of cultural resources with potential to attract rural tourists            |
| Role of cultural heritage in rural tourism development                | Contribution of heritage to identity, authenticity, and tourism diversification |
| Current level of heritage valorization                                | Assessment of existing use and integration of heritage into tourism offers      |
| Barriers and challenges                                               | Administrative, financial, infrastructural, and social constraints              |
| Stakeholder awareness and engagement                                  | Recognition of heritage among local actors and institutions                     |
| Measures for improved valorization and promotion                      | Proposed actions, investments, and governance improvements                      |
| Future development perspectives                                       | Long-term vision for heritage-based rural tourism                               |

Additional qualitative insights were gathered from secondary documents and online resources. Secondary data were used mainly for contextualization rather than research questions testing. Statistical reports were used to describe tourism development trends, spatial imbalances between coastal and rural areas, and the basic demographic characteristics of the study area. Political and strategic documents were analyzed to identify

institutional frameworks, development priorities, and policy objectives related to cultural heritage and rural tourism. These sources supported the interpretation of interview findings and enhanced the robustness of the qualitative analysis.

The combination of data from diverse stakeholder groups with documentary evidence and field observations ensured robust methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity and richness of the finding [2,15,68–70]. Data analysis followed a combined deductive–inductive content analysis approach [71–73]. An initial coding framework was derived from the interview protocol and existing literature. Predefined categories were refined and supplemented by themes emerging directly from the participants' narratives. The analytical process involved summarizing respondent perspectives for each category, identifying key patterns, commonalities, and variations across stakeholder groups, and linking the empirical insights directly to the research objectives.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Key Cultural Resources with Potential to Attract Rural Tourists in Šibenik–Knin County

All ten respondents unanimously emphasized the extraordinary richness and diversity of both tangible and intangible heritage as the county's greatest strength for rural tourism development. Among tangible resources, the most frequently mentioned were major archaeological and historical sites (especially the medieval fortresses, sacral buildings, and Bribirska glavica—widely regarded as one of the most important archaeological localities in Dalmatia), restored historic mills, former mining complexes in Siverić, and immersive cultural attractions such as Etnoland in Pakovo Selo and the Ivan Meštrović Family Tomb in Otavice. Traditional rural settlements and reconstructed ethno-villages (for example Ethno Village Stari Primošten) were repeatedly highlighted for their ability to offer visitors an authentic glimpse into past ways of rural life.

Intangible heritage received equally strong emphasis, particularly local customs, folk dances, traditional singing, and gastronomic practices. As Respondent 1 put it, “we must not forget the folk dances and songs that are regularly performed at special events, because they are the ones that revive tradition and contribute to a unique visitor experience.” Respondent 2 stressed the holistic character of rural heritage: “the most important material resources of the historic core are tradition, old houses, and dry-stone walls, while the intangible resources include the preparation and consumption of traditional dishes, the cultivation of indigenous plants and fruit trees, and traditional jewellery.” Respondent 8 captured the emerging trend particularly well: “Intangible heritage, such as klapa singing, ojkanje and ganga, as well as local customs, folklore and gastronomic traditions provide an opportunity to create a holistic experience that tourists are increasingly seeking today—contact with local identity, authenticity and inclusion in community life”.

Several interviewees also pointed to religious pilgrimage routes and UNESCO-protected elements, underlining that it is precisely the synergy between cultural and natural resources that gives the county its competitive edge. Respondent 9 summarized this view succinctly: “It is precisely the combination of cultural and natural values that makes Šibenik-Knin County very attractive and competitive as a tourist destination.” The findings in this subsection directly address the first research question by highlighting how stakeholders perceive authenticity—embedded in both tangible sites and living intangible practices—as the core element differentiating rural tourism experiences from standardized coastal offerings.

### 4.2. Cultural Heritage in Rural Areas of the County

Cultural heritage was unanimously regarded as far more than a decorative backdrop—it is the primary motivator for visitors who seek authentic experiences blending nature,

history, tradition, and local ways of life. Respondent 1 explained that “it is not enough for tourists to see nature—they want to feel the spirit of the place, learn about history and tradition, taste local specialties, and participate in customs. It is precisely cultural heritage that gives identity to our rural areas and makes them recognizable on the tourist map”.

When paired with genuine hospitality and high-quality gastronomy, heritage strengthens regional identity and directly supports local economies. Respondent 4 observed that “today, there are two gastronomic establishments at Knin Fortress that offer traditional products such as cheese from the mountain goat. In addition to promoting the destination itself, cultural heritage also directly influences the development of smaller family farms from the local area.” Respondents also noted that heritage-based content helps extend the tourist season and enriches the destination’s image. Respondent 5 stated plainly that, “cultural heritage is certainly one of the tools for extending the tourist year, creating tourist products, and enriching and creating the image of the destination.”, while Respondent 8 added that “cultural heritage adds value to the tourism offer, differentiates a destination from others and helps create a story that attracts visitors. The authenticity that heritage carries becomes the main attraction—whether through local stories, songs, customs or culinary specialties.” These insights further illuminate the first research question, confirming stakeholders’ strong consensus on authenticity as the key differentiator driving demand for rural tourism over mass coastal alternatives.

#### *4.3. The Current State of Valorization of Cultural Heritage in the County*

While awareness of cultural heritage’s importance is widespread, systematic valorization remains highly uneven across the county. Well-developed examples include the restored fortresses and archaeological sites (Knin Fortress, Burnum, Bribirska glavica), the UNESCO-listed Cathedral of St James in Šibenik, ethno-villages, museums, and signature gastronomic specialties (Dрниš prosciutto, Skradin risotto, dishes prepared under the baking bell). Intangible elements—folklore performances, klapa and ojkanje singing, traditional crafts, and local festivals—are also gradually being woven into the tourism offer, usually in partnership with national and nature parks.

Nevertheless, many outstanding resources are still severely underutilized. Respondent 10 observed that “the state of valorization varies: in some places it is already well developed, and in others it is still in its infancy. The problem often lies with local self-government and the population itself.” Chronic lack of funding, depopulation, and demographic ageing were cited again and again as core constraints. Respondent 3 stressed that “the potential of rural areas is enormous, but the current valorization is still not at a satisfactory level. We should systematically invest and develop projects that would enable the presentation of cultural heritage and rural life to visitors,” while Respondent 10 advocated interdisciplinary cooperation: “Valorization should be carried out by teams composed of experts from various institutions across the county. Such an approach would enable more systematic and efficient preservation and promotion of cultural resources.” This subsection primarily responds to the second research question, revealing the persistent institutional and financial barriers that hinder effective valorization despite widespread recognition of heritage potential.

#### *4.4. The Biggest Challenges and Obstacles in the Use of Cultural Heritage in Rural Areas of the County*

Despite the widely acknowledged potential, respondents identified a familiar set of structural and behavioral barriers. The most frequently mentioned obstacles were insufficient financial resources for restoration, promotion, and event organization, together with a severe shortage of qualified professional staff. Respondent 3 summarized the situation clearly: “the biggest challenge is the lack of financial resources including the renovation

of facilities, the organization of events, and the education of local communities,” while Respondent 5 identified additional issues: “ownership, protection by conservators, financial resources for the restoration and valorization of these resources, and the lack of professional staff to deal with them”.

Interviewees also highlighted passive or risk-averse attitudes among parts of the local community and political leadership, the absence of interpretation centers, poor market visibility, and the lack of a coherent long-term vision. Respondent 1 pointed out that “cultural heritage is still not sufficiently recognized by local politicians and the Ministry of Tourism, who direct the development processes,” and Respondent 7 added that the main challenges include “lack of interpretation centers, weaker visibility on the market, and a passive attitude of the local community towards resources.” Respondent 9 also noted that “the biggest challenges lie primarily in the insufficiently high-quality valorization of cultural heritage and inadequate promotion.” The barriers outlined here provide detailed empirical evidence for the second research question, underscoring institutional fragmentation and chronic underfunding as the primary impediments to progress.

#### 4.5. Future Development and Promotion of Cultural Heritage as an Element of Rural Tourism in Šibenik-Knin County

All respondents expressed cautious optimism: cultural heritage is an inexhaustible resource for sustainable rural tourism, provided development stays rooted in authenticity and local identity rather than artificial reconstruction. Respondent 3 emphasized that “the combination of tangible and intangible heritage creates a special experience that is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas.” Respondent 9 stressed the importance of preserving place identity and linking cultural with natural resources to tell the county’s full story, while warning that careful planning is needed to protect the environment.

A recurring message was that there is no need to invent new attractions—it is enough to present existing heritage in a professional, authentic, and engaging way. Greater inclusion of local products in restaurants and accommodation was strongly advocated. Respondent 4 argued: “Instead of importing other people’s products, I think we should include our local cheeses, homemade foods, and traditional recipes in the offerings of restaurants and catering establishments much more.” Respondent 9 added that “rural heritage could be better valorized through the organization of specific programs and events that connect the local community and visitors, and through the education and inclusion of local stakeholders in tourism projects.” Respondent 7 advocated the rapid creation of interpretation centers, thematic routes, digitization projects, and stronger collaboration with creative industries.

To further structure the findings, a policy–gap matrix was developed comparing strategic policy objectives with stakeholder perceptions of current practice (Table 3). The matrix highlights systematic gaps between declared development goals and their implementation, particularly regarding rural hinterland integration, institutional coordination, and community involvement.

**Table 3.** Policy–practice gaps in heritage-based rural tourism development.

| Policy Objective               | Strategic/Policy Intent                        | Observed Practice (Interviews)                         | Identified Gap                                               |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Development of rural tourism   | Diversification beyond the coast               | Tourism remains strongly concentrated in coastal areas | Weak integration of the rural hinterland                     |
| Cultural heritage valorisation | Active and systematic use of cultural heritage | Underutilisation of heritage resources in rural areas  | Insufficient long-term investment and coordinated governance |

| Strategic planning for rural tourism    | Long-term, coherent strategic planning                | Predominance of short-term and ad hoc initiatives        | Lack of strategic continuity                              |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Authenticity and local identity         | Protection and promotion of authentic local identity  | Superficial or inconsistent use of heritage elements     | Weak mechanisms to safeguard authenticity                 |
| Stakeholder cooperation                 | Cross-sectoral and multi-level governance             | Fragmented institutional action and limited coordination | Absence of coordinating destination management structures |
| Community involvement                   | Active local participation in tourism development     | Limited participation and weak capacity-building         | Insufficient empowerment of local stakeholders            |
| Socio-economic and demographic outcomes | Economic revitalization and demographic stabilization | Limited impact on employment and demographic trends      | Structural constraints and delayed effects                |

In summary, the interviewees agreed that cultural heritage can become the main engine of economic revitalization and demographic stabilization in the rural hinterland, but only through sustained investment, genuine county-wide interdisciplinary cooperation, long-term strategic planning, and unwavering respect for authenticity and local identity. These forward-looking perspectives directly address the third research question, illustrating how stakeholders envision cross-sectoral collaboration and community engagement as essential pathways to leveraging heritage for rural revitalization.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this study clearly confirm what every stakeholder in Šibenik-Knin County already feels in their daily work: cultural heritage is universally seen as the single most important resource for building sustainable rural tourism. This complete consensus—reaching across museums, tourist boards, academia, cultural institutions, and rural entrepreneurship organizations—shows a shared conviction that tangible and intangible heritage elements, when combined with the county's stunning natural landscape, can create an authentic, competitive, and genuinely year-round tourism offer [74–76]. In relation to the first research question, this consensus underscores authenticity as the primary mechanism for differentiating rural offerings from mass coastal tourism, aligning with broader theoretical emphasis on experiential and affective traveler motivations. Such strong agreement gives local and county authorities a solid evidence base for updating tourism strategies, preparing destination-management plans, and applying for EU and national funding focused on rural regeneration.

The heritage resources identified as most promising—archaeological sites, sacral complexes, fortresses, dry-stone architecture, EU-protected gastronomic products, and living intangible expressions such as *klapa*, *ojkanje*, *ganga*, traditional crafts, and festivals—match closely with successful examples from other Mediterranean rural countries like Spain [4,17,54], Italy [13,77], France [14,31], Croatia [22,23,61], Turkey [78] and other [79]. Tourist boards and destination managers can immediately turn this stakeholder-validated list into practical tools: thematic routes, multi-day experience packages, and joint marketing campaigns that extend the season and guide visitors from the crowded coast into the hinterland. For local entrepreneurs—family farms, small accommodation providers, restaurants, and guides—these resources offer ready-made content for high-value, low-volume products that command better prices and keep more money circulating within rural communities [78,80,81].

Despite this recognized richness, the systematic under-valorization of cultural heritage in rural areas remains the central problem—a pattern familiar across southern Europe’s peripheral regions [82–84]. Addressing the second research question, the identified barriers—particularly chronic underfunding and institutional fragmentation—explain why valorization remains uneven, even in the presence of successful local models. Successful cases already exist within the county itself: the revitalized fortresses in Šibenik, ethno-villages, and gastronomic events built around Drniš prosciutto all show that targeted investment and professional management quickly bring more visitors, longer stays, and higher spending. These local examples serve as realistic, replicable models for inland municipalities such as Knin, Drniš, Skradin, Primošten, Unešić, and Ružić, and they can be directly referenced in project proposals for EU rural-development funds.

The overwhelming emphasis on authenticity as the county’s main competitive advantage supports broader theoretical arguments that perceived authenticity is the core appeal of heritage-based rural tourism in an age dominated by standardized coastal offers [85–87]. This reinforces the response to the first research question, positioning authenticity not merely as a descriptive trait but as a strategic asset for market positioning. Tourism entrepreneurs and marketing teams should therefore focus on storytelling grounded in real local narratives. Museums and heritage interpreters can use these findings to justify continued investment in high-quality, place-specific interpretation rather than generic visitor centers. For today’s travelers—especially the growing segments looking for slow, experiential, and regenerative travel—guaranteed authenticity is the decisive reason to choose Šibenik-Knin County over mass destinations.

The barriers repeatedly highlighted—chronic underfunding, shortage of qualified staff, weak cooperation, and insufficient political priority for inland areas—are typical of rural territories sitting next to strong coastal tourism zones throughout the Mediterranean and Central-Eastern Europe [87–89]. As evidenced in response to the second research question, overcoming these requires redirecting resources toward hinterland projects and building professional capacities. This study gives policymakers at county and national level concrete evidence to push for a much larger share of tourism-tax revenues and EU structural funds to be directed toward heritage-led projects in the interior. At the same time, it provides development agencies and NGOs with clear arguments for designing training programs that target both local officials and rural residents. Finally, the third research question is illuminated by stakeholders’ optimistic visions for interdisciplinary cooperation and community inclusion, which emerge as critical enablers for transforming heritage into a driver of economic and demographic revitalization.

For the academic community, the research offers several insights of wider relevance: (1) it documents near-complete stakeholder consensus on the centrality of cultural heritage in a region previously studied mainly through the lens of coastal mass tourism; (2) it shows how institutional differences can be turned into productive synergies rather than conflicts—an insight useful for multi-stakeholder governance studies elsewhere; (3) it highlights the crucial mediating role of gastronomy and living intangible heritage in connecting institutional offerings with community-based entrepreneurship, thereby enriching theoretical discussions on integrated rural tourism systems.

## 6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a purposive and availability-based sample of key institutional and expert stakeholders, which reflects the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study. While this approach enabled in-depth insights into strategic and governance-related perspectives on cultural heritage and rural tourism, it does not allow statistical generalization of the findings. Future studies could expand the stakeholder scope to include individual SME

entrepreneurs, local cultural associations, heritage protection and conservation bodies, and infrastructure management authorities in order to capture operational and implementation-level perspectives.

Second, the research focuses on a single case study region—Šibenik-Knin County—which limits the direct transferability of findings to other geographical contexts. However, the case-study approach provides rich, context-specific insights into heritage-based rural tourism in a Mediterranean setting. Comparative studies across multiple regions or countries would allow broader generalization and deeper understanding of common patterns and region-specific differences.

Finally, the study relies primarily on qualitative data. Although methodological triangulation was used to enhance robustness, future research could integrate quantitative approaches, such as surveys of local residents, entrepreneurs, or visitors, to further validate and extend the findings. Longitudinal research designs could also help assess how heritage-based rural tourism initiatives evolve over time and how policy interventions translate into concrete outcomes.

While this study focuses on cultural heritage valorization, governance, and stakeholder perspectives, it does not address tourism infrastructure and accommodation supply, which represent important enabling conditions for heritage-based rural tourism development. Future research could therefore examine how small-scale, locally embedded accommodation models can support heritage-led rural tourism, particularly from a sustainability perspective.

## 7. Conclusions

This study has clearly shown that local stakeholders unanimously recognize cultural heritage as one of the principal resources for the future of rural tourism in Šibenik-Knin County. At the same time, they consistently point out that this resource remains significantly underutilized in the hinterland, where tourism development still lags far behind the coastal zone. The main barriers identified—insufficient financial resources, lack of coordinated strategic planning, limited professional capacities, weak cross-sectoral cooperation, and a sometimes-passive attitude among parts of the local population and political leadership—remain significant challenges. Stakeholders also highlighted opportunities for coordinated actions, cross-sectoral collaboration, and community engagement as critical enablers for valorizing heritage in rural areas.

The key strengths of this research are several. It is one of the first studies to focus specifically on the role of cultural heritage in rural tourism development in Šibenik-Knin County, helping to fill an important gap in Croatian rural and cultural tourism literature. By conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of all major stakeholder groups (museums, tourist boards, academia, cultural institutions, and rural entrepreneurship support organizations), the study provides a comprehensive, multi-perspective view that goes well beyond official strategies and dry statistics. The findings underscore strong consensus on the importance of heritage while also revealing differences in stakeholder priorities, creating a robust foundation for future planning and collaborative initiatives.

The practical value of the research is especially high for several audiences: local and county-level tourist boards who want to diversify and depersonalize their offer; public institutions responsible for culture and heritage protection who need strong arguments for continued investment in the hinterland; municipalities and development agencies searching for proven models of community-based tourism; and regional policymakers drafting the next generation of strategic documents for the period after 2030. At the national level, the results reinforce the urgent need for support mechanisms targeting rural areas adjacent to highly developed coastal zones.

In summary, cultural heritage in Šibenik-Knin County is not just an ornamental addition to the existing tourism product; it has the genuine potential to become the central pillar of sustainable rural tourism. It can extend the season, redirect visitor flows from the overcrowded coast toward the hinterland, generate new income for depopulating rural communities, and preserve the county's unique identity for future generations. Achieving this transformation will demand systematic and long-term commitment, coordinated governance structures, continuous education of local actors, and targeted investment. If these conditions are met, Šibenik-Knin County can serve as a successful Croatian and Mediterranean example of how cultural heritage can effectively reverse negative demographic trends and breathe new life into rural areas without sacrificing their authenticity or environmental values.

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## Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This appendix presents the semi-structured interview guide used for data collection. All interviews followed a common set of core questions to ensure comparability across stakeholders. In addition, each respondent was asked two role-specific questions tailored to their institutional role, professional background, or ongoing projects.

### *Appendix A.1. Core Questions (Asked to All Respondents)*

#### Current State and Development Potential

1. Which cultural resources (tangible and intangible) do you consider most important for attracting rural tourists in the study region?
2. What role do you believe cultural heritage plays in the development of rural tourism in this area?
3. How would you assess the current level of cultural heritage valorization in the rural parts of the region?

#### Challenges and Barriers

4. What are the main challenges in using cultural heritage for rural tourism development?

5. Are there administrative, financial, or infrastructural barriers that limit this process?
6. To what extent is cultural heritage recognized by local stakeholders as an important factor for rural tourism development?

#### Opportunities for Improvement and Future Perspectives

7. What measures should be taken to improve the value of cultural heritage and its integration into the tourism offer?
8. Which elements of cultural heritage should be particularly emphasized in the promotion of rural tourism?
9. How do you envision the future of cultural heritage-based rural tourism in the region over the next five to ten years?

#### Appendix A.2. Role-Specific Questions

##### Museum and Cultural Heritage Institutions

- How do museums and cultural institutions contribute to rural tourism development?
- Which traditional programs, exhibitions, or activities do you offer to visitors?

##### Local and Regional Tourism Organizations

- What activities are currently undertaken to promote cultural heritage within rural tourism?
- Are there plans for new projects that could further enhance heritage-based rural tourism?

##### Academic and Educational Institutions

- What are the key academic insights regarding rural tourism and cultural heritage in the region?
- What recommendations would you propose for future development?

##### Cultural Infrastructure Management Bodies

- How do major cultural infrastructure sites contribute to rural tourism development?
- Which traditional programs or interpretive activities are offered to visitors?

##### Rural Development and Entrepreneurship Support Organizations

- Which projects related to rural tourism and cultural heritage are currently implemented or planned?
- How do you assess the effectiveness of previous projects?

##### Early Education and Community Heritage Programs

- Which traditional dances, customs, or practices are taught, and how are they presented to families and the local community?
- How does the inclusion of folklore and traditional practices in early education contribute to the preservation of local cultural heritage, and can this have long-term effects on rural tourism development?

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