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Sustainable Governance of the Po Delta Cultural and Landscape System: Balancing Cultural Heritage Protection and Territorial Development

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Abstract

The sustainable management of cultural and landscape heritage is a complex challenge involving many actors and disciplines. This study analyses the governance system of the Po Delta to identify improvements for reconciling heritage protection with sustainable development. Through a literature review, cultural institution mapping, and empirical surveys, the study examines existing network dynamics in the sense of sustainability. The results highlight a need for a mesostructure to facilitate cooperation among local authorities and cultural institutions.

Keywords: cultural heritage; sustainable governance; Po Delta; territorial development; network management; public–private partnership

1. Introduction

The sustainable management of cultural and landscape heritage is a complex challenge involving many actors and disciplines. To navigate this complexity, heritage governance must be conceptualised as an integrated framework whose scope spans from international regulatory protection to systemic local value creation. In this sense, the value of cultural heritage is expressed through a series of artistic, economic and managerial dimensions, requiring innovative approaches to reconcile conservation with sustainable territorial development [1]. Numerous theoretical models and regulatory instruments, including the Burra Charter (2013), the UNESCO Convention of 1972 and the Faro Convention (2005), have helped to outline the basic principles for the protection and enhancement of heritage, recognising the central role of local communities in the decision-making process [2].

However, translating these overarching governance principles into practice reveals deep-seated dilemmas across distinct operational subfields. In the administrative sphere, heritage management often has to mediate between seemingly conflicting objectives, such as the conservation and economic use of cultural resources [3]. This tension is particularly evident in the tourism sector, where the valorisation of heritage must be balanced with the need to preserve its authenticity and integrity [4]. In addition, recent international instability has highlighted the cultural sector's fragility and the need for innovative strategies to ensure the resilience and sustainability of cultural institutions [5], further exacerbating the managerial complexity of territories that are already structurally fragmented.

To address these fragmented management dilemmas, recent academic literature has increasingly turned toward network management models and ecosystem governance to



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leverage multi-stakeholder synergies [6]. However, implementing such collaborative networks is non-linear and becomes significantly more problematic in marginal or peripheral destinations, where geographic isolation, economic dependency, and institutional distance often hinder cooperative behaviours. Although extensive environmental and cultural research exists on these peripheral areas, a significant gap remains in understanding the evolution of sustainability as an active governance framework and an indispensable organisational tool capable of overcoming severe institutional fragmentation [7]. In this sense, the analysis of the international literature concerning the management of cultural and natural heritage can offer innovative and up-to-date perspectives in territorial organisational and managerial strategies.

To bridge these gaps, this study presents an integrated research framework to analyse the governance dynamics required to reconcile the protection of environmental, social, and territorial identities with sustainable economic development. Driven by this objective, the paper addresses three interconnected research questions:

RQ1: How do existing network dynamics and stakeholder perceptions currently shape the implementation of sustainability principles in a fragmented territory?

RQ2: What are the primary structural and administrative barriers that prevent public and private actors from developing integrated management strategies?

RQ3: To what extent can the creation of an intermediary coordinating body (a so-called mesostructure) facilitate effective cooperation among local authorities, cultural institutions, and economic operators?

To properly address these questions, this study adopts a multi-methodological approach centred on an interesting case study: the Po River Delta territory. Positioned geographically and institutionally across two distinct regional boundaries (Veneto and Emilia-Romagna) and designated as a UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserve, this area represents an emblematic socio-ecological system of complex environmental governance [8]. It encapsulates a high degree of structural fragmentation, friction in multi-level governance, and intense cross-border management dilemmas. Recognised as an area of primary national interest, it had been identified as a suitable site for a national park (the Italian Framework Law on Protected Areas—Legge 6 dicembre 1991, n. 394 [9]), a policy measure that was never implemented. Furthermore, the Delta faces a peculiar tourism tension: it must navigate the need for environmental and cultural preservation while being socio-economically pressured by nearby mass-tourism giants, such as Venice and the Adriatic Riviera. Consequently, the Po River Delta serves as an ideal real-world laboratory for testing how sustainability can transition from a theoretical concept to an active governance framework. To achieve these objectives, the study unfolds across targeted sub-sections: a comprehensive literature review that establishes the framework of heritage values and network governance, a methodological mapping of regional cultural institutions, and an empirical survey that evaluates stakeholder dynamics and sustainability investments. Ultimately, the paper utilises a strategic TOWS analysis to deliver actionable solutions and outlines an integrated mesostructure as a possible roadmap for long-term territorial resilience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Cultural Heritage Values and Sustainability

Cultural heritage finds its expression through a complex series of values traditionally attributed to it. In contemporary managerial literature, value is defined not as a static attribute, but as a dynamic expression of the multidimensional significance of cultural heritage, involving structural, artistic, economic, and managerial dimensions [2]. In the field of international conservation and heritage studies, various paradigms have emerged over the decades to define and standardize these value frameworks, including the fundamental

guidelines established by the Venice Charter [10], the operational concepts of the Burra Charter (2013) [11], the criteria of the Natural Heritage Charter [12], the parameters of the Natural Heritage List [13], and the identification methodologies of Significance 2.0 [14]. Numerous theoretical models and international regulatory instruments, most notably the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 [15] and the Council of Europe's Faro Convention (2005) [16], have helped to outline the basic principles for the protection, active co-management, and holistic enhancement of heritage, progressively recognising the central role of local communities in the decision-making process and social value creation [2,17].

The core definition of cultural heritage itself has generated an ongoing academic debate since the formal adoption of key conventions by UNESCO [15] and ICOMOS [11]. Initially limited to monumental architecture and tangible historic sites, the conceptualisation of heritage has broadened to encompass complex socio-cultural contexts, rural landscapes, and both tangible and intangible elements [18]. These elements are increasingly recognised for their integrated aesthetic, historical, ecological, and social value at both European and global [19] levels. This inherent complexity complicates the search for globally shared operational definitions [20] and highlights the critical need for nuanced management tools to balance long-term preservation for future generations with localised economic development [5].

Additionally, modern public and business economics view cultural heritage as a multi-layered asset that can significantly impact a territory's economic dimension, serving as a tool for socio-economic expediency [21]. It serves as an active economic resource capable of generating direct productive value [22] and cross-sectoral spillover effects on regional attractiveness and brand identity [23]. Given this recognition, the strategic management of cultural enterprises and creative networks has gained increasing interest within business economics, institutional design, and management research [24,25]. In recent decades, interest in cultural enterprises and in the long-term sustainability of heritage management has grown significantly, transforming the field from a niche topic into a core pillar of the broader cultural and circular economy [26].

However, the operational implementation of sustainability within cultural contexts remains complex and somewhat controversial. According to ICOMOS [25], achieving authentic sustainability in cultural heritage projects requires a holistic evaluation of cultural, technical, economic, and environmental outcomes [27]. By understanding the multifaceted nature of cultural heritage and its embedded values, institutional stakeholders can build strategic frameworks that enhance its resilience, ensuring it benefits future generations [28].

To put the concept of sustainable development into practice within heritage management, sustainability must be transformed from a broad ethical mandate or a purely political slogan into a concrete, measurable management tool. Following the global reference model developed by Müller and Grieshaber [29], a sustainable cultural organisation is operationally defined as an institution engaged in a continuous process of safeguarding and improving environmental health, whilst simultaneously creating tangible social value and promoting human well-being across the full spectrum of its activities, for the benefit of present and future generations. To bridge the gap between abstract theoretical objectives and actual performance in the field, empirical measurement methods must go beyond simplified metrics based solely on visitor numbers, such as gross visitor figures or ticket sales. The multi-layered effects of sustainability can be robustly quantified using multidimensional, sector-specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are strictly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These standardised evaluation methods must operate across three interconnected spheres: the governance, social, and environmental spheres [28,29].

Achieving heritage sustainability objectives is inherently complex due to their multiple competing aspects. In general, there remains a lack of universally recognised or standardised indicators for measuring sustainability in this domain, despite an extensive body of literature on the topic [30,31], particularly in balancing community needs and tourism pressures [32]. Economic sustainability, frequently identified as a critical vulnerability in the cultural sector, pertains to the continuous creation and maintenance of systemic economic value, differentiating it from narrow financial sustainability, which is often at risk due to structural constraints, mission dependencies, and shifting state allocations [33], and the volatile nature of alternative funding mechanisms like crowdfunding or short-term grants [34]. As detailed in the broader field of cultural economics, long-term economic durability requires a shift from mere financial survival to systemic value creation [35]. Social sustainability is directly linked to the long-term impact on community cohesion and human well-being, with a focus on how heritage enhancement affects local populations, civic empowerment, and equity in access [36,37]. This conceptualisation expands upon the foundational capacity of heritage to operate as a shared common-pool resource within polycentric territorial networks [38], generating, storing, and enhancing social capital [39], while driving overall urban and regional sustainability [40] and fostering deep-rooted socio-economic regeneration [41]. This model aligns with historical conceptual frameworks emphasising the importance of place attachment and community involvement in fostering long-term sustainable behaviours [42,43].

Environmental sustainability concerns protecting sites from intensifying climate disturbances, which is one of the most critical structural barriers to contemporary heritage preservation and requires complex socio-economic and adaptive legal solutions [44]. To counteract these risks, modern administrations must move beyond reactive conservation by implementing proactive circular-economy strategies [45] and solid green-economy principles in the daily management of cultural ecosystems [46,47].

The pursuit of these goals leads to the inclusion of an indispensable fourth dimension of sustainability: governance [48]. UNESCO (2017) elaborates on the classic triple-bottom-line model by incorporating governance, thereby emphasising the foundational importance of democracy, transparent policy design, and localised decision-making processes. It explicitly recognises that these administrative and political aspects are completely interdependent and must be addressed holistically to achieve long-term sustainability, embedded in frameworks of democratic network governance [49] and the recent participative turn in cultural policies [50]. Furthermore, the economic implications of cultural heritage conservation cannot be overlooked. Proper ecological and managerial protection of heritage sites can enhance their structural contribution to sustainable development by generating stable, high-quality revenue streams for local communities [51]. It underscores the need to integrate heritage conservation into broader regional economic strategies, shifting the evaluation of public–private partnerships from a purely ‘Value for Money’ focus to a systemic ‘Value for Society’ [52,53], ensuring that cultural heritage contributes to the vitality of local economies while preserving its intrinsic value. Novel analytical frameworks link heritage directly to environmental values, demonstrating that local communities view the natural environment itself as a non-substitutable form of cultural heritage that shapes both local economies and place identities over time [54]. It is also important to note the frequently overlooked role of cultural heritage in creating sustainable urban and rural settlements, mitigating depopulation, and enhancing social cohesion and a sense of belonging, all of which are vital for community development. It is particularly important to adopt an experiential ‘learning by doing’ approach to actively engage the younger generation, thereby transforming them into the future custodians of our shared cultural heritage [55].

Particularly in peripheral and highly sensitive regional landscapes, the necessity to balance long-term material protection for future generations with localised economic development and tourism attraction constitutes a persistent governance challenge, revealing severe institutional frictions if multi-level coordination mechanisms are absent, exposing the deep politics of world heritage in negotiating tourism and conservation [56] through complex relationships between agency and institutional museum policies [57]. Particularly in the destination management domain, tensions regularly arise between preservation and enhancement, as central government organs typically focus on rigid conservation, while local stakeholders and commercial operators prioritise economic growth and territorial development [22], especially during periods of global systemic fragility [58]. It is therefore important to examine in greater depth how these tensions are managed and the relationships between the various groups involved.

In summary, while the literature reaches consensus on heritage as a multidimensional asset across four sustainability spheres, controversies persist regarding governance friction between rigid preservation and peripheral tourism development. This tension exposes a critical research gap in integrated coordination tools, directly motivating the research questions to examine how fragmented local networks navigate these structural barriers.

2.2. Network Management and Ecosystem Governance

Having outlined the main problems and emerging issues in cultural heritage management, the theme of stakeholder network management emerged as the main strand of inquiry, seeking functional solutions. Nowadays, the questions that cultural heritage management faces are various and relevant: firstly, a significant shift toward networked models that emphasise collaboration over traditional hierarchical structures [59]. This trend is evident in the growing number of partnerships among public, private, and third-sector organisations, fostering multi-stakeholder cooperation. The shift toward networked governance is a crucial dimension of cultural heritage, seen as a driver of innovation. This operational evolution reflects a broader transition from the traditional management of cultural heritage to the systemic governance of cultural heritage networks [60]. Managing interdependencies and cultivating public value are the primary mechanisms for addressing multi-stakeholder demands [61]. Within contemporary cultural landscapes, this transition requires shifting the focus from rigid, isolated organisational boundaries to dynamic, fluid partnerships that ensure long-term institutional resilience [6].

To structurally frame these collaborative dynamics, contemporary literature emphasises multi-actor frameworks that transcend traditional public administration hierarchies. Specifically, the implementation of the Quadruple Helix model—which integrates academia, industry, government, and civil society—facilitates cross-sectoral innovation and enlarges management structures' competencies by combining diverse fields of knowledge, professional skills, and civic legitimacy [62]. As cultural organisations increasingly embed themselves within broader innovation ecosystems, this model evolves into the Quintuple Helix, incorporating the natural environment in an optic of sustainability. Such an eco-logistical approach operationalises socio-ecological interactions within fragmented regions, demonstrating that the co-creation of value and the alignment of multi-level governance logic are essential prerequisites for achieving both environmental stewardship and sustainable territorial development [48,63]. However, in peripheral landscapes and multi-level territorial frameworks, such geographical and political fragmentation hinders the operational scale of stakeholder networks, reducing trust and diminishing governance performance [64]. This issue requires analytical frameworks capable of evaluating the institutional scale and structural ties linking peripheral cultural organisations, shifting the focus from simple local cooperation to complex inter-regional synergy.

The management of public networks, particularly in the cultural sector, is part of the broader reforms and transformations in public administration within the New Public Management (NPM) framework. This developmental vector demonstrates that administrative shifts are rarely linear, being heavily contingent upon historical path-dependencies and institutional backgrounds; as Pollitt and Bouckaert [65] have verified regarding European administrative traditions, such macro-level diversities fundamentally dictate how structural reforms adapt to localised cultural governance. Within this multi-layered network landscape, evaluating institutional efficacy requires a shift toward complex performance management frameworks that measure the broader impact of public policies on collective well-being, reflecting the historical push to reinvent government structures [66]. The NPM approach, as conceptualised during its peak developmental phase [67], with its emphasis on efficiency and accountability, has influenced cultural policies, favouring management models inspired by private-sector logics. However, navigating these market-oriented structures within public ecosystems generates severe administrative frictions, as organisations frequently face conflicting institutional logics requiring high levels of network trust and systemic legitimacy to maintain organisational resilience [68]. Consequently, the specificities of culture raise questions about the compatibility between market logics and the public value generated by cultural institutions [1], requiring a deeper unravelling of how authentic cultural value is distinctively created and preserved [69].

In this sense, public administration reform in Italy has shown a significant “implementation gap,” with difficulties in adapting NPM logics to contexts characterised by rigid administrative traditions [70]. This structural misalignment confirms that Italian administrative reforms have historically been constrained by deeply entrenched bureaucratic paradigms. Looking at the broader European aggregate, the generic structural effects of New Public Management have frequently generated unintended frictions rather than straightforward efficiency [71]. Cultural network management involves overcoming these rigidities through collaborative, multidimensional governance models that enable effective planning and resource allocation. Institutional analysis shows that change in public management is not linear but is influenced by historical and cultural factors, with management accounting and administrative changes being particularly slow-moving and path-dependent [72]. This non-linear trajectory is frequently characterised by a clash of competing macro-level institutional logics—such as bureaucratic authority and professional expertise—requiring organisations to navigate conflicting mandates to maintain structural resilience [68].

The role of performance management systems in public institutions is crucial for assessing the impact of cultural policies and their contribution to collective well-being. Operationalising these evaluation toolkits requires moving beyond narrow financial audits toward comprehensive performance management frameworks capable of quantifying long-term social impact and systemic sustainability as observed in modern public sector evolutionary regimes [73]. The literature also highlights the importance of trust and legitimacy in managing public networks, key to ensuring the sustainability of cultural institutions [64]. As established by the alternative administrative traditions of public governance [74], building high levels of horizontal trust and perceived legitimacy within complex and highly uncertain governance networks is the fundamental prerequisite for minimising conflicts and enhancing collaborative resource sharing [75]. In this framework, the concept of “culture governance” takes a central role, highlighting the need for innovative tools for public policy coordination and enhancement of cultural institutions [17,76,77].

However, there are several governance challenges of networks, especially on the strategy level, such as coordinating decentralised structures. Also, ensuring accountability while maintaining flexibility is key, given the ongoing sustainability challenges and

network effectiveness paradigms examined by Provan and Kenis [78]. This shift from traditional hierarchical governance to more networked forms generates innovative collaborative approaches based on trust [79,80]. Empirical evidence demonstrates that higher levels of trust within governance networks lead directly to more positive administrative outcomes and increased network effectiveness [81]. Broadening the scope of public management ecosystems, complex networks of interconnected organisations, to last development, it seems far more necessary to generate new management instruments. According to Hetemi et al. [82], managing ecosystems effectively requires a deep understanding of interdependencies and a shift from traditional hierarchies to more fluid strategies tailored to context. Key elements of ecosystem management are coordination, co-creation, and value-sharing among diverse actors; embedding these practices in regional governance; and creating the right KPIs to control and measure them, allowing for more autonomous and decentralised practice of control and accounting.

Conclusively, current scholarship aligns with the necessity of multi-helix collaborative ecosystems to foster institutional resilience. However, distinct debates emerge regarding the severe administrative friction between private-sector market logics and entrenched, path-dependent bureaucratic traditions. This institutional misalignment highlights an operational gap in managing decentralised network effectiveness, directly underscoring the need for an inquiry into the structural barriers posed by fragmented territories.

2.3. Decentralisation, Autonomy, and Participatory Governance

Closely related to the previous point, decentralisation is a prominent topic in cultural heritage governance. Local authorities, NGOs, and community groups are gaining more influence in decision-making processes, directly influencing the network management of cultural institutions. A continuous dialectic involves local and central authorities, especially in countries such as Italy, where the State is responsible for conservation. Still, promotion activities are split among the State, regions, and local authorities (Articles 4 and 6 of the Italian Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape). Autonomy for museums, in particular, has been linked to increased creative freedom and innovation, as these institutions are better able to collaborate with partners such as private donors and international organisations [83]. Ultimately, this structural shift towards autonomy allows museums to bridge the gap between traditional practices and contemporary societal needs, anchoring institutional sustainability directly to community empowerment [37].

Economic sustainability and museums' proactive role in society are the two motivations behind another central point of the question. In this sense of societal commitment, public-private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly viewed as essential for the sustainable management of cultural heritage. These partnerships enable the blending of state support and private investment, contributing to more efficient resource allocation while ensuring that cultural heritage remains accessible as a public good. However, debates persist regarding the risks of commercialisation and the tensions among cultural, didactic, and commercial objectives, aligning with the classic public partnership complexities outlined by Bovaird [84] and Hodge and Greve [85]. On the other hand, collaborative arrangements leverage the strengths of both public institutions and private entities, potentially yielding sustainable and innovative conservation solutions. However, the complexities of these partnerships cannot be overlooked. Adaptability and responsiveness in planning processes are key to success. There is a growing recognition of the need for ongoing dialogue between public and private sectors to cultivate trust and cooperation [86].

In the specific context of inter-regional governance, this resilience cannot rely on loose, informal agreements. The dual challenges of administrative fragmentation and environmental risk force peripheral networks to shift from temporary, project-based col-

laborations to formalised public–private–third-sector ecosystems [6]. To bridge the gap caused by asymmetric regional legislations and local political mandates, literature suggests the introduction of ‘mesostructures’ or ‘boundary organisations’. A mesostructure is an intermediate level of governance that acts as a bridge between the macro level (the rules of the game, i.e., the general laws and institutional constraints of the state) and the micro level (individual organisations and local actors operating on the ground). Its main function is to translate, interpret and implement abstract public policies, transforming them into concrete guidelines, regulations and coordination mechanisms suited to the specific characteristics of a given territory or sector [87]. These intermediate structures act as stabilising nodes in regional innovation ecosystems, translating macro-level policies into coordinated local actions and professionalising peripheral cultural actors who would otherwise operate in complete isolation.

This instance is also gaining traction, promoting a more participatory and inclusive approach to governance. This framework emphasises the role of local communities in commons management, advocating for shared stewardship among cultural institutions, citizens, and other active parts of civil society, drawing directly on the classical political economy of the commons developed by Elinor Ostrom [38]. This approach raises concerns about balancing expertise and local knowledge, particularly in networked governance systems that aim to develop innovation and democratic participation. However, incorporating the concept of commons into cultural heritage management can inform policies that maximise the positive impacts of heritage on social capital. By viewing cultural heritage as a shared resource, communities can develop collaborative management models for safeguarding heritage, effectively leveraging community-based associations to build and store local social capital [88].

Inclusion and democratic participation are core principles in modern cultural policies, with an increasing emphasis on engaging a wide range of stakeholders in decision-making processes. This approach has seen significant growth in popularity in recent years, sanctioning a sort of cultural turn. In “The Participative Turn,” Bonet and Negrier discuss the shift towards participatory governance in cultural management, emphasising the importance of involving diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes. They argue that this “participative turn” reflects a new recognition of the value of local knowledge in the management of cultural resources. As traditional top-down approaches become less effective at addressing social and cultural issues, participatory models emerge as a means of fostering collaboration, building trust within the network, and empowering communities [50]. However, as critical heritage studies remind us [89], traditional institutions and entrenched cultural elites often dominate these processes, potentially undermining genuine inclusivity within the participatory framework.

The theme of network expansion relies not only on the expansion of digital space but also on the practical governance of cultural heritage and on unexpected implementations. As public funding diminishes, organisations increasingly rely on networked governance to secure financial resources in a way far more complex than simple PPPs. Collaborations with international partners, corporations, and philanthropic organisations are crucial for funding conservation efforts, exhibitions, and digitisation projects. While network governance can provide resilience, some scholars warn of the same risks as PPPs, leading toward market-driven goals due to dependence on private funding [83], a structural vulnerability that forces contemporary administrations in Europe to rigorously review alternative financial sustainability mechanisms, such as crowdfunding campaigns and micro-donations [34]. Anyway, network governance has recently resembled an interesting experiment in various respects, playing an increasingly important role in cultural diplomacy and international cross-border cooperation to mitigate geopolitical imbalances [5,59,90].

In conclusion, scholarship widely supports community-inclusive frameworks and intermediate boundary arrangements to empower regional actors. Nonetheless, prominent anxieties persist regarding elite capture and commercialisation within public–private arrangements, leaving an implementation gap that must be addressed.

2.4. Regional Application: The Po Delta Governance and the Meso-Level Model

In the Italian context, participation enters the actual dialectic between the public and the private, and between the national and the local, in the management of heritage, for the broader scope of sustainability. In the previously cited text, Visser Travagli highlights how:

“La valorizzazione è infatti prima di tutto partecipazione e non solo flussi turistici, dai quali ricavare il maggior volume possibile di introiti. L’uso corretto del bene diventa allora anche garanzia di conservazione, per questo motivo paradossalmente la valorizzazione è la miglior forma di tutela” [83] (“Indeed, heritage enhancement is first and foremost about participation, not merely about tourist numbers from which to generate as much revenue as possible. The proper use of a heritage site thus also ensures its preservation; for this reason, paradoxically, enhancement is the best form of protection.”).

In this delicate equilibrium, given the richness of heritage sites that inform the entire Italian territory, national public network management systems need to be investigated in depth. In this sense, Donato and Gilli [86] argue that a strict micro-level focus, even within a managerial framework, is not sufficient. The heritage sector in Italy requires a model that fosters the interdependence of cultural assets across territories, necessitating both micro (individual) and meso levels of governance. The multi-scale model proposed by Donato and Gilli suggests a more holistic management system. It advocates for a meso-level of governance that oversees groups of cultural institutions connected by their territorial and cultural relevance. This level would serve as an intermediate layer of management, coordinating a large network of actors.

This inter-regional layer enables more adaptive and responsive management, ensuring that heritage management transcends traditional administrative boundaries, as cultural regions and natural ecosystems—such as water basins—often do not align with existing bureaucratic structures, necessitating dynamic landscape and ecosystem design scenarios that can shift with environmental complexities [91]. The multi-scale approach also offers opportunities for greater cross-regional collaboration, resource sharing, and network innovation. Similarly, within these fragmented territories, organisational adaptation depends on the complex interaction and reconciliation between macro-level institutional logics (authority, the market, professionalism) and meso-level institutional logics (risk, capacity), giving rise to different profiles of meso-institutions (pioneers, complacent, market-oriented), which can be structurally mapped and evaluated through advanced network analysis approaches to stakeholder perceptions [92]. Within cross-regional frameworks, only the ‘pioneers’ cluster manages to develop a cohesive ‘meso-logic’ to remain flexible and resilient, especially in the face of the systemic impacts of climate change, which are so significant for areas such as the Po Delta [68]. In this sense, cultural institutions can collectively pursue goals such as climate resilience, integrated fundraising, tourism development, and international cross-border promotion, which may be challenging for smaller, isolated institutions to achieve on their own. Furthermore, such inter-regional integration can enhance visitor experiences, contributing to the sustainable management of Italy’s vast cultural assets.

In this sense, the case of the Parco Regionale del Delta del Po is of primary importance for identifying potential actors in this innovative managerial modality. The territory of the Po Delta Regional Park has, in the past, been the subject of several studies related to heritage management, but these were conducted as part of an evaluation of the broader Ferrarese territory. This specific socio-economic condition of peripheral networks has

been structurally framed by economic geography concepts addressing regional territorial capital [93] and the endogenous development of peripheral areas [94]. The Po Delta can be seen as a dynamic territory situated at the intersection of marginality and opportunity. Geographic marginality traditionally is linked to economic and social disadvantage, but the Delta's unique attributes—such as its natural resources and cultural heritage—offer significant development potential [83]. A shift in perception and knowledge of the territory and its protection and enhancement mechanisms could be relevant to sustainable economic development.

In this sense, a seminal publication, *“Competenze e strumenti per il Patrimonio Culturale: Il caso del territorio ferrarese”*, is the result of an interdisciplinary research project conducted by the University of Ferrara. It is an innovative and interdisciplinary publication featuring texts by F. Donato, A.M. Visser Travagli, and F. Badia [83]. It explores the management and enhancement of Ferrara's cultural heritage through various academic lenses. The work presents three key sections: knowledge of the cultural landscape, diagnostic and conservation methods, and strategies for both cultural and economic valorisation. It highlights the importance of collaboration between public and private actors to overcome challenges related to infrastructure and governance through structured stakeholder mapping, a foundational toolkit to clarify strategic goals when diverse public–private interests intersect [95,96], particularly in a region rich in both natural and cultural resources yet still marginal in some parts, such as the Ferrara Province [83].

With the same interdisciplinary approach, subsequent studies delved into the Delta del Po in depth. Elena Borin's study, *“Fostering the Creation of Cross-Sectorial Networks: Key Drivers for Culture-Related Collaborations in Italy's Po Delta Region”*, ref. [97] investigates how cross-sector collaborations can enhance cultural development in this area, tracing the evolutionary potential of these trans-sectoral networks within the specific regional fabric of the Po Delta. The research emphasises the need to establish networks that integrate a variety of stakeholders and different instances. Borin highlights several key drivers that foster these collaborations, arguing that “boundary groups” and “facilitators” can play a critical role in connecting different stakeholders and promoting long-term cooperation.

Along the same research line, in *“Unlocking the Potential of Intellectual Capital (IC) in Italian Cultural Ecosystems”* [98], Borin and Donato explore how intellectual capital can be leveraged within the cultural sector, focusing on the Delta del Po context. The study highlights how IC can foster innovation, sustainability, and collaboration in cultural ecosystems. By integrating IC into these ecosystems, stakeholders create value for regional growth. This strategic alignment between localised assets and regional attractiveness aligns with classic economic geography frameworks on territorial capital and endogenous development [93,94], in which intangible resources are converted into sustainable economic pathways. Borin and Donato argue that while IC is recognised as a valuable asset, its full potential has not been realised in cultural ecosystems in the Delta del Po region. The study suggests that collaborative frameworks and leadership are key to revealing this potential, calling for further research to better understand how IC can be maximised in practice and to enhance the cultural ecosystem. This operational boundary emphasises a persistent implementation gap, confirming that the simple existence of intellectual capital is insufficient without structured coordination mechanisms to handle network accountability and performance [99].

Finally, the authors place strong emphasis on the need to identify a mesostructure. As mentioned above, this appears to be a key element in managing local cultural heritage, especially in an area far from main tourist routes yet rich in cultural and natural sites. This structural requirement shifts the focus from loose, informal coalitions to formalised public–private–third-sector ecosystems capable of navigating multi-level governance chal-

lenges [100]. Recent research has focused on potential new interdisciplinary tools to evaluate and steer these complex frameworks. PES mechanisms can be useful frameworks for internalising costs by establishing connections between ecosystem service providers and users. By positioning the park authority as an intermediate regulator capable of facilitating these value-sharing schemes, this localised application provides a concrete operational answer to the international literature on ecological economics and complex performance indicators [101,102]. Ultimately, while this combined body of literature acknowledges the potential of cross-sectoral networks, intellectual capital, and environmental mechanisms, a gap remains in how to translate these independent tools into an integrated, day-to-day governance lens for long-term sustainability.

Framing the territorial context, localised literature converges on utilising intermediate meso-governance to unlock the Po Delta's dormant territorial and intellectual capital. However, a distinct implementation gap remains regarding how to transition loose cross-sectoral networks into a sustainable management framework, a void that directly establishes the final research question inquiry into a formal coordinating mesostructure.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Context: The Po Delta Region

As outlined in the structural design of this empirical investigation, a dedicated spatial and administrative contextualization is required to understand the operational conditions of the study area. The Po Delta, divided into two administrative regions (Emilia-Romagna and Veneto), as shown in Figure 1, represents a territory of immense cultural, landscape, and natural interest, yet it simultaneously faces acute governance complexities. Administratively organised into two distinct Regional Parks, the Emilia-Romagna protected natural area was established in 1988 and covers approximately 54,000 hectares. In 1999, the Po Delta Park was inscribed onto the prestigious list of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, joining the historical territory of the city of Ferrara. Subsequently, in 2015, the area was also formally designated, alongside the Veneto Regional Natural Park of the Po Delta, as a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program.

In this specific geographical setting, complex ecological wetlands—which serve as vital habitats for numerous protected animal species—exist in immediate proximity to complex historical buildings. Many of these physical structures are directly linked to the region's recent history of economic and industrial exploitation and land reclamation. As a consequence, conservation and enhancement processes within the region encounter highly articulated operational challenges. This complex territorial management is further exacerbated by the growing threat of climate change, which induces significant environmental vulnerabilities. Concurrently, the region suffers from geographic marginalisation away from the primary regional tourist flows and faces a structural shortage of land transport infrastructure, creating severe barriers to socio-economic development and integrated heritage stewardship.

The selection of the Po Delta Regional Park as the empirical focus of this study is methodologically justified by its unique configuration as a territory situated at the intersection of geographical marginality and exceptional endogenous opportunity. Within the framework of economic geography, peripheral landscapes are typically defined by structural socio-economic disadvantages, environmental precarity, and spatial insulation. However, the Po Delta effectively translates these vulnerabilities into a dynamic laboratory for governance innovation, where its vast natural assets and UNESCO-recognised cultural landscape function as primary drivers for the conversion of territorial capital [84] and endogenous regional development [94]. Rather than viewing geographic insulation merely as a source of marginalisation, this approach demonstrates that a strategic shift in

perception, diagnostic knowledge, and the integrated enhancement of the territory can serve as a crucial catalyst for sustainable economic growth [88].



Figure 1. Location of the Po Delta region in Italy and the boundaries of the Po Delta Regional Park in Emilia-Romagna (in dark green) and Veneto (in light green).

The academic validity of isolating this specific regional system rests on a growing body of local and interdisciplinary literature that increasingly calls for a departure from isolated, functionalist management practices. Early regional inquiries established that effective heritage safeguarding cannot occur in a vacuum; instead, material conservation methods must be structurally aligned with sustainable public–private business models to successfully overcome systemic infrastructural and governance barriers [83].

Subsequent field research expanded this paradigm by introducing the necessity of cross-sectoral networks to mitigate institutional fragmentation. Within this reticular perspective, museums and cultural institutions are conceptualised as active territorial hubs embedded in the region’s productive tissue. These institutions are responsible for both long-term preservation and the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism, relying heavily on the horizontal action of boundary groups and organisational facilitators to align multi-stakeholder interests and build network flexibility [97]. This localised coordination explicitly tracks international principles of public network effectiveness, which demonstrate that horizontal legitimacy and relational trust are the core prerequisites for guiding decentralised configurations toward overall structural resilience [78].

Finally, contemporary cultural ecosystem mappings have integrated the intangible dimension into regional growth models, focusing on the strategic deployment of Intellectual Capital (IC). While IC represents an invaluable, non-substitutable asset for fostering innovation and sustainability within the Po Delta, its systemic potential has historically gone unexpressed due to severe geopolitical fragmentation and a lack of unified, dedicated

territorial leadership [36]. This operational constraint reflects a persistent implementation gap within public administration reforms [65]. It confirms that the conversion of intangible intellectual capital into collective public value cannot rely on loose, project-based collaborations but fundamentally requires a formalised governance mesostructure to serve as an intermediate coordinating layer that bridges traditional bureaucratic and provincial boundaries.

3.2. Materials and Methods

Building on data from the literature, a wide-ranging exploratory research project was developed. A purposive sampling method was adopted to select the surveyed institutions and sites of cultural interest. This strategy was chosen to explore and map the local heritage network as thoroughly as possible, and to ensure that the selected cases possessed the specific characteristics necessary to address the research questions, in line with the theoretical framework. Specifically, the mapping process began with the park's official website and was supplemented with local maps, municipal websites, and pro loco (local tourism association) databases. Sites were selected based on the following criteria: (1) Relevance to the literature. The site or institution reflects the core cultural and heritage dimensions identified in the academic debate. (2) Local attractiveness. The site is officially recognised by local municipalities, regional tourism bodies or official press as a relevant attraction. (3) Thematic nature of the area. The site explicitly represents one of the three foundational pillars of the territory: natural, cultural, or industrial heritage.

Regarding the heterogeneity of the sample, the study adopts an epistemological perspective grounded in recent developments in the taxonomy and governance of cultural institutions [103]. Rather than a structural bias, the diversity of the institutions reflects the true nature of the region, understood as a social fabric composed of realities that cannot be reduced to a standard or essentialist formula. According to the methodological principles underpinning this approach—which, in any case, operate within a common framework of shared governance, namely that of the Delta Park—the marked structural and functional diversity of the institutions analysed does not introduce a bias into the results, but rather pursues the deliberate aim of documenting the uniqueness of each case whilst, at the same time, bringing to light shared patterns of crucial importance that cut across the entire territorial context [104]. A complete list of the sites identified can be found in Appendix A. The localisation of these entities is visualised in Figure 2 (northern part) and Figure 3 (southern part), following the list in Appendix A as legend.

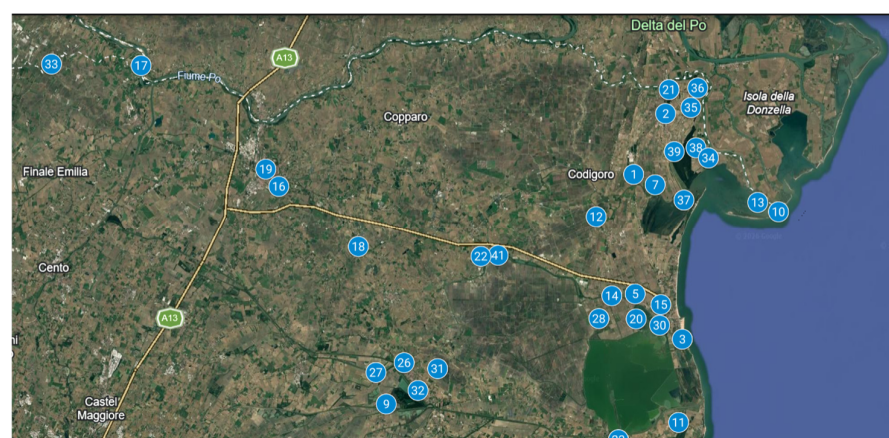


Figure 2. The northern part of the area, showing the sites surveyed (The numbers refer to the list appearing in Appendix A).

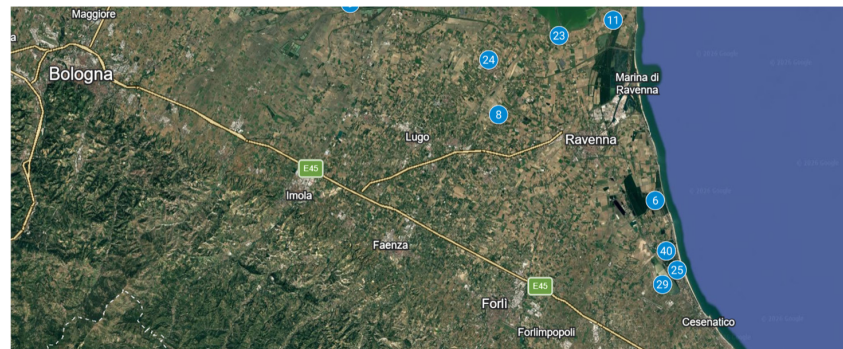


Figure 3. The southern part of the area, showing the sites surveyed (The numbers refer to the list appearing in Appendix A).

An interview was then developed based on the selected specialist literature. Data collection was commissioned to an independent professional research organisation. The research and interview design and data collection instruments were developed through an iterative process of continuous consultations between the authors and the organisation's methodology experts. This partnership ensured strict adherence to professional quality standards, data validation, and ethical guidelines during the entire fieldwork phase. To ensure the rigour of the empirical survey, the research instrument was validated for both content and construct validity. Content validity was established qualitatively by ensuring that all questionnaire items, including the selection of the 13 specific stakeholder groups and the multi-item dimensions of sustainability, were rigorously grounded in the established regional governance and stakeholder management literature [29,96]. The first part consists of closed-ended questions, yes–no questions, and Likert-scale items. The qualitative part allows the identified institutions to provide extensive responses to the territory's specific issues. Of the 41 sites identified, three were closed to the public. Ultimately, the sample comprises 38 organisations. The questionnaire was administered in September–October 2024, and 10 of the indicated recipients responded (response rate: 26.3%). The 10 respondents constitute a valid sample for exploratory research in a field that remains relatively under-researched and are well justified, given the limited reference population. The aim is not to be exhaustive, but to explore the issue and the topic with the respondents. The validity stems from the ability to explore decision-making processes and underlying motivations in depth, as well as from the fact that the respondents are decision-makers at key sites. The size of the target group is determined by the desired level of detail and the specificity of the variables under consideration: within a limited 'universe', a small number of interviews allows for an analysis that large quantitative samples would not permit. This approach is further supported by the work of Boddy [105], who highlights how, in groups of respondents with common characteristics, the point of 'theoretical saturation' is usually reached between 6 and 12 interviews. Therefore, the 10 cases analysed provide sufficient coverage of the area's significant dynamics for an initial exploratory study on the topic.

Construct validity was assessed through convergent and discriminant criteria. Concerning internal consistency, the reliability of the multi-item scales used to measure stakeholders' interest (Q8) and power (Q9) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. This statistical indicator allows us to estimate the internal consistency of a set of observed variables, determining the extent to which they converge on measuring the same latent construct. Formally, the calculation is based on the ratio of the number of items K , the sum of the variances of the individual items y_i^2 and the variance of the total scale score x^2 , according to the formula:

$$\alpha = K / (K - 1) \left(1 - \left(\sum y_i^2 \right) / x^2 \right)$$

For the interest scale, the value was 0.83, whilst for the power scale, it was 0.70. Since both coefficients meet or exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 in social research, the survey instrument is statistically valid, and the data collected are considered fully reliable for supporting the analysis of territorial governance and the coordination proposals presented in this study.

Discriminant validity was confirmed by verifying that 'Interest' and 'Power' captured statistically distinct dimensions; the low-to-moderate correlation between the aggregate scores demonstrates that respondents effectively distinguished between a stakeholder's environmental engagement (interest) and their formal strategic influence (power). This approach made it possible to verify that the observed consistency was not due to systematic distortions or to gross logical errors in the completion of the Likert data. Given the specific scale of the peripheral ecosystem and the resulting sample-size constraint, more complex factor-analytic techniques were omitted, relying instead on this robust nomological and qualitative validation framework.

In line with the methodological framework proposed by Wehrich [106], the qualitative data collected through open-ended questions will be analysed in an initial SWOT analysis phase to systematically identify the endogenous factors (strengths and weaknesses) and exogenous factors (opportunities and threats) of the local context. Subsequently, these variables will be integrated into a TOWS matrix to shift from a static classification to a dynamic perspective, thereby enabling the identification of specific strategic options based on the logical interactions among the different categories of factors.

With regard to data visualisation, the figures contained in this study were generated using Gemini (Google LLC, Mountain View, CA, USA). The tool was used solely to enhance the quality of visualisation and the graphical layout on the basis of manually defined conceptual structures. No textual or conceptual material was generated by the software. All conceptual content and figure structures were compiled manually by the authors to ensure academic accuracy and consistency with the content of the manuscript. The software version is not specified by the provider.

4. Results

The 10 responding organisations comprise a diverse mix of museum complexes and historic sites (40%), nature reserves and landscape sites (30%), and centres dedicated to industrial archaeology and production linked to water management (30%). The museum complexes describe themselves as centres of primary importance from historical, artistic, cultural, and religious perspectives, focusing on institutional activities in research, conservation, and dissemination in the scientific and archaeological fields. Nature reserves and sites perceive their own reality as unique areas of particular conservation interest, presenting themselves both as inland freshwater areas essential for biological conservation and as points of reference for local associations and promotion through online tourist booking portals. Finally, facilities dedicated to industrial archaeology and land reclamation link their identity to the active management of state-owned waterways, highlighting that water management interventions are significant not only economically but also for the territory's functional and physical defence.

The first section of the questionnaire comprises quantitative and closed-ended questions. It starts by focusing on institutional management and general data on the governance structures (public/private/partnership) of museums, their staffing (including both contracted employees and collaborators), and audience engagement metrics (e.g., number of paying visitors from 2021 to 2023).

As shown in Figure 4, of the responding organisations, 50 per cent are privately managed, 40 per cent are public, and only 10 per cent are in a public-private partnership.

In all, the responding realities have 504 employees and 26 collaborators. Total accesses for 2021 were 59,298; for 2022, 95,727; and for 2023, 94,315. The 30% of respondents did not provide the requested data in this area. Notably, there is a positive trend between 2021 and 2022, likely due to post-pandemic reopenings following COVID-19, and a slightly negative trend between 2022 and 2023 (1412 fewer visitors). To the questions “Do you feel satisfied with the number of accesses recorded in 2022?” and “Do you feel satisfied with the accesses recorded in 2023?”, half of the sample responded affirmatively and half negatively for both years.

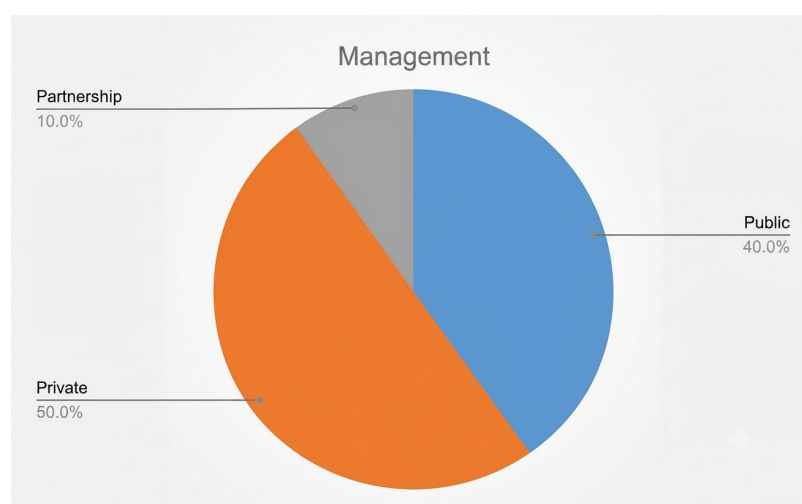


Figure 4. Type of management of different realities.

Then respondents were asked to rank a list of stakeholders using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest score, and 1 is the lowest. Each of the 13 stakeholders was rated to indicate the extent of their interest in the respondents’ organisation’s operations and their power over the organisation’s strategic decisions. The relevance of this type of stakeholder mapping and listing stems from the study by Monza et al. [96], which focuses directly on museums and cultural institutions. An arithmetic average was then computed from the responses, and, using the resulting mean, a grid was compiled, with ratings on the x-axis for interest and on the y-axis for power.

The resulting graph is shown in Figure 5. Based on the literature [95], we identify stakeholders who received a rating above 2.5 in both domains as requiring close management. In this case, they are mainly institutional stakeholders (referral entities, institutions, schools), similar and area associations, and tour operators that receive the highest scores. A picture thus emerges of the stakeholders deemed most relevant by the respondents, who seem to have both an institutional and an educational role, situated within a network where the territorial element is present but primarily operates at the level of the governance framework. In contrast, a good number of stakeholders have a high level of interest but low power over the organisations surveyed, in particular, industry associations, the media, collectors, and museum suppliers. Respondents therefore feel they are the focus of attention from various stakeholders and need to keep a broad network informed of their work. Sponsors and service supply companies score low, so they must be monitored by the organisations.

In this sense, using the same Likert scale assessment method applied to Social Network Analysis (Dalka et al., 2021) [92], the organisations were asked to identify their centrality in the network of area stakeholders in some specific topics (sustainability, innovation, conservation of cultural heritage, enhancement of cultural heritage, enhancement of the territory, education, tourism attraction).

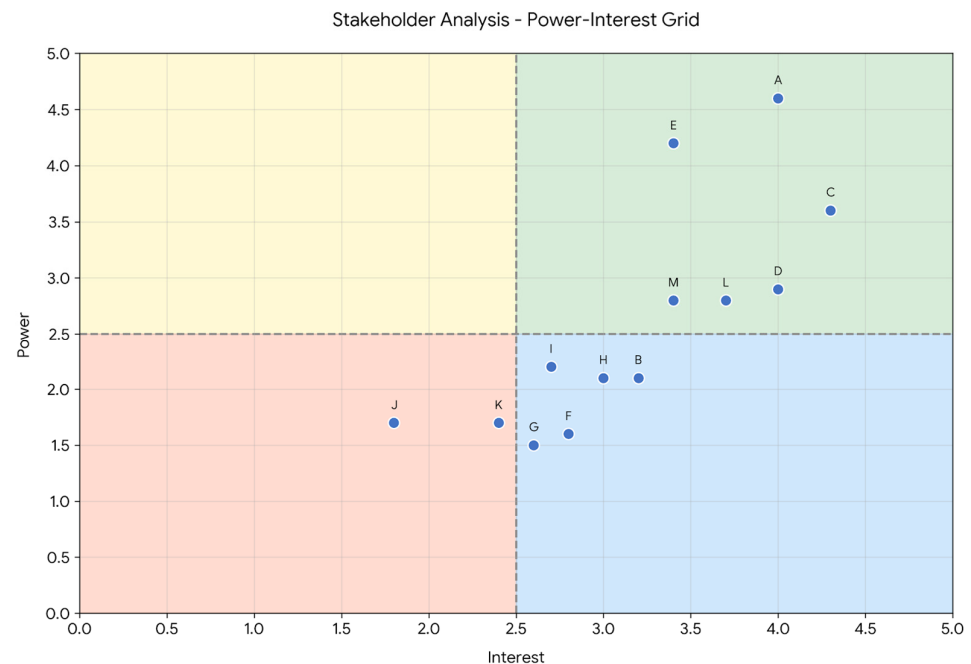


Figure 5. Power-Interest Grid. Legend: A. Reference entities. B. Researchers working for museums. C. Area schools. D. Cultural associations of similar sectors. E. Institutions. F. Museum suppliers. G. Collectors. H. Sector associations, e.g., ANMLI. I. Sector media. J. Sponsors. K. Service supply companies, e.g., coop. staffing. L. Local community, e.g., non-sector associations. M. Tour operators, e.g., travel agencies.

The graph in Figure 6 shows the arithmetic means of participants' responses. In general, the respondents consider themselves decidedly central in cultural heritage enhancement, territorial enhancement, education, and tourism attraction, aligning with the data from the previous stakeholder grid. Interesting how they consider themselves less central to sustainability. The same analysis applies to the lowest-ranked factor—innovation—which is perhaps seen as the most complex to pursue and the least directly linked to one's own cultural role. Similarly, the low perceived centrality in the conservation sector suggests that this function is still delegated almost exclusively to top-level institutions responsible for protection, thereby reducing the role of individual stakeholders in this technical sphere. Conversely, respondents appear to view their primary mission as enhancing the entire territory, perceiving their role as more active and decisive in the area's systemic development rather than in the physical preservation of individual heritage assets.

At this point, the questionnaire focuses on sustainability. It investigates whether sustainability is an internal strategic goal, how museums engage with public or institutional sustainability efforts and external pressures for action.

All respondents consider sustainability a sensitive element for their organisation. 40 per cent of responding organisations have designated a specific internal figure to handle this area. 90 per cent of the respondents participated in institutional discussions on the topic, while 70 per cent believe there are external/institutional pressures to implement actions in this sense. Figure 7 shows whether respondents have implemented actions and/or investments across the 4 areas of sustainability (economic, social, environmental, and governance). It is particularly worth noting the high level of management activism: 80% of stakeholders report having made significant investments in governance. Starting from this outstanding data, a comparison between perceived centrality (Figure 6) and actual operational effectiveness (Figure 7) reveals a significant paradox: although stakeholders do not feel they play a leading role in sustainability at the network level, they express a unanimous individual commitment, particularly in the environmental and social dimen-

sions. This discrepancy suggests a profound fragmentation of efforts, with investments within the organisations acting proactively but in isolation, without, however, perceiving sustainability as a collective value at the local network level.

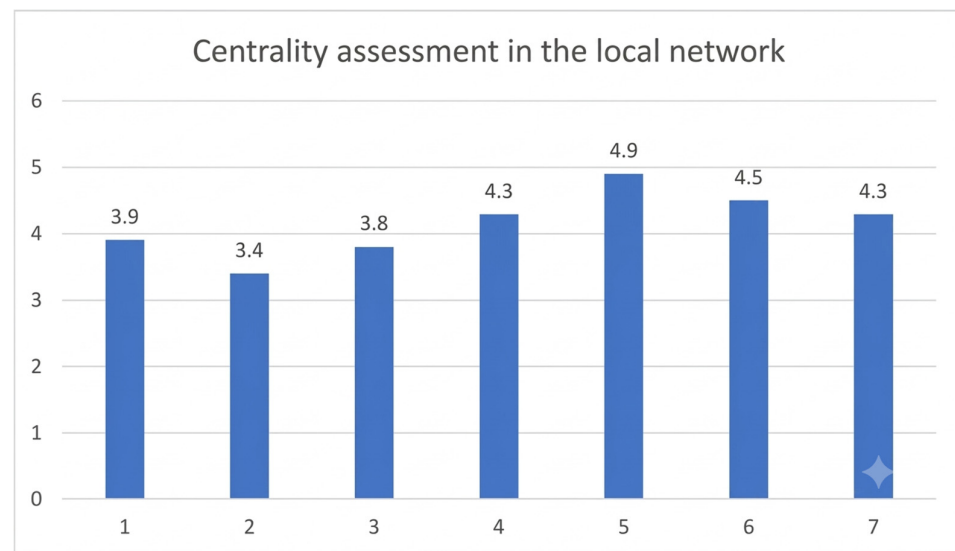


Figure 6. Centrality assessment in the local network. Value: 5 highest centrality–1 lowest centrality; Legend: Centrality in the areas of sustainability (1), innovation (2), conservation of cultural heritage (3), enhancement of cultural heritage (4), enhancement of the territory (5), education (6), and tourism attraction (7).

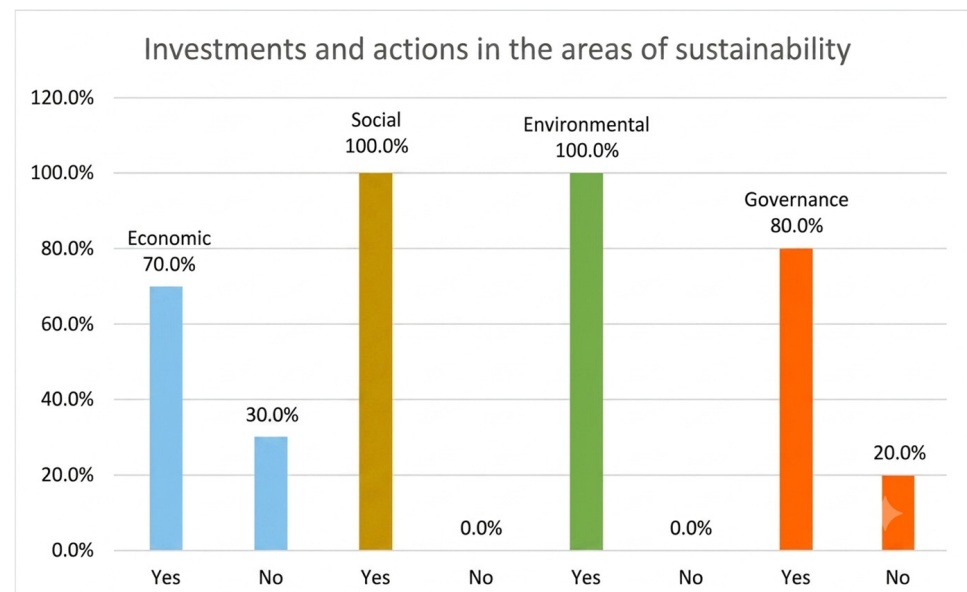


Figure 7. Investments and actions in the areas of sustainability.

Figure 8 shows the answers to the question “With which stakeholders do you think your relationships in the field of sustainability are lacking?” to which it was possible to answer by selecting multiple subjects from the stakeholder list already used previously. The answer was not mandatory, so not all respondents selected a stakeholder. The stakeholders who received the most selections were the institutional entities (Reference entities: 5 selections; Institutions: 3 selections) and the tour operators (3 selections). It is possible to hypothesise, from the low rate given to Service supply companies and Museum suppliers, a difficulty in clearly defining the operational parameters of sustainability. In particular, there appears to be a lack of awareness of local supply chain dynamics, which are fundamental

to managing true sustainability, beyond the purely institutional level. The need for greater cohesion and shared planning with relevant stakeholders, as well as closer relationships with tourism operators, has emerged to ensure sustainable tourism development.



Figure 8. Missing relationships in sustainability. Legend: 1. Reference entities. 2. Researchers working for museums. 3. Area schools. 4. Cultural associations of similar sectors. 5. Institutions. 6. Museum suppliers. 7. Collectors. 8. Sector associations, e.g., ANMLI. 9. Sector Media. 10. Sponsors. 11. Service supply companies, e.g., Coop. staffing. 12. Local community, e.g., non-sector associations. 13. Tour operators, e.g., travel agencies.

The second section, composed of quantitative and qualitative questions, shifts to the specific context of the Delta del Po, examining the museums' perceptions of their cultural role, the effectiveness of regional governance, and inter-organisational cohesion. Questions address awareness of and participation in projects aimed at territorial enhancement, as well as the potential benefits of such engagements.

Responses to the question on general perceptions of the Po Delta area, particularly its cultural dimension, reveal nuanced insights that underscore both the area's potential and its existing governance and promotional challenges. Several participants emphasised the vastness and ecological importance of the Po Delta, noting that it is a unique environment that extends beyond the Adriatic coast to Ferrara, and stressing the need to view it as an integrated system rather than as isolated parts. There is strong sentiment against unrestricted tourist access, with respondents supporting the protection of coastal biodiversity and prioritising controlled tourism to preserve environmental integrity. A prevalent theme is the lack of cohesive communication and coordination among local entities, which currently results in fragmented promotion and limited public awareness. This fragmentation prevents the formation of a unified image of the Po Delta Park, making it difficult for tourists to grasp the area's full cultural and ecological scope. In addition, respondents emphasise the need for a more unified approach to cultural and natural enhancement, rather than leaving responsibilities to individual local entities, while recognising the Delta's untapped potential for tourism and cultural development, especially in the off-season. This feedback indicates both a strong awareness of the Po Delta's importance and a call for better network governance to support its sustainable promotion.

In the graph in Figure 9, several aspects that emerged in the previous response can be compared using a Likert scale evaluation. The average that emerged from the responses to the question "How much do you think the Po Delta area is valued as a culturally and ecologically relevant place?" is 3.4, indicating a positive value. Similarly, the question "How much do you think the Po Delta area is affected by enhancement projects?" receives

a generally positive response, with an average of 3.6. It is therefore interesting to compare these responses to the following answer, which averages one point lower. To the question “Do you think the cultural realities of the Po Delta are adequately coordinated?”, the average response is 2.6. 30 per cent of respondents identified the Park Authority as the body responsible for ensuring cohesion among the various organisations; 20 per cent said they did not know how to answer. Note that this question was only included in the questionnaire by giving a value greater than or equal to 3 in the previous question. The remaining 50 per cent were asked to explain the reasons for this perceived problem. This lack of coordination stems from several factors, primarily the difficulty of establishing a shared language and framework among stakeholders. Limited access to information, individualistic approaches and self-interest further hinder collaboration. Interviewees also point to the absence of a unified management body between the two governing regions, which complicates efforts to achieve cohesive action and shared goals. Thus, even if it is quite clear that an institution is entitled to coordinate the organisations, a perception of deficient inter-organisational coordination is evident, as confirmed by the graph in Figure 10, which shows that exactly half of the respondents acknowledge the need for more territorial coordination. Despite the distinct differences among the types of institutions, a clear uniformity emerges in their responses to territorial networks: all categories identify a significant problem with the absence of shared governance, reinforcing the necessity for this reorganisation.

To improve coordination in the Po Delta area, respondents suggest organising regular meetings and promoting closer cooperation among the various entities. From the answers emerges the importance of improving informal links between the Park institution and the Visitor Centres, as well as increasing the involvement of the Delta’s peripheral areas. Proposals include creating a working table and a shared network among managers, as well as promoting greater awareness of the habitat’s ecological importance.

Finally, respondents were asked to complete a SWOT analysis regarding the park area and their own organisations.

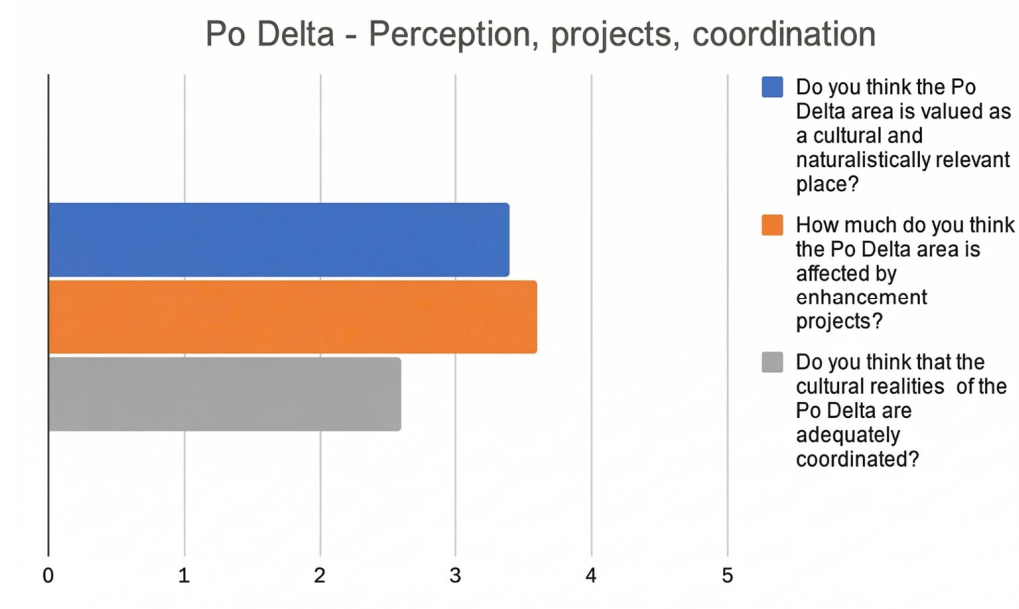


Figure 9. Perception of the area, projects that involved the area, and coordination of the different realities. Value: 5—strongly agree/positive answer; 1—strongly disagree/negative answer.

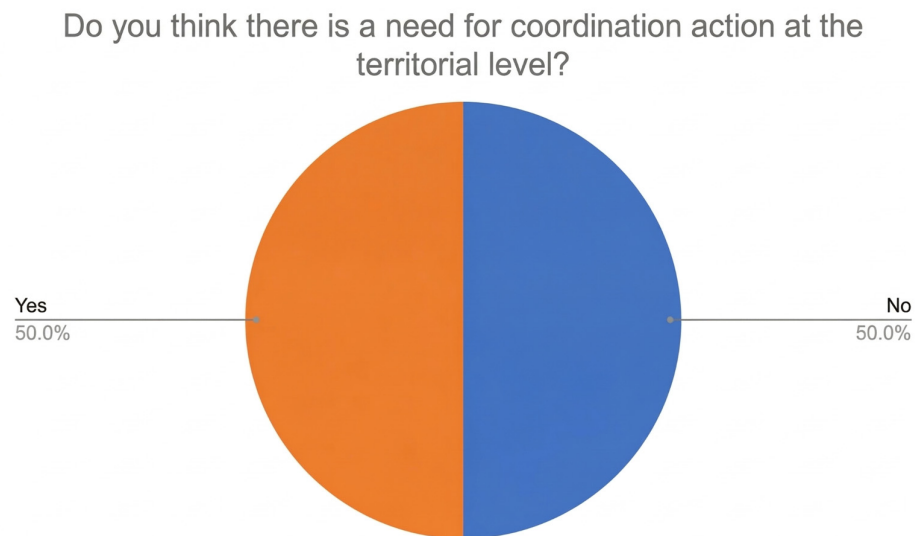


Figure 10. Coordination action need.

Strengths include natural beauty, a rich cultural heritage, and expert-led management, positioning it as a key destination for environmental and cultural tourism. However, weaknesses such as limited funding, infrastructure issues, and poor coordination among visitor centres hinder the region's potential. Opportunities exist for educational outreach, European funding, and sustainable tourism projects to enhance conservation efforts and cultural promotion. However, threats such as climate change, invasive species, and workforce instability pose significant risks.

The SWOT analysis presented (Figure 11) earlier is explored in greater depth here through a TOWS strategic analysis (Figure 12). The comparison of internal and external factors outlines a potential model for territorial development in which sustainability acts as a connecting element between ecosystem protection and the local cultural fabric, with a view to economic development as well. By combining the staff's technical skills and the richness of the natural heritage with the opportunities offered by European funding, a potential strategy emerges to transform strengths into solutions to the evident challenges, building on the highlighted cultural expertise. The introduction of themed itineraries and forms of experimental mobility supported by advanced digital tools would enable the management of tourist flows, reducing pressure on the most sensitive areas whilst simultaneously promoting cultural, natural and historical excellence and distinctive features. From this perspective, environmental issues, too, such as the impact of climate change or the spread of invasive species, would be reinterpreted as opportunities for research and innovation: through collaboration with universities and the integration of private capital, applying the Quintuple Helix model, these challenges could generate new production chains and, above all, skilled employment, attracting talent to the region. This approach transforms the conservation of biodiversity, which remains abundant in the region and relatively unexplored, into a major attraction that counters geographical isolation and the fragmentation of local initiatives. The effectiveness of this system would, however, depend on overcoming the divisions between the various stakeholders involved, making it desirable to establish a mesostructure, an intermediate level of coordination that harmonises the actions of individual actors towards a unified and sustainable vision for the region.

In general, this double analysis seems to fully confirm the data that emerged earlier, and the general need for greater inter-organisational coordination, while also adding the strong concern for managing the challenges of climate change, which only a strong focus on sustainability issues can help address.

INTERNAL FACTORS	
STRENGTHS +	WEAKNESSES –
Naturalistic beauty and environmental diversity, local culture, food and wine Historical and naturalistic importance and richness Visibility Point of reference for visitors and for the promotion of the park itself and its visitor centers Area of high productive interest Exclusive expertise and management by in-house staff Peculiarities that should be enhanced	Few resources dedicated, both economic and human (staff shortage) Lack of infrastructure Poor consideration of the importance of museums and tourist centers in their role at the institutional level, excluding the territory from projects Poor coordination of visitor centers Marginality to mainstream tourism routes and poor connections Difficulty in unifying the governance of a multifaceted park Little enhancement of the territory Natural vulnerability of the territory

EXTERNAL FACTORS	
OPPORTUNITIES +	THREATS –
Educational Disclosure Various funding lines, through European projects too Communication campaigns for enhancement, including technologically targeted campaigns Great potential in terms of environmental and sustainable tourism Potential for collaboration with relevant agencies for competitiveness Valorizing resources related to invasive species seen as an opportunity Improving and increasing infrastructure Projects that enhance biodiversity and conservation including for scientific studies. Protecting important tangible and intangible heritages	Climate change (hydro-geologic and climatic disruption, extreme climatic events) Invasive alien species Risk of closure due to staff absence, especially due to dismantling of tenured staffing Peripheral points considered as areas of lesser interest Depopulation Unemployment

Figure 11. SWOT analysis.

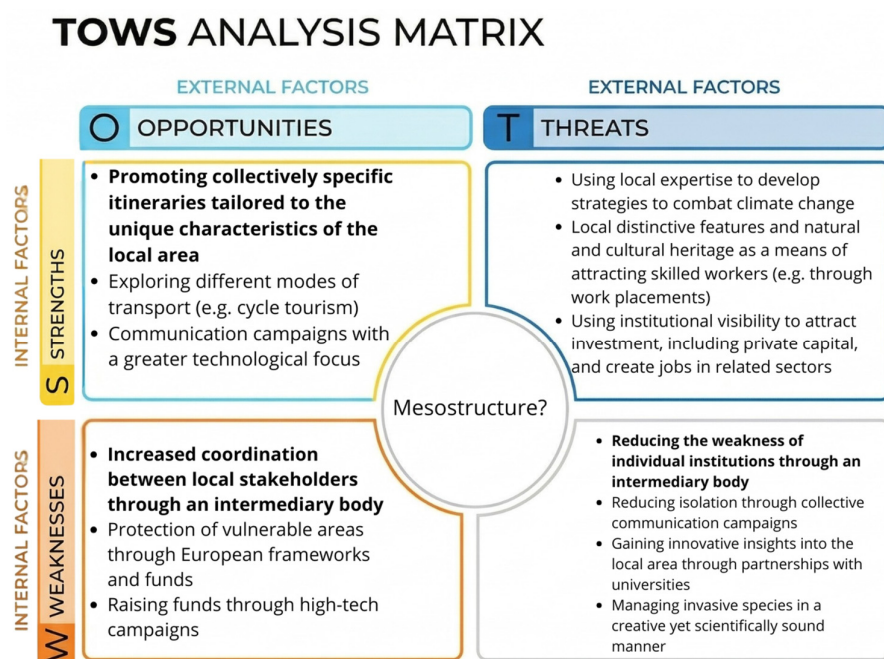


Figure 12. TOWS analysis.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The issue of sustainable management in a territorial network of cultural and tourism organisations is, as illustrated, a complex and debated topic. The widely investigated Italian scenario, in particular, offers examples and raises questions that remain relevant. The Po Delta Regional Park seems to pose even more questions for the sustainable management of the territory. The problems of geographic marginality, limited connections, and the threats posed by climate change and invasive alien species seem to combine with human and institutional deficiencies in territorial coordination. Yet the territory's great potential, the deep cohesion between cultural institutions and the community of reference, and the

centuries-old coexistence between man and nature seem to offer significant opportunities for improvement toward holistic sustainability.

The research began by accounting for the complexity of the regional and cross-regional situation in the Po Delta using a diverse sample of surveyed entities. It is precisely this diversity, however, which not only reflects the true managerial complexity of the area but also highlights how a structure capable of addressing the diverse needs of these organisations is perceived by all as lacking and desirable. An analysis of the research findings suggests that although sustainability is a shared value, there remains significant uncertainty about what it actually means to manage sustainability within a complex supply chain. Indeed, there appears to be a fragmented understanding of the variables involved in land management and supply chain dynamics. Cultural organisations in the region struggle to identify all the links in the value chain necessary for sustainable and integrated management. This operational difficulty is reflected in the study by Consiglio, D'Isanto and Pagano [53], which highlights how the distinction between managerial styles and organisational structures played a crucial role in the resilience of cultural heritage during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the increase in visitor numbers in the post-pandemic period, as evidenced in this research, testifies to a renewed public interest in heritage, operators' satisfaction remains divided, confirming that an increase in visitor numbers does not automatically guarantee a shift towards sustainable management without a network strategy. In terms of network analysis, the stakeholders perceived as most significant remain the institutional ones, with a prominent role assigned to key organisations, educational agencies and local associations, in line with the theories put forward by Donato and Visser [83] regarding the social function of museums. However, the full integration of sustainable practices into the operational strategies of cultural institutions remains an ongoing challenge: cultural heritage management and sustainability are fields that are beginning to converge, yet barriers to fully integrating sustainable practices into these institutions' operations persist. The future of cultural governance, as emerged from the Po Delta case study, lies in overcoming fragmented management, as previously advocated [97], through a mesostructure that serves as a liaison between individual organisations and stakeholders more broadly, a desirable and potentially viable solution. This organ would also allow the interception of different funds and participation in European calls, including the expertise of new figures in charge. Collaboration between realities would enhance the visibility of the territory, recognisable under a single reference, thereby managing tables of confrontation with institutions and enabling different realities to confront each other, thereby increasing the spread of virtuous sustainability practices. As previously illustrated, a managerial vision of the network, oriented toward a multistakeholder approach and underpinned by complex, plural frameworks such as the Quintuple Helix [62], could help develop the territory. A development understood not in the sense of tourist exploitation tout court, but in terms of enhancement and empowerment, firstly for local communities, secondly for slow and low-impact tourism practices, aimed at understanding the territory and spreading, even beyond these boundaries, values of active sustainability. In essence, the research confirms the findings of previous studies on the territory. Still, it updates knowledge to meet the needs of the last decade, particularly in raising awareness of an operational approach to sustainability. The research carried out represents an update on previous work and an advancement in managerial knowledge of the territory, supporting sustainable development, the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, and community participation.

Furthermore, the analysis of governance of cultural heritage in the Po Delta highlights the need for a more integrated and participatory approach to address the challenges of sustainability, economic enhancement, and environmental protection. Public policies should encourage forms of public-private partnership, while ensuring that the logic of the market

does not compromise the cultural and social mission of the institutions involved. Involving local communities in heritage management through co-governance models inspired by the concept of “common goods” could promote greater sustainability and a widespread sense of belonging among citizens. Finally, there is a need to integrate environmental sustainability into heritage management strategies. The adoption of innovative tools, such as digitising cultural heritage and using conservation technologies, can create new opportunities to integrate conservation and economic development.

In short, the sustainable management of cultural heritage requires a paradigm shift in public policies, based on mesostructures that promote cooperation between stakeholders, administrative flexibility and the promotion of territorial specificities. The case of the Po Delta suggests that only through a systemic, multi-level approach will it be possible to guarantee areal sustainable governance. To provide concrete management tools for practical implementation, the proposed mesostructure should first establish a performance measurement system with multidimensional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)—covering economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions—that are strictly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [19,20]. Furthermore, it is essential to formalise the consultative tables into a participatory governance model (e.g., inspired by the “commons” approach) that defines clear roles and responsibilities for all actors involved [17,38]. Finally, the mesostructure should adopt management control instruments such as the Balanced Scorecard to effectively align high-level strategic objectives with daily operational metrics [99]. Future studies may focus on understanding the variables involved in sustainable land management at the level of individual cultural heritage sites and networks, identifying additional KPIs and proposing integrated monitoring and management tools.

This study is subject to inherent limitations regarding its sample size, even if somewhat representative and exhaustive, and its cross-sectional design, which prevent it from capturing the long-term dynamic evolution of network relationships in response to exogenous shocks. Future research should systematically target non-responding entities, as securing a higher institutional response rate would, in itself, constitute a compelling finding regarding network engagement patterns. Furthermore, subsequent studies should identify the specific operational and managerial dimensions of the proposed coordinating mesostructure, a level of applied depth that fell outside the immediate scope of this work.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: In Italy, according to national legislation (Law no. 3/2018 and Ministerial Decree of 30 January 2023), formal ethical approval from a Territorial Ethics Committee is strictly mandatory only for clinical trials, medical interventions, or health-related observational studies. For non-clinical, social, or economic research conducted at the University of Ferrara (Università degli Studi di Ferrara), studies utilising completely anonymous questionnaires administered to healthy adult volunteers do not require mandatory formal ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Gemini 3 Flash to enhance the quality and visual clarity of the figures and charts, which were previously developed and processed by the authors. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

The respondents are identified by an asterisk.

1. Abbazia di Pomposa—Museo Pomposiano (Codigoro)
2. Bunker di Mesola (Mesola)
3. Casa Museo Remo Brindisi—Arte & Design del Novecento (Comacchio)
4. Castello di Mesola (Mesola)
5. Centro di Documentazione Cinematografica del Delta del Po (Comacchio)
6. Centro Visite Bevanella (Savio di Ravenna)
7. Chiavica dell’Agrifoglio (Codigoro)
8. Ecomuseo delle Erbe Palustri (Bagnacavallo)
9. Ecomuseo delle Valli di Argenta—Museo delle Valli, Museo della Bonifica, Museo Civico (Argenta)
10. Faro di Goro (Goro)
11. Fattoria Guiccioli (Mandriole, Ravenna)
12. Impianto idrovoro di Marozzo—Casa della Memoria (Lagosanto)
13. Lanterna Vecchia (Goro)
14. Loggiato dei Cappuccini—Chiesa della Madonna del Popolo o di S. Maria in Aula Regia (Comacchio)
15. Manifattura dei Marinati di Comacchio (Comacchio)
16. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Ferrara (Ferrara)
17. Museo Civico Archeologico “G. Ferraresi”—Casa Ariosto (Ostellato)
18. Museo Civico di Belriguardo (Voghiera)
19. Museo civico di Storia Naturale di Ferrara (Ferrara)
20. Museo Delta Antico di Comacchio (Comacchio)
21. Museo del Cervo di Mesola (Mesola)
22. Museo del Territorio di Ostellato (non fruibile, Ostellato)
23. Museo NaTuRa di Sant’Alberto—Museo Ornitologico e di Scienze Naturali Alfredo Brandolini e Centro Visite del Parco Delta del Po (Sant’Alberto, Ravenna)
24. Museo Casa Monti e Riserva Naturale di Alfonsine—CEAS Centro di Educazione alla Sostenibilità della Bassa Romagna (Alfonsine)
25. MUSA—Museo del Sale di Cervia (Cervia)
26. Oratorio di S. Croce (Argenta)
27. Pieve di San Giorgio (Argenta)
28. Pieve di Santa Maria in Padovetere (Codigoro)
29. Salina di Cervia e Centro Visite Saline di Cervia (Cervia)
30. Salina di Comacchio (Comacchio)
31. San Lorenzo e Convento dei Cappuccini (Argenta)
32. Santuario della Celletta (Argenta)
33. Scavo della Terramara di Pilastris (chiuso, Bondeno)
34. Stabulario di Goro (Goro)
35. Torre Abate (Mesola)

36. Bosco di S. Giustina (Mesola)
37. Torre della Finanza (Comacchio)
38. Torre Palù (Goro)
39. Chiavica del Bosco (non visitabile, Goro)
40. Torre San Michele Cervia—Ufficio Informazioni e Accoglienza Turistica (IAT-R) (Cervia)
41. Vallette di Ostellato (Ostellato)

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