

Journal of Regional & Socio-Economic Issues
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The Contribution of Education in Prisons. The Development of Prisoners' Skills through Creative Writing according to Freire's Pedagogy

Abstract:

This presentation examines the contribution of education in prisons, with an emphasis on the development of prisoners' skills through Creative Writing. By presenting case studies where inmate students participate in a creative writing workshop based on Freire's pedagogy, the positive effects of such programs on personal development, self-esteem enhancement, and social reintegration are highlighted. The study, which is part of a doctoral research project, focuses on the challenges and opportunities offered through education within prisons, proposing improvements and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of these programs.

Keywords: prisons, prisoner education, creative writing, reintegration, life skills, social cohesion.

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1. Introduction

Social exclusion is a multifaceted phenomenon closely linked to poverty, unemployment, social inequalities, and deprivation of basic rights. It is defined as the inability of individuals or groups to fully participate in social, economic, and political life due to limited access to essential resources such as education, health, and employment. In Greece, this situation is particularly evident in large urban centers, where vulnerable groups such as immigrants, the homeless, ex-prisoners, and the long-term unemployed face daily obstacles in accessing services and rights. The European Union recognizes the importance of this issue and has prioritized the fight against social exclusion through policies that promote equal access to social goods and services. However, effective addressing of the issue requires coordinated actions and substantial interventions at both national and local levels (Tsopanoglou et al., 2007).

Prisons are closed social structures often associated with punishment and social exclusion. However, modern approaches to correctional policy promote the idea of education and training as a means to develop prisoners' skills, aiming at their reintegration into society and preventing recidivism. Education within prisons can act as a catalyst for positive changes in the lives of inmates, offering them not only knowledge and skills but also the opportunity to discover new aspects of themselves (Anitsi, 2022).

This research was conducted as part of a doctoral study in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Aegean, aiming to examine the contribution of educational programs in prisons with the goal of transitioning inmates to employment. The study involved incarcerated students participating in a creative writing workshop from the 3rd School of Second Chance in Thessaloniki during the period November 2023-May 2024. This workshop offers prisoners the opportunity to express themselves creatively, develop critical thinking, and improve their self-confidence. The results show that such programs can have a significant impact on the personal development of prisoners and serve as a foundation for successful reintegration into society.

The researcher, with the assistance and support of her supervising professor, Mr. Tsobanoglou, organized and conducted three significant actions related to education in closed structures. The first event took place on May 22, 2021, with the theme: "Vocational Education in Greece and Closed Structures. New Horizons for Social Rehabilitation." The purpose of this event was to highlight the current situation regarding Adult Education in Greece, specifically within correctional facilities. Education in prison is not secondary; it is a fundamental right for everyone, regardless of their past. Proceedings have been published in electronic form and are available to all³.

Subsequently, the following year, on September 23 and 24, 2022, in collaboration with the Agricultural Prisons of Kassandra and the Central Macedonia Scientists' Association "Aristotle," a two-day conference was organized with the theme: "Vocational Education in Agricultural Prisons. Dialogue on Social Reintegration." The purpose of this conference was to explore and analyze the contribution of education and vocational training in agricultural prisons, as well as to enhance the social reintegration of prisoners. It focused on the educational needs of prisoners, the prospects for reducing recidivism through education, and the ways in which creative writing, arts, and vocational training can contribute to the reintegration process.

³ <https://www.apostaktirio-books.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/%CE%95%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%B3%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%BC%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%95%CE%BA%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%AF%CE%B4%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%95%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%AC%CE%B4%CE%B1-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CE%9A%CE%BB%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AD%CF%82-%CE%94%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%AD%CF%82.pdf>

Finally, on April 13 and 14, 2024, in collaboration with the University of the Aegean, Department of Sociology, the University of Western Macedonia, the Interdepartmental Master's Program "Creative Writing" (University of Western Macedonia – Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), the "Lighthouse of the World," the 3rd School of Second Chance of Thessaloniki, and the "Central Macedonia Scientists' Association Aristotle," they organized the 1st Panhellenic Conference on "Education of Roma in Closed Structures." The aim of the conference was to highlight the major problems affecting social and ethnic minorities, such as the Roma, as well as the supportive role and work of structures like the "Lighthouse of the World," the 3rd School of Second Chance of Diavata (a school offering second chances within the prison), and the role that Creative Writing—Master's Program of the University of Western Macedonia—has played over the past decade within correctional facilities. The proceedings of the two-day conference and the Panhellenic conference are pending publication.

2. The Effectiveness of Educational Programs in Prisons and Their Contribution to the Development of Prisoners' Skills

Education within prisons is a crucial tool for improving the prospects of reintegrating prisoners into society. The educational programs implemented in closed environments, such as prisons, aim to develop skills that can enhance prisoners' self-esteem, improve their quality of life within prison, and reduce the likelihood of recidivism after release (Davis et al., 2013; Tsobanoglou et al., 2005).

2.1 The Importance of Education in Prisons

Education in prisons goes beyond the mere provision of knowledge; it also serves as a means of personal and social transformation. Educational programs offer prisoners the opportunity to discover new skills and interests while preparing them for the labor market, thus reducing the barriers they face due to their incarceration (Cox & Sykes, 2017; Koutra, 2015). According to Paulo Freire (2000), one of the most influential educators of the 20th century, education has the potential to liberate individuals from oppression, which is particularly relevant for prisoners in closed environments. Freire developed a revolutionary approach to education, known as the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," which posits that education is not merely a process of transmitting knowledge but an act of political and social change that can free individuals from structures of oppression.

Freire challenges the traditional view of education, where the teacher "deposits" knowledge into students, who passively absorb it. Instead, he proposes a dialogical and critical approach, where students and teachers collaborate in building knowledge through the exchange of experiences and dialogue. Education should be an act of "conscientization," where individuals become aware of the social, political, and economic realities surrounding them and acquire the tools to change them (Freire, 2000).

In the context of prisons, Freire's approach can transform the educational experience of prisoners from a mere activity to pass the time into a process of liberation and self-discovery. Through dialogical teaching and critical thinking, prisoners have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, understand the roots of their oppression, and develop an awareness of their power to change their lives. For instance, in a creative writing workshop, prisoners can use writing as a means of expression and self-discovery. With guidance that respects their personal stories and encourages them to critically analyze their position in the world, prisoners can develop self-esteem and expressive skills, which are vital for their reintegration into society (Freire, 2000; Moustaka, 2018).

2.2 Benefits, Challenges, and Limitations of Educational Programs for Prisoners

Participation in educational programs contributes to the development of skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and communication. These skills are essential for the social and professional integration of ex-prisoners (Wilson et al., 2000; Zairis, 2016). Studies show that prisoners who participate in such programs have higher employment rates and lower recidivism rates compared to those who do not participate (Hughes et al., 2001; Kyriazi & Sakellariou, 2009).

Despite the proven benefits, educational programs in prisons face significant challenges, such as lack of funding, staff limitations, and the frequent transfer of prisoners, which disrupts the continuity of classes (Ward & Maruna, 2007; Moustaka, 2018). Additionally, inmates often encounter discrimination from prison staff and society at large, which can limit the effectiveness of these programs (Meiners, 2010).

However, adopting Freire's approach can offer a path to change these structures from within. Educators who adopt this approach can empower prisoners to see themselves as active creators of their own lives, rather than passive recipients of their fate (Cox & Sykes, 2017; Kyriazi & Sakellariou, 2009).

Overall, education within prisons is a powerful tool for promoting social integration and reducing recidivism. The development of skills through educational programs not only contributes to the personal improvement of prisoners but also has positive effects for society as a whole, through the enhancement of social cohesion and the reduction of crime (Anitsi, 2022; Tsobanoglou, 2007). Freire's pedagogy offers a radical and humanistic approach to education in prisons, inviting prisoners to actively participate in the learning process and develop skills that will help them redefine their position in the world. In this way, education can serve as a means of liberation and personal growth, enhancing prisoners' potential for successful reintegration into society (Freire, 2000).

2.3 Case Study: Creative Writing Workshop

A notable example of the positive impact of educational programs in prisons is the participation of Greek and foreign students in a creative writing workshop at the 3rd School of Second Chance in Thessaloniki, located at the Diavata Correctional Facility. This workshop has been operating since 2011 under the auspices of the University of Western Macedonia and the Creative Writing Master's Program. The students' writings have been included in collective works, published almost annually since 2013, with a total of seven books published so far. The workshop presented here focuses on the publication of the latest book, released in 2024.

Programs like these allow prisoners to express their thoughts and emotions through writing, thereby boosting their self-esteem and psychological resilience (Winterfield et al., 2009). Participants have reported that such activities help them cope with the stress and isolation of incarceration, while also acquiring communication skills that can be utilized after their release.

3. Design of the Creative Writing Workshop

The Creative Writing Workshop for prisoners is an initiative that combines Paulo Freire's educational approach with modern writing and self-expression techniques. The workshop's design includes a series of educational activities aimed at developing skills in expression, critical thinking, and self-awareness, while simultaneously promoting mental empowerment and personal growth for the participants.

3.1 Objectives of the Workshop

The primary objectives of the Creative Writing Workshop are as follows: 1) Development of Writing and Communication Skills: Participants learn to express themselves in writing,

improving their grammar, syntax, and the structure of their texts. 2) Enhancing Critical Thinking: Through the analysis and creation of texts, prisoners develop the ability to think critically and to consider different perspectives, 3) Self-Expression and Personal Development: The workshop offers participants the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through writing, contributing to the strengthening of their self-esteem, 4) Social Reintegration: By cultivating communication skills and building self-confidence through writing, the workshop prepares prisoners for their reintegration into society.

The combination of creative activities and the Freirean pedagogical approach helps transform the writing process into a tool for self-discovery and empowerment, enabling prisoners to envision new possibilities for their lives beyond incarceration.

3.2 Structure and Content of the Workshop

The workshop was conducted over a cycle of 27 weekly sessions, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The structure of the sessions included theoretical introductions, practical exercises, and individual or group work. This research presents a representative cycle of 10 weekly sessions, featuring selected writings by incarcerated students that have been included in the book published in 2024, titled "Experiences of Confinement" (<https://www.apostaktirio-books.gr/product/%CF%86%CF%85%CE%BB%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%AE%CF%82-%CE%B2%CE%B9%CF%8E%CE%BC%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B1/>).

- 1st session: Presentation of educational goals and potential outcomes. The session included participant introductions and the creation of a safe and supportive environment. The concept and benefits of creative writing were explained.
- 2nd session: "Exploring Personal Identity Through Writing": Writing activities that encourage self-expression and recognition of personal history.
- 3rd session: "Narration and Storytelling": Teaching techniques for storytelling and character development. Exercises on composing personal stories and analyzing examples.
- 4th session: "Use of Metaphors and Symbols". Practice in using metaphors and symbolism to express emotions and ideas.
- 5th session: "Creating Dialogues". Techniques for writing realistic dialogues that enhance storytelling.
- 6th session: "Poetry and Rhythm". Exploration of poetic writing and rhythm as a form of expression.
- 7th session: "Developing Critical Thinking Through Writing". Activities that encourage text analysis and critical thinking.
- 8th session: "Creating Stories of Hope and Change". Writing stories focused on personal growth and the possibilities for change.
- 9th session: "Writing as Therapy". Exploring writing as a tool for processing traumatic experiences and building psychological resilience.
- 10th session: "Final Presentation and Feedback". Presentation of participants' works and open feedback session. Encouragement to continue writing beyond the workshop.

3.3 Educational Methods and Approaches

The workshop is based on dialogical methods and Freire's pedagogical approach, aiming for the active participation of prisoners in the learning process. The researcher acted as a guide and coordinator, inviting participants to contribute their experiences and perspectives. The methods used include: (1) Dialogical Teaching: Active participation of participants in discussions and exchange of views, (2) Group Collaboration: Development

of texts in small groups to enhance cooperation and communication, (3) Individual Writing Exercises: Personal expression through written creation, with an emphasis on analysis and self-reflection, (4) Feedback: Systematic feedback from instructors and participants for the improvement of the texts.

3.4 Expected Outcomes and Measuring Success

The expected outcomes of the creative writing workshop include the improvement of prisoners' writing and communication skills, the enhancement of self-esteem, and the development of a positive attitude towards reintegration. A key indicator of the workshop's success is the written works produced by the participants themselves.

The design of the creative writing workshop aims to create a supportive environment where prisoners can express themselves freely, explore new possibilities, and prepare for their reintegration into society through the power of writing. By engaging with their own narratives and developing their creative abilities, participants are encouraged to view their future with optimism and a readiness for a new beginning.

As part of this assessment, we will present selected writings by incarcerated students, including personal story narratives, creative poems, and stories that express a desire for change, highlighting their optimism and hope for a fresh start. These texts not only demonstrate the participants' growth in expressive and literary skills but also serve as a testament to their evolving perspective towards life after imprisonment.

4. Conclusions

The study of the role of closed structures, such as prisons, in training and educational programs for inmates highlights education as a catalytic factor for the personal and social development of prisoners. Through writing, inmates gain the opportunity to express their emotions, experiences, and thoughts, thereby enhancing their self-esteem and emotional resilience.

The texts produced in the workshops, including personal narratives, poems, and stories of change, demonstrate the ability of inmates to use writing as a means of self-expression and processing their inner conflicts. These activities not only promote their personal growth but also facilitate their reintegration into society, providing them with communication skills essential for the transitional period after their release.

Paulo Freire's pedagogy, which is integrated into educational programs in prisons, promotes a dialogical and critical approach, encouraging prisoners to recognize and challenge the oppressive structures that have shaped their lives. This method of learning reinforces a sense of personal empowerment and responsibility, urging them to envision and pursue a different life path.

Despite challenges such as funding limitations and societal stigma, these programs prove to be effective and vital for the empowerment of prisoners. Education in prisons, especially through writing, offers a pathway to liberation and reintegration, transforming closed structures into spaces of personal renewal and social contribution.

Overall, educational programs in prisons make a significant contribution to the development of inmates' skills and serve as a powerful tool for social cohesion and crime reduction. The experience of inmates participating in the creative writing workshop underscores the necessity of continuing and expanding such programs, as well as supporting them through broader societal and correctional systems.

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Sustainable The Literary Mapmaker: Kazantzakis' Travels through a Cartographic Lens

Abstract

“Travel for me is like intoxication with good wine, it stirs and invigorates my blood”. Kazantzakis had a fiery passion for exploring new horizons. In addition to his multiple excursions in Greece, the author traveled to Eurasia and the Middle East. Travels to remote places, in the desert, in monasteries, with difficult conditions, far from the comforts of today's traveler. The geographical spread of his travels, on the world map, extends from Lisbon to Tokyo (west-east), from Murmansk, Russia, to Singapore (north-south). Kazantzakis was the founder of travel literature in our country, as - a century ago - with his books *Traveling* he systematized and highlighted this particular literary genre. The author's travel writing vividly represents an era where major historical and political events occur, bringing the reader into contact with the countries he visited, the people he met, and the culture of the places he traveled. As an eternal Odysseus, he travels to find answers to his innermost concerns, raising universal questions about the course of man. At the same time, he travels the "age of extremes", where empires collapse, global and local wars occur, illiberal regimes rule, systems of governance and social transformations are implemented. The current borders of the world are far removed from the era of Kazantzakis' travels. He himself is an active subject of historical events, as we read in his travel books. Thus, travel writing - in addition to literary - presents cultural, social, historical, geopolitical, geographical and cartographic interest. The timeless interest in the author's travel books, their relevance today, as well as their great importance in his overall work, result in the necessity of the cartographic dimension of Kazantzakis' travels, for a more complete understanding of his travel writing. Thus, the present work explores the visualization/mapping of the author's routes in the countries he visited.

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1. Introduction

Travel geography plays a key role in shaping our understanding of the world, promoting cultural exchange and fostering a spirit of exploration. Beyond simple physical landscapes, it encompasses the intricate web of places, routes and connections that define how people traverse the planet (Argyropoulou, 2020). This discussion highlights the importance of travel geography as a lens through which we see and engage with the diverse and dynamic world around us. Travel geography is a gateway to cultural exploration. It allows us to discover the unique customs, traditions, languages and lifestyles that characterize different regions. By immersing ourselves in the geographical context of a place, we gain insights into the historical factors that have shaped societies and contributed to their particular identity. Whether exploring ancient ruins, interacting with local communities, or enjoying native cuisine, travel geography bridges gaps and fosters cross-cultural understanding.

Understanding the geographical significance of landmarks and heritage sites fosters a sense of responsibility for their preservation. When travellers understand the ecological, geological and historical significance of a place, they are more likely to engage in sustainable practices that protect these treasures for future generations. Travel geography educates us about the delicate balance between human interaction and the preservation of natural wonders and cultural heritage. Travel geography reveals the intricate web of connections that link the world together. It presents the networks of trade routes, migration patterns and communication channels that have historically shaped human interactions. In a contemporary context, this interconnectedness is highlighted by the extensive air and sea routes that facilitate the movement of people, goods and ideas across continents. Recognition of these connections promotes a global perspective and fosters a sense of shared humanity (Panagopoulou et al., 2006).

The effort to map travel routes worldwide is a fascinating journey through time, culture and geography. By skillfully weaving together diverse references and constructing a comprehensive bibliography, this effort gains depth and authenticity. Constructing a comprehensive map of global travel routes requires a meticulous approach. Utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS-GIS) technology, historical records, modern transportation networks, and cultural influences converge to form a living mosaic of human travel. This fusion creates a visual representation of embarkation points, critical crossroads and final destinations, resulting in a holistic depiction of the travel patterns that have shaped the world (Ntzouropanos et al., 2022).

The cultural and economic dimension of travel routes is revealed through scientific works. Alfred W. Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* offers an in-depth examination of the transformative impact of colonialism on global travel routes. An in-depth look at the cultural motivations, whether for spiritual pilgrimage or cross-cultural exchange, illuminates the historical context. Thus, references such as this enhance the layers of meaning embedded in the map, providing insight into the motivations that prompted human movement.

An extensive bibliography enhances the authenticity and depth of the travel route map. Works such as Jared Diamond's *"Guns, Germs, and Steel"* delve into the geographic impacts on travel routes, while Kenneth Pomeranz's *"The Great Divergence"* examines economic influences. Simon Winchester's *"Atlantic"* offers insights into maritime exploration, while Charles C. Mann's *"1493"* explores the enduring effects of Columbus' voyages. Each reference adds a layer of knowledge, enhancing the map with historical, geographical and cultural context.

A corresponding source of geographical, anthropogeographical and cartographic data is Nikos Kazantzakis' travelogue, as the great Greek writer, poet and philosopher was an insatiable traveller. For him, travel was a way of life, but also a way of escape. He travelled to Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Long, long journeys, with difficult conditions of travel and accommodation. He travelled to experience other cultures, to incorporate his absorbing

travel images and experiences into his works - most notably his *Odyssey*. He took part in difficult expeditions (leader of the repatriation mission of the Greeks of the Caucasus, member of the recording of German atrocities in Crete, war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War), crossed difficult regions (the Sinai Desert, crossing the Yangtze), travelled in very bad conditions (the winter journey from Moscow to Vladivostok in a train carriage with no heating). At the same time, he sought to stay in places of retreat (Aegina, Gottesbang, Bekovo), so that he could work on his works unhindered (Prevelakis, 1984). Kazantzakis's travel writing consists of his five travel books, but elements of it can also be extracted from his novels and from his rich correspondence, both to his two wives and to his friends. The present work has a twofold aim. First, to highlight the importance of the author's travel writing in his overall work, as the interest of the reading public in Kazantzakis' travel books is undiminished and timeless. Sources from his respective trips to Russia and the Soviet Union are used for the mapping. Then - as the recording of the places/places visited by Kazantzakis in the countries he travelled to so far has only been in textual form - it explores the way of visualizing/mapping the author's routes, so that the reader "travels" with the author to the countries he visited on the world map.

2. The timelessness of Kazantzakis' travel books:

"The journey and confession have been the two greatest joys of my life. To go around the world, to see - to see and not to be satisfied - new lands and seas and people and ideas, to see them all as if for the first time, to see them all as if for the last time, with a long look" (Kazantzakis, 2013). This is what Kazantzakis tells us and P. Prevelakis writes: ...moved to gather images, agitation, color.

Kazantzakis often travels as a newspaper emissary, but his motivation is not subsistence. Being a correspondent simply allows him to satisfy his passion for travel. He does not consume places, he reflects, he interprets, he lives. Based on travel, he evolves on all levels. He looks at cultures, he feels the movement of history, he learns the life of each person, therefore he learns to be universal, he listens to and seeks nature the landscape as a part of the human soul, as part of the perpetual search for freedom.

On every trip he collects images, ideas and experiences. This is not enough for him. In every place he tries to see its essence, culture, people, life. He tries to learn everything, politics, society, art, everyday life, monuments. Kazantzakis seeks the marrow of the place he visits. Every journey is a journey to the Other, to self-knowledge, to a transcendence of the self into a universality. In a world that is searching anew for identity and destination, Kazantzakis' travelogues are anew guides, not for travel but for life. This need to reread ourselves, to try to face the universal is a very modern thing. Kazantzakis's travelogues are in every respect contemporary texts, texts of self-knowledge and reflection (Ntzouropanos et al., 2023).

The Traveling series of books is tremendously important to Kazantzakis' writing and life. It is not a mere reference to places, Kazantzakis gives us the essence of a place, its soul, gives us a complete picture on all levels. This makes him relevant to today.

3. The context of Kazantzakis' travel writing:

Nikos Kazantzakis, the famous Greek writer and philosopher, was famous for his endless search for knowledge. During his travels, Kazantzakis actively sought interaction with those who shared his passion for exploration, intellectual dialogue and search for deeper truths. He embarked on journeys to many parts of Greece, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. His time spent abroad amounted to 24 years, equivalent to one-third of his total life. The extent of his travels covered a geographical range from Lisbon in the west to Tokyo in the east, from Murmansk in the north of Russia to Singapore in the south. The time span of the present study aligns with the duration of the author's travels, spanning from 1907 to 1957. He had a

deep yearning to experience new places, guided by an insatiable spirit, and as a result of these "spiritual escapades", he aimed to present to the world a new archetype of the modern traveller. This archetype embodied an individual who not only explored space but also documented it as a traveller, while simultaneously immersing himself in the socio-economic and political landscapes of each destination. The fusion of space and time within Kazantzakis' travel narratives vividly captures an era marked by significant historical events and sweeping social transformations in the nations he traversed. As such, his travel writing possesses a multifaceted significance that extends beyond its literary nature to include social, historical, political, geographical and cartographic dimensions (Ntzuropanos et al., 2022; Ntzuropanos et al., 2023).

4. Highlighting the cartographic dimension of the author's travel books:

The work, in terms of its cartographic part, was focused with four levels of study.

On the first level, the geographical boundaries of the author's travels were studied on the world map and the total number of countries Kazantzakis travelled to be mapped. The geographical area of his travels stretches west from Lisbon, east from Tokyo, north from Murmansk, Russia, and south from Singapore (Fig. 1).

The countries of Kazantzakis' travels are shown on the map below.



Figure 1. The countries visited by Kazantzakis

On the second level, the author's time spent in the countries he visited was studied (Fig. 2). Kazantzakis lived and travelled in Greece for two thirds of his life of the (he died at 74 years old), while the remaining third (24 years) lived and travelled abroad.



Figure 2. Months of residence of Nikos Kazantzakis.

On a third level, Kazantzakis' visits were examined, both at the borders of the states of his time and according to their present-day limits. According to the state borders of the author's time, the research showed that he travelled/stayed in 24 countries (Prevelakis, 1984). With the current state borders and the resulting border changes, the number of visiting countries amounts to 38. And on the fourth level, the cartographic dimension of Kazantzakis' travel writing in Russia/Soviet Union was analyzed as a case study.

5. Russia (Summer 1919):

Kazantzakis travelled to Russia during the civil war there.

The author, as Director General of the Ministry of Survival, undertook to organize the mission to repatriate the Greeks living in the Caucasus, as their lives were in danger. He himself chose his associates and, as the leader of the expedition, they left for Russia in July 1919 (Fig. 3). The members of the expedition included George Zorbas, the later fictional hero of the writer Alexis Zorbas.

6. Historical background:

The author's journey took place at a crucial historical moment for Russia, as the country was emerging from the eight months of the First World War on the winning side, but also during which the civil war (1917-1922), which started as a consequence of the October Revolution, was taking place and "shook the world" (Reed, 2011).

During the civil war, counter-revolutionary (the so-called "White") armies rallied against the Soviets with the help of the Allies (including the Greeks), who sent troops to Russia. As far as Greek participation is concerned, this lies in its participation in the Crimean Campaign, i.e. in the Greek expeditionary force that participated in the campaign that was attempted mainly by France, as a member of the Entente, against the Bolsheviks in Crimea in 1919. As a consequence of the participation of the Greeks in the above campaign, it was the Bolsheviks who retaliated against the Greeks of the Crimean region, Georgia, the Caucasus and Kars (Dimitriadou et al., 2006).

7. Stops on the journey:

The author, along with the other members of the expedition, travels at sea in the Aegean and his first stop is off the coast of Constantinople. There they stayed on board the ship in the open sea, as they waited for the sea to calm down. They then crossed the Bosphorus and sailed across the Black Sea to reach the coast of Russia. For a month they toured the villages of Georgia and Armenia, organizing the departure of the Greeks there.



Figure 3. Russia (Summer 1919)

8. Soviet Union - First trip (October 1925 - January 1926):

Kazantzakis travelled to the Soviet Union four times. In his first three trips, 1925-1926 (Fig. 4), 1927 (Fig. 5), 1928-1929 (Figs. 6, 7, 8, and 9), he stayed in the country for a total of two years. His last trip to the country was in 1957 and was a stopover on his way to visit Japan and China. The author's travel impressions of the country are derived from his travels in the above mentioned dates and are included in his book "Kazantzakis, N. (2013). *Traveling. Russia*. Athens: Kazantzakis Publications". Also for the author's travels in the country, we have references in the books "Prevelakis P. (1984). *Four hundred letters from Kazantzakis to Prevelakis*. Athens: Eleni Kazantzakis Publications", "Kazantzakis E. (1998). *Nikos Kazantzakis, the uncompromising*. Athens: Kazantzakis Publications", "N. Kazantzakis (2014). *Reference to Greco*. Athens: Kazantzakis Publications", "N. Kazantzakis. (1993). *Letters to Galatea*. Athens: Difros Publications" and "Kazantzakis, N. (2014). *Travelling. Japan-China*. Athens: Kazantzakis Publications".

9. Historical background:

The author travels to the Soviet Union a few years after the October Revolution of 1917, the end of the First World War in 1918 and the end of the Civil War 1917-1922.

He visits a country moving at the pace of changing political and social patterns, which is trying to reconstruct itself economically, as the post-Civil War Soviet Union was much more backward than it was during the era of Tsarism. The Bolsheviks' aim was to change for the better the mostly illiterate and superstitious inhabitants of the country and at the same time modernise it industrially and technologically. A very difficult task as, on top of that, after the revolution the bourgeoisie did not exist, as its members emigrated and with them the educated cadres necessary for the reconstruction of the post-revolutionary state.

Lenin, who led the revolution victoriously, as early as 1921 designed and implemented the New Economic Policy, i.e. "State Capitalism", in an attempt to restore the market. This was a development of the market economy, based on the agricultural sector, under the control of the state. At the same time, however, especially from 1921 with "democratic centralism", democracy within the party ceased to exist and the pursuit of policies different from those advocated by the communist party was forbidden.

In 1924 Lenin died and the authoritarian Stalin took over the government, who in 1928 implemented the "planned economy" of the Five-Year Plans, with the creation of a heavy energy industry. Under him, party congresses were held without any regularity, the separation of powers was abolished and the authoritarian system of government sought to dominate the citizens at all levels of their lives. (Hobsbawm, 2018).

10. Stops on the journey:

In October 1925 Kazantzakis left Athens for the Soviet Union as an envoy of the newspaper "Eleftheros Logos". His first stop was Odessa. He then visits Moscow and Leningrad. He returns to Moscow and after his stay there, he returns to Greece. The duration of his stay in the country was about three months (Prevelakis, 1984).

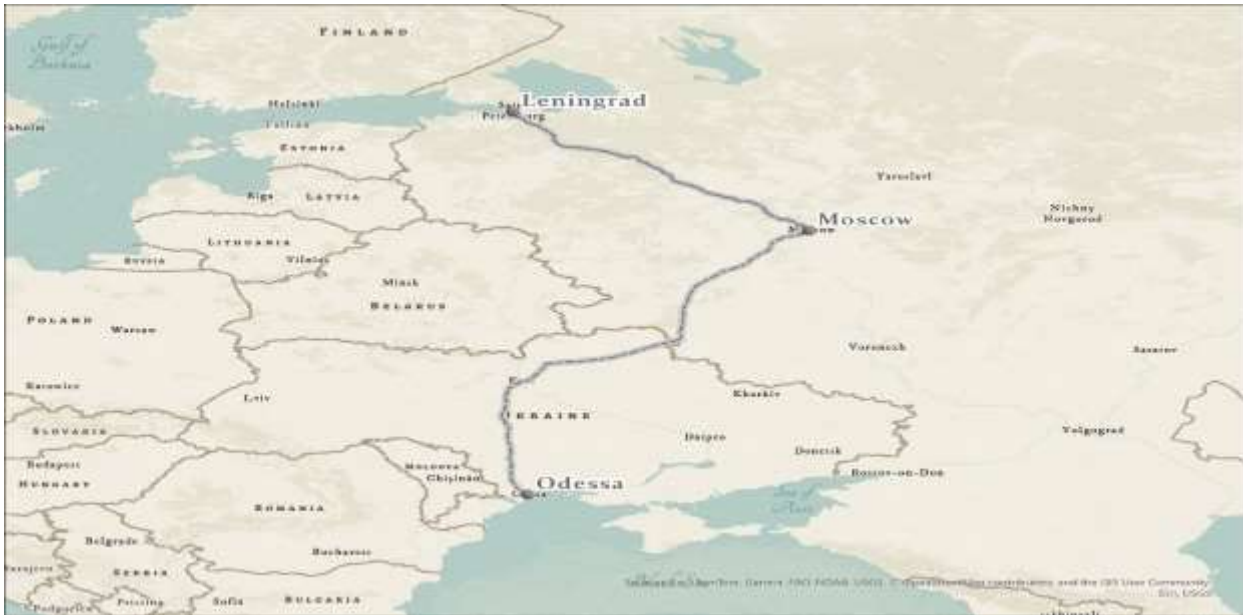


Figure 4. Soviet Union – First trip (October 1925 – January 1926)

11. Soviet Union – Second trip (October - December 1927):

This journey of the author takes place on the occasion of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution and Kazantzakis arrives in the country as a guest of the Soviet government.

11.1 Stops on the journey:

He leaves Athens by ship and, with a stopover in Constantinople, arrives in Odessa and from there to Moscow. After the celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution and his speech at the pacifist conference, he and some other guests of the Soviet Government, leave Moscow by train for a tour of the Caucasus. The stops on his journey: Moscow – Kharkov – Rostov-on-Don – Baku – Tbilisi – Batumi – Poti – Garni – Novorossiysk – Rostov-on-Don – Moscow. After the tour of the Caucasus, from Moscow he goes to Kiev and from there to Odessa. He returns to Athens, with stopovers in Constantinople and Thessaloniki.

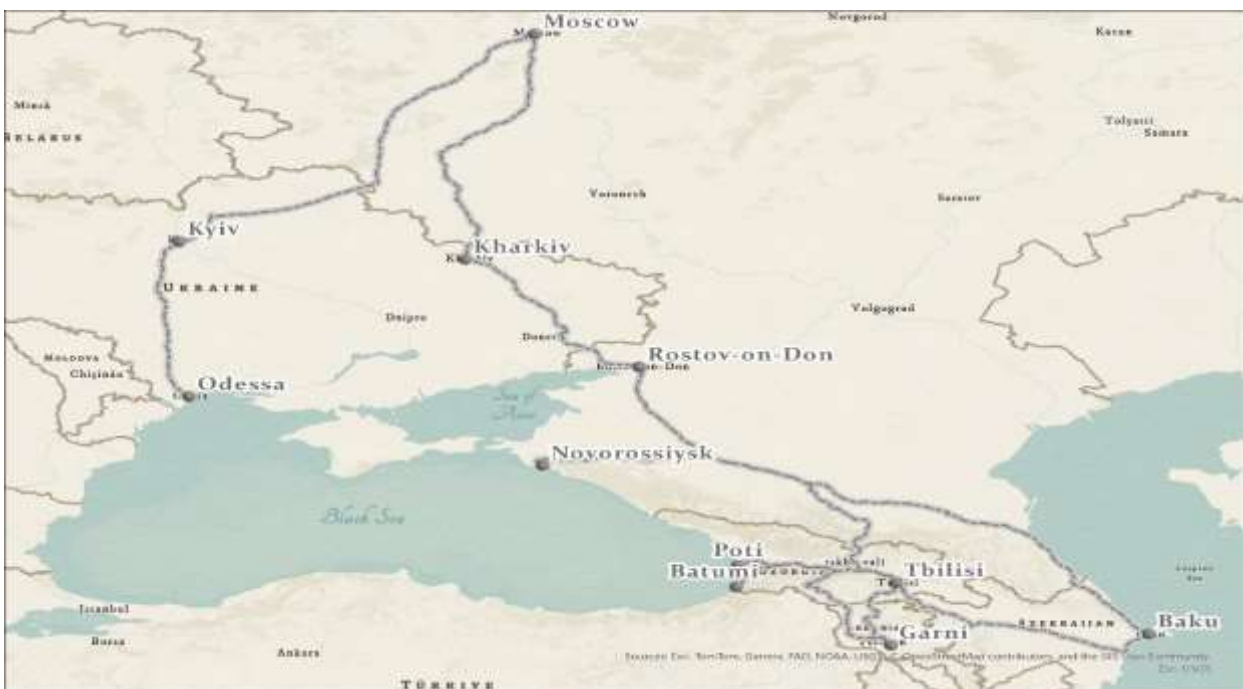


Figure 5. Soviet Union – Second trip (October – December 1927)**12. Soviet Union – Third trip (April 1928 - April 1929):****12.1 First route:**

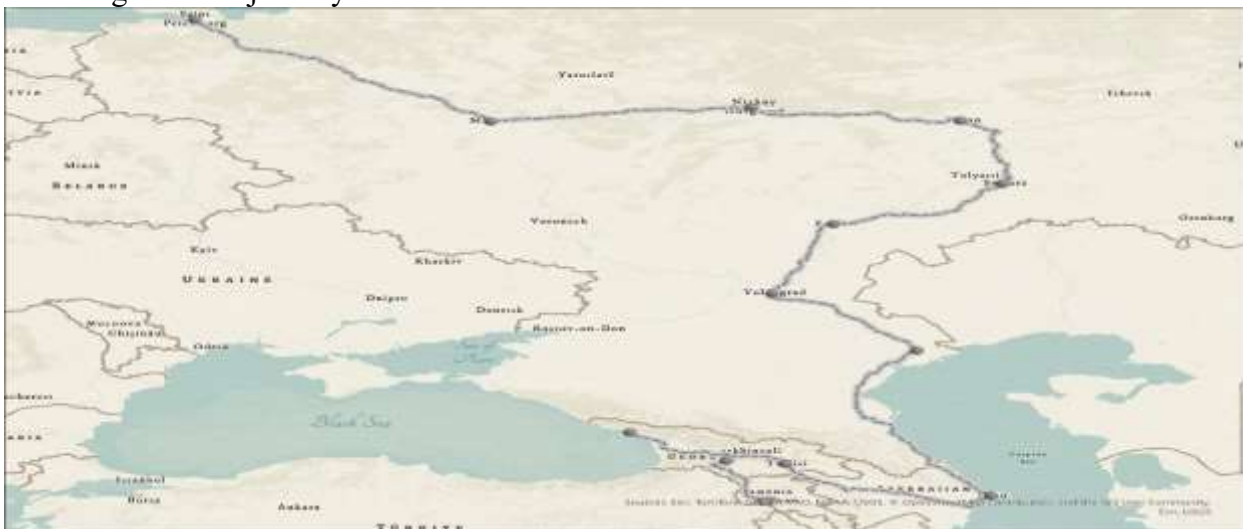
In April 1928, Kazantzakis traveled from Athens again to the Soviet Union, where, with a stopover in Constantinople, he arrived in Odessa and then in Kiev, where he stayed for forty days, together with his friend the writer Panait Istrati. Then they went to Bykovo, where they stayed for a month and a half. Then, via Moscow, they visited Leningrad and returned to Moscow.

12.2 Second route:

In July of the same year, Kazantzakis (with the company of Eleni Samiou, Istrati and Istrati's companion Bilili Baud-Bovy) traveled by train from Moscow to Murmansk, in the Arctic Ocean, on a journey that lasted ten days.

**Figure 6.** Soviet Union – Third trip (April 1928 – April 1929), 2nd route**12,3 Third route:**

The following month (August) the author (in the company of Eleni Samiou, Istrati and his companion Bilili Baud-Bovy) travels to the southern Soviet Union. The stops on his journey: Moscow – Nizhny Novgorod – Kazan – Samara – Saratov – Volgograd – Astrakhan – Baku – Tbilisi – Borjomi – Yerevan – Vagarshapat – Tbilisi – Sukhumi – Moscow. Then they go to Leningrad. This journey lasted four months.

**Fig 7.** Soviet Union – Third trip (April 1928 – April 1929), 3rd route

12.4 Fourth route

In January 1929, Kazantzakis, this time alone, toured first to the north and then to the east of the country. The stops on his journey were: Leningrad – Petrozavodsk – Khem – Murmansk – Perm – Yekaterinburg – Omsk – Novosibirsk – Krasnoyarsk – Irkutsk – Chita – Khabarovsk – Khabarovsk – Vladivostok – Moscow.



Figure 8. Soviet Union – Third trip (April 1928 – April 1929), 4th route

12.5 Fifth route:

In March 1929 the author travels to Turkestan. The stops of his journey: Moscow – Samara – Orenburg – crossing Kazakhstan – Tashkent – Samarkand – Bukhara – Merv – Bukhara – Samarkand – Lake Aral – Moscow. The author makes this journey without the permission required for such a visit (Kazantzaki E., 1998, p. 258).



Figure 9. Soviet Union – Third trip (April 1928 – April 1929), 5th route

12.6 Soviet Union – Fourth trip (June 1957):

The author's last visit to the country took place in the summer of 1957 (Fig. 10), when he traveled to Japan and China, stopping off in the Soviet Union.

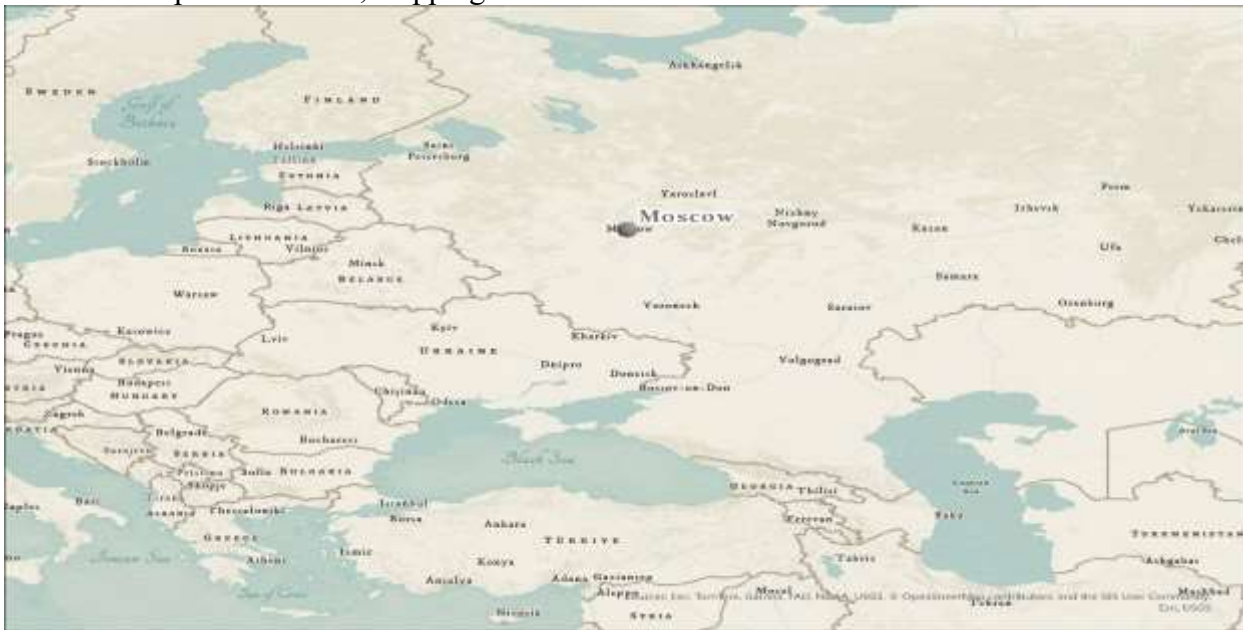


Figure 10. Soviet Union – Fourth trip (June 1957)

13. Instead of an epilogue

This work expanded Kazantzakis' travelogue and specifically his travels to Russia and the Soviet Union. The author's travelogue gives us a lot of information about each country he visits, taking the reader to unknown or even exotic places. The reader of travel books *Traveling*, through Kazantzakis' writing, moves from everyday life to contemplation, to the idea, to the pursuit of freedom, which is the main redeeming advantage of the author's writing. Through his travel books, the author proposes a model of life, where travel is a solution to the dead ends of the city, entertains, brings the traveler into contact with new people, places, customs and traditions, images. The visualization/mapping of the author's journeys helps the reader to focus the author's descriptions on the geographical space, to integrate the Kazantzakis discourse on the world map. In this way, the author's great travel ventures become fully understandable, especially in an era when travel was difficult and time-consuming.

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Cultural Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Tourism Development in the Heroic Island of Psara

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to investigate cultural entrepreneurship on the island of Psara and to examine its contribution to the tourism development of the region. Psara, although small in area, has a rich historical heritage and natural beauty. Their cultural identity is deeply intertwined with the destruction they suffered in 1824, during the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. The destruction of Psara has been recorded as one of the most shocking historical events and inspired the famous poem by Dionysios Solomos. The research focuses on the one hand on the analysis of the ways in which the island uses its natural and cultural resources to enhance tourism and on the other hand on the potential for cultural development based on the opinions of the inhabitants in a quantitative survey with 130 questionnaires distributed to them.

Keywords: Fisherman, cultural tourism, coastal islands, cultural entrepreneurship, sustainable development

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1. Introduction

Psara is a small but inhabited island in the northern Aegean Sea, located about 15 nautical miles from Chios the nearest large town with the municipality of Heroic Island of Psara as its seat. It has a population of 422 inhabitants and an area of 42 square kilometers, it is mainly a barren island.

The island's long history, culminating in the heroic sacrifice of the people of Psarians during the 1821 Revolution, is a major attraction for visitors, combining culture and tranquility away from the popular tourist destinations. Cultural tourism on the island offers authentic experiences. The most tragic historical moment of Psara was the holocaust of Black Raki on 22 June 1824, when the town of Psara fell into the hands of the Turks. Those of the civilians who made it in time fled by boat. The rest were killed or drowned. The 'Black Battle', immortalised by Solomos, was elevated in people's consciousness as a symbol of sacrifice and total commitment to the cause of Freedom. Those Psarians who were saved from the catastrophe fled to the surrounding islands; Kriezis, 2021; Spanos, 2018 Municipality of Psara, 2023;

2. Tourism as a Means of Sustainable Development in Psara

Tourism is one of the main pillars of the Greek, but also of the global economy. In the case of Psara, tourism has the potential to be directly linked to the cultural heritage of the island, offering a unique opportunity for sustainable development. Although tourism has been studied in many parameters, there is no universal definition of tourism. Tourism is a 'product' of the ever-expanding tourism industry, which is defined by five key factors: facilities, services provided, hospitality, freedom of choice and tourist experiences (Manola et al., 2022; Manola et al., 2022; Trikalitis & Manola, 2024; Tsatalbassoglou & Manola, 2024)

Tourism in Fishery is not only an economic phenomenon, but also a social and cultural phenomenon. As an economic phenomenon, tourism development is influenced by the laws of supply and demand, as visitors choose Psara for the natural beauty of the island, its cultural heritage and the experiences offered. Socially, tourism leads to interaction between visitors and locals, strengthening social relations and creating new opportunities for social mobility and development. Culturally, tourism in Psara creates a juxtaposition of different cultural stimuli, enhancing local identity and cultural dialogue. Maniou, 2023b; Manola & Koufadakis, 2022; Maniou, 2024).

Further, sustainable tourism development can be achieved through the integration of cultural heritage into the island's tourism product. This requires the development of tourism infrastructure that respects the natural and cultural environment, the promotion of tourism as a cultural experience and the strengthening of the local economy through sustainable practices. Manola, 2019; Manola, 2022; Manola et al., 2023)

Psara, with its rich history and unique cultural heritage, has the potential to develop sustainable business models based on tourism. The island can leverage its cultural assets, such as the Black Ridge and archaeological sites, to create sustainable tourism businesses that promote the values of the local community while enhancing economic and social well-being. The development of sustainable tourism businesses will require the adoption of policies that ensure the protection of the natural environment, the promotion of local products and the strengthening of the local community through social entrepreneurship. (Miaoulis, 2021)

3. Cultural Entrepreneurship in Psara and Archaeological Sites

Cultural entrepreneurship in Psara represents a key factor for the island's sustainable development, linking its historical and cultural heritage with the modern economy. Organizing cultural routes titled "*In the Footsteps of Heroes*" or creating a cultural park that connects the island's historic monuments could serve as a significant incentive for business

development and the enhancement of cultural tourism. (Maniou et al., 2024; Maniou et al., 2024a; Maniou et al., 2024b).

The promotion of cultural heritage through festivals, educational programs, and experiential tourism activities can contribute to Psara's economic growth by attracting visitors and creating new job opportunities. At the same time, strengthening cultural entrepreneurship could also stem from collaboration with other island communities, utilizing best practices in the fields of cultural tourism and sustainable development. (Maniou & Mitoula, 2025; Maniou et al., 2025a).

The use of new technologies and digital tools can play a crucial role in disseminating the island's cultural heritage. Virtual tours, online archives, and interactive applications can enrich the visitor experience, making Psara's cultural heritage more accessible and appealing to the general public. (Maniou et al., 2025).

The destruction of Psara and the holocaust of Mavri Rachi in 1824 was a historical event that shocked all of Europe. In recognition of Psara's contribution to Greek history and the bravery and self-sacrifice of its people, the Hellenic Parliament voted to rename the Municipality of Psara to the *Municipality of the Heroic Island of Psara*. Below is a list of the historical and archaeological sites of this heroic island. Psara possesses a rich cultural heritage with great potential for promotion through organized initiatives, cultural events, and modern forms of touristic development. (Kaltsas, 2021; Koumarianou, 2021).

3.1. Points of Interest Contributing to the Identity and Tourism Development of the Island

Mavri Rachi Hill is an iconic site of remembrance of the Greek Revolution, where in 1824 the Psarian people chose self-sacrifice rather than surrender to the Ottomans. Today, a modest monument honors their sacrifice, offering opportunities for further development through guided tours and commemorative events.

Church of Saint Nicholas, built in 1793 and closely associated with the destruction of Psara, has been renovated and functions as a significant religious and cultural site. Promoting it through new technologies can boost religious tourism and the local economy.

The bust of Konstantinos Kanaris, located near the church at the site of his family home, enhances historical memory and cultural entrepreneurship through events, storytelling, and festivals that attract visitors.

The Spitalia, an old quarantine station renovated by Aris Konstantinidis, and **the captain's houses (kapetanospita)** in the area of Kavos, reflect the island's maritime tradition and could be key elements in thematic tourism.

The Mycenaean settlement at Archontiki offers valuable insight into prehistoric habitation on Psara, with findings displayed at the Archaeological Museum of Chios, strengthening the island's link with cultural tourism and archaeological research.

Overall, Psara is a land with a rich cultural legacy and strong potential for sustainable tourism and local development. (Miaoulis, 2021a; Nikodimou, 1862; Spanos, 1967; Spanos, 1962; Psara-Link, 2023; Exploring Greece, 2023; Ferryhopper, 2023; Karatzas, 2023; Mantis, 2013)

4. Research Methodology

The quantitative research conducted for this study involved questionnaires distributed both to local residents of the island of Psara and to individuals originally from Psara who do not reside permanently on the island but visit due to their origin. A total of 130 questionnaires were distributed, and the research lasted for 3 months, from October to December 2024.

What is your gender?



Figure 1: According to the research data, 51% of the respondents were male and 49% were female.

Age

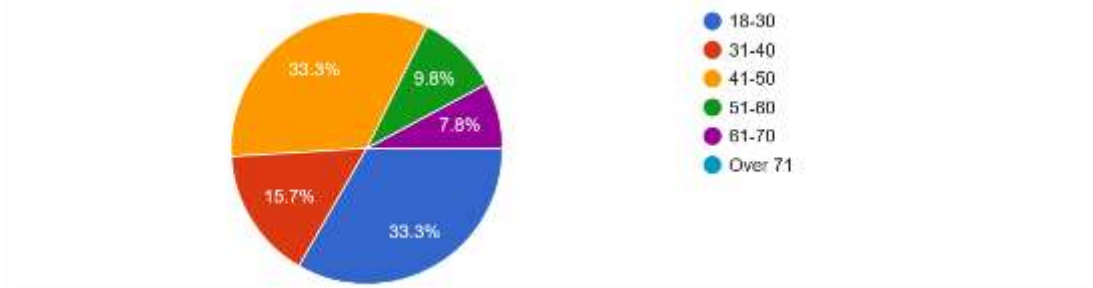


Figure 2: The majority of participants fell into the following age distribution:

Place of residence

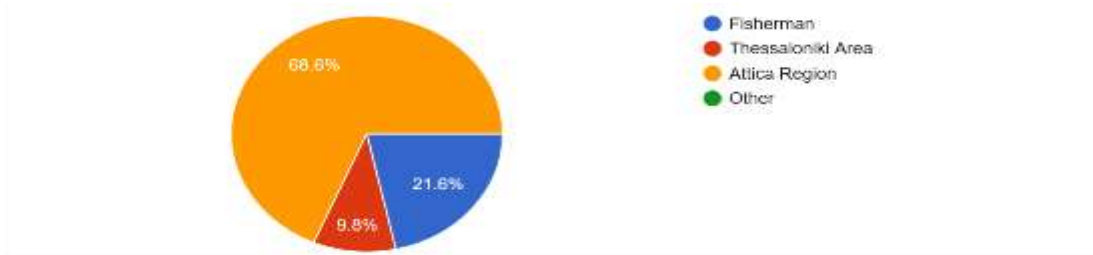


Figure 3: Regarding the respondents' place of residence:

Level of education

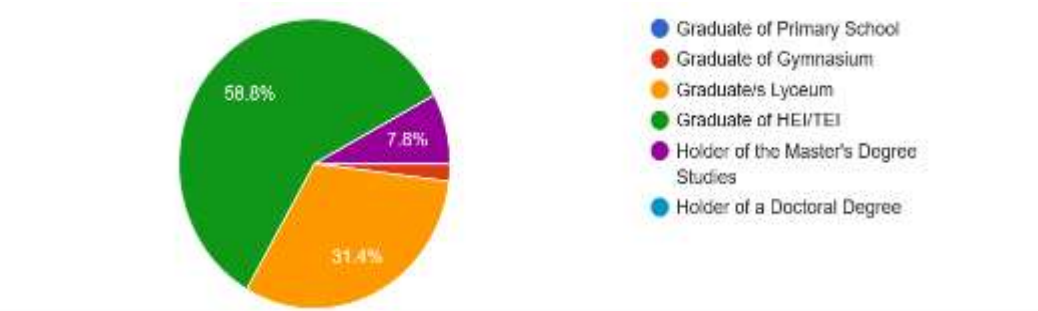


Figure 4: The educational level of the participants is distributed as follows: The sample shows diversity, with a strong representation of university graduates.

Occupation

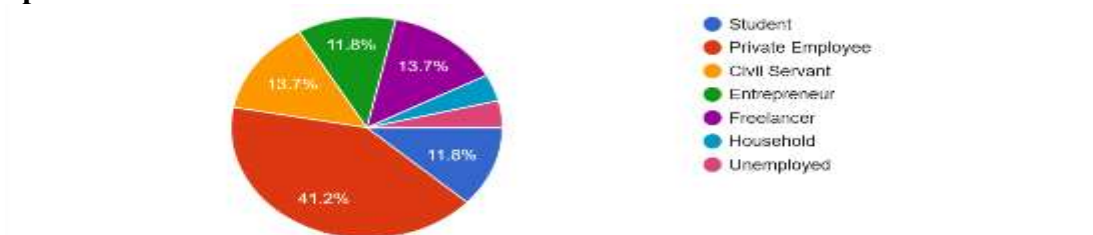


Figure 5: The professional profile of the respondents is as follows: These figures indicate that the majority are in stable employment, primarily in the private sector, which may influence their perception of economic development and opportunities on the island.

Personal income

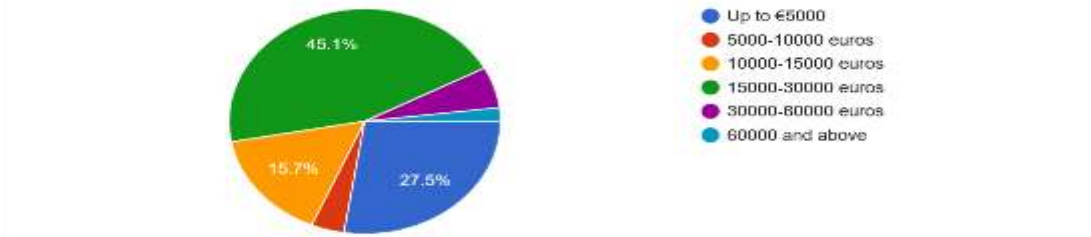


Figure 6: The income levels vary significantly: These results suggest that a large portion has moderate incomes, while a notable percentage has very low income, potentially affecting their priorities and needs regarding the island.

Are you from Psara?



Figure 7: The sample gave a homogeneous answer, with 100% indicating they are originally from Psara.

How often do you visit Psara?

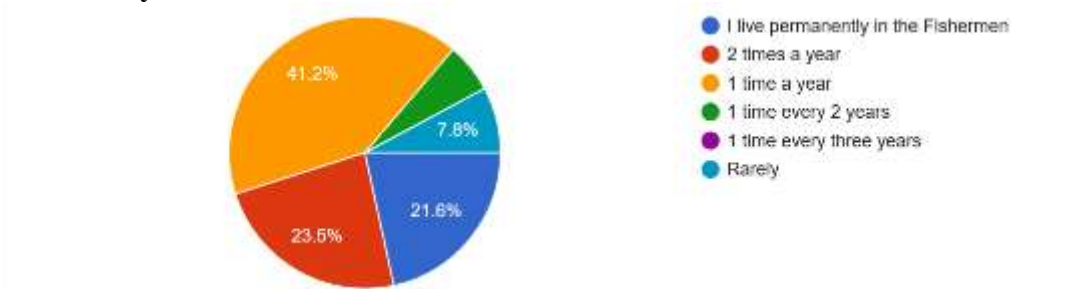


Figure 8: In response to the frequency of visits to Psara:

What is your religion?

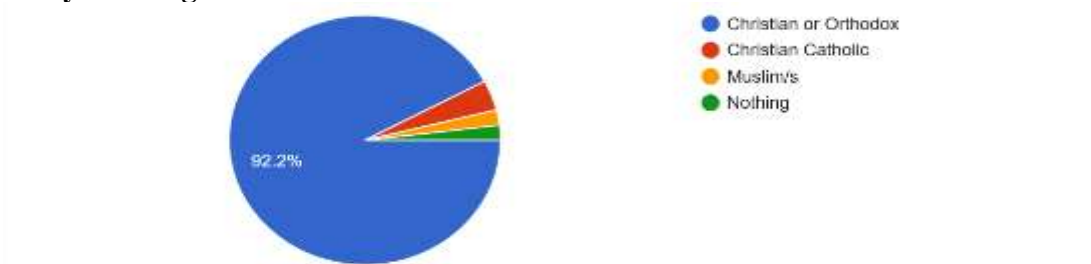


Figure 9: 92.2% of respondents identified as Greek Orthodox Christians, highlighting significant homogeneity relevant to the cultural context of Psara.

Do you know which of the following businesses/events exist?

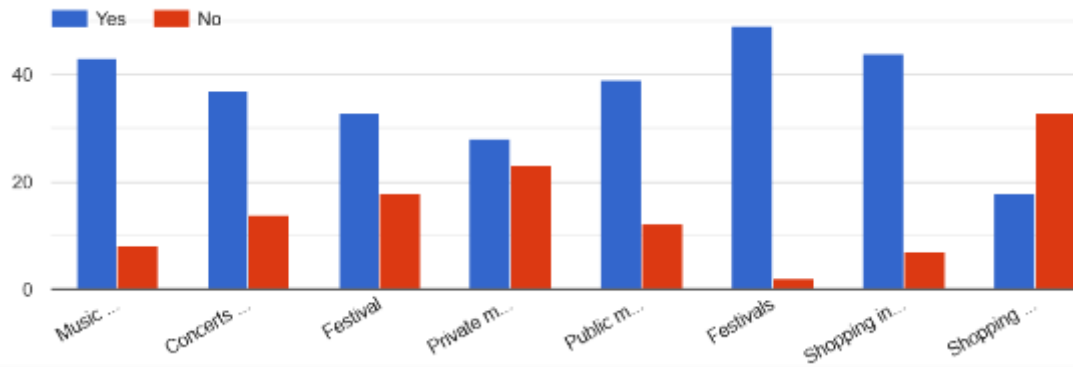
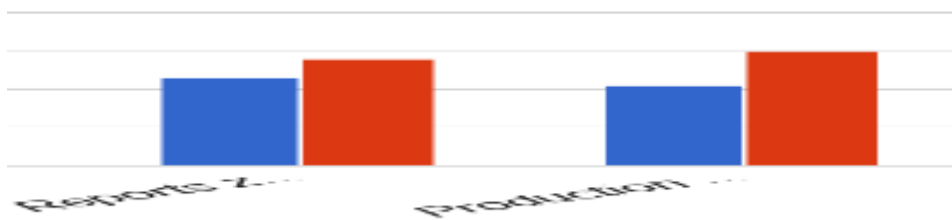


Figure 10: This Figure reveals the participants’ level of awareness of cultural businesses in Psara. The distribution of answers shows a satisfactory level of awareness for most initiatives.



Which of the following businesses/events have you visited?

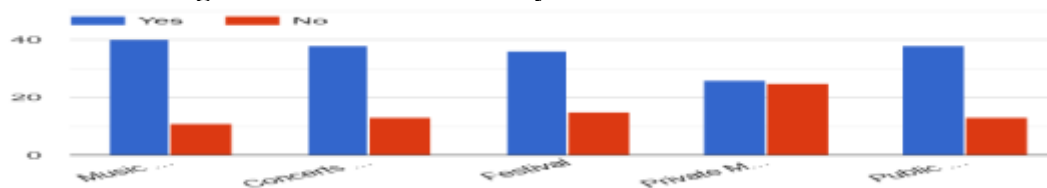
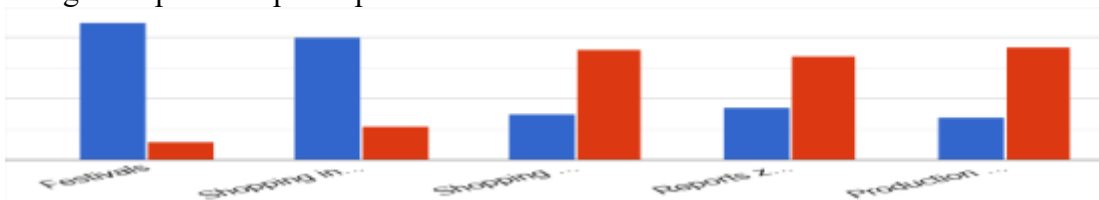


Figure 11 This data reflects which participants have visited cultural businesses or events in Psara. Comparing this Figure with the previous one may show similarities between theoretical knowledge and practical participation.



The following forms of cultural entrepreneurship do not exist today in Psara. Which of these would you like to exist?

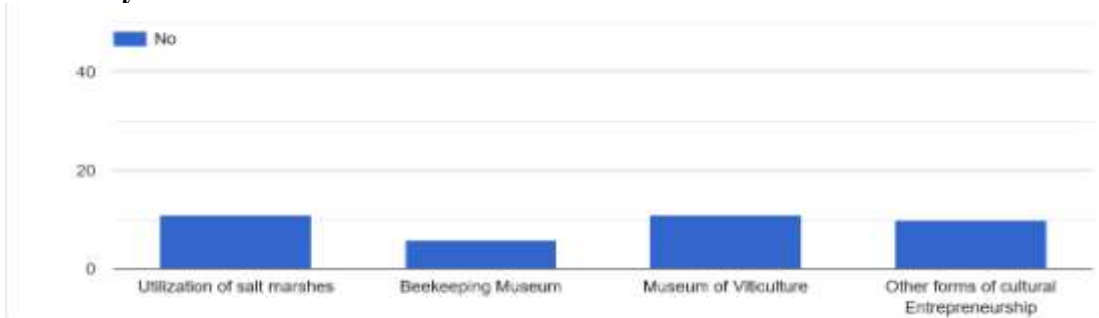


Figure 12: This Figure highlights participants’ interest in new forms of cultural entrepreneurship. Their preferences reveal potential areas for future development.

Would you pay a ticket to visit the forms of cultural entrepreneurship in Psara if they existed?

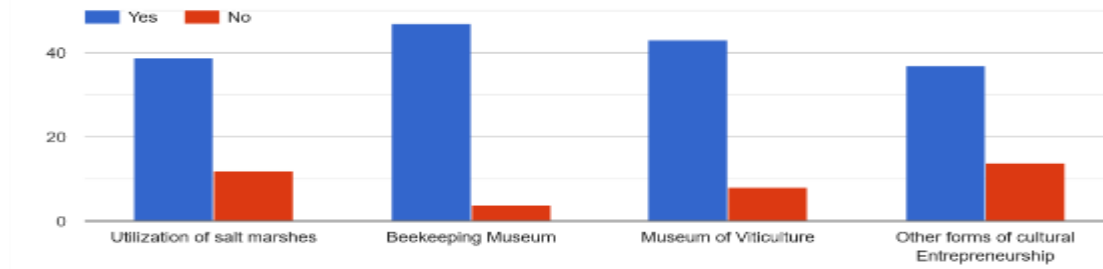


Figure 13: When asked about willingness to pay for entry to cultural ventures, the majority responded positively, suggesting the viability of such actions and a recognition of the island’s cultural value.¹⁴ Are you aware if any of the following ways of preserving Cultural heritage exist in Psara?

Are you aware if any of the following ways of preserving Cultural heritage exist in Psara?

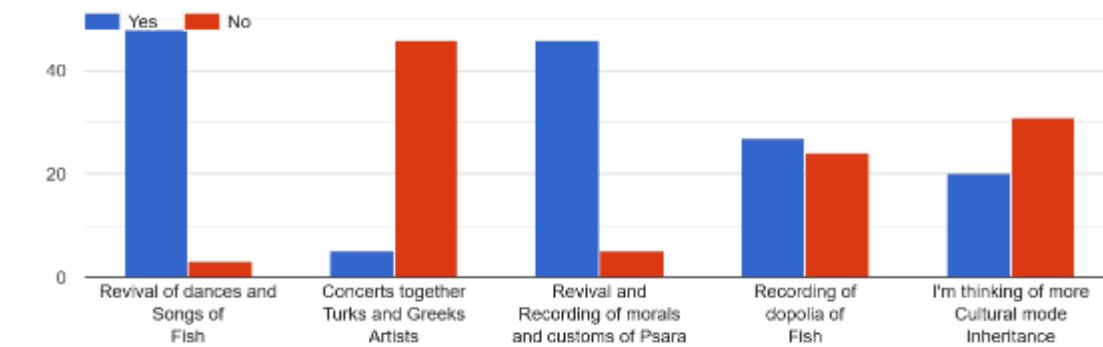


Figure 14: Awareness of heritage preservation methods indicates the population’s level of sensitivity and the need for further educational efforts, as a significant portion answered negatively.

Have you participated in/attended any of the following intangible cultural heritage events OUTSIDE Psara related to the island of Psara?

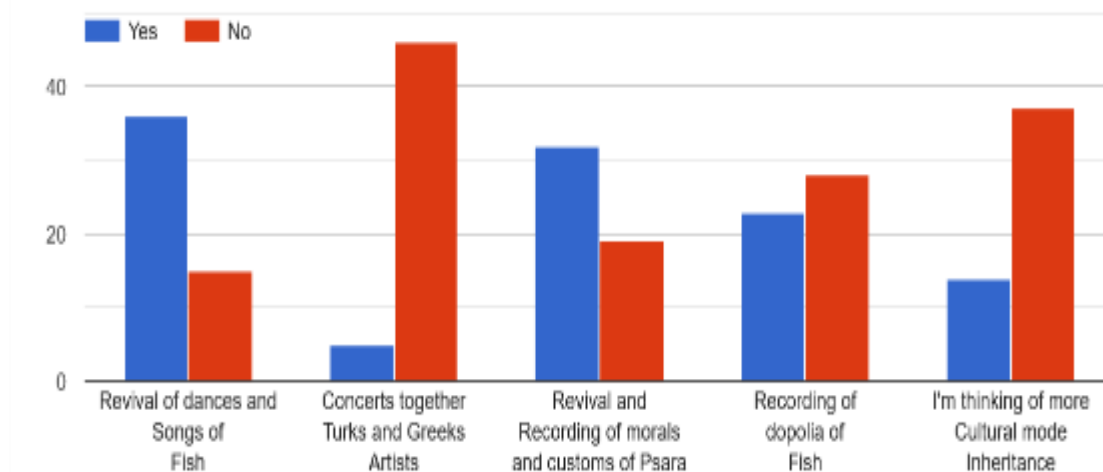


Figure 15. Participation in intangible cultural heritage events outside of Psara indicates the degree of community mobilization for the preservation of the cultural identity of the island. A necessary question for this research, as it shows the potential for future events or initiatives outside of Psara that could enhance the interest and visibility of the island.

Are you aware of/have you participated in the following cultural heritage preservation activities taking place on the island of Psara?

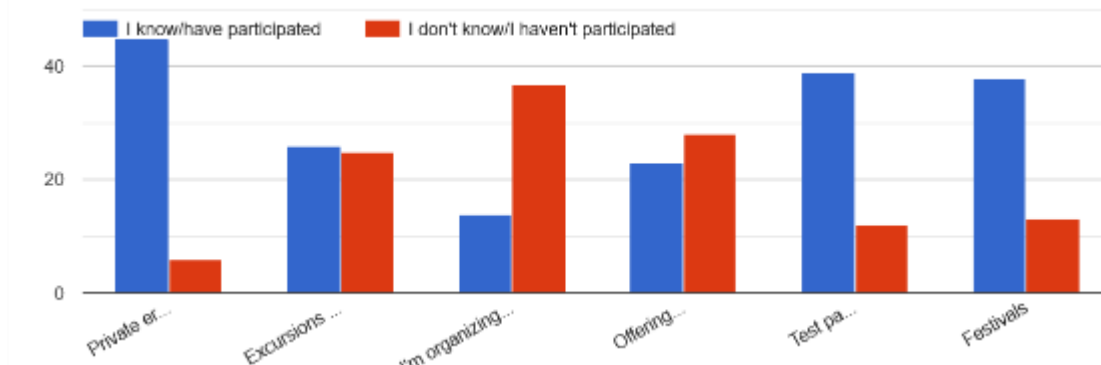


Figure 16. Awareness of or participation in cultural heritage preservation activities on the island of Psara reveals the local activity and the interest of the residents in it, giving varied answers depending on the activity, a positive result as it reveals potential for improvement, but also interest and motivation from the survey participants.

Which of the following cultural heritage preservation activities would you like to exist?

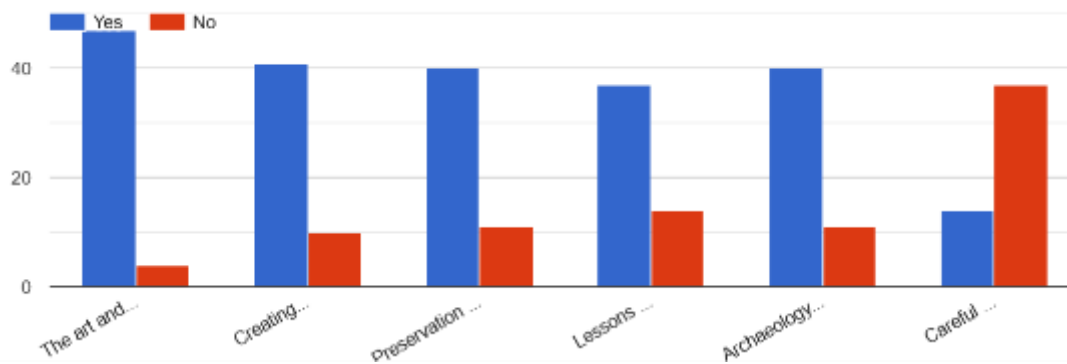


Figure 17: The above Figure displays the possible desired cultural heritage preservation activities, revealing which initiatives have a greater chance of success if implemented.

Are you aware if there are actions being taken to revive traditional farming methods for the following products?

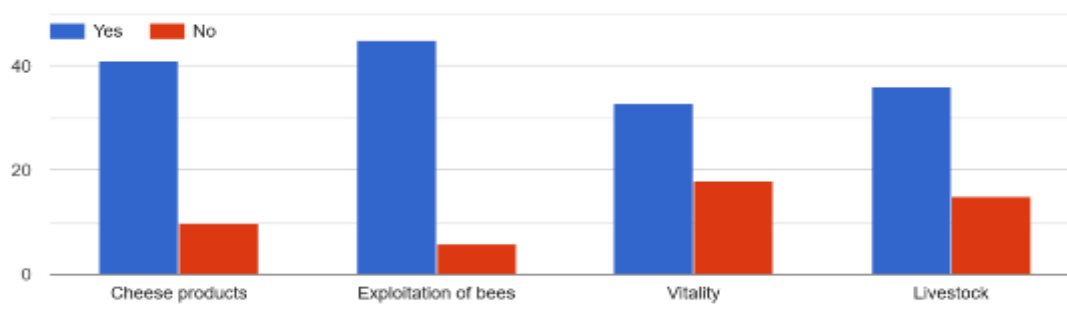


Figure 18:The information on the revival of traditional farming practices shows the respondents' connection to the island's agricultural tradition, indicating that there is a particular emphasis on local cheese products and the island's beehives.

Have you participated in promotional activities for the revival of traditional farming methods?

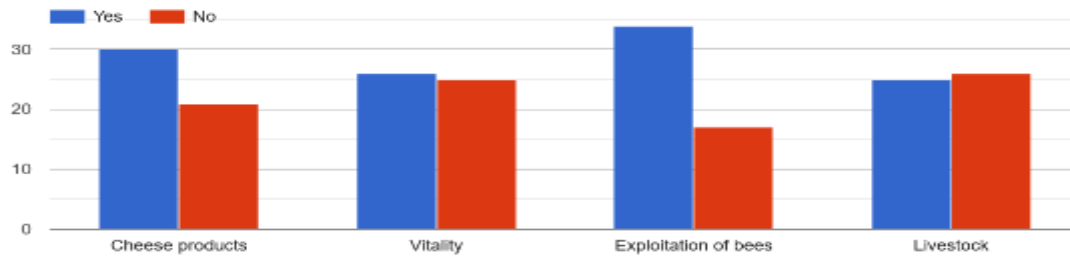


Figure 19: Participation in actions promoting traditional agricultural methods reveals the degree of involvement with agriculture and interest in sustainable development, linking the previous question with the present one, and showing once again the importance of the beehives of Psara for the cultural identity of the island.

Which of the following traditional products would you like to be commercially exploited?

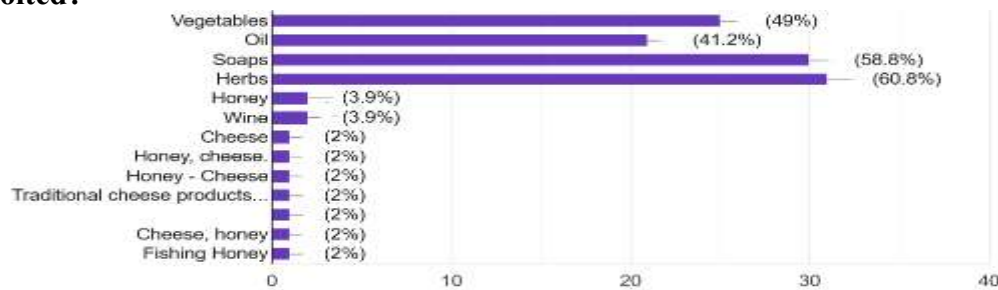


Figure 20: Preferences for commercially exploited traditional products indicate the possible directions of local economic development, with 60.8% choosing herbs as an option, while other possible options seem to be soaps (58.8%), oil (41.2%) and vegetables (49%).

Are you aware of any publications that preserve historical memory and heritage in Greek?

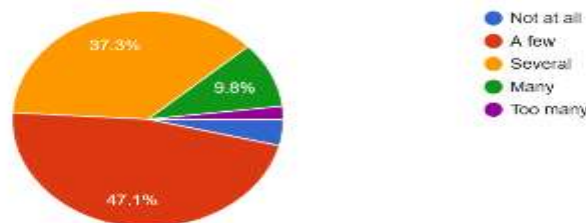


Figure 21: Awareness of publications that preserve historical memory underlines the importance of written documentation on cultural heritage, showing that 47.1% of the sample is aware of only a few corresponding texts.

Are you aware of or have you attended any actions WITHIN PSARA for the promotion of books about Psara, such as:

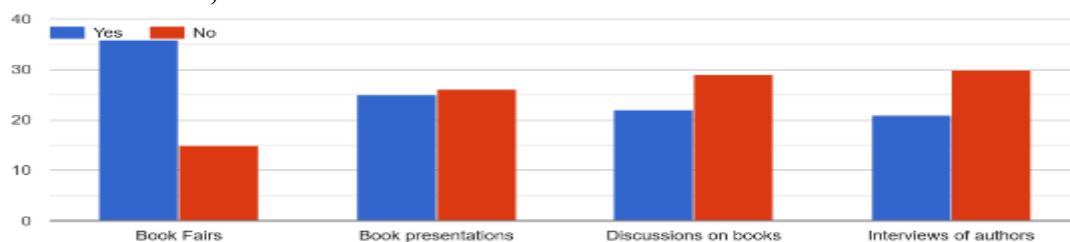


Figure 22: Participation in actions for the promotion of books about Psara within the island shows the need to improve the degree of mobilization of the local community about their literary heritage.

Are you aware of or have you attended any actions OUTSIDE PSARA for the promotion of books about Psara, such as:

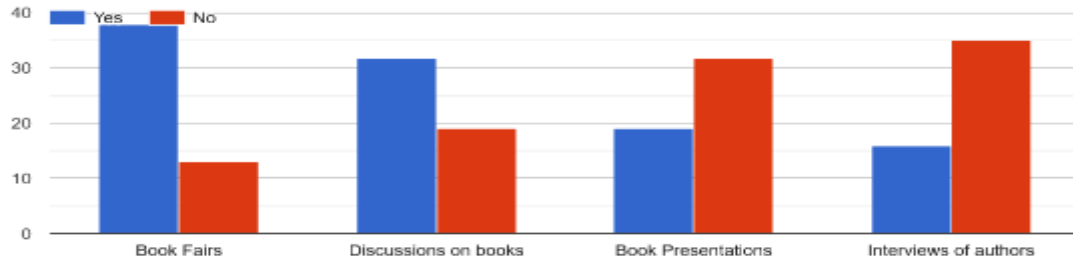


Figure 23: Participation in actions for the promotion of books about Psara outside the island reveals the effort to preserve the cultural identity to a wider audience, another area that needs strengthening.

Are you aware if the current legal framework provides subsidies for young entrepreneurs?



Figure 24: Information on subsidies for young entrepreneurs shows the level of information residents have about economic opportunities, with a significant percentage selecting the "don't know/no answer" option.

Which of the following business actions affect the sustainable development of the island? (Sustainable Development means development that satisfies present needs without compromising future needs)

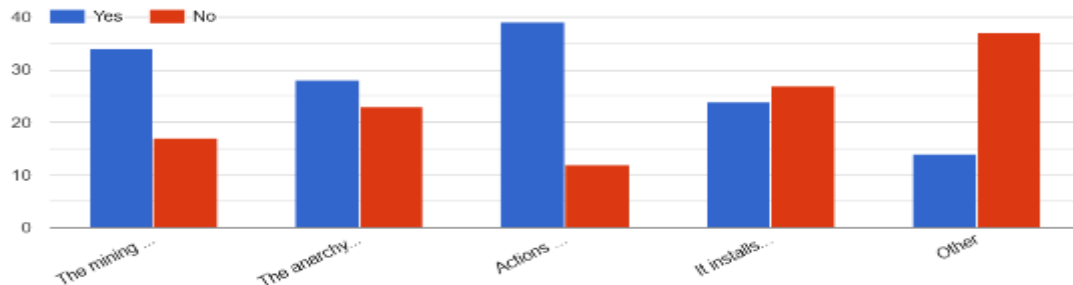


Figure 25: The next question presents the business actions that affect sustainable development and underlines the importance of a balance between economic and environmental well-being.

Have you read any of the following books that are related to Psara?

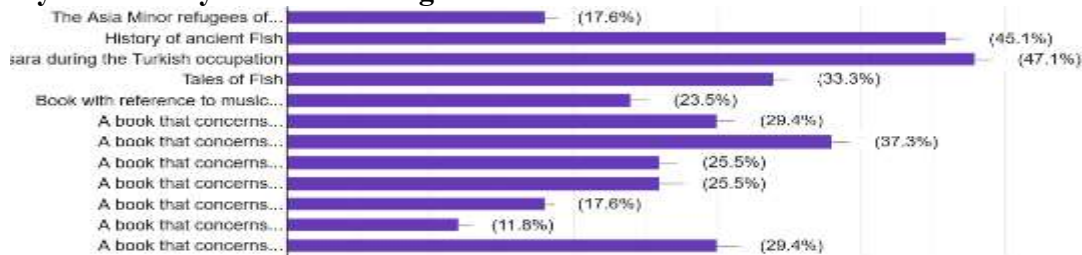


Figure 26: Reading books related to Psara shows interest in local history and cultural preservation, showing a variety of responses, with most participants choosing books about Psara during the Turkish occupation and the history of the island.

27. Are the transportation services (ferry and local transportation) sufficient to serve both the locals and the tourists?

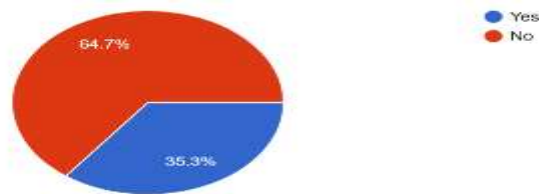


Figure 27:The adequacy of transport services affects both the daily life of the local people and the tourist development, and the answers for such a crucial issue show great room for improvement, as 64.7% of the sample stated that public transport does not work well enough.

What kind of cultural activities/events would you like to attend on the island of Psara?

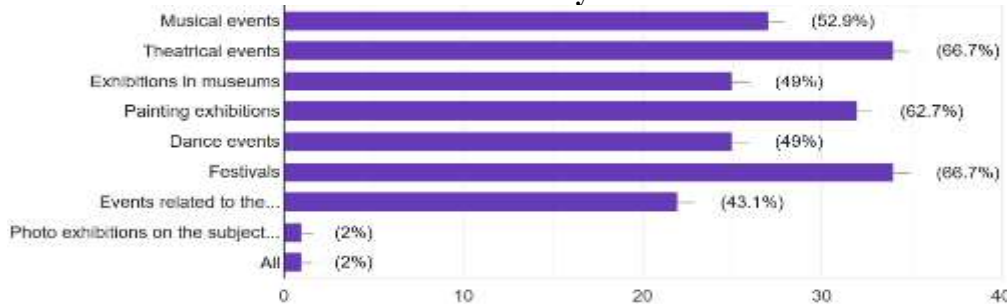
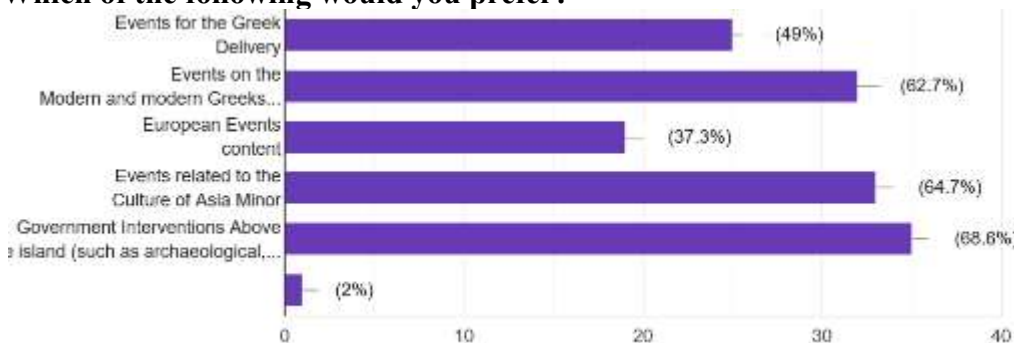


Figure 28:Preferences for cultural events on the island indicate the needs and interests of the public, contributing to the targeted development of cultural activities such as theatre performances (66.7%), art exhibitions (62.7%) and festivals (66.7%)

Which of the following would you prefer?



Figure

29:Finally, the choice between different proposals shows the respondents' priorities regarding the cultural and economic development of Psara, a question that revealed that the participants' preferences differ, but that all proposals were chosen by at least 37.3%.

4.Findings of the Survey on the Cultural and Economic Development of Psara

Participation in book promotion activities for Fishers outside the island highlights the effort to preserve the cultural identity to a wider audience. However, this is an area that requires further strengthening. Similarly, participation in book promotion activities within the island demonstrates the need for greater mobilisation of the local community for its literary heritage.

The knowledge and involvement of local residents in initiatives to preserve the cultural heritage of Psari reveals local activism and interest in its protection and promotion. Responses vary according to the activity, suggesting both the potential for improvement and the existing mobilisation of residents. In addition, participation in cultural events outside Psara indicates the degree of community awareness of the preservation of the island's cultural identity and the potential for future activities that could enhance its extroversion and promotion.

In terms of entrepreneurial activity, residents' awareness of grants for young entrepreneurs reflects the level of information about economic opportunities. It is noteworthy that a significant percentage chose the answer "don't know/no answer", indicating the need for better dissemination of information in this area. At the same time, the business actions affecting the sustainable development of the Fishers underline the importance of a balanced approach between economic and environmental well-being.

Reading books about the Fishers is an indication of interest in local history and cultural preservation. Responses varied, with most participants choosing books about the history of the island and the period of Turkish occupation.

A particularly critical issue for the daily life of residents and tourism development is the adequacy of transport services. The responses show considerable room for improvement, with 64.7% of respondents stating that public transport does not adequately meet their needs.

Finally, the choice between different cultural and economic development proposals revealed a variety of preferences among participants. However, each proposed action garnered at least 37.3% of preferences, suggesting an interest in multi-level development on the island.

5. Conclusions

Cultural entrepreneurship in Psara can act as a driver of sustainable tourism development, using cultural routes, local festivals and religious events to enhance local identity. It is a key axis for preserving historical memory and strengthening the local economy. The combination of cultural heritage, tourism and local traditions can create a sustainable development model that will contribute both to the promotion of the island and to improving the living conditions of its inhabitants.

Archaeological sites, such as the Mycenaean settlement at Archontiki, and historical monuments, such as the Black Ridge and the church of Agios Nikolaos, are central points for the promotion of cultural tourism. Their exploitation through organised tours, educational programmes and digital technologies can enhance the interest of visitors, attracting both researchers and tourists interested in the history and culture of the island.

The promotion of the cultural heritage of Psara through cultural entrepreneurship actions can lead to the creation of a resilient and sustainable development model, based on the history, traditions and natural resources of the island.

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Can Medical Tourism Develop in Rural Areas in Greece?

Abstract:

Medical tourism is a highly profitable global business with Greece being popular for IVF, dentistry, orthopedics, cardiac surgery and cardiology, as the average cost of treatment is 50-70% lower than the European average. However, most of the above-mentioned high-quality medical services can only be offered in Athens, Thessaloniki and sporadically in Ioannina and Alexandroupolis: to develop medical tourism in rural areas, other fields must be sought including tourism for people with kidney failure who undergo dialysis, people with hematological diseases who undergo frequent transfusions and people with various disabilities. The reason is that these patients are organized into groups, federations and even national organizations and it is easy to reach them en-masse in their country and offer them a combination of treatment and tourism, even in very popular Greek destinations that may have limited medical capabilities. Providing appropriate facilities, both in tourism and medicine, certain Greek urban areas could become important medical tourism destinations for these travelers.

Key Words: Medical tourism, kidney failure, transfusions, disability

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1. Introduction

Medical tourism is defined as the travel of individuals from their country of residence to another country seeking treatment for a wide range of health problems. Medical tourism is part of health tourism where people seek therapeutic solutions to problems related to physical health, mental health, well-being, rehabilitation and reintegration (WTO, 2018).

Medical tourism has its roots in Ancient Greece where patients from various cities sought treatment at the Asclepieia, the temples of Asclepius that were also medical centers: a similar practice was also common during the Roman period while, after the Middle Ages, people again used to travel to thermal and mineral springs that provided therapies for rheumatic and respiratory diseases (Pavli and Maltezou, 2024). In recent years medical tourism involved people from medically underdeveloped countries who traveled to medically advanced countries to resolve their health problems (Horowich, 2007). An example for Greece was heart surgery, with people travelling to the United States (mainly Houston, Texas) and Great Britain (mainly London) to be operated: for this the state covered the expenses of the patient and one accompanying person but only after the approval of the proposed treatment by a state committee to which the interested parties appealed, providing a certificate that the treatment could not be offered in Greece.

Although this practice still exists, (EOPYY, xx), the enormous progress of medicine in Greece over the last thirty years resulted that only a few and very specialized cases today require treatment abroad. Indeed, over time, medicine has developed significantly worldwide, as medical information, scientific interactions and the dissemination of medical knowledge through medical training and online conferences became widely available: as a result, today patients move from medically advanced countries (even from those that are pioneers in medical research, drugs, tools and digital applications) to other countries, with the sole criterion being the cost of services and the speed of performing interventions and procedures, without often taking the quality of service into significant consideration (Medical Tourism Magazine a, xx), at least until failures and complications occur (Chen and Wilson, 2013). The same applies to medical procedures that are illegal in the country of origin, such as abortion, cosmetic procedures not offered in the patients' country of residence (mainly gender reassignment), various experimental innovating treatments (for cancer and other incurable diseases) not approved by the authorities of the country of origin, the purchase of infants through illegal adoptions (by providing false certificates of pregnancy and childbirth), euthanasia, as well as illegal transplantations by bypassing the waiting list. The latter is an unethical as well as occasionally lethal, as transplantations are often performed in places that are not a hospital or a clinic. In illegal medical tourism, fraud is common, but the patient, despite paying considerable amounts of money, usually does not file any complaints since he is also participating in an illegal act (Medical Tourism Magazine b, xx).

2. Medical tourism in Greece

Factors influencing the increasing popularity of legal medical tourism in Greece are (mtgreece, xx, MinTour, 2023)

- The high cost of the requested medical service in the patient's country of origin, related to the costs in Greece,
- The long waiting lists for operations, interventions and other forms of treatment in the country of origin, which are shorter in Greece,
- The enormous progress of medical science in Greece
- The low cost of air travel and accommodation in the country and
- The possibility of visiting archaeological sites, cultural sites and destinations of particular natural beauty

Medical tourism is a highly profitable global business: it is known that, for medical purposes, according to official data, 25 million people moved worldwide in 2019: in 2020 the

global turnover was 54 billion US dollars, which rose to 90 billion in 2022 with the projection for 2027 predicting a turnover of 200 billion dollars and 300 billion in 2028, i.e. an increase of 15-25% each year (WTO, 2023, medicaltourismwatch, 2023, Business wire, 2023). Moreover, according to a recent study, the global turnover in 2030 will exceed 400 billion US dollars (Data Bridge, 2023).

As for the leading countries in legal medical tourism, Thailand attracts hundreds of thousands of medical tourists for cosmetic and gender reassignment procedures, followed by Malaysia, India, Brazil (which for too many years was the dominant destination for cosmetic procedures), Singapore and Mexico (Miksis, 2024). Greece, although there are no official statements, does not seem to attract large numbers of medical tourists, since (according to the available data), in 2017 only 108,500 medical tourists out of a total of 30 million visitors were recorded, a percentage of only 0.36% (MinTour, 2023).

The reason that these countries attract medical tourism is not only the quality of services and low prices, but mainly their organization. The huge turnover of medical tourism attracts a large number of intermediaries, linking the medical tourists and the health providers and services of the host country: however, in order to succeed in this, host countries must provide certified medical services. This certification, that is absolutely necessary today, was a practice established in 1968 for the hospitals and other health facilities in Canada and in 1994 for the hospitals in the United States, followed by the establishment of the Joint Commission International (which basically evaluates American hospitals) as well as the British QHA Trent Accreditation and GCR, which today check the quality of services and the effectiveness of treatments in about 500,000 hospitals worldwide (accreditation.ca, jointcommissioninternational.org, qhatrent.co.uk). Therefore, for all the countries concerned, many hospitals and health facilities seek to obtain these certifications (from one or more organizations) in order to attract American and European medical tourists. In Greece the Hellenic Health Tourism Council was established in 2013 to attract medical tourists that are known to spend an average of 5000 euros per trip, compared to the 1500 euros spent by the average tourist, meaning that, if 100,000 medical tourists are attracted to Greece, they will spend up to 1.5 billion euros, since it is known that tourism expenditure is multiplicative (elitour.org)

Today Greece is popular for IVF, dentistry, orthopedics, cardiac surgery and cardiology, with the average cost of treatment being 50-70% below the European average: for example, dental implants cost up to 1500 euros, depending on the difficulty and materials, while in Western Europe they cost over 3000 euros. At the same time, Greece also offers opportunities for tours during the waiting or recovery time, making it an overall attractive destination (medical-tourism-to-Greece, xx), while it is also a health-safe destination: indeed, several countries like South Africa or Thailand, have a very different epidemiology (this concerns infectious diseases) from Europe and North America, meaning that the exposure to diseases without building natural immunity can pose a risk to medically frail people, since these are diseases (such as tuberculosis, typhoid and other infectious diseases) that have long disappeared from the Western world (Chen and Wilson, 2013). The quality of postoperative care can also vary dramatically, depending on the hospital and country, being significantly lower than the American and European standards. Furthermore, long-distance travel immediately after surgery may increase the risk of complications such as thrombosis and possibly pulmonary embolism (Chen and Wilson, 2013), while several countries that welcome medical tourists may not have adequate insurance and legal policies to fairly deal with complaints and complications. These facts about the standards of healthcare providers around the world have been recognized by the World Health Organization, which in 2004 launched the Global Alliance for Patient Safety. This body helps hospitals and governments around the world to define policies and best practices for patient safety, which are obviously particularly important in the provision of medical tourism services (WHO, 2004). Finally, patients after

returning to their country of origin sometimes find it difficult to have insurance cover (public or private) for the medical costs required for their follow-up or various interventions, especially when treatment was illegal or not permitted by the authorities of the country of origin.

4. Medical Tourism in rural Greece regions – a proposal

In Greece most of the above-mentioned high-level medical services can only be offered in Athens, Thessaloniki and sporadically in Ioannina and Alexandroupolis, mainly due to the proximity to Balkan countries. If our intention is to develop medical tourism in rural Greek areas, other fields must be sought: in our opinion, these fields could include tourism for people with kidney failure who undergo dialysis, people with hematological diseases who undergo frequent transfusions and people with various disabilities. The reason is that, as these patients are organized into groups, federations and even national organizations, it is easy to reach them en-masse in their country and offer them a combination of treatment and tourism, even in very popular Greek destinations that unfortunately have limited medical capabilities.

In the case of dialysis patients, who are bound to their region due to their mandatory presence in dialysis centers three days a week (Gonzalez, 2017), the possibility of moving to a Greek destination where they can combine treatment with vacations is particularly attractive. Destinations where dialysis centers operate can attract large numbers of dialysis patients throughout the year, allowing these patients to take long vacations, perhaps two or more weeks, with the possibility of moving around several destinations. Another possibility for dialysis centers is to collaborate in order to expand the circle of destinations that these patients could visit. The cost can be covered by interstate agreements.

Patients with hematological diseases who require regular transfusions may have decreased in numbers in recent years, due to advances in science and prenatal screening, but they continue to have significant travel restrictions, especially for long-distance excursions. These patients can receive the transfusion they need in destinations that have a hospital with a hematology clinic and blood transfusion centers, allowing them to stay longer at the destination. Furthermore, many patients may seek treatment for hematological diseases (bone marrow transplantation and treatment of various conditions such as anemia and hemophilia) in large hospitals in Greece, given the low cost and high level of services (Medical Tourism Magazine c, xx). In this case too, patients can be approached en-masse and obviously combine holidays in consecutive destinations with corresponding facilities, while the cost of transfusions can also be covered by international agreements.

Finally, for patients with various disabilities, the ability of regional destinations to provide quality accommodation depends on the type of disability and the specialized needs of each group of travelers. Basic requirements are the existence of hotel units with services for disabled people, such as ramps, easy access to the pool, transportation with specially designed vehicles, physiotherapy and kinesiotherapy, as well as the availability of spacious rooms with appropriately designed bathrooms (ENAT, 2008, Rapti, Sepetis and Pierrakos, 2024, Darcy, Mckercher and Schweinsberg, 2020). These people can also be reached en-masse through participating clubs or organizations and the cost (which may include the accompanying person) can be private or through transnational agreements. Here too, they can travel to a series of destinations with appropriate planning. However, the main requirement is the commitment of the accommodating unit to provide the necessary services, in collaboration with physiotherapists and other health professionals, as well as local health units if needed.

In conclusion, although today in Greece the demand is for high-level medical treatments and interventions, that are provided only in the capital and some major cities, it seems that there is room for the provision of medical services from regional destinations, which can simultaneously improve both the quality of life of patients, who will now be able to

travel to well-known and popular Greek destinations, and the economic prosperity of the host places.

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Sustainable visitors' economy. The case of the Green Baths of Europe (Almopia Baths, Pella)

Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of the natural and cultural heritage of Municipality of Almopia, Greece towards regional development and emphasizes on the role of the local community as a driving force in the process of managing the natural environment and promoting local culture. The point of reference are the thermal springs of the Municipality of Almopia, Greece, which, combined with the unique landscape that surrounds them, form a separate and unique natural resource. Within this context, research was carried out on the possibility of environmental and cultural upgrading of Almopia region, as well as on the perspective of regional sustainable development. The research is divided into two parts: a) quantitative research, which focuses on the wishes and preferences of the visitors and b) qualitative research, which is addressed to the accommodation owners and local tourist agencies, seeking information about the services provided and investigating the implementation of sustainable practices.

Keywords: Natural Environment, Culture, Ecotourism, Sustainability, Health, and Wellness Tourism

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1. Introduction

Greece is renowned for its rich cultural and historical significance. Beyond its unaltered folk traditions and world-famous antiquities – which attract millions of visitors annually, the country is also distinguished by its unique geographical features and invaluable natural environment. Greece's majestic mountains, diverse flora, enchanting wetlands, and numerous stunning landscapes have, in recent decades, inspired a resurgence of interest and a redefined understanding of vacationing in the country.

Accompanying this shift in perspective, and aligned with growing environmental consciousness, various forms of alternative tourism have emerged in Greece in recent years. Today, vacations are no longer exclusively associated with summer and the sea but extend throughout the entire year, offering the opportunity to explore all regions of the country, each with its own hidden beauty.

Key characteristics of alternative tourism include a) the promotion of controlled small-scale tourism development, b) attention to the individual preferences of travelers and c) a focus on local culture and the preservation of traditional values.³

This form of tourism does not prioritize large profits, nor does it seek the concentration of mass tourism in specific locations or seasons. Instead, it embraces sustainability and year-round vacations, modest economic gains that remain within the local communities, and the fostering of personal connections between visitors and residents, while prioritizing the preservation of local cultural and environmental factors.⁴

Ecotourism, as a subset of alternative tourism, focuses particularly on environmental conservation and sustainable management, while fostering interaction with local cultural heritage.

The economic benefits of ecotourism, particularly for local communities, are substantial. Since these alternative vacations are not confined to the summer months, they provide a consistent source of income and create opportunities for expanding the local tourism economy. Specifically, ecotourism generates employment, encourages residents to remain in their communities (thereby stabilizing population levels in rural or remote areas), and enhances local engagement in regional development. The result is a balanced local society and economy, without the depletion of natural resources or the destruction of ecosystems.⁵ Ecotourism also offers significant potential for economic growth in rural regions and can play a role in poverty reduction in developing countries.⁶

However, its value extends beyond economic impact or the preservation of local culture, wildlife, and endangered species. One of its most profound benefits lies in its ability to foster a shift in how individuals perceive their relationship with the environment. By providing life-changing experiences ecotourism cultivates a deeper commitment to protect unique natural landscapes against threats posed by climate change and uncontrolled development.⁷

Another rapidly growing form of sustainable tourism is health and wellness tourism. The modern lifestyle- characterized by long work hours, heightened stress and more recently the global health crisis has negatively impacted both mental and physical well-being. As a result, there is increasing demand for wellness-oriented vacations, which promise a return to nature and offer authentic cultural experiences in pursuit of a better quality of life.

In Greece, wellness tourism is thriving, offering visitors a range of high-quality options. These include stays at modern hotel complexes near thermal springs, thalassotherapy centers

3 Komilis, p. 31

4 Sfakianakis, p. 172

5 Tsounis, p. 12, 16

6 Xu et al, p. 2978

7 <https://greenglobaltravel.com/benefits-of-ecotourism-20-top-travel-bloggers-nature-travel/>

and dedicated to holistic rejuvenation programs. The sector's potential is underscored by forecasts predicting an annual growth rate of 21% in the coming years.⁸

Notably, since hydrotherapy sessions typically last only around twenty minutes, visitors are left with ample free time to engage in a variety alternative activities, thus enhancing, the appeal of year round tourism in Greece's exceptional bioclimate.⁹ This extended tourism season provides health and wellness tourism with a distinct advantage is the comparative advantage that health and wellness tourism with a distinct advantage over other types of tourism: i.e. by maintaining consistent employment across a wide range of tourism relate businesses throughout the year.

In recent years, the concept of wellness has expanded, including different dimensions- spiritual, emotional, social, mental- that must operate harmoniously. Wellness tourism involves cultural engagement and participation in sustainable initiatives such as zero waste or waste reduction practices. This type of tourism activity is sometimes referred to as *regenerative tourism*, an evolving concept wherein sustainable tourism not only preserves the status quo but also improves the places it is applied.¹⁰

2. Thermal Spa Towns

Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest direct use of geothermal energy dates back at least 10,000 years ago in North America, where indigenous peoples were drawn to hot springs for both spiritual and practical purposes. These springs were often regarded as sacred and places of healing, believing that the warm water offered a variety of health benefits.¹¹

In Greece, the exact origins of geothermal water use for healing purposes remain unclear. However, it is known that Asclepieia – centers of worship and health services dedicated to the treatment of both body and soul– began to emerge around the 5th century BC.¹² Archaeological findings and written records indicate that Asclepieia employed a combination of mythological, philosophical, and ideological approaches to health, providing what is now called *holistic health care*.¹³

These centers offered comprehensive medical treatments, including balneotherapy, light exercise, proper nutrition and other therapeutic practices.¹⁴ The surrounding natural environment played a critical role in the healing process. Factors such as location, climate, sunlight, abundant clean water, fresh air, lush vegetation, and a tranquil atmosphere were positively predisposed visitors and contributed to their recovery or healing. Asclepieia were typically built near water sources, hot or cold springs, or near the sea. The Asclepieion of Kos was in an area lush with cypress trees, near the ancient thermal spring of Vourina.¹⁵

Historical figures such as Hippocrates, Xenophon, Aristotle, Strabo, and Plutarch wrote about the therapeutic properties of hot springs.¹⁶ Initially, balneotherapy took place in natural settings, but the first organized thermal spa towns with hot water facilities were established during the Roman and Byzantine periods.¹⁷

Over the centuries, the use of baths has evolved to meet various needs. In antiquity, the use of healing natural resources was widespread for treating ailments or improving health,

8 <https://www.tourismtoday.gr/o-τουρισμός-ευεξίας-στην-ελλάδα-οι-7-πυ/>

9 <https://thermalmedicineacademy.gr/συνεδρια-της-ακαδημιασ/>

10 <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/wellness-tourism/market-entry>

11 <http://www.history.alberta.ca/energyheritage/energy/alternative-energy/geothermal-energy/geothermal-energy-throughout-the-ages.aspx>

12 Aggelidis, p. 39

13 <https://www.tovima.gr/2008/11/24/opinions/asklupieia-ta-kentra-ygeias-tis-arxaiotitas/>

14 Aggelidis p. 39

15ό.π.

16 Sfakianakis, p. 71

17ό.π.

though during the Roman era the use of hot waters was primarily for rejuvenation, well-ness and social interaction.¹⁸

The Roman bath complexes, known as Thermae, were vast and luxurious complexes featuring advanced plumbing systems. These facilities were richly adorned with art and included a wide array of amenities such as shops, theaters, libraries, gyms and lecture halls.¹⁹ Notable examples include the Thermae of Diocletian and Caracalla in ancient Rome.²⁰ The practice of public bathing spread to the East under Emperor Constantine, and this practice later spread from Byzantium to the Muslim world.²¹

Due to its geomorphology, Greece has a significant number of mineral springs.²² According to the Hellenic Authority for Geological and Mineral Research, there are 822 recorded thermal springs, though only a small number have been officially classified as therapeutic.²³

From the 1950s until the 1980s, thermal spa towns in Greece were popular destinations for many people.²⁴ Their new facilities, high quality services and a variety of activities established these towns as recreational resorts.²⁵

However, since the mid-1980s, these towns have experienced a sharp decline, that continues to this day. Today, many areas associated with thermalism suffer from neglect and deterioration. The absence of long-term planning, minimal state intervention, and the lack of modernization efforts have led to outdated services, degraded infrastructure, abandoned buildings, lack of amenities, environmental degradation, and a loss of local identity.²⁶ To revitalize thermal tourism and broaden its appeal, diversifying the services offered is essential. Thermal spa towns should be an attractive option not only for the elderly but also for a wider audience, including younger people seeking connection with nature, relaxation, entertainment, and short vacations.

Some potential actions to enhance these towns include the comprehensive renovation of buildings and facilities, improving the environment around thermal springs, and providing high-quality services through specialized personnel. In Europe, thermalism experienced a renaissance at the dawn of the third millennium, with thermal spa towns being redefined as modern tourist destinations, as places of recreation and culture. These towns now combine the traditional form of hydrotherapy with alternative activities and cultural heritage promotion.²⁷

A key development in the growth of thermal spa towns was the establishment of the *European Historic Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA)* in 2009, a non-profit organization based in Brussels, dedicated to the protection and promotion of the cultural heritage of historical thermal spa towns in Europe.²⁸

Several Greek towns including Aidipsos, Loutraki in Corinthia, and the Loutra of the Municipality of Almopia have been incorporated into the European Historic Thermal Towns Network.²⁹ Their inclusion not only enhances their recognition but also adds value to their existing cultural and natural assets. More importantly, it creates promising prospects for development, offering opportunities to renew tourism products, strengthen health and wellness services, and promote local history and culture.

18 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p. 29

19 Aggelidis, p. 46, 48

20 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p.44

21 *ό.π.*

22 [History \(thermalsprings.gr\)](http://History(thermalsprings.gr))

23 Healing Springs – Hellenic Academy of Healing Medicine (thermalmedicineacademy.gr)

24 *ό.π.*

25 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p. 254

26 Papageorgiou, p.p. 65-66

27 [Spa Towns as Places for History - EHTTA \(historicthermaltowns.eu\)](http://Spa Towns as Places for History - EHTTA (historicthermaltowns.eu))

28 [Our network - EHTTA \(historicthermaltowns.eu\)](http://Our network - EHTTA (historicthermaltowns.eu))

29 [Our members - EHTTA \(historicthermaltowns.eu\)](http://Our members - EHTTA (historicthermaltowns.eu))

3. Almopia

The border region of Almopia is rich in both natural and cultural heritage, presenting considerable potential for the development of sustainable tourism. Its thermal springs, known as the Pozar Baths, along with the broader natural environment are integral to the area's history and traditions. Almopia's landscape is unique in Greece, distinguished by its exceptional ecological and aesthetic value.

The region's current geomorphological features were shaped during the Neolithic era, following significant geological transformations over millennia.³⁰ Intense volcanic activity and tectonic movements contributed to the emergence of thermal springs and the formation of a geothermal field.³¹

Today, Almopia forms a basin, surrounded by mountainous terrains with substantial elevation differences, ranging from 120 to 2524 meters.³² The Voras mountain range lies to the northwest, Paiko to the northeast, and to the south stretches a fertile plain, traversed by Almopeos (also known as Moglenitsa) river.

Almopia's natural environment is a diverse mosaic featuring agricultural landscapes, springs, streams, dense forests, valleys, steep gorges, and alpine meadows. The majestic peaks of Voras, the vibrant plains, and the rushing waters of Almopaios combine to create a stunning natural backdrop. This beauty has long been admired by both Greek and foreign travelers of the 20th century, who described it in an idyllic way. Notably, the German traveler Adolf Hermann Struck, in 1908, described Almopia *as an ever-blooming garden*.³³

The region is also home to numerous rare and protected species of fauna and birdlife, particularly in the Voras and Paiko mountain ranges. Biodiversity has led to the designation of three areas as Special Protection Zones within the European Ecological Network Natura 2000, covering a total area of 285,630.84 hectares.³⁴ However, these areas are under threat from activities such as uncontrolled grazing, illegal hunting and logging.³⁵

Located at an altitude of 360-390 meters, in the foothills of the Voras range are the thermal springs of the Almopia Baths. These springs are set within a scenic natural environment³⁶ characterized by dense vegetation, ravines, small waterfalls and caves, which is part of the Natura 2000 network.³⁷ The thermal waters of the springs flow through the Pozar gorge running parallel to the cold waters of the Agios Nikolaos stream for a short distance.³⁸

Numerous trails radiate from the spa town, leading to areas of exceptional natural beauty, such as the *Kounoupitsa* waterfall and the *Issio Pefko* gorge. The Ministry of the Environment, Spatial Planning, and Public Works has officially designated certain areas as Landscapes of Special Natural Beauty, including the *Koziaka* valley, the *Agios Nikolaos* gorge and the plain *Kali Pediada*.³⁹

The Pozar Baths serve as a gateway for hiking excursions into the area's unspoiled forests. There are more than twenty documented routes,⁴⁰ and both the European E4 and E6

30 Karatzoglou, p. 19

31 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p.p. 140-141

32 Astranidis & Astranidou, p. 119

33 Chrisostomou, p. 26

34 M.D. 50743/11-12-2017

35 Almopia Municipality Business Plan, p. 19

36 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p. 145

37 Peraki, p. 29

38 <http://votaniki.gr/vlastisi/apisteutes-perioxes/o-thermopotamos-tis-aridaiais/>

39 <https://filotis.itia.ntua.gr/biotopes/?category=1>

40 <http://www.hellaspath.gr/index.php?p=2>

long distance trails pass through the surrounding mountains.⁴¹ In addition to hiking, the mountains of Almopia are home to numerous climbing sites.⁴²

In addition to its remarkable natural landscape, Almopia is notable for its significant cultural heritage which includes long-lasting traditions, historical monuments, and paleontological and archaeological discoveries. The region is also renowned for its high-quality agricultural products.

4. The Green Spa Town of Almopia

Almopia baths have emerged as a popular resort, and year-round destinations are experiencing notable tourist growth in recent years. Wellness and recreation are harmoniously integrated into a verdant natural environment, where thermal medicinal and cold waters form natural waterfalls, flowing through the spa town. The idyllic setting, combined with the surroundings, therapeutic benefits of hydrotherapy create ideal conditions for relaxation. The opportunity for outdoor hydrotherapy in nature is unparalleled in Greece and across Europe, contributing to the inclusion of Almopia Baths in the Network of Historic European Spa Towns.

The thermal springs of Almopia represent a valuable resource and are an inseparable part of the region's natural and cultural heritage. Their origin is attributed to volcanic activity from previous millennia, and the natural and chemical properties that characterize the springs have remained stable for the past seventy years.⁴³

The thermal spring at Loutraki Almopia was officially recognized as a natural therapeutic resource in 2014 by the Minister of Tourism. The spring maintains a temperature of 37.8 oC and contains chemical elements such as Calcium (Ca), Magnesium (Mg), Bicarbonates (HCO₃), Potassium (K), Arsenic (As) with a flow rate of 200 cubic meters per hour. Hydrotherapy at these springs is recommended for the treatment of musculoskeletal and nervous system disorders, but it is contraindicated for those with respiratory or cardiovascular diseases. Additionally, it is important to note that spring water is not suitable for drinking therapy, due to its high arsenic content.⁴⁴

Balneotherapy can be enjoyed in the natural environment, where two waterfalls and a large outdoor pool are available, or within the indoor facilities of the two hydrotherapy centers. In addition to hydrotherapy, the spa town provides dining services and massage treatments, and a marketplace offering traditional local products. The number of visitors annually exceeds one million. However, the current state of the baths has deteriorated compared to modern spa facilities and even relative to their condition in the 1950s and 1960s.

During that earlier period, the spa town was an exceptional resort, featuring new accommodation, where nature, tranquility, comfort, and a serene atmosphere prevailed. This picturesque setting was complemented by high standards of cleanliness, the good mood of people and lively summer celebrations. It is also worth noting that the duration of one's stay was determined by a physician, who examined visitors prior balneotherapy and provided therapeutic guidance.⁴⁵

In recent years, there has been no accommodation available at the spa town, despite the recommendations made in the 2008 development plan prepared by the Pella Development Agency, which proposed reopening abandoned lodgings. The hotels that once flourished during the spa town's golden era now present an image of neglect and despair, contributing to the degradation of the surrounding area. However, in the vicinity of the spa town there are

41 Almopia Municipality Business Plan, p. 116

42 <https://www.routes.gr/?Page=el/Climbing/Areas>

43 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p.p. 147- 148

44 Papadaki-Keklikoglou, p. 151

45 *In the same*, p. 240

fifty businesses offering rental rooms with a total capacity of 700 beds⁴⁶ and twenty-six hotels with a capacity of 1112 beds.⁴⁷

To restore the spa town's former prestige, significant changes are required. Sustainable investments aimed at upgrading services, enhancing the area's aesthetic appeal, creating new tourism offerings, protecting, and utilizing the natural environment, and promoting culture are essential to reviving its lost glory.



Figure 1: Spa Town Almopia Source: personal archive



Figure 2: Pool with thermal water Source: personal archive



Figure 3: The abandoned hotel *Avra* at Loutra. Source: personal archive

For sustainable development in Loutra Almopia, various infrastructure improvements are essential, such as enhancing the road network, improving signage and constructing

46 Telephone communication with the President of the Rooms to Let Association, 26-06-2023

47 <https://www.grhotels.gr/touristikos-odigos/anazitisi-ksenodocheion-kai-kampingk/>

pedestrian pathways. A proposal to connect Loutra with the Voras ski center via a cable car, could further boost tourism in the area.

Another valuable addition would be the creation of a system to transport thermal water directly to hotels, allowing guests to experience hydrotherapy at their accommodation. This would reduce congestion at the Loutra and elevate the quality of services offered.

The Loutra currently faces several challenges: a) aging facilities, b) low-quality services, c) deteriorating environment, d) lack of specialized staff and e) the limited alternative activities. To overcome the above weaknesses, it is necessary to formulate a comprehensive sustainable development plan that takes into account the risks present in today's competitive tourism market, while also capitalizing on the strengths and opportunities available. This investment plan should be based on rational management and protection of natural resources.

The main objective is the revitalization and promotion of the Loutra. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to create new tourism products and services is required, as well as to revitalize the area aesthetically and environmentally, with a focus on sustainability. Specifically, the following targeted interventions and actions are proposed.

New facilities and appropriate equipment are required, aiming to transform the Loutra into a center of therapy, recreation and relaxation, where personalized rehabilitation and wellness services will be offered. In this context, it is necessary to staff the Municipal Company with specialized human resources, such as medical staff (e.g., orthopedists and physiatrists), paramedical personnel (e.g. physiotherapists) and other employees specializing in the provision of wellness and spa tourism, so that comprehensive treatment and high-quality services can be offered.

A comprehensive renewal of infrastructure and services is expected to attract specific categories of visitors, such as athletes. Besides, as mentioned earlier, the thermal water of the Loutra Almopia is the most suitable for treating musculoskeletal conditions, bones and joints. Hydrotherapy, in combination with other healing and wellness methods, offers benefits to athletes, whether in cases of injury, pain and fatigue.

The promotion of cultural monuments and the showcasing of modern local history are of critical importance for the development of the Loutra, as Almopia played a significant role in the Macedonian Struggle and in the events of the First and Second World Wars. The creation of a cultural information center, the reopening of Museums and their enrichment with more exhibits, the operation of the Speleological Park, and the realization of cultural activities will contribute to the fulfillment of the above objectives.

Combining hydrotherapy with mountain hiking is a competitive advantage for the Loutra, given that this option is not available in other spa towns in Greece. In addition, the establishment of an environmental center would help foster an understanding and appreciation of the value of natural resources and cultivating ecological awareness among visitors. At the same time, the implementation of an environmental fee would enhance efforts to protect nature, as the revenue would be entirely dedicated to this purpose.

For the future development of the area, another strong element is the combination of thermalism with visits to the Voras ski center and the preserved settlement of Agios Athanasios. The upcoming repair of the road network connecting these two areas is expected to add further value to the region.

The construction of a conference center aimed at organizing scientific conferences on topics such as sports medicine and rehabilitation as well as ecological tourism would bring significant social development to the area. Loutra Almopia has the potential to become an important tourism destination, within a visitor-based economy that emphasizes health, wellness and rehabilitation in a green, internationally recognized environment.

By highlighting the strengths of the Loutra and combining thermalism with other activities, Loutra Almopia, through a collective effort, can be transformed from a mere spa facility into a state-of-the-art health and wellness resort with national and European appeal.

5. Conclusions

The case study of Loutra Almopia brings to light the development potential of the area and highlights the role of the local community and visitors in sustainable management practices of the natural environment and the promotion of local culture. The thermal springs of Almopia, combined with the unique landscape that surrounds them, create a distinct and exceptional natural resource with strong prospects for the development of health and wellness and ecological tourism. A holistic local development approach can bring great prosperity and increase the region's population with specialized personnel creating a new far-reaching wellness economy.

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