



Incontro Nazionale  
Ecomusei 2003  
9 - 12 OTTOBRE BIELLA

## SUMMARY DOCUMENT

### Introduction

The National meeting of Ecomuseums, held in Biella from 9 to 12 October 2003 and promoted and organised by Regione Piemonte, (the first Italian region to pass legislation in 1995 on the subject of ecomuseums), offered an opportunity to resume and develop the themes outlined by the meeting in Argenta (1998), the first-ever Italian meeting to reflect on ecomuseum policy.

The Meeting, which was attended by the representatives of 54 Italian ecomuseums, highlighted the strong growth of the ecomuseum movement that has grown up over the years, attaining maturity and importance at a national level. It underlined the enormous interest shown in this stimulating and vital social, cultural and territorial movement by the academic world, by local, regional and national institutions, by trade associations (in particular, agriculture and handicrafts), and by operators and citizens.

The meeting took the form of an opening and closing plenary session, four main thematic sessions and two special sessions dedicated to a closer examination of the construction of “community maps” or cultural maps, and the presentation of experience and case studies by experts from other European nations.

In the opening plenary session, after the welcome given by the local authorities and in particular by the President of the Province of Biella and the Mayor of Biella, the meeting was briefly introduced by the Councillor for the Environment, Agriculture and Parks, and the Councillor for Industry, Work and Budget of Regione Piemonte.

The paper given by the Co-ordinator of the Meeting’s Scientific Committee officially opened the discussion, which was then followed by presentations given by the representative of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities, the Director of the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions, and by the Organisations of local public authorities (ANCI, UNCEM and UPI) and trade organisations: the Italian Confederation of Farmers, Coldiretti, Confagricoltura and Confartigianato.

The debate then developed and focused more specifically on individual themes during the four open sessions co-ordinated by members of the Scientific Committee: “Cultural and legislative references for the ecomuseum project”, “The construction of the ecomuseum project”, “Ecomuseums and their surrounding territory” and “The development of the ecomuseum project”. These sessions hosted a broad range of presentations with contributions by numerous Italian ecomuseums, as well as papers by experts, academics, planners and administrators.

The special session entitled “Ecomuseums in Europe” presented a very interesting programme of

contributions on the practical realisation and development of ecomuseum policies in Europe and other parts of the world, involving the presentation of specific ecomuseum experiences from Romania, Sweden, Japan, Ireland and Portugal.

The meeting was extremely well supported, as can be judged from the number of persons present (571 registered participants).

### **Problems and points of interest**

The meeting highlighted a wide panorama of problems and points of interest that can be summed up as follows:

- **Cultural references** were identified that are common to all Italian ecomuseums; in particular, the affinity with original French ecomuseography was underlined, stressing in particular that the ecomuseum is a process that stems from and grows through the wishes of the community.
- The **central role of the community** and individuals in the ecomuseum project is a need shared at every level throughout the process of setting up an ecomuseum.
- The **involvement of the local population** is enormously important for the development of the ecomuseum project. While, in theory, this sharing may be limited to the acquisition of information, in practical terms it affects everyday choices that would lead to situations of conflict if not managed using a single approach by the various components.
- The importance of relations and contacts between the ecomuseum and **local authorities** is highlighted by the fact that where these conditions have existed, ecomuseums have found fertile ground in which to develop their project.
- The **scientific world** (universities, research institutes, local experts, etc.) fulfils a major role of “facilitation”, but should provide support that does not undermine or replace the central role of the community.
- It is inconceivable that a local area that has decided to move towards an ecomuseum would not continue a series of **research activities** that also involve monitoring the evolution of the project. To ensure their cultural dimension and sustainable economic development, ecomuseum projects require constant research activities extensively involving administrations and scientific institutions based locally or within the ecomuseum system.
- **Training** is a crucial aspect. It is vital to define a programme of training activities aimed at ecomuseum staff, at volunteers who play an active role in planning and managing the various initiatives, and at local economic operators in order to ensure that the project is fully shared, and that common methods and languages can be introduced to encourage a co-ordinated and unitary interpretation of the territory. The organisation of specific training workshops for each area is appropriate, as well as enabling meetings that require the participation of different experiences to encourage comparisons and the exchange of good practice.
- The Ecomuseum is not just a museum of the past and the memory, but above all a **laboratory in which to build a future** that is shared by communities.

- The culture examined by ecomuseums is not just material culture, but involves work on the entire **cultural sphere**, thereby revealing the ethnographic and anthropological aspects present in every initiative and each project.
- The **memory** which ecomuseums try to recover is not just an element of the past, but a link between the past, present and future which prevents, against the background of our “fluid modernity”, everything becoming instant, a moment, an isolated flash.
- An ecomuseum is **not an ecomuseum if it does not**: transform the community, enhance the local area, and positively affect the landscape.
- The value of diversity and the individuality of each project make it impossible to lay down **general uniform criteria** for the formation, construction and management of an ecomuseum.
- The ecomuseum is a place where models are elaborated to control **change**, therefore it need not be enclosed within a rigid definition, but should open itself to change by learning to manage it. The concept of local identity should be understood as a dynamic and active value that is constantly being redefined.
- The ecomuseum is an instrument with which the **relationship between people and places** is not just recognised and revealed, but is also examined, re-proposed and reinvented on the basis of the community process that it activates.
- The “**chaos**” of the world of ecomuseums has a creative dimension because of the opportunities it reveals, as is shown by numerous actual examples. Obviously, this “chaos” cannot be controlled, but it is possible to establish a balance by introducing new elements (hypotheses, prefigurations, critical elements, etc...) that help to make the situation develop and evolve. In this sense, we can talk about managing the ecomuseum process.
- The ecomuseum world does not need to construct models or boxes, but rather to identify **points of reference**.
- People are frightened and perplexed about defining blanket **regulations**, and there is a desire for laws that do not impose constraints but instead help to promote, focusing on institutional interventions that are as light-handed as possible.
- There are two **institutional levels** that it is hoped will affect the ecomuseum world in different ways: the national level, which should accredit and officially recognise the existence of ecomuseums in the panorama of our national cultural institutions, and the regional level which will define the criteria and instruments used to co-ordinate ecomuseums in practical terms.
- It is particularly clear that some **common criteria** need to be established which will help distinguish those organisations which are not ecomuseums, for example by drawing up and approving an “Ecomuseum Map”.
- Ecomuseums are not necessarily **on the edges of society**, although marginality is a condition that prompts a community to search for solutions, thereby making it a condition that favours the birth of an ecomuseum.
- It is evident from the experience of many ecomuseums that they were conceived, developed and organised in **critical situations** as a counter-measure aimed at creating alternative conditions to the abandonment and decline of an area.

- The recent proposals for **urban ecomuseums** demonstrates the validity and need to experiment the ecomuseum approach as an innovative formula to project and enhance the cultural heritage and landscape in highly diversified socioeconomic and cultural contexts.
- The **system of values** that the ecomuseum network aims to embody is a complex system whose political, social and cultural meaning and importance is expressed within a collective project for innovative conservation.
- The construction of the ecomuseum project is a collective "**learning process**". The key to why an ecomuseum is set up and develops is the start of this collective learning process. The ecomuseum must be a means and not an end of the process.
- The Ecomuseum also represents a moment for critical reflection on our **development models**: namely, as a 'sustainability workshop' and a place for the dynamic reinterpretation of special local features leading to the start of a process of local development. In this sense, its aims are synergic with protected areas and the local "Agende XXI", with which it is appropriate that the ecomuseum should establish closer contacts and relations.
- The role of ecomuseums is also to save the heritage and cultural assets from the **risk of being turned into commodities**. In particular, it is important to prevent the cultural heritage and resources being regarded as "ubiquitous assets" that can be marketed without any link to the area to which they belong or from which they come.
- The first step of every ecomuseum project must be to increase the quality of life of the local population. This increase necessarily entails planning precise measures to encourage **sustainable economic development** in the surrounding area, also by identifying new professions and quality tourist proposals.
- It is particularly clear that the concepts of **protection and use** need to be clarified; ecomuseums do not aim to protect and directly safeguard local realities, but instead they should spark a process leading to an understanding of how the community can safeguard and protect its internal links in a dynamic fashion, as well as those with its reference territory. In this sense, contact with the protected areas themselves is crucial since for years they have sought to balance these two components.
- An important task for ecomuseums is to guide **tourism** towards forms that are sustainable and attentive to the needs of local communities, encouraging understanding of the fact that tourism aims not only to guarantee the quality of welcome and hospitality offered to tourists, in response to their expectations and requirements, but above all to improve the quality of life of those living in the area in question.
- The relationship between ecomuseums and **schools** is fundamental in a number of ways. The role of schools is central both for the study and development of training and educational projects and for field research, and also for the construction and management of the entire ecomuseum project. In particular, the challenge is to involve schools not just as users but also as active players in the reinterpretation and renewal of the contents.
- It is a shared requirement to reinforce a **system of relations** and to make a closer examination of the complexity and variety of the themes that have emerged. To do this, it is important to promote and organise a series of more specific meetings that allow those subjects to be discussed that were announced but have not been discussed and debated.

- Additional **meetings** are needed above all to set out and present the various experiences of ecomuseums, not just in Italy, exploring them in even greater detail in order to discuss both the techniques and instruments of analysis, representation and interpretation.
- It is important to tackle the delicate topic of **continuity over time** for ecomuseum projects and the means and instruments used to guarantee it. To this end, it is important to define a common path, and in particular to identify the bodies and instruments that guarantee the representation of all players, its democratic nature and transparency.

### **Closing remarks by the Scientific Committee**

Ecomuseums emerge from the Meeting as a concept that fulfils a novel but essential role in the complex process of the breakdown of communities and their loss of identity, triggered by growing globalisation but also by aspects of the process of emancipation and the democratisation of societies, by deregulation and the widespread uniformity that it produces. This worrying situation involves, on the one hand, the risk of completely losing the shared values that link persons within a community and communities to their local area, and, on the other, rising insecurity, anxiety and unease that threaten to lead to attitudes of localism and closure.

In this complex social context, the delicate role of the ecomuseum, as it emerged from the Meeting, is to act as the process, path and means through which individuals can find a way of rediscovering common denominators, and in short, once again become a community.

A community that undergoes constant, rapid change, at the exaggerated rhythms of the economic, social, technological and environmental transformations imposed by the global era, but at the same time is increasingly aware of being a dynamic phenomenon whose identity is not, and will never be static, rigid and unchanging.

A modern-day identity, one that is alive and changeable, not a faded and nostalgic copy of a lost past, nor fuelled by the desire to redeem ethnic or territorial origins, but rather an active player capable of being enhanced by new stimuli, harmonising and linking them to others, in the crucial perspective of a common bond.

The ecomuseum is a tool for reviving the art of listening and storytelling, it welcomes and gives value to humankind and people's endeavours. It underlines the value of the landscape, attracting attention to the harmonic rhythms of growth and exchange with nature, helping the individual once again to find the necessary energy to build and sustain a dialectic relationship with others.

The ecomuseum is therefore a physical place but also a mental space. It is a plaza, the agora of a community that is constantly developing, an open and changing space for sharing and discussion, ready to welcome the new and different, re-debating the past without forgetting or denying it, in a dialectic that enhances diversity, recognising its richness and making it a shared synthesis.

The Biella Meeting offered a chance for ecomuseums to become more acutely aware of their own role thanks to the unanimous recognition of the importance of these projects expressed by institutions, organisations, the scientific world and communities. As a means of highlighting

important aspects of the local culture and its history through the development of authentic, shared and integrated processes of improvement.

While recognising the impossibility of imposing uniform training, construction and management for ecomuseum projects, the Biella Meeting univocally qualified the role of the ecomuseum as a process, path and means through which individuals can find a way to rediscover common denominators, and become a community; by clarifying its role. The conditions were also established for the construction of an efficient network of links to guarantee methods of comparison and independent dialogue, and also a working network capable of devising and developing projects.

The Meeting also allowed a wide range of problems and critical aspects to be identified and defined in the world of Italian ecomuseums. In response to these problems, the meeting then decided the appropriate tools and measures for a shared working approach that would also guarantee opportunities for the growth and development of ecomuseum projects in our country.

So that this approach can be implemented on a stable basis, taking root within the reference areas, it needs to be elaborated, constructed and put into practice in close collaboration with local institutions and operators (administrations, associations, agricultural estates, crafts enterprises, etc.) and with schools, building up a network of collaborations and synergies with all the initiatives focused on the genuine improvement of local resources.

The Meeting was also a valuable opportunity to reveal a high level of enthusiasm and exceptional proactive capacity, emphasising the readiness of the ecomuseums to become active local players, not at all on the sidelines of the modernisation process of Italian society; a process that adds value to local situations, making people aware of their own natural and cultural heritage, building strategies for lasting and sustainable development based on this awareness, and on the reconstruction of dynamic and open local identities.

### **Future tasks and commitments - proposals**

Turning to the problems and needs of ecomuseums, a number of concrete working proposals emerged from the sessions of the Biella Meeting which, if extended to the general situation of all Italian ecomuseums, should be taken as the next steps in a common working approach.

In particular, the commitment to promote the following initiatives:

- The constitution of a Permanent Scientific Committee for Ecomuseums, a body that represents a fixed reference point for research and training for all Italian ecomuseums and which would allow an ongoing and profitable dialogue to be established between ecomuseums and the scientific world. It would enable the latter to implement its supporting and guiding role and to fulfil a major function in terms of “facilitating” the development process of ecomuseum projects that, as was highlighted by the discussion at the Meeting, must never undermine or replace the centrality of the community.
- The constitution of a National Co-ordinating Committee of Ecomuseums whose first tasks would include the setting up of institutional alliances, ensuring the national recognition of

Ecomuseums by the Ministries in question (Protection of the Environment and Territory, Cultural Heritage and Activities, Agricultural Policies, etc.), drawing up a “guidance procedure” to stimulate and offer general guidelines for regional legislation on ecomuseums, and establishing contacts and projects at a European level.

To launch this co-ordination process it is important to define, as soon as possible, the methods of representation and the working methods and organisation.

- The National Co-ordination should be seen as the first step towards the hypothesis of setting up a Federation of Ecomuseums (or another form of national representation, if a more appropriate form is identified), constituting a benchmark for the world of ecomuseums that would represent it in a shared, transparent and democratic manner, working to guarantee the continuity of ecomuseum projects over time, preparing instruments and studying appropriate strategies, promoting new opportunities for meeting, stimulating planning by providing ecomuseums with an archive of “good practice”.  
The Federation of Ecomuseums must be the means and not the end for ecomuseums, in the same way that the ecomuseum is for its reference community.
- The preparation of a Map of Ecomuseums that defines the general reference criteria in terms of contents and intents, identifying a common analytical base that defines a project as an “ecomuseum”. In addition to the results of the Biella Meeting, as summed up in this document, the Map can be drawn up using the data already available from individual ecomuseums or ecomuseum systems.
- Setting up and promoting an Ecomuseum data bank with special reference to the working opportunities in terms of ecomuseum interventions, in synergy with similar initiatives to enhance the landscape, environmental and cultural aspects of an area.
- The identification and promotion of communications strategies and instruments, in particular the definition of specific instruments of communication focused on individual ecomuseums, the promotion of their initiatives, and the analysis of themes of common interest. In this context, it is important to enhance the portal [www.ecomusei.net](http://www.ecomusei.net), on the one hand, through an improved and more transparent structure and articulation, and on the other, by defining means of access and implementation supported and directed by the ecomuseums themselves. It is equally necessary to find the time and means to promote the circulation and exchange of printed materials already prepared by ecomuseums.
- The study of a possible Ecomuseum Brand that responds adequately to the need for criteria that guarantee the quality of projects and ecomuseums, not only in terms of the services offered but above all in relation to the soundness of the mission adopted by the ecomuseum and the consistency of its actions and initiatives with the said mission. The possible definition of an ecomuseum brand would have to take into account their independent and creative character, by definition, in order to avoid, on the one hand, the start of a standardisation process that would inevitably lead to the impoverishment of ecomuseum projects and, on the other, committing the error of promoting the ecomuseum as a tourist or commercial product.