

Interpreting the landscape of Andros island: A case of local engagement on Menites village

Project description

Introduction : where, who, what & why

Andros island, the northernmost of the Cyclades Archipelago, is blessed with water resources and holds an ancient rural landscape, dating back to the prehistoric era. Most of the landscape elements are strongly related to the use of water, and are made of stone, reflecting a long lasting agricultural culture. Typical examples of these elements are terraces, impressively constructed dry stone walls dividing land, water channels, water mills, springs, olive presses and threshing floors as well as typical cottages and residence constructions, scattered or concentrated in small villages. A wide and impressive network of old walkways and often stone paved donkey routes, formed a web that has connected all this heritage in a meaningful and productive way for millenia.

This impressive heritage has, since the decline of agriculture and the depopulation of the numerous villages of Andros after the 1950's, ceased being a productive resource for the island. Andros being close to Athens, the capital of Greece, since the '80s started attracting Athenian people interested in having vacation homes on the island. Local people started selling their land, so either new developments for housing took place or restorations of existing establishments. Many new roads were opened, frequently along old walkways, due to these developments, and many elements of the above rich heritage were further degraded.

In 2009, three friends, researchers and activists in the fields of environment, culture and sustainable tourism decided to use the research they were undertaking for the benefit of Andros. They founded the non-profit organisation Andros Research Center (ARC), to conduct research and to transform it into good practices in order to protect and promote the environment and culture of Andros. ARC (www.androsresearchcenter.org), a year after, initiated "Andros Routes" (www.androsroutes.gr), a project aiming to revive the old walkways of the island. So far 180km have been restored and signposted to European standards and a long-distance path, the Andros Route, of 100km crossing Andros from north to south received in 2015 a quality certification by the European Ramblers Association. During 2018 and 2019 ARC has designed and launched the 1st and 2nd "Andros on Foot Festivals" (www.androsfootfestival.gr), 2 multi day walking festivals offering residents and visitors the opportunity to explore via walking the rich Andros natural and cultural heritage. The day hikes of the Festivals were combined with guided visits to important locations and enjoyable local meals were cooked for participants by cultural village associations of Andros in almost 20 villages.



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The main goal and style of all projects of ARC is a creative interpretation and use of natural and cultural heritage for the sustainability of Andros, having as main pillars volunteering, and community engagement.

The purpose of this paper is to share information and insights on a case of local engagement on a village of Andros named Menites where a collaborative attempt to interpret local landscape heritage is progressing, making good use of the tools provided on the Delphi course.

Why Menites? Existing local engagement in heritage interpretation

Menites, one of the 70 villages of Andros has a very active local cultural association. Their yearly activities include the pork fiesta (slaughtering a pig and preserving the meat of the year in several forms, including sausages), the preparation of local seasonal sweets, making soap and other activities related to religious celebrations in their area. The ladies ruling the association have for some years now collaborated to support the Andros Routes Project. Many hikes have been organized in their area ending at the association shelter where walkers had the chance to learn more about Menites by the association ladies and be treated with local flavours. Two years ago as part of the Andros Routes project, a circular route was designed and way marked together with the association ladies, one that included the most important attractions of their area. A few months later a representative of the Association participated in a Heritage Interpretation seminar hosted by ARC as part of the Andros Routes project. Ever since the trainee has been organizing, on behalf of the Association, guided hikes for anyone interested, especially visitors. It made all the sense for this Association to be chosen for the Delphi heritage interpretation methodology implementation.

While the methodology was being planned (April-July 2020) an application for funding was drafted for the materialization of it, to the Greek Ministry of Culture at the end of April 2020. Funding for the project was partially approved beginning of September 2020. The Greek Ministry of Culture provides its auspices on the project as well.

Interpreting Andros landscape in Menites village with local engagement step by step & progress

This heritage interpretation plan focused on working with the local village association representatives to address issues on local landscape heritage interpretation..The plan includes a further call to local scientists in order for them to present their knowledge on the landscape elements finally chosen by the village association members and provide insights on the association's choices.

On the following table one can see the elements of the plan designed in comparison with the progress made till today:

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no	Steps	Progress	Pending
1	Extending invitations for meetings with the association people	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 meetings were done	≥ probably more will be necessary
2	Meetings to discuss local heritage & what to do with it (media) !	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> the one 5/8/2020 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> the other 27/8/2020	
2a	Depicting phenomena & proposing media (from meetings)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (in detail below)	
3	An oral history seminar (specialist Tasoula Vervenioti) for an inventory of interviews from local people focused on the phenomena depicted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> seminar specialist agreed	≥ seminar & interviews pending
4	Invitation to researchers active on the phenomena depicted to participate on the project by sharing research findings (under the auspices of a local research institution Kairis Library)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> invitation extended	≥ sharing findings
5	a joined workshop (locals, interviewers, scientists) to exchange notes on the phenomena (oral history findings & scientific findings)		≥
6	selecting which phenomena, deciding the themes & writing the stories for the target groups chosen for each media		≥
7	Funding ?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> application to the Ministry of Culture was partially approved !	≥ fundraise for the rest of the budget
8	Materializing the plan : leaflet ? information board ? digital guided tour ? a yearly schedule of activities/events ?		≥

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Phenomena depicted, media proposed & underlying values traced

The 2 meetings were just a start and more must follow. The way the meetings were run was relaxed and informal, seemed like a simple discussion and exchange of ideas and thoughts.

The major questions that were brought to the discussion were:

- What can one consider heritage in their area ? is the landscape in their area, full of natural elements and/or human constructions, worth understanding and protecting ? Why if yes and why if not ?
- If yes then which phenomena reflect this heritage, and how could they be presented to visitors ? ?

The discussion led participants to share info, needs, wants, and reflect on what is considered heritage and its meanings.

The participants were also invited to :

- Focus on the most characteristic items of this heritage- the phenomena, the facts and their meanings
- Co-decide on how to find more information about these phenomena locally (oral history interviews, old photos, other items, etc.)
- Reflect on how could these phenomena be presented and attract different audiences (target groups) (local school children, village association groups, politicians of Andros, second home owners from Athens, either originating or not from Andros, foreign second home owners and Greek and foreign visitors).

Many were the phenomena depicted by participants (5 ladies) and many ideas were shared. The phenomena include : tangible natural and manmade landscape elements, like the water richness of the place (springs, ravines, etc.), the intense vegetation, several types of trees, and fruit trees, the towerhouses, dovecotes, watermills and special churches with 2 altars found on this area, amongst others. There were many intangibles also mentioned like some special local words, and names of the area, stories said, local seasonal smells, the culinary tradition and others.

The media discussed were the creation of a leaflet, an information board on the village center, and/or smaller ones at selected spots along an interpretive walk, a yearly calendar of local activities and a digital guided visit to the village or presentation of the village.

The discussion on the present of the village illuminated the underlying values somehow "glueing" the phenomena depicted. The value compass showed a closeness to conformity and security (family security, sense of belonging and social order), to benevolence and tradition.

Notes & remarks on the meetings

1. Obviously Covid 19 global situation restricted progress and meetings. Meetings had to be done outdoors and interruptions took place from people passing by
2. IE and Delphi knowledge on heritage interpretation procedures were on purpose mentioned briefly at the beginning of discussions with local people to avoid creating feelings of deviation between "experts" and "non experts"
3. Meetings were audio recorded. This was very helpful in order to be able to hear again all people involved, as many were speaking simultaneously.



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4. *The fact that some researchers had already dealt with some of the phenomena in the area made the local people's contributions deviate from the actual knowledge to "what the experts say"*
5. *Local Association people were only ladies. They expressed an interest on practical uses/deliverables as results of the process*
6. *Discussing about local heritage and the landscape led to a focus on the past. When the present was mentioned, an awkward feeling was expressed by local people. It felt like the present is void of content especially since Menites is one of the many villages of Andros facing demographic degradation. Sadness and disappointment was expressed by local people for this fact*

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The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project code: 2018-1-DE02-KA204-005084

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