

# Sustainability and the small destination: The EDEN project in Italy

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**Abstract** | The central hypothesis of this paper is that the quality of urban life, the collective well-being and the sustainability can become competitive factors in local tourism development policies with particular reference to small destination. The present work shows how competitiveness of small destinations moves away from a paradigm that considers the concept of growth being synonymous of development. The development concept is broader and more comprehensive than that of growth, as it involves ethical and cultural aspects that lead it back to the improvement of quality of life. Thus, 'degrowth' (Latouche, 2003; Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010; Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alier, 2010) and the 'alternative growth' (Layard, 2005; Van den Bergh, 2009; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012) are new paradigms of growth, which highlights the challenge that destinations have to face in order to switch from a quantitative to a qualitative pattern. The latter puts quality at the heart of development, as a leverage of competitiveness and social well-being of local communities. The smaller destinations are areas most suited to development paths in which quality is a transversal factor and not the prerogative of a single sector. These destinations are more oriented to undertake sustainable development paths in which the quality, social capital and innovation play an important role in all areas such as the economy, the environment and cultural heritage, creating added value capable of reinforcing the entire territorial system. In this framework the EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) project is an initiative promoted by the European Commission to promote models of sustainable tourism development for small destination throughout the European Union. This paper analyses the EDEN project experience in Italy, by identifying the distribution of candidate destinations in the various regions and the type of proposing subjects, opening up prospects of future research aimed at understanding the concrete effects of the EDEN project on the sustainable tourism development of the small destinations.

**Keywords** | Small destinations, Sustainable tourism development, EDEN project, Italy.

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**Resumo** | Este trabalho pretende demonstrar como a qualidade de vida urbana, o bem-estar coletivo e a sustentabilidade se podem tornar fatores competitivos nas políticas de desenvolvimento do turismo local, em especial nos destinos de pequena dimensão. O presente trabalho mostra como a competitividade dos destinos de pequena dimensão se distancia de um paradigma que considera o conceito de crescimento como um sinónimo de desenvolvimento. O conceito de desenvolvimento é mais amplo e abrangente do que o conceito de crescimento, dado que envolve aspectos éticos e culturais que o direcionam para a melhoria da qualidade de vida. Assim, o 'decrecimento' (Latouche, 2003; Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010; Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Allier, 2010) e o 'crescimento alternativo' (Layard, 2005; Van den Bergh, 2009; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012) constituem os novos paradigmas de crescimento, destacando-se o desafio que os destinos têm de enfrentar, de forma a passar de um padrão quantitativo para um padrão qualitativo. Este último coloca a qualidade no centro do desenvolvimento, como uma alavanca para a competitividade e o bem-estar social das comunidades locais. Os destinos de pequena dimensão são as áreas mais adequadas para a definição das vias de desenvolvimento, em que a qualidade é um factor transversal e não a prerrogativa de um único setor. Estes destinos estão mais orientados para assegurar vias de desenvolvimento sustentável em que a qualidade, o capital social e a inovação desempenham um papel importante em todas as áreas, como a economia, o meio ambiente e o património cultural, criando valor acrescentado, com capacidade para reforçar todo o sistema territorial. Nesse contexto o projeto EDEN (Destinos Europeus de Excelência) é uma iniciativa promovida pela Comissão Europeia para promover modelos de desenvolvimento do turismo sustentável para destinos de pequena dimensão em toda a União Europeia. Este artigo analisa a experiência do projeto EDEN em Itália, através da identificação da distribuição de destinos candidatos nas diversas regiões e o tipo de temas que propõem, abrindo perspectivas de futuras pesquisas que visam compreender os efeitos concretos do projecto EDEN sobre o desenvolvimento do turismo sustentável em destinos de pequena dimensão.

**Palavras-chave** | Destinos de pequena dimensão, Desenvolvimento sustentável do turismo, Projeto Eden, Itália.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses the relationship between sustainable tourism development and the small destinations. Such destinations are able to recuperate and valorise local identity, to narrate their history and traditions through cultural heritage. They put quality at the centre of development as a lever of business competitiveness, of the social solidity and well-being of the local community with a view to sustainable endogenous and lasting development.

In recent years the economic literature has concentrated on the study and analysis of the socio-cultural characteristics of the territory and of the local environment. The territory intended not only as a physical factor becomes able to play an 'active' role. New policies for territorial development no longer concern just competitiveness but increasingly

also habitableness and the concept of sustainable development. The sustainability of development is divided into three components: economic growth, dynamic equilibrium of the environment; social balance, cohesion and inclusion (Caroli, 2006) and presumes a virtuous integration and co-evolution of such sub-systems (Camagni, Capello & Nijkamp, 2001; Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 1993). Recently in certain areas of Italy, various territories considered to be on the margins of strong and consolidated systems have initiated local development paths concentrating on identity, local history, the recovery and enhancement of cultural wealth and identifying in the quality of life of the territory the drawing factor of their development.

In this renewed framework the EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) project is an initiative promoted by the European Commission to promote

models of sustainable tourism development throughout the European Union. Starting in 2006, it recognises, through an annual contest, small destinations not involved in mass tourism, which pursue objectives of economic growth and tourism development whilst keeping in mind environmental, social and cultural sustainability.

This paper analyses the EDEN project experience in Italy, by identifying the distribution of candidate destinations in the various regions and the type of proposing subjects, opening up prospects of future research aimed at understanding the concrete effects of the EDEN project on the sustainable tourism development of the small destinations.

## **2. Sustainability: A possible path for tourism development in the small destinations**

Recently a need to define new models of socio-economic development in the concept of growth itself has emerged, since the term is frequently used as a synonym of 'development'. The concept of development is really broader and more comprehensive than that of growth, especially of economic growth understood as an increase in pro-capita product, since it involves cultural, ethical and environmental aspects which characterise the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable growth. In this context the sustainability of tourism can be a response to the ecologic-economic challenge which the territories are called upon to manage, if the three fundamental dimensions of development - environmental, economic and socio-cultural - can be fully integrated, from the point of view of their co-evolution (Camagni et al., 2001; Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 1993). It should be pointed out that the term 'sustainability' is used in many ways in economic and managerial studies in tourism. One can distinguish between 'tourism sustainability' and 'sustainable tourism', referring in the former case

to the approach adopted by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) which also attributes to tourism the concept of balance among the three dimensions or pillars of sustainability involving every form of tourism, any destination and both niche-market and mass tourism. Instead, 'sustainable tourism' refers to a specific demand segment which has lead in the literature to identifying different types of tourism and to constructing tourism products connected with these. As far as the analysis of the demand for sustainable tourism is concerned, it is difficult to identify the characteristics of the motivations and behaviours of the various segments on which to build specific products, therefore in the literature no common definitions have been agreed upon. Many authors have analysed and identified the behaviour and motivations of tourists with similar characteristics identifying 'eco tourists' (Weaver & Lawton, 2007), 'nature-based tourists' (Balmford, Beresford, Green, Naidoo, Walpole & Manica, 2009; Buckley, Pickering & Weaver, 2003) and 'responsible tourists' (Franch, Sembri, Martini, Pegan & Rizzi, 2008).

Although univocal conclusions have not been reached in the literature on the topic, these segments of sustainable tourism evince certain common key elements such as: respect for and safeguarding of the environment (particularly the ecosystem and biodiversity) and a reduction of the environmental impact of tourism-related activities, respect for and safeguarding of the traditional culture of local populations, wherever possible the active participation of local populations in running tourism businesses and the sharing of the socio-economic benefits deriving from tourism. These new forms of tourism should be oriented toward overcoming the problems connected with the scant economic, social and environmental sustainability typical of mass tourism and contextually promoting pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Fennel & Dowling, 2003). In the passage from theoretical statements to practical applications,

in the current state, contradictions have emerged which do not allow or make difficult tourism proposals that respect the basic principles of these alternative forms of tourism. In fact tourism has a systemic impact because it transversally involves the economy of the territory in which it develops (Franch, 2010) and this systemic logic is the premise for the birth and development of a destination. It should be stressed that tourism is able to transform a territory, in infrastructural, structural, social and environmental terms (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2008; Franch, 2010); therefore, it requires a local system management in order to create sustainable and lasting value.

The tourism phenomenon cannot be considered a remedy for the territories that automatically produces local development with significant medium-long range results, but on the contrary it can set off mechanisms impoverishing the territory, modifying social and cultural balance, damaging environmental quality, and of disproportionate consumption needs compared to those usual and acceptable for the destination (Hunter & Green, 1995).

The sustainability of the development model is in itself a value able to influence the competitiveness of the destination. Thus a close tie exists between sustainability and tourism competitiveness (Mihalic, 2000) since the safeguarding and preservation of the environment and internal social balance contribute to improving the quality of the tourism supply and to generating medium and long range economic effects, therefore they should not be considered limits but rather conditions for development.

Small destinations, which are configured as destinations community (Kaspar, 1995; Martini, 2005; Murphy, 1985), characterised by natural and cultural resources that it would be difficult to reproduce elsewhere and able to represent a tourism supply with a strong identity, succeed in promoting endogenous development models in which the direct involvement of the local community exercises and ensures greater control over the dimensions of ecological and social sustainability especially if the

decision-making models are of a participative sort.

In fact the small destinations succeed in pursuing processes of coevolution of the three areas of sustainability (Ciciotti, Dallara & Rizzi, 2008) unlike the large metropolitan systems which, although favoured with strong competitive advantages in economic terms, have problems connected with social equity and produce strong environmental pressures. The small destinations, through a shared, endogenous community vision, can go beyond the boundaries and position themselves as 'distinct areas' oriented toward promoting excellent models of sustainable tourism development (Calzati, 2011) and therefore good practices to spread on a European Community level.

### 3. Sustainable tourism policy in Europe

Tourism development has experienced constant growth throughout the world in recent decades. This situation has contributed to an increased awareness that such growth must be sustainable from the environmental, economic and social viewpoints. Tourism has proven to be one of the main drivers of economic development, of the productive, social and cultural innovation of destinations, but, even when slightly developed, it can compromise the resources which it uses with negative consequences for the destinations themselves and for the surrounding territories (Weaver, 2009). Tourism is an activity which can have a considerable impact on the sustainable development of destinations and it is a global phenomenon which draws its wealth from local diversity. Responsibility for sustainable tourism development is divided among the numerous actors involved in the governance of the sector. However, the public actors have the greatest responsibility for tourism sustainable development (de Salvo, 2010; Hall, 2010), in adopting policies that may influence tourism, such as environmental protection, cultural heritage, efficient energy, the handling

of wastes, etc. This new attention means that the new approaches to tourism, united by a philosophy of sustainable development, direct the models of tourism development toward the sustainable enhancement of local resources. In fact the local policy agendas are orienting towards issues which concern matters of sustainable development, wellbeing and quality of life of the communities and the enhancement of territorial identity. How these additional issues are incorporated into local policy is the result of how local and social actors work together and how different interests, values and knowledge are (or are not) negotiated and discussed together (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010).

For many years the European Commission has laid the foundations for European tourism policy by valorising the factors that determine its competitiveness and promoting its sustainable development. Over the years the Commission has presented the communications *Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European Tourism* [COM (2007) 621] and *Europe, the world's N.º 1 tourist destination: A new political framework for tourism in Europe* [COM (2010) 352]. The former contributed to the definition of a reference framework for the implementation of policies and actions in the tourism sector and in all the policy areas that have an impact on tourism and its sustainability. From the latter Communication, in the lines that define the European action framework for tourism, emerges one intended to promote the development of sustainable, responsible and quality tourism. On a European level, the Commission has introduced numerous instruments to support the sustainability of tourism, in the awareness that the quality of tourism destinations depends on their natural and cultural environments. In this context for some years initiatives have been encouraged and promoted to facilitate the environmental management of businesses with the adoption of a European environmental quality mark, the EU Ecolabel, and with the eco-management system and EMAS audit.

In the area of the sustainable development of destinations, the Commission has supported the constitution of a Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism, NECSTourR, and the EDEN destination network. The actions connected with territorial enhancement and with the sustainable management of tourism development, encourage initiatives which promote responsible resource management and allow the valorisation of destinations that adopt policies for the sustainability of tourism. The actions called for in the Communication of 2010 outline an alternative approach to tourism development, where the responsible use of natural resources, the protection of natural wealth, the safeguarding of the natural and cultural integrity of the destinations and the quality of life, are transformed into competitive factors. In particular, local governments hold a central role in the processes of valorisation and sustainable development of the destinations, by seeking to provide responses to the renewed requests both of residents and of tourists, increasingly aware of the quality of the welcoming, of the valorisation of local resources and traditions. Europe's commitment, therefore, is to improve the image of Europe and its perception as a set of quality tourism destinations.

#### 4. The EDEN project (European Destinations of Excellence)

The EDEN project is an initiative promoted by the European Commission to promote models of sustainable tourism development throughout the European Union. The project started in 2006 and calls for the awarding of recognition, through an annual contest, to the small destinations, not involved in mass tourism, which pursue objectives of economic growth and tourism development with an environmental, social and cultural cut. The long-range objectives of the project regard: strengthening the visibility of excellent emerging European tourism

destinations; the creation of a platform for sharing good practices throughout the EU territory; rewarding and support of forms of sustainable tourism. The project calls for the selection in each member state, through an annual contest, of destinations proposed as examples of good practice in sustainable tourism development. The competition is held on a national level, with the involvement of the central administrations of the Member states and candidates (Ministries, Government agencies, etc.), which have the task of identifying 5 finalist destinations in their own territory from among which a winner will be chosen. Each year, from the initial project edition, the European Commission, together with the relevant national tourism bodies, identifies a topic that is the theme of the initiative (Table 1). The EDEN topics present an opportunity for demonstrating the importance of the diversity Europe can offer with reference to natural resources, historical heritage, traditional celebrations and local gastronomy. In 2012, as illustrated in table 1, a selection was not made, because the European Commission decided to alternate one year the selection of destinations and the following year their promotion. In fact, the 2012 tender, as will that of 2014, only covered the promotion of EDEN destinations to be implemented, in each country, by the tourism promotion bodies.

Table 1 | EDEN themes.

2013	Accessible tourism
2011	Tourism and regeneration of physical sites
2010	Aquatic tourism
2009	Tourism and protected areas
2008	Tourism and local intangible heritage
2007	Best emerging European rural destinations of excellence

Source: Adapted from the European Commission EDEN project.

The topics provide visibility for various assets of the European regions and are related to sustainable tourism development in economic, environmental, and cultural terms as well as in terms of local community involvement. To participate, destinations must respond to two selection criteria established by the European Commission and to others identified by the individual National Evaluation Committees. The former, which are of a general nature, are: to be a 'non-traditional' destination, with a low or very low density of tourists; to organise at regular intervals a specific event connected with its own immaterial heritage and to manage its own tourism supply in a way which ensures social, cultural and environmental sustainability. The latter, more detailed, are established by the National Evaluation Committee, instituted in each participating country.

All EU Member States can participate in the EDEN project as may candidate nations. From the first edition in 2007 to 2013, 24 EU Member States and two candidates have received awards (Table 2), with a total of 119 EDEN destinations. (Figure 1)

The countries which have always had a winning destination for each topic proposed include: Austria, Belgium Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Romania and Hungary (Figure 1).

4.1 The EDEN project in Italy: A preliminary survey

Italy is a country characterized by its historical villages of incomparable beauty. The numbers confirm this: 95,000 monumental churches, 40,000 fortresses and castles, 30,000 historic houses with 4,000 gardens, 36,000 archives and libraries, 20,000 historical towns, 5,600 museums and archaeological sites, 1,500 monasteries and 49 sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List ([www.italia.it](http://www.italia.it)). The country has also a significant natural heritage with 24 national parks, 152 regional parks and 30 marine protected areas ([www.parks.it](http://www.parks.it)). This

Table 2 | Member and candidate EU countries and the EDEN project.

EU member countries	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia , Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Hungary.	28
EU member EDEN destinations	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Hungary.	24
EU Members without EDEN destinations	Denmark, United Kingdom, Slovakia and Sweden.	4
EU Candidate countries	Iceland, Montenegro, Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.	5
EU Candidate countries EDEN	Iceland and Turkey.	2
EU Candidate countries without EDEN destinations	Montenegro, Republic of Macedonia and Serbia.	3

Source: Own construction from the European Commission EDEN project.

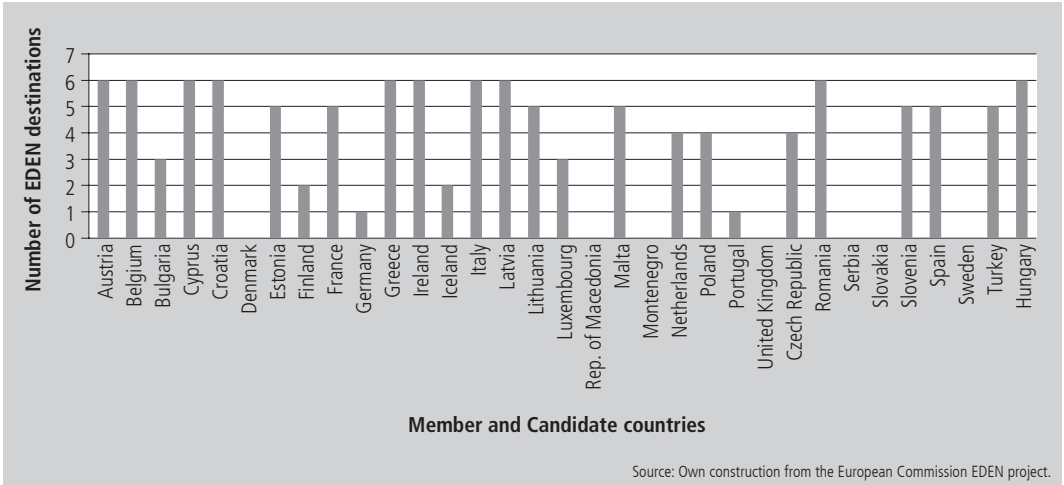


Figure 1 | Distribution of Eden award in member and candidate EU countries.

wealth distributed throughout the national territory can contribute to realising projects of environmental, tourism and social sustainability.

The smaller territories best represent the Italian model in which there is a strong relationship between creativity and the production of culture with the history, traditions and a talent for social inclusion. In fact, through policies enhancing their own typical elements, the small destinations express their ability to provide answers to the modern tourists’ search for experiences, contact with nature, authenticity and identity (Chafe, 2005). The particular characteristics

of the small destinations, and therefore also of the EDEN destinations, are an important factor of sustainable development and of national and international competitiveness. Unlike other areas in which the governance of the cultural aspects is often subordinate to choices of prevalently economic growth in the smaller destinations the relationship between the value of the cultural and environmental heritage and its conservation is significant. In this context the EDEN project contributes to the visibility of those small destinations capable of combining quality of life and environmental safeguarding by

starting up endogenous and durable sustainable local development processes. In Italy from 2007 to 2013, 35 territories were rewarded because their

policies for local tourism development were coherent with the themes proposed annually by the European Commission (Table 3).

**Table 3** | Italian destinations candidate in the period 2007-2013.

<b>EDEN 2007 Emerging rural destinations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Municipality of <i>Specchia (Lecce)</i>, <i>Puglia</i>, Winning destination</li> <li>2. Municipality of <i>Apricale (Imperia)</i>, <i>Liguria</i></li> <li>3. <i>Ex aequo</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Municipality of <i>Castel del Piano (Grosseto)</i>, <i>Tuscany</i></li> <li>- Municipality of <i>Seggiano (Grosseto)</i>, <i>Tuscany</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Municipality of <i>Corciano (Perugia)</i>, <i>Umbria</i></li> <li>5. Municipality of <i>Furore (Salerno)</i>, <i>Campania</i></li> </ol>
<b>EDEN 2008 Tourism and local immaterial wealth</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Municipality of <i>Corinaldo (Ancona)</i>, <i>Marche</i>, Winning destination</li> <li>2. Municipality of <i>Agnone (Isernia)</i>, <i>Molise</i></li> <li>3. <i>Ex aequo</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Municipality of <i>Sermoneta (Latina)</i>, <i>Lazio</i></li> <li>- <i>Comunità montana</i> of <i>Monti Lepini e Ausoni (Lazio)</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Municipality of <i>Ripatransone (Ascoli Piceno)</i>, <i>Marche</i></li> <li>5. Municipality of <i>Greccio (Rieti)</i>, <i>Lazio</i></li> </ol>
<b>EDEN 2009 Tourism and protected areas</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Protected marine area <i>Penisola del Sinis – Island of Mal di Ventre</i>, (<i>Sardinia</i>), Winning destination</li> <li>2. <i>Orsiera Rocciavré</i> Natural Park and the Reserve of <i>Chianocco</i> and <i>Foresto</i> (<i>Piedmont</i>)</li> <li>3. <i>Valli del Mincio</i> Nature Reserve (<i>Lombardy</i>)</li> <li>4. <i>Colli Euganei</i> Regional Park (<i>Veneto</i>)</li> <li>5. <i>Montecasoli di Bomarzo</i> Nature Reserve (<i>Lazio</i>)</li> </ol>
<b>EDEN 2010 Aquatic tourism</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Municipality of <i>Monte Isola (Brescia)</i>, Winning destination</li> <li>2. River (<i>Velino-Nera</i>) and lake system (<i>Piediluco-Ventina-Lungo-Ripasottile</i>) (<i>Umbria</i> and <i>Lazio</i>)</li> <li>3. Municipality of <i>La Salle (Valle d'Aosta)</i>;</li> <li>4. <i>Alcantara</i> River Park Agency (<i>Sicily</i>);</li> <li>5. <i>Ex aequo</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Municipality of <i>Zoagli (Genova)</i>, <i>Liguria</i></li> <li>- Municipality of <i>Contursi Terme (Salerno)</i>, <i>Campania</i></li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<b>EDEN 2011 Tourism and site reconversion</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Municipality of <i>Guspini - Montevecchio</i> mining site (<i>Sardinia</i>), Winning destination</li> <li>2. <i>Colline Metallifere Grossetane</i> Park ( <i>Tuscany</i> ) Municipality of <i>Melilli – "Pirreria di S. Antonio"</i> (<i>Sicily</i>)</li> <li>3. <i>Ex aequo</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "<i>Porto Flavia</i>" mining area – <i>Masua-Iglesias</i> (<i>Sardinia</i>)</li> <li>- <i>Carbonia</i> – the Great <i>Serbariu</i> Mines (<i>Sardinia</i>)</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. <i>Ex aequo</i>: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Orientata Saline di Priolo</i> Nature Reserve ( <i>Sicily</i> )</li> <li>- Municipality of <i>Schio (Veneto)</i></li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<b>EDEN 2013 Accessible tourism</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Municipality of <i>Pistoia</i> and <i>Province</i> (<i>Tuscany</i>), Winning destination</li> <li>2. Territory of <i>Langhe e Roero</i> (<i>Piedmont</i> ) (Municipality of <i>Alba, Bra</i> and Union of Municipality of <i>Barolo</i> in collaboration with Tourist Office of <i>Alba Bra Langhe Roero</i>, Tourist Consortium of <i>Langhe Monferrato Roero</i>)</li> <li>3. Municipality of <i>Castellana Caves (Puglia)</i></li> <li>4. Natural Park of <i>Prealpi Giulie (Friuli Venezia Giulia)</i></li> <li>5. Municipality of <i>Gavirate and Luino (Lombardy)</i></li> </ol>

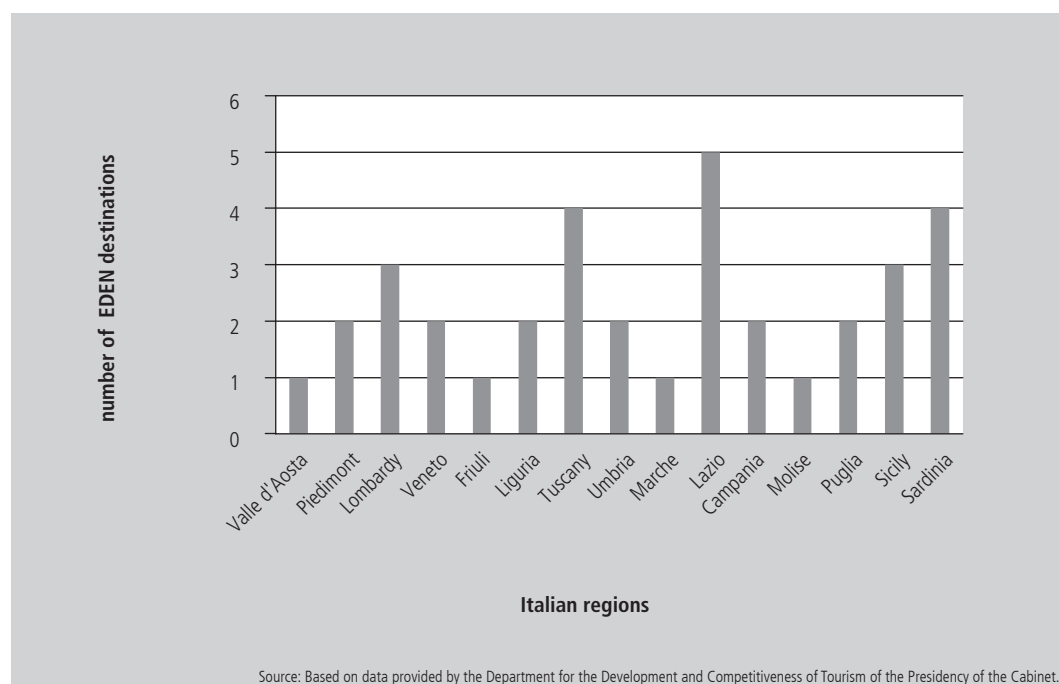
Source: Based on data provided by the Department for the Development and Competitiveness of Tourism.



An analysis of the Italian experience shows that from the start of the project the subjects proposing their candidacy have always been public bodies: cities, mountain communities and park authorities. The candidacy of the territories of the *Langhe* and *Roero*, in 2013, emphasise two innovative aspects compared to all the preceding editions. The first is the presence of a public-private partnership, the second, calling for the collaboration of tourism offices and consortia, makes evident the importance of promotion and communications for the small destinations. With reference to the former aspect, private subjects did in fact collaborate with the public body in the presentation of the candidacy. This choice is coherent with the complexity of tourism development policy, increasingly oriented toward collaboration with the local economic actors and extra-institutional subjects. In fact numerous studies in tourism (Dredge & Thomas, 2009; Haugland, Ness, Gronseth & Aarstad, 2011) demonstrate that collaboration is a relevant aspect in tourism destination planning and sustainable development.

The tourist destination is in fact a complex network involving a large number of actors who, through specific forms of collaboration, co-produce a variety of goods and services (Haugland et al, 2011). It represents a 'multi-actor situation' (Nordin & Svensson, 2007, p. 54) where the process of formation of public policy for local development negotiates the distribution of power and management of a complex organisational structure. With reference to the second aspect, the importance of promotional and communications policies in the management of the destination's image and renown emerges. These are basic elements of the ability to attract and of the competitiveness of destinations (Peters, Weiermair & Katawandee, 2006) able to enhance their cultural, social and economic identities.

From its first edition to the present, the Eden project has involved 15 out of 20 Italian regions. *Lazio*, with five tourism destinations of excellence has received the most awards, followed by Sardinia and Tuscany with four destinations and Sicily and Lombardy with three (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** | Distribution of Eden award in member and candidate EU countries.

4.2 The EDEN project in Italy: The case study of the region of Lombardy

This part of the work highlights the experience of the Eden Project in the Region of Lombardy presenting the results of a survey conducted in 2012<sup>6</sup>. Since the beginning of the project (2007) until now, the region of Lombardy counts with several nominations. In 2009 the region was represented by the Natural Reserve *Valli del Mincio*<sup>7</sup>, occupying the third position in the list. In 2010, the municipality of *Monte Isola* achieved the first place and recently, in 2013, the municipalities of *Gavirate* e *Luino* positioned themselves in fifth place<sup>8</sup>.

The research involved the collection of evidences by the actors and promoters of the application of the destination and the analysis of the documentation provided by the Department for Development and Competitiveness of Tourism by the Municipality of

*Monte Isola* and the *Mincio* Park.

In-depth-interviews with project managers of the two EDEN destinations highlighted the commitment of the local administrators to characterize their own land as high-quality environment, landscape and gastronomy in order to safeguard the promotion of culture and traditions as well as the quality of hospitality and tourism and, in so doing, promoting sustainable tourism development.

The interviews focused specifically on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the territory, the reasons for the nomination exchanges of good practices and the benefits and consequences as a result of the recognition (Table 4).

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph presents part of the results published by Calzati (2013a).

<sup>7</sup> The Natural Reserve *Valli del Mincio* involved four municipalities of Mincio's Regional Park: *Rodigo*, *Porto Mantovano* and *Curtatone*.

<sup>8</sup> The results of research include only the EDEN destinations of 2007 and 2010 as the survey has been carried out in 2012.

Table 4 | Results of interviews with the head of Communication and Environmental Education of the Regional Park of the *Mincio* and the Mayor of the Municipality of *Monte Isola*.

EDEN destinations of the region of Lombardy	Year	Topic	Strengths	Weaknesses	Why to apply?	Exchange of good practices	Advantages and disadvantages
Natural reserve <i>Valli del Mincio</i>	2008-2009	Tourism and protected areas	Being the largest Italian inland marsh  Part of the Natura 2000 network  2 small coastal villages <i>Rivalta sul Mincio</i> (in the municipality of <i>Rodigo</i> ) and <i>Grazie</i> (in the municipality of <i>Curtatone</i> )  Ecotourism Marian Sanctuary (XV century) of <i>Santa Maria delle Grazie</i>  Ethnographic Museum of the crafts of the river  Recognition as eco-museum	Limited economic resources  Inability to network  Little attention to the environmental heritage  Abandonment of the traditional agricultural practices	The territory meets the requirements of the project	Unrealized due to internal operational limits and the lack of an active network between EDEN destinations	No advantages More promotion on local media and popularity

**Table 4** | Results of interviews with the head of Communication and Environmental Education of the Regional Park of the *Mincio* and the Mayor of the Municipality of *Monte Isola* (cont.).

EDEN destinations of the region of Lombardy	Year	Topic	Strengths	Weaknesses	Why to apply?	Exchange of good practices	Advantages and disadvantages
Municipality of <i>Monte Isola</i>	2010	Water-related tourism	The largest inhabited lake island in Europe.  2 islands: <i>San Paolo</i> and <i>Loreto</i>  6 churches 1 museum 1 castle  “ <i>Naet</i> ” boats, symbol of the <i>Iseo Lake</i> (shipyards)	Topography of the area  Limitation in transport means	Local Administration has always operated precise choices for water-related tourism hospitality  The territory meets the requirements of the project	Network with others EDEN destinations	Increased visibility at national and international level

Source: Based on data provided by the *Valli del Mincio* Regional Park and of the Municipality of *Monte Isola*.

Looking at table 4 it is evident that both destinations are characterized by a significant environmental quality confirming a vision of the area in which is getting an increasing importance the habitability and the quality of places. From this perspective landscape is assumed as a measure for sustainable development of a destination.

In reference to the EDEN project the fulfillment of the requirements defined for an EDEN destination constitutes the main motivation behind the application of the two destinations under study. Furthermore, it is evident that both the project managers identified in increasing the visibility and reputation of the destination the main benefit obtained from the participation in the project, even if no indicators have been used to assess the real impact of this increase.

The leaders finally show that the exchange of good practices among winning destinations, which represents one of the objectives of the EDEN European project, has not been made. The Mayor of *Monte Isola*, however, has pointed out that the recent establishment of a European ‘Eden Association’, joined by all the winning destinations, enhanced the exchange of best practices within the EDEN network, which can represent a first step in this direction.

5. Conclusions

Our brief reflections based on the activity conducted stress the commitment and determination of the European Union in promoting the visibility of tourism territories defined as small destinations, excluded from the mass tourism circuits. The EDEN project is a tool able to increase the renown of small destinations, which are not marginal areas with a qualitatively weak or absent tourism supply and therefore incapable of promoting tourism development. The EDEN project, coherent with the passage from a traditional economy to one of intangibles, indicates these destinations as excellent on the basis of a marginality that assumes a positive connotation (Calzati, 2013a). Two considerations emerge from the research activity, the first shows that Italy is committed to conducting environmental and social sustainability activities, which lead to a new development paradigm oriented toward a different concept of living, producing and consuming. This paradigm is based, rather than on continuous growth, on the enhancement of the qualities and excellence of the Italian small destinations. In fact, Italy, despite a strong visibility and renown connected with its principal cities of

art –Rome, Florence, Assisi, Venice, Naples – orients its tourism policies towards the valorization of the small destinations that characterize the image of the country. These characteristics are small villages, local identity, the quality of the landscape and food and wine, which give value to the local supply, valorising what the Romans called *genius loci*, the talent of places, to its uniqueness and its identity-bearing nature (de Salvo, 2011).

The second reflection points out the importance of the role of promotion and communications as tools able to increase the competitiveness, visibility and renown of the small destinations. Since 2012 the EDEN project has consistently alternated the assigning of the annual award with tourism promotion and communications activities for the winning destinations of the previous year. This choice is meant to avoid that the EDEN award be considered an isolated instrument, limited only to assigning a mark to the destinations, and therefore extraneous to a process of tourism planning of the territory (Lorenzini, Calzati & Giudici, 2011). This work constitutes an initial reflection on the EDEN project experience in Italy. Beyond a descriptive analysis of the phenomenon the work indicates how the small destinations can embark on new paths of sustainable tourism development and identify in the award a possibility for the improvement of their visibility and renown. This has been confirmed, in Italy, by recent empirical analyses conducted in the regions of Umbria and Lombardy through the gathering and analysis of the testimony of the promoters of the candidacy of destinations. In fact, the project heads identify an increase in visibility and renown of the destination as the main advantage obtained from the award. (Calzati, 2013a, 2013b). Future research integrations will concern the extension of the methodology mentioned to all the Italian regions with winning destinations and the identification and selection of a set of indicators able to measure the increase in visibility and renown.

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