

Reframing the Landscape of the Prespa Lake

An Interpretative Apparatus for the Regional Development of Pustec Municipality

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Abstract - *This paper examines the Prespa Lake landscape as a complex cultural, ecological, and territorial system, proposing an interpretative framework for the regional development of Pustec Municipality in Albania. Positioned at the borders with North Macedonia and Greece, Pustec represents a unique intersection of landscapes, cultures, and ecosystems. The study investigates the interplay between territory, landscape, and environment, highlighting how qualitative perceptions of landscape can inform planning and development, complementing quantitative territorial analysis. Drawing on the works of Turri, Jakob, Cosgrove, and Magnaghi, the research situates landscape as both a perceptual and operative tool, capable of integrating infrastructure, natural systems, cultural heritage, and dwelling patterns into a coherent vision when the protagonist is the Prespa Lake. Comparative analysis with transboundary developments around Prespa Lake illustrates differing approaches to sustainable tourism, rural livelihoods, and environmental stewardship across Albania, North Macedonia, and Greece. The methodology combines field observation, mapping, and qualitative analysis, producing a framework that identifies potentials, constraints, and opportunities for Pustec. The paper concludes by proposing an integrated, landscape-based approach for regional development, emphasizing environmental conservation, cultural valorisation, and socio-economic resilience. By framing Pustec within the broader Prespa Lake landscape, this study offers a model for interpreting and guiding development in border regions, where ecological, cultural, and spatial dynamics converge.*

Keywords - Landscape, Territory, Nature, Culture, Environment

Introduction

The municipality of Pustec is part of the district of Korça and is located at the northeastern end of the district. The municipality shares borders to the west with the municipalities of Pogradec and Maliq, while on the northwest and east with the Republic of Northern Macedonia and on the south and southeast by Greece. The capital of the municipality is the town of Pustec, which is located 25 km from the city of Korça. The municipal administration is organized with 9 villages, which are: Pustec itself, Shulin, Leska, Zarashka, Cerje, Goricë e Madhe, Goricë e Vogël, Diellas, Gollomboc, which extend over a length of 45 km. The territory of the municipality covers an area of 1363.8 ha. The population density is 94 inhabitants/km². The largest village in terms of area is the centre of the municipality, Pustec; as well as the village of Gorica e Madhe. These villages together, represent 35% of the inhabited territory of the municipality. Pustec Municipality, is one of the newest municipalities of Albania dominated by the Northern Macedonian minority in Albania, and established in the 2015-th by the latest territorial-administrative reform. It has a strong rural and natural character and is not a much-known region, due to its geographic location. However, in the last

years there has been an ever-growing interest in the region, thanks to the growing tourism from within and outside the national borders. Tourism is slowly but surely becoming the main local economy in addition to that of agriculture. Pustec has very distinct characteristics and a high potential of development, due to the rich natural and cultural resources, the mix of ethnical population; and its strategic geographic location. Despite these potentials, there also exist several territorial, social, and environmental problems, related to isolation, shrinking, migration and emigration, and natural erosion. Pustec is positioned at the edge of Albania's border with Northern Macedonia and Greece (EU). We would like to imagine Pustec municipality not as a confined territory, but as a point where different landscapes intersect, and which, in turn, potentially re-connect Pustec with the territorial tissue of Albania, Northern Macedonia and Greece. This issue will become more critical after the EU joining of the first two countries. We see Pustec as a point of convergence and territorial reference, capable of valorising the potentials and mitigating the problematics. Starting from the issues of accessibility, infrastructure and fragmentation

and the potentials of Pustec's nature, culture and dwelling, the aim is to propose a vision for the future development of the area: a contemporary and all-encompassing vision of development capable of putting Pustec on the map. In relation to the transformations, potentials, and problematics, outlined above, this research aims to develop a methodology that will allow settlements to respond to these specific problematics and valorise the potentials for the envisioning of future sustainable development in the Albanian context. The aim therefore, is to propose solutions and conceptual frameworks for the problems listed above. Given the lack of perspective for an area with great potentials like Pustec, and the general direction of the global and local trends of developments towards sustainability, heritage and tourism, the purpose of this research is to provide an all-encompassing frame of analysis that can bring to a vision for the future sustainable development, at the strategic and spatial level. If we take in consideration the development around the Prespa lake we can notice very different conditions regarding Grece, North Macedonia and Albania. From the Greek side we can see an attention towards the valorisation of natural, cultural and rural landscape (Fig. 1). It appears clear that from the Greek side, considering also the encounters with local authorities, is important to promote for the economic development of the area a certain experiential tourism without alternating the autochthonous characteristics of the place.

From the Macedonian side we can notice how generally the settlements are more urban and the tendency is to utilize the natural resources at their disposal, but always without overloading the territory. From the extensive cultivation of apples, to the beaches around the lake (Fig. 2). Pustec in the productive sense remains a bit passive in development but with great potentials. It relies mainly on small agriculture plots in rural settings. The natural landscape is not particularly curated, but there is a great variety of cultural aspects, from the building modalities, to the monuments, to the various crafts, that need to be valorised. Analysing Prespa Lake is particularly insightful when applied to transboundary regions, which form one of the most significant and culturally rich landscapes in Southeast Europe. Situated at the borders of Albania,

North Macedonia, and Greece, these protected areas show how rural territories can function as evidences for sustainable land management, biodiversity conservation, and landscape planning. The mosaic of traditional agricultural practices, wetlands, forests, and small villages around the lake demonstrates a dynamic interaction between nature and human adaptation. Such cultural landscapes are critical to understanding how socio-ecological systems evolve over time and how they can inspire more integrated urban planning models. In the context of urban sustainability, studying the Prespa landscape enables a deeper appreciation of nature's role not only in ecological resilience but also in regional cooperation. The border context intensifies the value of this landscape, as it requires coordinated governance, shared conservation strategies, and multicultural understanding to preserve its ecological integrity.

In the conventional planning formula employed by the authorities there are two main issues regarding the analysis and planning processes: the rigid territorial boundary of the region; the non-overlapping systems (nature, agriculture, water, infrastructure, urban). The administrative division of the territory and the compartmentalisation of the systems fall short on the capturing of the complexity and the wholeness of the region's characteristics and potentials. For this reason, the research proposes a place-based, and landscape-based approach, founded on a transversal frame that works on the superimposition of different overlapping systems, in order to capture the essence of the Prespa Lake region in its multifaceted, cultural, spatial and relational dimension.

Literature review – The complex nature of landscape

Landscape vs. Paysage: an etymological enquiry

If we take a look at the Anglo-Saxon and Latin derivations of the words landscape and paysage we start to recognise two different approaches in the comprehension and worldview that orient the meaning of the word. Landscape as a term, originally emerged in the 1600s as a pictorial term representing an extensive view of a natural

scenery. It has its origins in the Middle Dutch (landscap) meaning region. from land 'land' and -scap '-ship, condition'. Similar formation in Old English (landscape), Old High German (lantscaf), German (Landschaft), Old Norse (landskapr), Danish (landskab), a region, district, province (*Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.*). The term usually referred to a system of humanmade spaces on the land. Other than the condition of the land, we can derive in the contemporary aesthetic dimension the root Land which is something that people belong to has the suffix Scape that sets back to the root shape. In the Latin version we see the appearance of the term Paysage in similar circumstances but much earlier. Once again, we have the introduction used to denote a stretch of land in the distance. The first documented use is registered by the French poet Jean Molinet (c. 1486, as cited in *Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.*). This neologism is composed from the root Pays that means also land, and the suffix age which refers to an ensemble, overall view, totality (e.g. vernissage, foliage, etc.). This implies a comprehensive and self-sufficiency dimension. It is clear that we have two different conceptions displayed. Etymologically landscape refers to an action on land apt to shape it, meanwhile paysage suggests a view over the landscape, and ads a

perspective on the land.

Landscape and Nature

The first consideration to make is that landscape is different from nature alone. There is a tendency to think of them as the same but in fact the latter includes the former. Nature itself is a concept of the citizens not the villagers. In antient and medieval times nature takes the connotation of a sacred or productive space. It was only starting from the renaissance that that it became the mental and visual construct that we all share today (Vitta, 2005). Landscape is the artificial not natural, result of a culture that redefines its relationship with nature (Jakob, 2009). The cultural aspect is crucial to understand the potential of landscape as a recognition and transforming tool. According to Cosgrove (1998) landscape is a way of seeing, a cultural tool that orders and signifies lived space. Starting from the industrial revolution there has been a fracture between nature and the city. Today the landscape represents a terrain of conflict and negotiation between transformation and conservation, between local identity and globalisation (Vitta, 2005). Vitta invites to not see landscape as a background, but as a structural component of the project and symbolic space



Fig. 1. Images from the Greece (Psarades on the left, Agios Achilios on the right).
source/ author (2023)



Fig. 2. Images from North Macedonia (Ljubojno and beach near Dolno Dupeni).

source/ author (2023)

where culture is reflected. The landscape is to be intended as a critical category, in order to become a criterion of analysis, and a design category, as a general horizon of designing the ambient around the buildings.

Landscape and Territory

Territory is a spatial and social ensemble, made of things that are subject to transformations and modifications. A territory tends to be defined quantitatively, as a measurable portion of space governed, used, and transformed through human practices. In this sense, territory is not only a geographical category but also a political and economic construct that expresses power, control, and appropriation (Elden, 2013). The territorial dimension connects human communities to their resources, infrastructures, and governance systems, situating them within processes of continuous change.

By contrast, landscape represents a qualitative dimension of space. As Jakob (2009) argues, landscape does not encompass all the territory, but it is the portion of territory "covered by the gaze of the subject." Landscape emerges through perception and cultural interpretation, it is the territory as seen, felt, and valued. While territory refers to the material and organizational aspects of space, landscape translates these into aesthetic and symbolic forms. The act of seeing transforms the territorial ensemble into a meaningful image, mediated by experience, history, and emotion (Cosgrove, 1984; Wylie, 2007).

Magnaghi (2010) in his work, uses what he calls a territorialist approach that considers landscape as inseparable with the territory. He aims for a place – based approach to urban and regional design, through a combination of top – down and bottom – up practices. Through an evaluation of cultural, natural and historic factors he proposes reterritorialization sustainable practices. In his frame there are many sustainabilities to be taken into account. Social, political, economic, environmental and territorial sustainabilities are indispensable for the reterritorialization of places. In order to institute places Identities Magnaghi (2010) methodologically in a non-deterministic way proposes: the historical reconstruction of the process of formation of the

territories in order to discover virtuous relations and previous local knowhows; an analysis of the cycles of territorialisation in order to discover the foundational values of the dwellings and the territories (myth, religion, identity, economy, etc.); an anti-evolutionary perspective of the development of the territories.

Landscape and Environment

Environment concerns our living in it, our health and wellbeing and the wellbeing of plants and animals. We can indeed live inside a Landscape but in the very moment we start perceiving it as a landscape we are thinking about it as something external, something visible, located inside a specific space and time frame. Environment refers to the totality of conditions that sustain life, human, animal, and vegetal. It implies an immersive condition: we live within environments, dependent on their health and balance for our wellbeing (Berleant, 1992). From an ecological perspective, the environment is an active and dynamic system of exchanges, composed of biological, physical, and chemical relations (Odum & Barrett, 2005). The most ambitious project of the environmentalist movement is to reconstruct an economy of nature (Daly & Cobb, 1994; Odum, 1989; Hirsch, 1981), introducing the natural capital for the constitution of an ecological economy.

By contrast, landscape refers to the environment as it appears to perception, as a visible and meaningful configuration. It emerges when human consciousness frames a portion of the environment through cultural or aesthetic lenses (Cosgrove, 1984). The very act of perceiving a setting as landscape externalizes it: it becomes an object of contemplation or design, situated within specific spatial and temporal boundaries (Ingold, 2000). In this sense, landscape belongs to geography and the humanities as much as to ecology but it is not only a physical entity but also a qualitative construct shaped by cultural interpretation and sensory experience (Wylie, 2007). Landscape includes both a portion of a territory and the perception of the latter, and encompasses environment and relationships (Turri, 2008).



Fig.3/. Images from Pustec (Pustec and Gollomboc).



source/ author (2023)

Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, this research proposes landscape as an instrument of urban and territorial reading and transformation. Rather than treating the components of planning (nature, agriculture, water, infrastructure, and urban systems) as separate and rigid, the study advocates a transversal reading that integrates these dimensions. We focus on four interrelated categories that are infrastructure, nature, culture, and dwelling, as lenses to reframe the classical paradigm of regional planning, in order to explore new ways of reading the territory of Pustec Municipality.

The research combines field observations, mappings and photographic documentations on the Prespa Lake in the Albanian, Greek, and North Macedonian parts, with a critical review of different theoretical positions in landscape theory of authors such as Turri, Jakob, Cosgrove, Magnaghi, Vitta. All of these authors share a notion of landscape that goes beyond the residual or decorative dimension. They also emphasise the cultural and operational potential of landscape as an all-inclusive qualitative dimension, which better expresses itself in the peculiar characteristics of specific places.

Through this framework, landscape functions both as a tool of observation and as a medium for intervention: it allows us to perceive the interactions between human activity and natural systems, identify potentials and vulnerabilities, and eventually propose strategies for sustainable development. This approach is inherently qualitative, emphasizing perception, interpretation, and relational understanding, but it also accommodates spatial representation through mapping and visual documentation.

By intersecting these categories, the methodology aims to produce an integrated reading of the region of Pustec that transcends conventional sectorial planning, focusing on the Prespa Lake basin as a collector of the transboundary condition, and individuating characteristic aspects for the Albanian, Greek and Northern Macedonian parts.

Discussion and Results

The first and most important assumption in the analysis phases is to consider the Prespa Lake as the centre and the starting point of the analysis and eventual strategies and projects. The lake as a strong element holds together these three nations and goes beyond the territorial divisions and the cultural diversities. If the territorial divisions need to be broken down, the cultural diversities need to be valorised. The challenge of understanding in a prepositive way this territory is precisely to provide a new multidimensional frame of interpretation, that might allow to see the territory with new eyes. Through the transversality and multidimensionality, the study grounds a possibility of methodologically passing from a sectorial and quantitative practice, to an interpretative and qualitative one.

Infrastructure

In practical terms when we talk about infrastructure the area is connected by a main road that goes around the lake, which branches to serve the various settlements, agricultural fields and connections with the lake. It is important to expand the understanding beyond the physical and practical meaning of the term. In the case of infrastructure it is the lake, in fact, that infrastructures the territory. The considerations are expanded further when we consider nature which is the predominant element of the territory, or even culture as infrastructure. Starting with these assumptions we can reframe the study of the infrastructure of Pustec in a series of other infrastructures. We start to discover that there is a visual infrastructure that connects and is connected by the natural elements. If we consider the lake as disappearing there is an infrastructure that connects the ring road of the lake. There is also an infrastructure that connect the fields of forces of the entire region with the cultural elements (Fig. 4). We can see that by liberating infrastructure from the functional dimension of an artificial layer that connects and organizes flows and services, it assumes a new qualitative dimension. The lake in fact is the main infrastructure. It has sustained and characterized the whole region in centuries. When we talk about sustainability, the improvement of the relation with the lake is a primary aspect. The lake has the potential to infrastructure the region not only physically, but also perceptually and culturally.

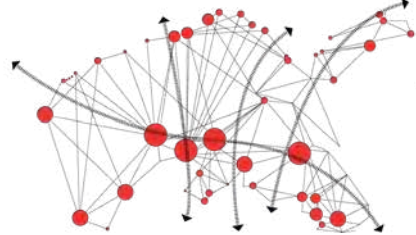
Dwelling

When we consider the dwellings in the region, just by mapping them we can start to understand the different characteristics in the tree nations (Fig. 5). From the Albanian side we notice how the settlements are closer to the lake. Paradoxically, due also to the receding of the lake, through the site visit it is noticeable in the Pustec area a disconnection with the lake. In the North Macedonian side, the settlements are collocated further emphasising

Visual communication of the territorial context with the lake



Communication of lake with the existing roads



Understanding context

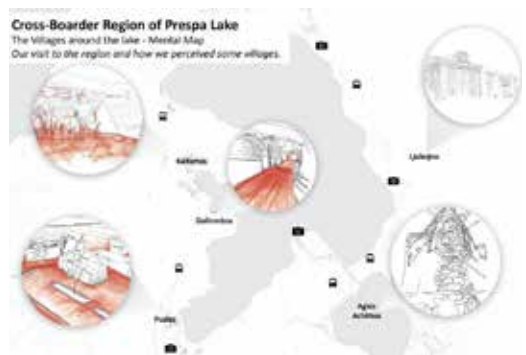


Fig. 4. Infrastructural analysis.

Elaborations: Sadmira Malaj, Gregor Andoni, Caterina Rondina, Lisa Mensi (2023)



Fig. 5. Dwelling analysis.



Elaborations: Julian Beqiri, Dejvi Dauti, Andrea Sterpin, Christin Erdmann-Goldoni (2023)

the particular connection when the lake is not immediately part of the settlements but the lake conserves its natural character and the proximity allows the pleasure of a completely natural scenario carefully curated (see Fig. 2). As for the Greek part, there are two strategically placed settlements that characterise the approach towards the lake. Psarades, which is a small rural settlement with a little harbour connected to several foot tracks that lead to many favourable views of the lake and cultural spots. Aigos Achilios is a small agropastoral community in an island with notable cultural and paesistic characteristics (see Fig. 1). The next analysis proposed is a mental map proposed as a

subjective analysis in order to capture dynamically the perception of the several settlements (Fig. 5). The dwelling analysis comes to be a crucial one, as it reveals the cultural diversities in the built environments, be it in the technics of construction, characteristics of the settlements, their different cultural characteristics, or the relations with the lake. In this sense the perceptual analysis, that considers Jakob's notion of landscape as a gaze, is fundamental to capture qualitatively the differences. In a prepositive sense the strengthening of the characteristics of Pustec might be a strategy that values the identitarian characteristics in order to produce variety around the lake.

Culture

When we talk about culture, the region has a very antient history. There is the need for a change of scale in order to include in a system the Ohri Lake, the Great Prespa and the small Prespa Lake which are home to historical settlements and fortifications. Furthermore, in this case, due to the presence of a particular kind of historical monument such are the cave churches, geology itself is considered as a cultural monument itself (Fig. 6). The peculiarity of the cave churches, found on the Albanian and Greek coasts of the Prespa Lake, is that they are accessible mainly only by the lake. This peculiar character allows for the infrastructuring of the lake in a set of connections that put together the geological and cultural aspects in the Pustec and Psarades area, which goes beyond the national boundaries. It is important no mention that the Prespa Lakes are annumerated as protected areas by UNESCO due to the cultural heritage and natural values. Culture constitutes a fundamental layer of the region that blurs man made and natural elements studied through a geological, archeological and infrastructural lens in our case. According to Magnaghi, in order to discover the foundational values of a territory, the mythical and historical dimension is indispensable. For Maurizio Vitta landscape in a sense is the continuous reevaluation of the relationship between nature and culture. In this sense, the geological and historical investigation, reveals the identitarian settlements and the characteristic cave churches, that reunite again the lake in an anthropological palimpsest that goes beyond the administrative divisions. The notion of heritage expands from isolated artifacts to systemic overlappings.

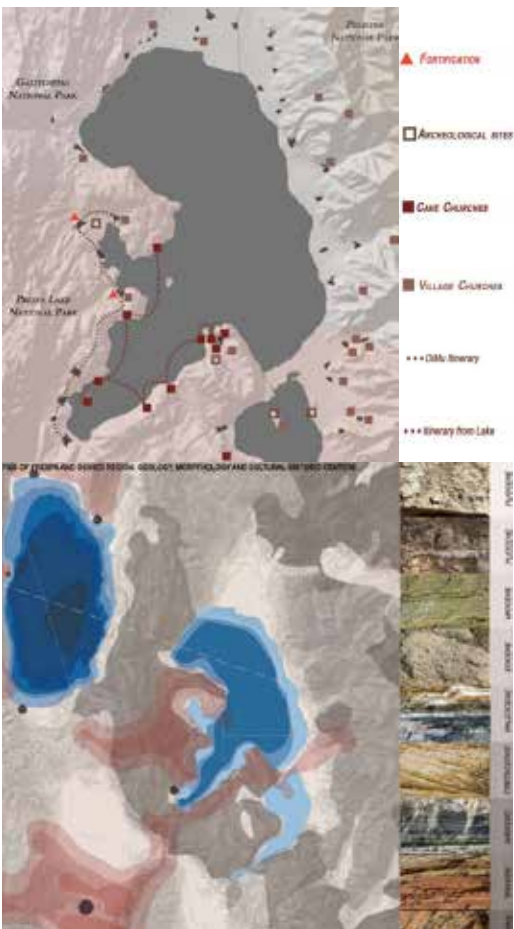


Fig. 6. Culture analysis
Elaborations: Kejsi Veselagu, Daniele Romagnoli, Maristella De Fabrizio

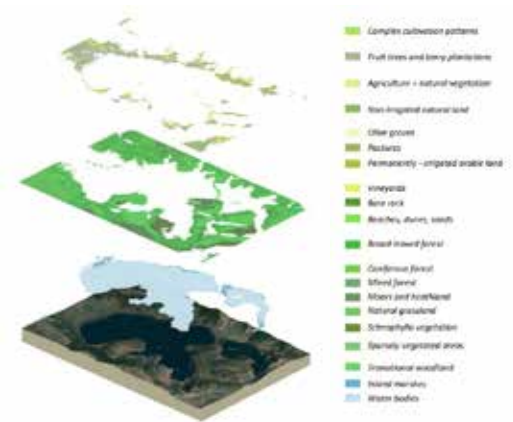
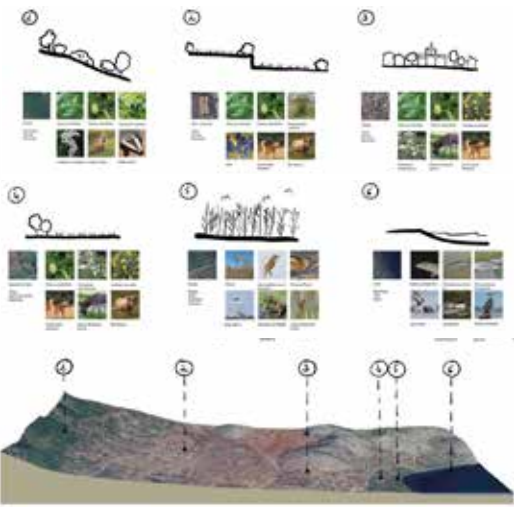


Fig. 7. Nature analysis

Nature

From the natural standpoint the region is home to a high geographic and biologic diversity. The geographic variety of the region is expressed in its high mountains, narrow islands, vast freshwater wetlands, salt marshes, meadows, reed beds and dense forests. The Great Prespa Lake and the Small Prespa Lake are also connected through underground water channels. The complexity of the natural system (Fig. 7) is further accentuated by the centenary relationship of man and nature. As a multilayered method of analysis there is the proposition of a section that puts together: the mountainous terrain; the agricultural fields; the urban environment; the lake hinterland; the



Elaborations: Anila Gjika, Alessandro delli Ponti, Francesco Axel Pio Romio

wetlands; the lake (Fig. 7). Putting in relation these different Ambiental characteristics, including the human habitat allows to imagine a connection and continuity between these different systems. In this case we note how the five elements of traditional planning (in order, nature, agriculture, infrastructure, urban, water) are, and should be a continuous unitary ecosystem. Magnaghi's call for reterritorialization proposes exactly the instauration of a closer relationship with the local productive systems and values. The lake as the center of this complex ecosystem embodies the synthesis of what Cosgrove define as the symbolic and functional elements that constitute the landscape.

Conclusions

Across all four analytical dimensions, the Prespa Lake landscape emerges as a continuous and relational system, contradicting the compartmentalized and nationalized logic of conventional planning. Infrastructure, nature, culture, and dwelling function as interconnected multilayered categories, that actualise methodologically a new reading of the territory. By reframing theoretically the planning paradigm through the concept of landscape, we have a kaleidoscopic fresh view of the territory. This is expressed in a practical apparatus that identifies relations and overlappings. These new landscape-based frames constitute a mosaic of possibilities that better represent the complexity of cultural, social and ecological relations. In the study the lake emerges as the core cultural, infrastructural, and natural element that holds together the whole area, around which these different frames revolve.

Though the methodological apparatus might be used as such, it is important to note that the reframing is based on another important characteristic of landscape that reside on the place-based dimension. After all, landscape is not a language, it is a dialect so to speak. These four new categories are chosen specifically to valorise

the characteristics of the region. The takeaway, methodologically resides in the approach that is simultaneously synthetic and fragmented.

Practically speaking, Pustec on one side should reinforce its identity valorising the intrinsic characteristics in relation with Grece and North Macedonia, and on the other the three regions should relay on the lake as the common ground. In the continuous battle between global and local it is a prerogative for Pustec to relay on the autochthonous cultural, natural, and productive systems to instaurate a true sustainable practice connected with the territory. The infrastructuring of the lake, the valorisation of the local culture, and the ecological continuity is a priceless resource and opportunity for the future development, be it for local sustenance or regarding the experiential tourism, in a world more and more globalised.

Ultimately, the landscape-based approach proposed allows for a more comprehensive view and understanding of the territory, where the overlapping systems allow the envisioning of future sustainable practices, that transcend the territorial boundaries and rigid planning instruments for the governing of the territory.

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