

The Coast of Sirens: From Paestum to Pisciotta, Palinuro and Policastro

Luigi Incarnato¹

Abstract

The aim of this research is to fill a gap in the network of long walking routes in South Italy by studying, rediscovering and reopening the ancient walking routes along the southern coast of the Campania Region in a way to find a sustainable way of development in a region where every year hundreds of young people emigrate, letting a desolate ensemble of empty villages.

The coastal walking route will make tourists and locals discover beautiful beaches and pristine natural areas, with cultural treasures like rural chapels, archeological sites, medieval villages, ancient farmhouses and watermills.

I myself started historical researches and a hard work of reopening tracks cutting wild bushes and trees.

The coastal walking route retraces ancient roads who had been the only way of transportation for centuries, together with shipping, also used for the “*transumanza*”, the seasonal migration of livestock (cultural heritage by UNESCO) with the aim of connecting all the small branches already walkable, together with the collection of technical data useful to plan the due works in order to reopen abandoned tracks. There is a social tissue of guides, farmers, accommodation facilities and service providers that can get its income from

¹ Associazione Scuola del Melograno – Centro di Studi per l'Immagine del Cilento e dell'Italia del Sud, Italy

this walking routes that can work all year long. The method of this research is predominantly empirical and the result of direct field experience from my work as a tourism entrepreneur and hiking guide.

For this reason, some concepts are not supported by bibliographical references but are the result of the ongoing debate among tourism entrepreneurs, tour operators and hiking guides and worthy of reporting as they reflect the current picture of the situation, projects and proposals for tourism and economic development coming directly from the market.

Keywords

Long walking routes; Connections from coastal to inner areas; Contrast to emigration from rural areas; Sustainable development in national parks; Old routes

Introduction

The region of Campania marks the real beginning of southern Italy. It has been sought-after since Roman times when it was tagged the *Campania Felix* or “happy land”. Hardly a surprise considering the fact that it includes the great city of Naples, beautiful countryside, Roman and Greek ruins, small islands and stretches of spectacular coast. But Campania’s real secret is located South of Salerno, and immediately south of the wonderful Greek temples of Paestum. Here the coastline bulges out into an expanse of mountainous landmass known as Cilento, now a National Park with World Heritage listing. It stretches from the Tyrrhenian coast to the foot of the Apennines, and it includes the peaks of the Alburni Mountains, Mt. Cervati

(1899 m.) and the coastal buttresses of Mt. Bulgheria and Mt. Stella. The extraordinary naturalistic richness of the heterogeneous territory goes hand in hand with the mythical and mysterious character of a land rich in history and culture: from the nymphs Leucosia and Kamaraton, to the beaches where Aeneas left his helmsman Palinuro, from the ruins of the Greek colony of Elea to the temples of Paestum (Pinto, 1986).

Inland the Cilento is largely undisturbed by the 21st century and you will enjoy visiting medieval and quaint villages where the traditional way of life is still evident (Pellecchia, 2010; Amann, 2022).

The area is interesting to design a foot walk because it is the gateway to a coastal path that could lead, continuing to the adjacent region, Calabria, all the way to Sicily and constitute a long-distance path parallel to the European long-distance trail “E1”, which runs from the North Cape to Sicily (Sentiero Italia when running in Italy) that instead runs mostly in the mountains.

Even without assuming a longer continuation a coastal trail, the coastal route is a viable proposal for tourism development of the sub-region Cilento that is not focused exclusively on beach tourism, allowing for an extension of the tourist season, which theoretically, given the climatic conditions at these latitudes, could last all year round. This would lead to the enhancement of the villages along the coast, now crowded only in the two summer months of July and August, creating an economic fabric of guides, hospitality, catering and direct sales to wayfarers and restaurateurs of local gastronomic excellence.

Framing the Territory

The Cilento coast (Fig. 1) is fairly rocky territory, with the shoreline lapped by a crystal sea.

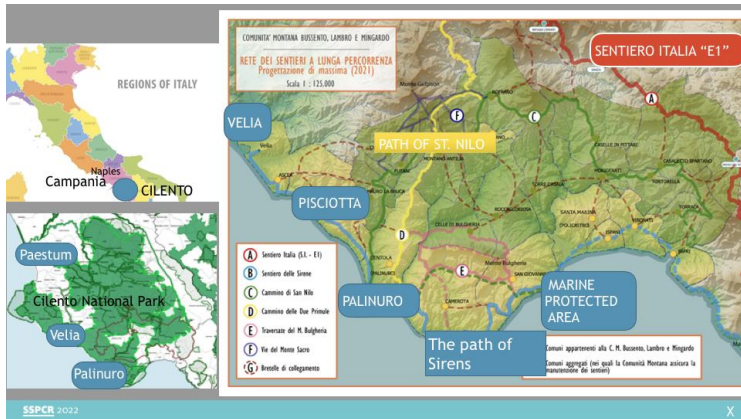


Figure 1 – Framing the Territory (Incarinato, 2020)

There is a wild kind of beauty here; rocky ridges set between small picturesque inlets and richly scented pinewoods backing onto wide sandy beaches. Aleppo pines loom over multicoloured undergrowth of myrtle and prickly pear; whilst huge, centuries old, olive trees grow right down to the shore. But large, sandy beaches can be found here as well, especially along the plains of Casalvelino and Velia, and just north of Palinuro and Marina di Camerota, long stretches of sandy beaches can be bound (Pellecchia, 2012).

But perhaps the most beautiful beaches can be found along the south coast of the Cilento: the beautiful Cala Bianca, the Bay of Infreschi, the beach of Marcellino and between Pisciotta and Ascea the hidden beaches of Fiumicello and Le Cale, only to mention a few (Pellecchia, 2010). Many of these beaches can only be reached on foot or by boat. For which reason they are often (with the exception of the short Summer season) almost empty.

The complete coastal walking tour will make tourists and locals discover all the most beautiful beaches of this area, as most of the walking route is obviously along the coast. But it will also walk through pristine natural areas and attractive

countryside, with all their cultural treasures like rural chapels, archaeological sites like Velia, Palinuro and Rocca Gloriosa, ancient farmhouses, old watermills and charming medieval villages, like Pisciotta, Centola, Camerota, Lentiscosa and San Giovanni a Piro (Laureano, 1998).

Method and witnesses

Believing that if you are planning to develop a walking trails, you have got to get out there and walk, I started my personal research to find a way to make my dream come true.

My study, started during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 with a bottom up approach, found a small help only in some friends and in a passionate Dutch-born, Salerno-based activity tour operator named Peter Hoogstaden.

Eventually and luckily the interest in preservation and reopening of a coastal walking route among the mediterranean bush, “maquis”, mountain lawns and pastures, has increased in the last few years among local enthusiastic. I started historical researches with old topographical maps (like the ones used by the U. S. Army during the II world war), cadastral survey, land registry, public records archival documents and history, listening and searching last witnesses of a past world. At the same time starting a hard and fascinating work of reopening tracks cutting wild and thick bushes and trees.

The research approach was empirical, drawing an initial inspiration from the accounts of two 19th century British travelers (Strutt, 2010; Ramage, 2013) who had crossed Cilento on foot two centuries ago.

Having collected all the topographical maps currently commercially available, compared with other maps, including those found in the repositories of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park Authority and

other local authorities, such as the *Comunità Montana* (an intermediate body between the municipalities and the province, which is responsible for the management of the mountain territory and the maintenance of roads and trails serving inland areas), I realized the lack, in the existing network of trails, of a coastal path crossing the entire Cilento.

Hence the idea to first undertake historical research, comparing the route traced in the two aforementioned stories with some maps dating back to World War II, kindly made available by the Dutch-born, Salerno-based activity tour operator named Peter Hoogstaden, which still showed the network of old roads passing along the coast before the construction of the new national highways during the 1950s and later.

I arrived at the dating of the period of decline and abandonment of the coastal route in favor of a more modern paved road network by interviewing witnesses and studying the construction plans of the same roads, as collected and catalogued by local history enthusiast Vincenzo D'Amato (D'Amato, 2009).

Subsequently, I tackled the study of the current situation, making use mainly of the resources made available on the Internet, and specifically the satellite top-down view offered by Google Maps, which allows one to locate the traces of the old routes step by step.

At the same time, and especially where the growth of vegetation had made it impossible to recognize the traces of the old roads from above, I researched their cadastral traces, prevalently making use of the tools made available by the Geoportal web of the Province of Salerno. By comparing the public properties of the roads with current cartography and satellite footage, I fully identified the old route, part of a public network of roads and paths.

Having finished the historical and cadastral research, I

located the route in the territory and walked it in its entirety, even in the most inaccessible sections, those that had landslides, or those where the vegetation has become a real forest and others a maze of brambles.

I myself, the first one to do the total research, walked and mapped the entire walk, collecting technical data useful to start and develop a plan for its reopening to public from South to Pisciotta and the archaeological area of Velia, where Parmenide founded the Eleathic School.

The chosen path includes of course technical data, so you have to elect among the different ones you meet on the spot the easiest and best way trying to walk on the same level avoiding as possible tiresome and dangerous up and down. at the same time reduce or cancel the normal current way with carriage commodities, i.e, asphalt/ main road. You need a perfect knowledge of distance and between the different points to reach and of all the operation and improvements necessary to keep the path sure and free; remove dick bush and hindering plants, furnish the path with step with rungs for ascent and descend, chains and hand-rails whenever there is need of such help. In addition, I surveyed the GPS tracks of the entire coastal path with georeferenced indication of the major points of interest and the ordinary and extraordinary maintenance activities necessary for its opening to the public.

Last to walk on this path was the man, who won the contract for the transportation of drinking water to the workers engaged in the building of the new national road, that replaced the old path in 1951.

Aniello, that is the name of the main witness of my research, is the one, may be the last one walking every day the ancient path in its full extension. He Is just the one surviving to remember how It worked being at the time the only coastal way operating as a living connection, way of exchange of human being and merchandise in his last moment. He is the

living memory of the building of the new national road being engaged as a worker in its construction in 1951 replacing and putting an end to the old romantic but difficult old path. He has lived its slowly end, even to the point of disappearing in the memory of the people living in the small villages crossed for centuries. Slowly the old path was abandoned for a while being a country connection from villages to country plots. Eventually being crossed only by poachers, people going for mushrooms, wild "asparagi" (asparagus), herbs and the like. At the very end even these people, just as shepherds disappearing with their goats, sheep and animals.

The same witness describes fascinating long walks with mules, loaded with charges of Erba Sparta, the old roman *Spartum*.

This cutting leafed grass today overwhelms the route in useless way. Then was so useful and quite disappeared as to be impossible to find. It was used to make ropes, tissues, carpets, baskets, even fishing nets.

The witness remembers long walks with mules, even 30 kms to reach a mountain still rich with Erba Sparta: gather it, bring back and sell to the villagers.

In Pisciotta, at least one family used to live with this help until the seventies of the late Century.

The same in Camerota - a village located in the southern part of the coastal walking route and connected to it via a medieval road – where still in the eighties of the late Century in the small lanes was possible to see woman engaged in this work.

Fishermen loaded with their wet charge also used to walk on this route, bringing fish into wood baskets on their heads to the next village, and after many hours of walk under the continuous leaking of their products, they were unrecognisable once arrived at the next village. Hard beautiful times, strong people used to long walks to win their living. Disappeared, what of their heirs? This is not the place

to investigate the late history of people, but the final result, the reopening of this walk should be a way to remember our local history and keep that for future generations.

Last but not the least, I interviewed my grandmother, born and raised in the Cilento National Park one hundred years ago. My grandmother was for long time director of the Post offices in Pisciotta and used to walk every day from Pisciotta to the neighbour villages up on the hills.

She used sandals. During the war, and even in the hard times following it, leather was scarce and expensive, at the point that cork, made from cork oak, substituted sandal sole. I am told shoemaker used the bark of the local cork oak that can be found along the path. They went on the spot to obtain it.

Going back to my grandmother history strictly tied to the above named path, she used to cross the hill between Pisciotta and the next villages everyday with her cork sandals. She was not alone in these beautiful, romantic but very hard walk. Other women were used to perform the same way. The fishermen's wives, daughters and relatives, used to climb the path from the beach to the villages loaded with their fishes in a basket. They used to bring those charges on the head just covered with twisted kerchief, called "*la spara*" in dialect. Fish was sold or just exchanged with the precious products of the hills, generally beans, potatoes and vegetables. The villager's inhabitants too used the same paths to bring their products to the next villages weekly markets. They started in the darkness of the early morning with their donkeys loaded with merchandise charged quite night-time at home with screaming reciprocates quarrels of the family's woman, "personal recollections" gathered in long walks.

So, the beautiful path was not a personal reserve of a solitary trekker like nowadays but was full of people and businesses, like when merchandise where sold or exchanged along the path, before getting to the village's market.

Those walking routes were not only the way of the strenuous

walker in need to reach their working place in the due time. They were also the way of the faith; they were the pilgrimage of simple people to the monasteries up on the mountains. The pilgrimage was done by foot along the paths. It could last more than two days. A long happy walk. Chapels, choirs, of course churches were left open along the way to offer rest and helps to the pilgrims coming along the paths.

My grandmother had also a special memory to remember, that may seem too personal, but it is not. The coastal route and the whole network of paths was the main way of connecting villages, used to bring merchandise on one hand, to make connections between people on the other hand.

Her story tells about her meeting with my grandfather before getting married. They used to meet in the middle of the path between two villages, with my grandfather riding a white mare, a gentle loan of his uncle.

As in the case of my grandmother, over the centuries there have been many marriages that have taken place between people from towns that are now several kilometres apart and reachable by car via long and winding roads, but once paradoxically closer than they are now, as they can be reached in a few minutes on foot by descending and ascending steep river valleys where driveways cannot be built. Today, little remains of these connections, and people move on different routes, mainly to larger centres reachable by fast roads and no longer to smaller neighbouring towns.

The walking route

The entire path of Sirens, named after the sirens who enchanted Aeneas' helmsman Palinuro, measures about 75 kilometres and crosses the territory of 6 municipalities, but it could easily double in size by traversing the entire coastal arc of the Cilento National Park (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 – The path of Sirens (Incarnato, 2020)

A first section is open to public since April 2021 thanks to the exhausting work mine and of the union of association, volunteers and mountain guides called “Massiccio del Bulgheria”, now a C.A.I. (Club Alpino Italiano) subsection. It starts in Scario, in the southern part of the National Park, close to Policastro and Sapri, the last city of the region, and reaches Palinuro, passing throughout the wildest areas of the Thirrenian Coast: the marine protected area of Infreschi and Masseta, ruins like the Castel of Molpa (where one of the first settlement of the area had been founded) and then reaches Palinuro Cape, with its archaeological area, small forts, towers and the Byzantine monastery of Saint Cono (Perciato, 2002).

Starting from Saline's beach it walks through a wild ridge and reaches first the village of Caprioli, where it encounters the “Cammino di S. Nilo” and then, through huge, centuries old, olive trees, reaches the medieval village of Pisciotta (perhaps the best preserved on the whole Cilento Coast), following a route that offers an extraordinary viewpoint over Palinuro Cape and the sea on one hand, over the variety of the mediterranean spontaneous flowers and plants on the other hand. This section, together with the one connecting

to Velia, is the one in worst condition, nevertheless it is now entirely walkable, after my solitary work.

Left Pisciotta the coastal route, with the constant view of the sea, reaches the beach, then it climbs the cliff and joins the Torre del Telegrafo, whom officials helped a with shines of light to find the right way on the cliff. The same travellers whom story helped me to find, quite two centuries later, the old passage (Strutt, 2010; Ramage, 2013).

From Telegrafo Tower one can keep walking taking advantage from a recent new short walking route “Il Sentiero degli Innamorati” (the Path of Lovers) and reach the beach and Velia archaeological area.

A case study: The Sentiero degli Innamorati

The Sentiero degli Innamorati is a case study: just a few kilometres of brand new and expensive path in a place, undoubtedly fascinating, but lacking any connection with a real long distance walk able to develop touristic flows. The result is that it is able to entertain masses looking for a perfect selfie or the true love (are two kms enough for falling in love?), more then be part of a real touristic sustainable development.

Official ceremony, being present the local Major and the "Presidente" of the Parco Nazionale del Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni saw the opening and operating of the "Sentiero degli Innamorati" "Lovers path", at the coast of more than 1.500.000 euro. It represent only a single section of a wider plan of renaissance aiming at real use and operation with the concourse of the administration of the Town of Ascea Just a single one among the villages lying on the path of the northern section of the Sentiero degli Innamorati.

The complete and total operation will have the financial

support of the Parco Nazionale del Cilento, Vallo di Diano e Alburni above mentioned being part of the "Progetto Integrato Rurale per le Aree Protette" of the European Regional Development Fund.

The path is only two kilometres long and reaches the height of 140 meters, lays on the northern section of the coastal path, in the common of Ascea leading from the strand to a viewpoint on the hill. It is just a section of my planned future path ("The Path of Sirens") which when realized would made possible to go on to the North along the beach till the archaeological site of Ascea. A small wooden bridge ten meters or less long to cross a brook towards Pisciotta and Palinuro in the south will reach one of the wildest and emotion rising place where you can go only with hard walking or by boat. Places quite unknown to the large public of the season time more interested at the beaches.

The intervention also included the construction of 12 footbridges to access the beaches, which are essential to protect the dune flora, a bicycle path that is little used because it lacks connections with a larger network of bicycle paths, and 8 large wooden platforms that are now poorly used and not in the best state of maintenance/conservation. In the summer of 2022, after years of neglect, two of these platforms were given to a cocktail bar that organized small concerts and events there, but only in the area of the immediate vicinity of the beach, where a number of catering and entertainment activities had long existed.

A lesson to learn

Only in summertime, "Il Sentiero degli Innamorati" enjoys a full time life. The whole area is crowded with tourists along the beautiful and sandy beaches where they spent hours and reach viewpoints to take photo and selfies.

In spite of the large sum of money employed "Il Sentiero degli Innamorati" does not realized till now a successful life of its own. That is a tourist flow aimed at the growth of the life of the interested country with an increased number of visitors, walking people, discovering the Place not only in the short bathing season. Only between June and September commercial life and restaurants on the strand are working.

That is a real deadlock to people compelled to go back even further up and cover the distance to get the main center of the little town which is one simple kilometer far, or less. And think of all the main historical center of these coastal villages are not widely interested, at least till now, to the touristic flow. At the moment no economic input or only a little one to shops, reception activities of the main center at the same time being more needing it, quite always more healthful of the crowded seasonal beach where instead starts and ends the path "Sentiero degli Innamorati".

Yet, with smaller investments it can be turn into a wider and proper function, using the section open to the public as a result of this intervention as a section of the larger coastal path, incorporating this and other interventions made in isolation into the network of paths and trails.

The ambition is to go further and reach Paestum with its temples, retracing old walking routes, who had been the only way of transportation for centuries, together with shipping. Also used for the "*transumanza*", the seasonal migration of livestock between the plains and the mountains (now declared cultural heritage by UNESCO) and (in that way) connecting all the small branches already walkable who need to be part of a more engaging and promising long distance walk.

Connections and social tissue

The connection status (Fig. 3) is interesting: the “Cammino di S. Nilo”, who retrace Byzantine monks traces and it is a consolidated institution able to move touristic flows many months per year and the walking routes network that connects sea to the Mt. Cervati, the highest in the Campania Region, the Cammino delle Due Primule, that already has its public of passionate and has been created by a small group of volunteers, some of them now professional guides or Bed & Breakfast and restaurants owners along the route.

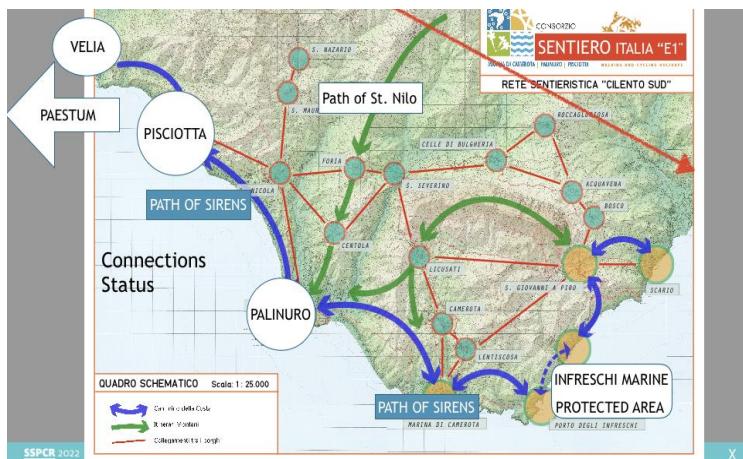


Figure 3 – Connection status (Incarnato, 2020)

The path of St. Nilo is also an important comparison because it begins where it starts (Sapri) and ends (Palinuro) also the coastal path in its part already practicable in 2022, of which it could be a logical completion and integration, to visit inland areas or complete a loop trail.

Along those walking route Bed & Breakfasts and other small business had grown in villages mostly unknown to travellers and where the accommodation capacity and shops was 0 before the birth of the walking route.

There are no official studies on this topic at the moment, but my observation says that along all the villages where the “Cammino di S. Nilo” passes through many bed and breakfast opened. I compared similar inner areas where there is no official walking route with good marketing actions like the Cammino has and the area where it passes through. I used the most famous online travel agency (Airbnb and Booking.com) maps to run this experiment.

I know from my experience that in the same area there were no accommodations until three years ago, when the Cammino has born. I know it because some of my hotel's guests tried to find a place to sleep inland after a tiring hiking up on the mountains of the inner Cilento, they did not find anything and were forced to reach again the coast and book an extra night at my hotel in 2016.

We are talking about areas where, even if not so far from the coastal area, many villages have no shops at all (among them San Nazario, Castinatelli, Terradura) because of the decrease of population on the last twenty years.

The whole area of Cilento suffered from the loss of 57.000 inhabitants, on average the 30% of the population with peaks of 70-80% in smaller villages in inner areas, compared to its population in 1961 up to a study made by ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) reported by the main newspaper (La Repubblica, 2022).

The same results are shown in a study conducted by 30 municipality of the inner areas in the 2019 (City of Roccadaspide, 2019).

Those areas, even if rich in naturalistic and historical attractions, the population is constantly decreasing, and villages are slowly dying. Every time you go in such small villages you can find abandoned house on sale at low prices, and the shops or bars are not sure to be open the next year. Where the “Cammino di S. Nilo” passes new business had grown, like bed and breakfasts and old shops can

compensate in some part the loss of customer due to the depopulation.

I also have a personal experience connected to my business: I run an *Albergo Diffuso* in Pisciotta, a village not touched by the *Cammino* but close to it, and I had at least ten double rooms booked by walker of the *Cammino* in the last year and they come in October and November, where our occupation rate is low.

One of the aims of this research and my solitary work of reopening the coastal path in Pisciotta section is to bring a branch of the *Cammino* to Pisciotta, the only coastal village suffering from demographic decrease, in a way to increase those numbers.

Again, thanks to those walking routes a tissue of association taking care of the path has born, providing guided tours and, the most important think, promoting it on the internet, social media and events and fairs all over Europe, helping the territory to be known by a bigger public. They also started to run annual events and small festivals bringing more people in such an unspoiled area.

Specifically, there are 55 accommodation facilities along the Path in 2022, with a clear disproportion between the coastal areas, where the Path begins and ends, where the accommodation capacity exceeds tens of thousands of beds (this is the case of Palinuro and Sapri) and the inland areas where there are two to three bed and breakfasts per municipality with no more than 15 to 20 beds in total (this is the case of Rofrano, Montano Antilia, Futani).

However, there are other considerations to be made. The accommodation facilities on the coast are almost all seasonal, opening in June (the smaller ones from April, the large hotels open only when they are sure to have a certain occupancy rate) and closing in September, only the small ones at the end of October, while those in the inland areas are less affected by seasonality not being linked to beach and mass tourism

but to a more sustainable and conscious tourism, which tends to stay longer in the area moving with the slow rhythms of the walker.

The trend, however, may soon reverse or at least lessen. As a member of the Cilento di Qualità Consortium, which brings together a number of large and medium-sized hotels, campgrounds and bed and breakfasts in four coastal municipalities along the stretch under consideration in this study, I have witnessed several debates about the possibility of staying open longer even on the coast precisely as a result of the increase in off-season requests during the annual closing periods, requests also coming from people who were thinking of taking the St. Nilus walk during the Christmas, November, January, February and March vacations.

Further consideration that comes from my direct knowledge of the operators is the following: some owners of bed and breakfasts in the inland areas are people who have another job in the city that is their main source of livelihood, and they live in the city most of the time (the closest are Salerno and Naples) and return to the village during the busiest periods when they find it convenient to open their businesses. Increased demands are leading some owners to reverse their lifestyles, spending most of their time in the village and going to the city only when they have no overnight demands, changing or leaving their previous "city" jobs. This leads to a greater vibrancy of small towns, another small economy of people returning to live in the village, where they shop, go out to dinner, self-supporting the local economic fabric.

The St. Nilus Trail was inaugurated to the public in June 2019, with the first signage laid and gps tracks made available to the public. In the first year, 50 walkers were surveyed-the walk has its own "passport" with travelers' credentials, and participating accommodations put a stamp on each stage traveled. In just three years, the number has risen to about

700 to 800 walkers, to which should be added those who walk only one stage or simply walk it independently without collecting their passport at the beginning and escape the census.

According to some estimates by the organizers of the Cammino, each walker spends about 50 euros a day on food and lodging, leaving on the territory during the time it takes to walk it, between I 500 and I 700 euros.

This does not change the economies of the coastal tourist centers, but in the inland areas where we have gone from almost zero annual presences to several hundred this creates a major economic impact.

It should be added that these centers were so little dedicated to tourism that they never had a statistical survey of tourist presences on their territory, the Way also offers this small service of statistical data revegetation, useful for hypothesizing future development strategies.

Once again, the social and business fabric seems to have moved earlier and better than the institutional one.

Moreover, in 2023 for the first time an official guide of the Cammino had been published, and the Cammino has been mentioned in many newspaper articles and TV shows.

We should talk also about the first real action of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park Authority in cooperation with the CAI (Club Alpino Italiano) for the preserving and enhancing of the Elea-Gelbison-Molpè walking route, from the sea to the inland, who has its logical accomplishing in a circle walk along the new coastal route.

There is a social tissue of mountain guides, association, farmers, accommodation facilities and service providers (like taxi and bus drivers) that already gets its income from walking routes, even if they are not connected together due to the lack of a coastal walking route.

Walking tourism in these environmental places with such a climate can work all year long. More and not only a little

more than the most crowded months. A way to achieve the goal of increasing and retain a tourist and employment season in a different and more interesting and varied way of life, useful to develop and preserve a sound countryside.

Long-distance walks created for the sake of walking are also plentiful: there is the European long-distance trail “E1”, which runs from the North Cape to Sicily (*Sentiero Italia when running in Italy*) and runs in Cilento too: a great idea, but especially in southern Italy still an ‘idea’, with too much asphalt section.

The coastal walk represents an interesting alternative to the Sentiero Italia when passing through the Cilento National Park.

Comparison: The Path of God

A comparison with one of the most well-known path of Southern Italy is due: the “Sentiero degli Dei” (“Path of the Gods”), along the worldwide known Costiera Amalfitana, in the province of Salerno, about a hundred miles north of the Cilento National Park, the subject of this study.

The comparison is interesting because of the similarity and proximity of the territory, but also because of the similar socioeconomic situation of the area before the creation of the path and the effects it created, as well as the lessons that can be learned to achieve similar economic spillovers, and even avoid some mistakes.

The Path of the Gods is about 10 km long, starts in Bomerano, a town near Agerola, and ends in the upper part of the famous Positano. It takes about 7 hours to walk it all. Towards the end of the 1990s the villages close the inner part of the Path of the Gods had only three hotels and one *agriturismo*, and off-season they were usually empty, the only walkers you would meet on the “Sentiero degli Dei” were a

handful of really serious Italian trekkers and out of season you would often do the whole two-hour hike without seeing a single person.

Similar to the current situation in Cilento, Positano, located on the coast, already had a conspicuous supply of even high-quality hotels and numerous tourist presences, concentrated in the summer season.

Then, a Dutch-born, Salerno-based activity tour operator Peter Hoogstaden bet the then mayor of Agerola, Tommaso Cuomo, that the following year he could bring at least 100 foreign outdoor enthusiasts to Agerola, provided a certain number of footpaths were cleared.

The first element of this mule track's current success – its name – was put in place not by some clever marketing executive but by 19th century politician and keen mountaineer Giustino Fortunato, who after walking it one day was so impressed by its lofty majesty that he baptized it “Il Sentiero degli Dei” – the Path of the Gods. Over a century would pass, however, before this spectacular trail achieved the fame its name deserved.

That first year, 1999, around a thousand outdoor enthusiasts descended on the Amalfi Coast to walk, among other routes, the Path of the Gods. But not only: right from the beginning, Hoogstaden's objective has always been to bring development through tourism to the whole area. Today, the number of hikers along the Path of the Gods, is far larger. In fact, he believes that, in the era of social media, the Path of the Gods has become a victim of its own success and it is now suffering of overtourism.

Among others, some international tour operators specializing in hiking tourism, cartographer Giovanni Visetti (Visetti, 2019), and Andrea Perciato, author of one of the texts cited in this article, have raised the issue on blogs and social networks.

The crowding and its use by mass and uninformed tourism,

in addition to generating congestion problems at certain times of the year, creates safety problems, with more and more interventions by the National Alpine and Speleological Rescue Corps for tourists who have fallen or been taken ill, partly due to inadequate clothing, equipment, and preparation, as reflected in numerous articles that have appeared in the local print and online press.

It's still an amazing walking trail, especially out of season. But many of those who do it today have little experience of serious mountain trekking – which leads to accidents. And the sheer number of walkers on a single path puts a heavy strain on a fragile ecosystem.

To date, Agerola, the high starting point of the Path of the Gods, although located in the mountains, at 630 meters above sea level, is the first among the mountain municipalities in the entire Campania region for growth in tourist presences with as many as 135,000 travelers in 2018, according to data disclosed by the Municipality of Agerola itself.

This allows, in addition to the direct repercussions in economic and employment terms, to collect significant income from the tourist tax, which the municipality has decided to dedicate to the maintenance of the Path of the Gods and also of the others that connect the mountain center to the coast, and to diversify the offer by focusing on other outdoor activities to be carried out at all times of the year, such as climbing. A small positive step toward diversifying the offer and tourist flows.

Conclusion

There's a serious lesson to be learned from this: there really are hundreds of ancient footpaths and mule tracks all over the Campania Region that are just as beautiful as the Path of

the Gods – but often almost entirely empty, perhaps because they lack the cool name, lack of maintenance or overwhelmed by vegetation and forgotten by locals, guides and authorities who should take care of them.

The reopening of the coastal route, named “The Path of Sirens” seems to be one of the priorities for a sustainable development of the Cilento National Park, one of the few instruments easy to use to fight against young people emigration.

The area has huge touristic flows on Summertime on one hand, at the point that we should start talking about overtourism phenomena in August, on the other hand hotels and restaurants shut down 8 months per year. Many owners and employees move every year to big cities or on the mountains of Northern Italy where they work in sky tourism.

Hard to accept if we only think that there is a request from travelers from all over the world that would like to walk in a place with such a sunny and warm climate all year round.

The reopening of the coastal route will make tourists and locals discover beautiful beaches and pristine natural areas, with cultural treasures connecting all the small branches already walkable who need to be part of a more engaging and promising long distance walk.

In the end we are not just talking about footpaths and business development, we are talking about collective memory. If an old route that was used for centuries is lost, so is part of a community’s history.

In fact, when UNESCO added the Amalfi Coast to their World Heritage List in 1997 they did so because – as the motivation they wrote back then puts it – it “can rightly be defined as a landscape of outstanding cultural value, thanks to the astonishing work of both nature and humankind”.

Yet, a walking route means something more. A way to discover and preserve our landscape with new aims, give a

definitive and concrete form to the future time to come of places still virgin or scarcely inhabited (Laureano et al., 1998). That can stop and avert improper use, private enclosures and rapacious appropriation of such a beautiful and unspoiled coastal place (if nobody knows what a former public road was, who can say it is not private and fight for a place to have public access?).

At the sometime a way to defend the soil hydrogeological instability with stone walls, ancient draining conducts to convoy rainwater (two true landscape mark of those lands) and for fire prevention as a fire break and emergency road for fire brigade vehicles.

Cilento is a sub-region beautiful and full of point of interest, where history, nature and human landscape melts on one hand, but also a place where it is hard to live and invest on the other hand.

It is a land far from main roads, from big cities, a land where not all locals fully understand the capacity of development they can reach thanks to this beauty.

A land where politics are not able to give proper answers to entrepreneurs and tourists, instead they try to destroy this beauty with wrong actions (new asphalt road, constructions, enhancing quads and motorbikes raids).

An authentic land, deeply rooted in its identity, but where every year hundreds of young people emigrate, letting a desolate ensemble of empty villages.

The problem of depopulation takes on dramatic proportions in the inland areas, however, as analyzed in the section on connections and social tissue, the creation and promotion of a series of paths included in a network of trails connected with the main tourist attractions can be an essential element in reversing or at least counteracting the trend, creating job opportunities for young people who have decided to stay and not emigrate.

A part of the world of tourism entrepreneurs, guides and

associations seems to have realized which is the right path to take toward sustainable tourism. The hope is that soon public authorities will do so as well, perhaps starting with simple actions, such as training courses for hiking guides (we are very few in Cilento, less than 10), or emulating the good practices undertaken, for example, on the Amalfi Coast by the municipality of Agerola and allocating funds from the collection of tourist taxes to trail maintenance and outdoor activities instead of authorizing the construction of new tourist settlements on the coast, empty for 10 months but consuming soil and landscape all year round.

Other desirable lines of action are the funding of an efficient public transportation network that meets the demands of green travelers from central and northern Europe who travel using public transportation and often, once off the train find desolate stations with no bus connections to historic centers and inland areas, which thus continue to be cut off from tourist flows. Lack of public transportation also makes some non-loop trekking routes difficult and burdensome, forcing the return by cab, when any are available (all of which are busy servicing the coast or inactive during non-summer months).

In this way, creating a complementary and comprehensive tourist offer will achieve the twofold goal of not increasing anthropic pressure on the coast on the one hand, and on the other hand countering depopulation of inland areas, which have many tourist attractions yet to be enhanced.

With this in mind, the reopening of a coastal trail, the "Siren Trail" could be, not only a tool to lengthen the tourist season, but also a valuable link between the coastal centers, affected by the largest tourist flows and the network of trails leading to the inland areas and their hidden resources.

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The mayors and citizens of the municipality of: Aquara, Bellosguardo, Campora, Cannalonga, Castelcivita, Castelnuovo Cilento, Castel San Lorenzo, Ceraso, Controne, Corleto Monforte, Felitto, Gioi, Laurino, Magliano Vetere, Moio della Civitella, Monteforte Cilento, Novi Velia, Orria, Ottati, Perito, Piaggine, Roccadaspide, Roscigno, Sacco, Salento, Sant'Angelo a Fasanella, Stio, Valle dell'Angelo e Vallo della Lucania (2019), *La strategia d'area del Cilento Interno* [The plan of action of the inner Cilento], Roccadaspide, City of Roccadaspide, pp 1-31, www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Strategia_Area_Cilento_interno.pdf.

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