

# THE POTENTIAL OF COASTAL ECOTOURISM IN CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ISLANDS: A CASE STUDY FROM THE AEGADIAN ARCHIPELAGO

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## Abstract

The study aims at identifying the challenges hindering the success of coastal ecotourism within a central Mediterranean archipelago - the Aegadian one, off the western coast of Sicily - and at identifying good practices in an attempt to propose a tourism model that addresses the environmental and socio-economic challenges of this archipelago. 4 study visits and 40 interviews with various coastal tourism stakeholders were carried out between October 2012 and October 2015. Whereas numerous challenges to coastal ecotourism have been identified, a number of success stories have been recorded, which confirm that should adequate policies be implemented and necessary actions taken, coastal ecotourism can serve as an alternative to the characteristic seasonal and mass tourism pattern currently dominating this archipelago.

*Keywords: Coastal management, Islands, Marine parks, Mediterranean Sea*

## Introduction

Coastal ecotourism is a form of responsible travel to coastal and/or marine settings for environmental conservation, improvement of natural resources and to support the well-being on the local communities. It encompasses a myriad of activities including nature photography, visiting cultural and heritage sites, cycling, snorkelling, scuba diving, kayaking, canoeing and bird watching (Sakellariadou, 2014). Other activities include rock pooling, walking on coastal footpaths and observing marine mega-fauna such as dolphins and seals (Garrod and Wilson, 2003).

## Methodology

The Aegadian archipelago is located to the west of the city of Trapani at the western-most point of Sicily (see Figure 1). It includes 3 inhabited islands Favignana, Levanzo and Marettimo, and is characterised by the largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) in Italy and the second largest MPA in the Mediterranean (Himes, 2007). 4 study visits were carried out on the 3 islands between October 2012 and October 2015 and relevant observations were made on any coastal ecotourism-related activity taking place within the archipelago. During the same period 40 informal and in-depth interviews were held with all stakeholders including local people, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), politicians and governmental agencies, operators, academics and tourists. Content analysis was then carried out to identify the challenges faced by and success stories from the coastal ecotourism sector in the archipelago.

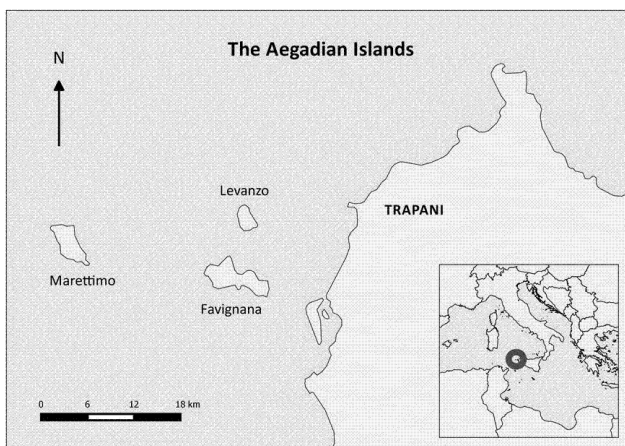


Fig. 1. Location of the Aegadian Islands off the western coast of Sicily.

## Results and discussion

Challenges to coastal ecotourism include island connectivity issues due to bad weather and regular disputes between regional government and service providers, lack of ecotourism services all year round due to insufficient numbers of tourists and the seasonal working lifestyle preferred by service providers,

green washing due to lack of true ecotourism understanding, emphasis on provision of mass tourism services, lack of awareness among locals and operators of the full ecotouristic potential of the islands during the off-peak seasons, failure by locals and fishermen to see the MPA as an exploitable resource that could sustain their income through ancillary tourism activities possibly due to bureaucracy at license-application stage, lack of mentoring and financing for new coastal ecotourism ventures and lack of interest by politicians in coastal ecotourism. Lack of holistic planning, disproportionate attention dedicated to the largest island within the archipelago (Favignana), coupled with lack of collegiality within the archipelago and stiff competition between operators on the same islands hinder the development of an ecotourism package for ecotourists. Lack of promotion and marketing of the Aegadian Islands as a coastal ecotourism destination and lack of (multi-lingual) interpretation/signage along with the language barrier were considered to limit the destination to domestic tourism. Last but not least, illegal dumping, lack of cleanliness in certain coastal areas as well as the discharge of raw untreated sewage in nearby shores are considered to be other main challenges.

Success stories included 2 projects which saw the involvement of the municipality of the Aegadian Islands and the management body of the MPA. The first project was spearheaded by the agency ENEA and included the introduction of an ecolabel, restoration of *Posidonia oceanica* meadows and the publication of two guide books for underwater excursions leading to a 7% increase in tourism on the islands. The second project was managed by the consortium Vivitalia and included a broad stakeholder analysis to assess current nature-based tourism practices and propose new strategies. Within this context four cycling itineraries have been developed along the coast of Favignana. The NGO 'Quelli della Farfalla - C.P.A.C Marrobbio' based in Favignana has been involved in cleaning and maintaining the coastal area between Cala Rossa and Bue Marino and proposed the prohibition of vehicular access in the zone and the introduction of bike stations. New ecotourism services have stemmed throughout the archipelago and include guided coastal walks followed by tasting of local products, snorkelling excursions combined with coastal cycling tours, selling of souvenirs produced from flotsam and donkey rides through pathways along the coast which are constantly maintained by the local forest rangers. The day-to-day of the archipelago's MPA is partially self-supported through administrative fees for licenses required by service providers to conduct an activity within the precincts of the MPA. This income is being used within the domains of conservation, monitoring and for the general upkeep of the archipelago's MPA.

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