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TRACING WASTE
ENVISIONING SUSTAINABILITY
Reflections on Tourism and Community Practices
for Collective Futures

edited by
Chiara Carolina Donelli
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foreword
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INTRODUCTION

From Chemical Elements to Sustainable Practices: Rewriting Waste Through Interdisciplinarity

*Chiara Carolina Donelli, Francesca Pangallo, Olga
Tzazadaki*

*“One can demonstrate that this story, while
completely arbitrary, is nevertheless true.”*

Primo Levi, “Carbon”, *The Periodic Table*
[1975], in *The Complete Works of Primo
Levi*, p. 614
[Norton- Liveright NY - Digital edition:
2019]

In 1975, a collection of short stories was published in Italy that would, roughly a decade later, establish its author - a Turin-based chemist and Holocaust survivor - as one of the most internationally recognized figures in contemporary Italian literature. The book that brought Primo Levi global acclaim is not, as one might assume, *If This Is a Man* (the account that made him famous within the Italian context at the end of the 1950s for his testimony on Auschwitz), but rather a different work, whose narrative construction was singular for its time and that subsequently reshaped and inspired new approaches to storytelling. *The Periodic Table*, first translated into English in 1984, is a short story collection where each chapter, also functioning as an autonomous narrative, takes its title from Mendeleev’s periodic table - the schema traditionally used to organize chemical elements by atomic number and electron configuration. In doing so, Levi thus weaves a dual thematic thread throughout the book: each of the twenty-one autobiographically inspired stories is structured around a specific chemical element, which both supplies the

chapter title (for example, Argon, Lead, Gold, Iron, or Carbon) and appears as the protagonist or as a central, sometimes metaphorical, narrative device. From a narratological perspective, this structure allows each chapter to attract or repel the others - much like atoms themselves - depending on the order in which the reader approaches them, thereby revealing new connections, insights, and interpretive possibilities across contexts that may initially appear disparate.

Tracing Waste, Envisioning Sustainability: Reflections on Tourism and Community Practices for Collective Futures draws on this principle both as inspiration and as a structural model, likewise operating on a dual track. Beginning with a specific case study - the regeneration of waste cooking oil into biodegradable and sustainable compounds and products - the volume nevertheless incorporates “atoms” from diverse disciplinary domains, spanning the hard sciences, such as chemistry and economics, as well as the traditional humanities, including literature and the arts. The rationale for assembling such a multifaceted set of subjects and perspectives within a single publication emerged from the development of a dedicated project, one of the many “Young Researchers” (YR) projects funded within the iNEST (Interconnected Northeast Innovation Ecosystem) Consortium, titled *Sustainable Business Models for Tourism with a Culture-Based Approach* (2024-2025).¹ This initiative brought together a team of early-career researchers to examine sustainability practices aimed at counteracting the production of waste, in a broad spectrum of declinations, generated by the tourism industry in conditions of overtourism. The primary focus involved material waste, especially in the form of waste cooking oil: representing the quintessential by-product of the restaurant sector - a business that plays an especially central role

¹ For the official iNEST consortium website, please refer to: <https://www.conorzioinest.it/>; for Young Researchers projects funded through iNEST-Spoke 6, please check: <https://pric.unive.it/progetti/spoke-6-inest/young-researchers> (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

in the tourism economy of the Italian peninsula - waste cooking oil also reveals the challenges and limits to recycling strategies, as EU policy and regulations prove, in terms of disposal and product regeneration within circular economic efforts.

Through its nine chapters divided into two sections, this volume gathers and critically discusses the Young Researchers (YR) project's results, presenting insights and outcomes that collectively hope to serve as a reference for the dissemination of sustainable tourism strategies mediated through culture and the creative industries. The YR project was developed in the broader framework of the PNRR - Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, which began with the promise of recovering from the losses caused by one of the most severe health and ecological crises in our recent times: the Covid-19 pandemic. Eleven university ecosystems were then established to tackle, through research, the multi-layered crises that followed this unprecedented event within Modernity. iNEST-Spoke 6 specifically addressed emerging issues related to tourism, culture, and creativity under the mantra of sustainability.

Whether the PNRR fulfilled its original expectations or instead compounded pre-existing structural problems—such as the increasing fragmentation and precarisation of academic labour, the growing projectification of sectors already structurally fragile, the pervasive overload of administrative duties that diverts time and energy away from research and teaching, and the persistent short-termism shaping research agendas and evaluation practices—was acknowledged but ultimately fell outside the analytical scope of this project. Nevertheless, the YR project engaged critically with the themes identified as central to the strategy—tourism, culture, and sustainability—seeking to move beyond the current state of the art and prompting the research group to address a fundamental question: are sustainable practices and circular economy truly able to restore cultural and social appropriation by communities affected by overtourism, or

do they arm or repropose the same logic of profit and production behind extractive Capitalism?

The interdisciplinary research team identified the concept of *waste* as the most effective element, a form of critical waste-based epistemology (Corvellec & Bevan, 2025) around which to discuss and engage with local communities in order to find possible answers to the question addressed above. Waste is not only maybe the most evident sign of tourist presence in selected contexts, in terms of disposable and residual leftovers daily produced by visitors, but it can also carry a powerful, symbolic connotation: referring back to communities and individuals, it was particularly enlightening to move from what professor Marco Armiero labeled as “wasting relationships” (2021), in order to understand the logic of exploitation behind places and privileges at a social and economic level. Where a new, attractive business or successful event is designed for visitors to have their money worth to be spent, there it is also where cultural traditions, local crafts, small enterprises and individuals are potentially excluded or rejected from their own homeland or neighborhood. Eventually, in order to explore and reflect on the extent to which the tourism industry - the “younger sibling” of the capitalist system according to scholar Marco D’Eramo (2025)² - either affects or benefits local communities, the research effort had to deal with multiple disciplines and dynamics entangled into this scenario, where the popular Anthropocene definition here identifies more with the definition of Armiero’s Wasteocene: an era in which waste works “rather as a set of socio-ecological relationships aiming to (re) produce exclusion and inequalities” (Armiero, 2021:1).

The INEST Young Researchers project therefore embraced the concept of waste, both in its formal and symbolic dimensions, as a lens to interrogate tourism dynamics. In line with

² See: <https://www.iltascabile.com/linguaggi/iperturismo-disperazione/> (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

these premises, the YR project originated from critically recognizing the *unsustainability* of contemporary tourist flows, together with the ongoing climate emergency. These challenges have recently prompted scholars to examine the complex relationship between tourism, economic growth, and territorial development (Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019), highlighting the fragile links between tourism and local communities in environmental and ethical terms (Jones & Wynn, 2018; Power et al., 2024). Monocultural tourism often reduces territories to commodified experiences for visitors, reinforcing stereotypical representations and distancing tourist encounters from the authentic local context (Bender et al., 2013; Rickly, 2022). As a result, local communities frequently bear a “social cost” (Pizam et al., 1978), manifested in increased waste production, gentrification, and transformations of urban and natural habitats, while often remaining excluded from tourism planning processes (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997).

The project’s effort thus began with the aim of addressing these interconnected social, cultural, and environmental issues by exploring sustainable and culture-based approaches to tourism development. Building on this as a possible investigation strategy, the team researched and enhanced sustainable initiatives that promoted socio-economic, cultural, and environmental resilience. Central to this endeavor were two Living Labs (LLs) established in specific territorial contexts. These LLs fostered synergistic, equitable, and inclusive processes, with a particular focus on waste and reuse - both material and symbolic - within the tourism sector. Interactions with artistic practices and creative languages guided these processes, allowing communities to participate actively in co-design and re-signification of local narratives. The actors involved in the living lab are the actors that although usually being at the center of attention, in overcrowded, over-touristified, over-observed places, are stories that stays at the margin. Empirically, the LLs structured experimental research activities, fostering co-creation of material and immaterial

artefacts derived from physical and symbolic residues, ranging from agro-food by-products to perceptions and narratives marginalized in mainstream tourism communication. Theoretically, the results were collected in this edited volume, which now we hope will serve as a reference not only for the dissemination of sustainable tourism strategies mediated through culture and the creative industries, but especially as the result of a shared, collective effort in questioning from an interdisciplinary perspective the contradictions laying around touristy economies and sustainability and as a methodological tool for inquisition (Corvellec & Bevan, 2025).

This critical stance emerged not only from theoretical engagement but also from the lived experience of a multidisciplinary team working together for more than a year, often sharing approaches, concepts, and terminology only to find out that the same word, or the same dynamic, can mean and imply different things according to each discipline and area of expertise involved. The project final event, that took place on Oct 27th, 2025, and artist book that eventually took shape under the name *ES-AUSTE* (2025)³, realised by artist Elena Mazzi who followed the team during this two-year project, crystallized this experience. Although the researchers come from different disciplinary perspectives—management, visual arts, literature, linguistics, anthropology, and material sciences—they all reflected critically on the complex and often problematic dynamics underpinning tourism's logics. Finally, working as a multidisciplinary team required constructing a shared language—or better yet, a common terrain of

³ For the event details, please check the official poster document at: https://pric.unive.it/fileadmin/user_upload/Spoke_6_iNEST/doc/Esau-ste_27-ottobre-YR-Spoke6.pdf; the book is available in Open Access for free download at: <https://magonzaeditore.it/it/product/esauste/>; and the video of the event: [youtube.com/watch?si=CEJD23DJI-EK_rhZ&v=C2h-54q09Cm4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=CEJD23DJI-EK_rhZ&v=C2h-54q09Cm4&feature=youtu.be) (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

action—where diverse disciplinary languages could be expressed. This volume seeks to capture and reflect that collaborative effort.

The book is divided into two sections, recalling both the project's keywords and main accomplishments. The first section, titled *Tracing Waste in Tourist Destinations*, explores how tourism contributes to the production of waste beyond material residues, investing material, cultural and symbolic domains. practices. Tourism is frequently celebrated as a generator of cultural exchange and economic growth, yet its contributions to waste in a broad spectrum remain understudied. The chapters collected under this first part purposely interrogates the multifaceted ways in which tourism produces forms of residue that go beyond discarded objects or environmental degradation, extending into landscapes, identities, narratives, and language practices. By examining territories as varied as the Venetian Lagoon, the North-East Dolomite Alps, and urban and suburban contexts, this section highlights how extractive economies, aesthetic commodification, and the rhetoric of sustainability can obscure new forms of exploitation. Drawing on artistic, narrative, sociological, translational, and ecological perspectives, the chapters collectively map the contradictions inherent in tourism's promise of renewal, showing that sustainability can sometimes reproduce, instead of reducing, patterns of waste.

Across these diverse contexts, it becomes clear that tourism not only reshapes physical and ecological spaces but also mediates cultural, social, and epistemic forms of value. Local identities, heritage narratives, and accessibility practices are constantly negotiated, commodified, or erased, revealing that the residues of tourism extend into the very ways communities experience, represent, and communicate their own spaces. By tracing these entanglements, the first book section illuminates the systemic tensions between the promise of sustainability and the persistence of extraction, setting the stage for a closer examination of how these dynamics manifest in specific territories, practices, and institutions.

In particular, chapter one opens by examining the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of tourism-generated waste. Francesca Pangallo surveys literary representations of the Venetian Lagoon, highlighting how contemporary writers expose the contradictions of tourist experience with outcomes of degradation, industrialisation, and ecological collapse of Venice and its surrounding ecosystem through fictional work. Supported and influenced by recent studies in the field of Environmental Humanities, Pangallo considers the dimension of *wasteland* as a critical literary lens for addressing present issues of liveability and sustainability within the Venetian lagoon area. By cutting through the familiar tourist imagery and promotional gloss attached to the city, the *wasteland* category reveals the systemic and unsustainable exploitation of collective memory, local traditions, and local communities by the tourism-driven economy.

Following the conversation, Linda Armano presents an analysis of two traditional figures in two specific mountain sites - the character of *Rollate* in Sappada (Udine), and the one of *Saltner* in Merano (Bolzano) - that have become subjects of cultural extraction in relation to "authentic" tourism practices. Local traditions and heritage are mobilized as consumable experiences, revealing a tension between community agency and external demand. This chapter establishes a thematic foundation for the section by showing how tourism transforms culture into a resource, producing intangible waste in the form of altered identities and commodified authenticity. Together, chapters one and two illustrate a continuum of extraction in terms of storytelling and social anthropology perspectives: in both cases, from the commodification of culture to the visual and narrative framing of ecological decline, what is left behind - cultural, material, and ecological residue - reveals the hidden costs of leisure economies.

Marco Baravalle's chapter on Porto Marghera deepens this analysis by locating the category of waste within a dialectical interplay of art, ecology, and social struggle. Whereas Pangal-

lo shows representations of environmental decline, Baravalle focuses on the industrial remnants themselves as both sites of exploitation and spaces of critical reflection. In chapter three, tourism intersects with the legacy of industrialization, and waste becomes a medium through which artists, residents, and activists negotiate visibility, memory, and ecological responsibility. Baravalle's research leads back to Armano and Pangallo by showing how cultural and environmental extraction are intertwined, and how sites of waste can simultaneously produce critical awareness and social tension.

In line with these three case-studies, the last chapter included in Section One shifts the focus to cultural heritage accessibility. Federica Alabiso considers the accessibility strategies included as of today in a selection of museums located in both Venice and Vicenza, extending the conversation to the epistemic and communicative dimensions of tourism. Even though museums mediate access to culture and heritage for a large public, yet linguistic and sensory barriers often render local knowledge partially invisible to visitors. This chapter links to Armano's exploration of authenticity and Pangallo's focus on representation by highlighting how tourism shapes not only what is consumed but also who can participate in cultural narratives. Together, these studies demonstrate that waste is not merely environmental discharge or residual matter: its social, cultural and narrative components are as much as important. By tracing the threads that connect these chapters, Section I reveals a systemic logic of tourism-induced waste: the chapters collectively argue that sustainability discourse often masks these entanglements, producing the illusion of renewal while reproducing exploitation at various levels. In mapping these interconnections, the section's goal is to make the readers familiar with the many and different angles through which tourism reshapes landscapes, identities, and knowledge, highlighting both its destructive potential and its capacity to provoke resilience and resistance actions.

The second section takes a multidisciplinary step into these potential actions of resistance developed by local communities and businesses affected by over-tourism wasting dynamics, and is complementary to the previous one by mapping the various strategies monitored by the YR research team. Titled *Resistance Practices to Waste and Tourism for Collective Futures*, Section Two turns from analyzing tourism-induced waste to exploring various practices that communities, artists, and local initiatives have been developing to counter and re-balance mass-tourism effects. The theme of sustainability is approached here as a participatory and creative process rather than a top-down framework: by engaging with local knowledge, material residues, and cultural practices, communities reclaim agency over territories marked by depletion, overexposure, or commodification. Along with this premise, crafts, chemical compositions, and artistic interventions emerge as laboratories of sustainability, where what might otherwise be wasted—materials, voices, and traditions—is reintegrated into collective narratives and local economies.

Matteo Baldan presents the core element of our investigation, waste cooking oil, demonstrating how circular economic practices can transform a by-product of daily life into a valuable resource. This chapter outlines the regulatory and market context for products derived from waste cooking oil (WCO), highlighting their role in preventing improper disposal. It examines EU policies, market dynamics, and how circular-economy models enhance the value of WCO-based products. More broadly, it underscores the importance of collaboration among industry, researchers, policymakers, and citizens. The shift toward a circular economy shows how collective action can reshape production and consumption, reduce waste, and support environmental and social sustainability for present and future generations. Baldan's research illustrates how local communities and administrations can generate environmental and social benefits simultaneously, highlighting the potential of small-scale, targeted sustainability measures.

Donelli, Armano and Mazzi explore how artistic practices critically engage with “sustainable” tourism’s rhetoric of circularity. By making visible both material and symbolic forms of waste, art provokes reflection on the contradictions inherent in attempts to reconcile leisure economies with environmental responsibility. Creative interventions thus function as tools of resistance, fostering dialogue around sustainability and consumption in tourist contexts. The chapter uses the Wasteocene framework (Armiero, 2021) to interrogate how overtourism and the commodification of local cultures produce material and symbolic forms of waste. Two communities, Venice and the Belluno Dolomites, serve as experimental sites of inquisition of both research and artistic practice. The artists Elena Mazzi, together with the researchers, investigated, interrogated and observed the territories in order to later establish a participatory forum of discussion and experimentation, in the form of Cultural Living Labs. The Cultural Living Labs (CLLs), are presented as methodological alternatives where art-led, participatory methods enabled participants to rethink waste—in this case waste cooking oil (WCO)—as a metaphor and material tool for questioning mainstream ideas of circularity, wasted memories and issues related to tourism. Through shared practices such as cooking, drawing, and storytelling, waste was reimagined as a generator of care, memory, and critical awareness rather than as mere discard. Elena Mazzi played a central role in the project, coordinating the three Living Labs, which took place in Venice (March 11-12, 2025) and Arabba-Colle Santa Lucia (June 20th, 2025), and guiding the artistic processes that shaped their outcomes. As an artist, Mazzi explores specific territories by reinterpreting their cultural and natural heritage through the stories and memories of local communities. With an approach informed by anthropology, she weaves together diverse forms of knowledge to imagine new relationships between humans, nature, and culture. Her contribution was fundamental in investigating both the tangibility of waste and the mark it leaves on local communities and their environments.

This chapter includes a graphic section containing visual materials from the Living Labs: photographs and drawings by Mazzi, which offer an additional interpretive layer to the themes discussed and visually articulate the collective experience emerging from the project.

Valeria Bruzzi focuses on participatory and art-based approaches to sustainable tourism, showing how community engagement and creative expression can valorize local knowledge and co-create meaningful cultural experiences. Similarly, Margherita De Luca and Camilla Ferri investigate craft and artisanal practices in Venice through an art-based research approach, revealing how challenging stereotypical representations of “authenticity” can transform tourist encounters into reflective, participatory spaces, where local skills and narratives are recognized rather than commodified. The central thesis is that participatory and site-specific cultural practices can support regenerative territorial development. *Art Tourism* is presented as a transformative paradigm that moves beyond passive consumption by engaging communities in creative processes that generate social, economic, and symbolic value, clearly differing from traditional cultural tourism centered on the passive consumption of pre-existing heritage assets. It redefines tourism through participatory artistic practices that re-narrate places, co-create shared meanings, and foster sustainable territorial development, while addressing risks of commodification and gentrification. Pilot projects in Lavarone, Tonezza del Cimone, and Roana illustrate how cultural prototypes can narrate intangible and relational heritage through artistic languages and community involvement. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including risks of performative participation, difficulties in measuring long-term impact, and the need to balance artistic authorship with community agency.

Eventually, the final chapter of this section examines micro-regeneration initiatives in the Po Delta and Polesine, illus-

trating the power of proximity-based social innovation. By reactivating neglected spaces through small-scale interventions, Olga Tzazadaki illustrates how communities reclaim agency and transform residual or marginalized resources into opportunities for sustainable development, demonstrating that localized action can counter broader pressures of touristification. Facing issues such as unemployment, depopulation, overtourism, and declining social cohesion, community-led tourism initiatives in this region have increasingly turned to proximity-based social innovation. Driven by small, bottom-up actors - including entrepreneurs, family firms, cooperatives, museums, and social enterprises - these efforts centre on preserving and revaluing diverse forms of cultural heritage. Research on social innovation in tourism highlights how such community practices mobilize tangible and intangible heritage to foster micro-regeneration and sustainable local development. Based on interviews and life-story narratives, in her chapter, Dr. Tzazadaki shows how key stakeholders act as custodians of local memory, generating community benefits and triggering wider processes of territorial micro-regeneration.

Taken together, all chapters collected in Section II show how communities, artists, researchers, and local actors actively resist the extractive and wasting dynamics of contemporary tourism by reclaiming materials, spaces, and narratives. Across the diverse case studies—from circular practices based on waste reuse, to participatory art, craft-based re-signification, and proximity-driven social innovation—emerges a shared commitment to transforming residues into resources and marginality into opportunity. These contributions demonstrate that sustainability becomes meaningful when rooted in situated knowledge, collaborative experimentation, and care for local ecosystems. Rather than proposing universal solutions, the section highlights a plurality of grounded practices that redefine tourism as a relational, community-centered, and regenerative process.

In conclusion, we hope readers will appreciate the multiple perspectives offered in the present volume, not just in terms of research development practices, but as efforts in looking at present eco-challenges with an open, interdisciplinary and collaborative attitude. The findings of the iNEST-Young Researchers project underscore the need for further research to interrogate the complex and multidimensional nature of tourism-induced waste. Material, cultural, and symbolic residues are intertwined, shaped by extraction, commodification, and selective accessibility, and their impacts extend beyond immediate ecological or economic concerns. Future studies could build on these insights by adopting longitudinal and comparative approaches, exploring how different territorial, social, and cultural contexts mediate the production and circulation of waste in tourism. In particular, research that bridges disciplinary perspectives—combining management, visual arts, narrative, linguistics, anthropology, and material sciences—can continue to illuminate the ways in which creative, participatory, and culturally grounded interventions reshape the relationships between local communities, visitors, and heritage resources. Emphasis on co-creation and collaborative methodologies may further clarify the conditions under which sustainability practices move from symbolic rhetoric to tangible, socially inclusive outcomes.

Finally, as the epigraph quotation at the beginning of this introduction recites, we hope that both our individual and collective attempts into exploring waste and tourism relationships might shine some truth for the public, suggesting further initiatives in the direction of sustainable practices in those fragile, hyper-tourist contexts, but also in a way that re-think our impact in terms of waste production and resource consumption. Being each discipline and chapter arbitrarily moving from the same issue, as editors of this collective volume, we as well wish readers to deliberately and purposely take whatever suggestions they please, and make from them more true, inspired and ambitious actions for a more socially and environmentally sustainable planet/future.

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