

Integrating Cultural Values into the Project of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of cultural values in the conservation and sustainable development of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park (PNLJPI). Through documentary analysis, field observation, and community surveys in Romanian and Moldovan villages, the research emphasizes the significance of both tangible and intangible heritage—such as traditional fishing, customs, and vernacular architecture—in shaping local identity. The findings highlight that neglecting cultural dimensions may undermine ecological goals and weaken community cohesion. The study advocates for an integrated, community-driven management model that leverages cultural heritage to promote sustainable tourism and strengthen regional development.

Keywords: cultural geography, cultural landscape, ethnography, intangible heritage, natural park

INTRODUCTION

From a cultural perspective, ethnographic landscapes are markers of cultural identity and reflect identity, authenticity, and cultural individuality. Through them, traditional technical and artistic achievements—transmitted across generations—are preserved; these are sources of ethnicity, provide cultural goods, unite members of local communities, and ensure the connection between generations. In terms of the environmental dimension, ethnographic landscapes reveal not only knowledge but also traditional techniques and practices for resource use and land management, as well as beliefs and prohibitions associated with maintaining the balance between humans and the surrounding environment (Onică 2019). The local community holds priority regarding the sustainable use of natural space and is informed and trained about the possibilities, opportunities, and limitations imposed on economic activities practiced.

Within the context of new interdisciplinary approaches in ethnological, geographical, and sociological research, cultural landscapes are recognized as fundamental resources for sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park is a relevant example, where traditional cultural values coexist with natural elements.

The cultural landscape of the region offers multiple economic opportunities through the promotion of cultural and ecological tourism, the stimulation of local entrepreneurial initiatives, and the development of traditional crafts, thereby contributing to the revitalization of rural economies. Culturally, these landscapes reflect ethnic identity, authenticity, and local specificity, preserving traditional techniques and customs. Ecologically, traditional knowledge and practices regarding sustainable resource use and nature protection provide sustainable models for environmental management.

Various development projects of the Lower Danube Euroregion (Fig. 1) between Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine—such as “*Promotion of Intangible Heritage and National Culture in Romania and the Republic of Moldova*” launched in May 2025, “*Green Tourism in the Cahul-Galați-Reni Cross-Border Region*”

from 2023, “Cross-Border Cooperation for the Valorization of Cultural Heritage in Galați, Romania, and Hîncești, Republic of Moldova” from 2022, and perhaps the best-known “Cross-Border Project ‘The Village Museum – Traditional Household’” from 2008—have aimed to leverage the European integration process and socio-economic development of communities, promoting cultural values through tourism while minimizing negative impacts on nature and culture. These projects maximize economic benefits for locals, local tourism businesses, and especially for residents in natural and protected areas such as the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park.

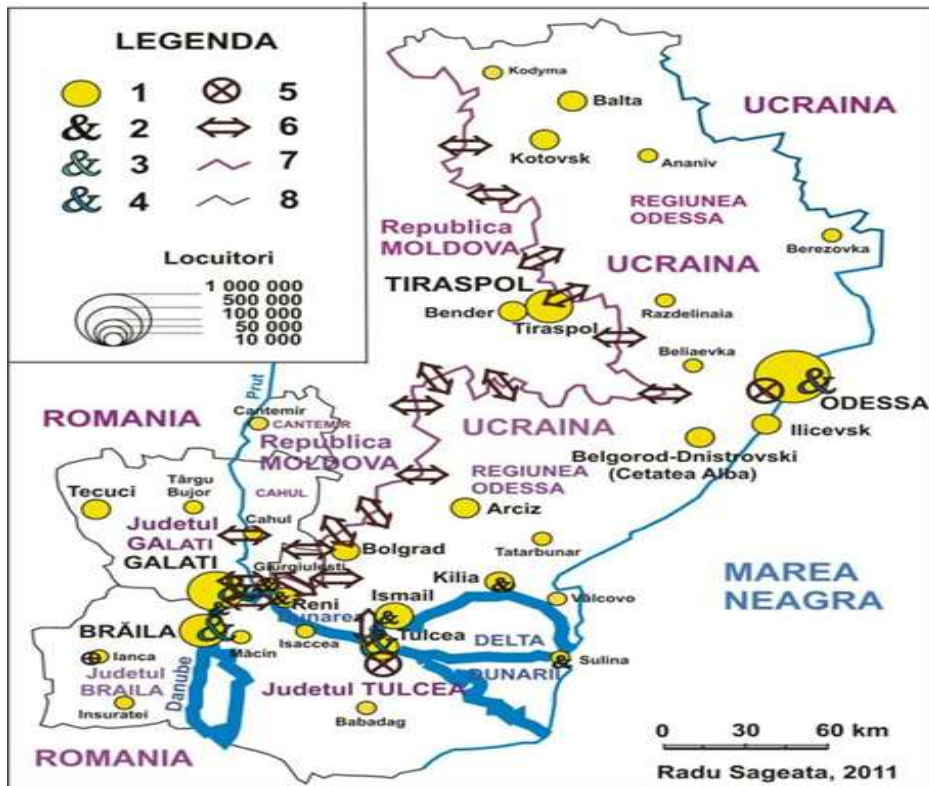


Figure 1. The "Lower Danube" Euroregion. Polarization centers, 2. River ports, 3. River-sea ports, 4. Sea ports, 5. Airport, 6. Cross-border connections, 7. Borders, 8. Administrative boundaries.

Source: Stanca R., 2011

Biogeographic aspects

Physical-Geographical features

The Prut River basin (Fig. 2), in its lower section located within Galați County (Fig. 3), falls within the geomorphological unit of the Moldavian Plateau, specifically the Bârlad Plateau subunit with its Covurlui Platform sector, which is further subdivided into the Covurlui Hills and Covurlui Plain. To the south, over a length of 12 km, the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park includes the Danube Valley. Four geomorphological units have been distinguished from the relief fragmentation: plateaus, tributary valleys, the Prut Floodplain, and the Danube Floodplain. The floodplain relief is generally flat, with a continuous slope from north to south. The general aspect of the floodplain is that of a wide depression. The microrelief consists of accumulation forms—such as ridges—and negative forms, including former lakes, oxbow lakes, channels, and marshes. Within the floodplain, outer ridges can be identified, such as the main Prut ridge composed of coarse to medium textures, while the rest are inner ridges—inter-ridges—formed along former levees and made up of fine textures and, to a lesser extent, medium textures. Relief altitude varies between 3 meters in the Lower Prut Floodplain at the confluence with the Danube and 209.4 meters at Cocos Hill. The Prut floodplain has average altitudes of 10–20 meters in the northern part—north of Oancea—and below 10 meters near its discharge into the Danube (Fig. 4;5).



Figure 2: Location of the Prut River Basin, between Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. Source: <http://www.icpdr.org/main/publications/focusing-prut-river-basin>

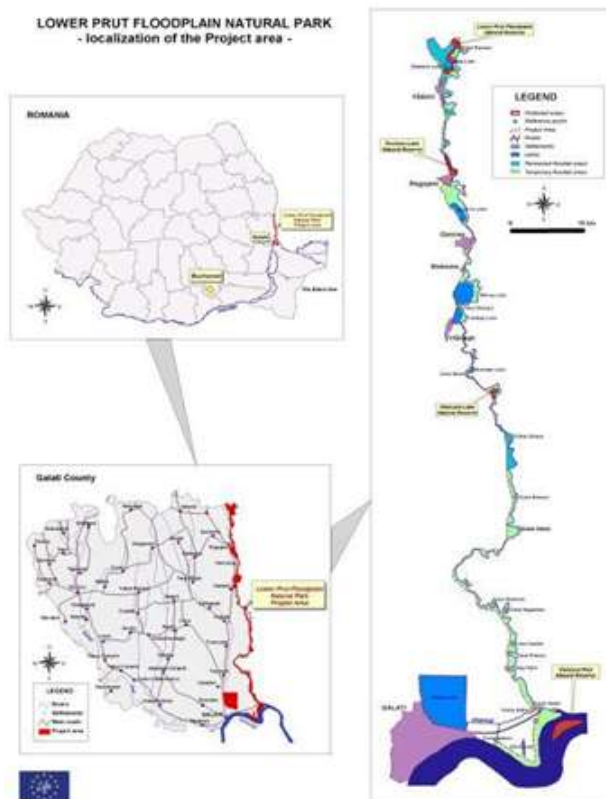


Figure 3: Map of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park. Source: Project “Ecological Restoration of the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park” LIFE05NAT/RO/000155



Figure 4: View of the floodplain landscape from the village of Tătarca, Tulucești commune, towards the Natural Park.

Source: Tulucești Commune City Hall, Galați County



Figure 5: General overview of the terrain from the village of Tulucești, Tulucești commune, towards the Natural Park.

Source: Tulucești Commune City Hall, Galați County

Cohesion between environment and society

At the beginning of the 20th century, Otto Schlüter formulated the concept of the "*cultural landscape*" later theorized by Carl Sauer, who emphasized that "the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result." This perspective suggests a one-directional anthropization of the environment. The cultural landscape, its reciprocal and inseparable interrelationship, defines the connection between people and their territory, thus requiring the integration of nature management into the cultural dimension. This holistic approach enables the protection of different domains not only from an ecological perspective but also of the local population (Fowler, 2002).

Local culture refers to the set of social relations developed in defined and restricted spaces, where specific forms of representation are established through shared codes of communication and meaning (Featherstone, 1993). According to Albagli (2004), the sense of belonging and behaviors associated with a specific geographic space underpin a notion of territoriality, in which social relationships and local specificity exist in a dynamic interdependence, reinforcing community identity. In this context, the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park constitutes

not only a protected ecological space but also a cultural space, where collective memory, traditions, and customs give meaning to belonging and support the social cohesion necessary for sustainable development.

Cultural landscape in the Natural Park

The localities within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park have a predominantly agricultural (Fig. 6) and fishing occupational profile (Fig. 7). The reeds in the area are used to weave mats (which were once essential household items—covering the clay floors of homes or used as shade while working in the fields) or for weaving household objects, the most common being baskets ("coșnițe") used to carry food to the fields in clay pots covered with hand-woven towels (Fig. 8). These woven towels were also made for various life events (baptisms, weddings, funerals). Traditional crafts are especially associated with making objects from wicker, but also with wool, flax (hand-woven carpets, blouses, etc.) (Fig. 9), and wood (various decorations, furniture, etc.).

The importance of traditional culture and civilization resources for contemporary life is also emphasized by Mihaela Hărmănescu, who notes in one of her studies that *"knowledge of traditional building culture reflects sustainable principles established over time through a continuous process; thus, the vernacular built heritage is in constant evolution and presents varied characteristics and forms, adapted to local climatic conditions, available materials, and ways of living. Some of these features can be developed or reproduced, others are no longer applicable today but offer solutions for the development of sustainability strategies in the rural landscape."*

Applying the concept of sustainability to the ethnographic landscape demonstrates that the transmission and perpetuation of conceptualization methods and reflections of the humanization process, as well as the transgenerational modeling of ethnographic landscapes, contribute significantly to cultural transmission processes. The succession of generations brings new models and transformations. Correct understanding of the structural, visual, symbolic, and value conversions of ethnographic landscapes provides, on one hand, opportunities for maintaining their material and spiritual stability, and on the other, for reevaluating the resources they provide, thus contributing to identifying viable solutions for the complex challenges of contemporary communities (Hărmănescu, 2015).



Figure 6: Shepherding – a traditional occupation; in the background, agricultural land and Lake Brateș can be seen, near the village of Tulucești.

Source: Personal archive



Figure 7: Fishing on Channel Chineja in the village of Tulucești.

Source: Personal archive



Figure 8: Baskets or creels made of willow

Source: Personal archive



Figure 9: Hand-woven carpets

Source: Personal archive

In the case of the villages in the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park, they are in the ethnographic subzone Covurlui-South, from Tulucești to Vlădești, and Covurlui-North, from Oancea to Cavadinești (Stanciu, 2023). The defining feature of peasant households in the southern half of the park is the blind stove with a back room where the fire was lit in a hearth. This element is a continuation of the specific culture of the Bărăgan Plain, with the architecture reflecting characteristics of the Lower Danube regions (Fig. 10).

In the northern part of the Natural Park, traditional rural architecture is an identity element, referring to houses built from adobe, with a hallway and a room divided into two. At the back was the "iatac" or "etac," about a third of the room's space, formed by a partition wall that was in fact the stove heating both rooms and also used for cooking. In this area, rural architecture is purely Moldavian (Fig. 11). The villages here are old, many founded by freeholding peasants ("răzeși") from medieval Moldova, and feature many interesting cultural-ethnographic aspects such as houses made of interwoven twigs, supported by buried forked posts and thickly plastered with clay mixed with straw or chaff.

A long-standing domestic industry tradition was spinning and weaving wool, flax, cotton, and silk ("borangic") to produce cloth. Hemp was sown in spring, often after rainfall. Once the hemp turned yellow, it was pulled, tied into bundles, and soaked for about six days. Then it was washed and dried on fences, often in cones formed by tying the tips of multiple bundles to allow wind penetration and faster drying. Alongside wool and textile plants, women also used silk for weaving. The raising of silkworms to produce silk thread was an ancient Romanian craft. From silk cloth, they made towels, shirts, sashes, and tablecloths. Thread spinning was done mainly in winter, from Saint Andrew's Day (considered the beginning of winter in Romanian tradition) until spring, when fieldwork began. Women gathered in the well-known "șezători" (spinning and social gatherings), where they competed with one another, while mothers taught their daughters the craft (Fig. 12). Hemp threads were wound on reels, tied into large skeins, and then boiled in lye with ashes to bleach them. They were then washed and dried. For dyeing, women used natural colors obtained from the bark, stems, roots, or leaves of various plants.

In this context, valuing the tangible and intangible heritage of villages within the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park can become an important pillar of sustainable development. Promoting cultural tourism, organizing craft workshops, reconstructing agricultural and architectural traditions, and showcasing cultural landscapes not only support the local economy but also contribute to preserving cultural identity and the environment. Thus, the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park emerges not only as a space for biodiversity conservation but also as a model for integrating rural cultural heritage into sustainable development strategies.



Figure 10: House with a thatched roof and storage room (chiler), typical of the Covurlui-South ethnographic subzone.

Source: <https://descopera-razesii.ro/>



Figure 11: House with a thatched roof and a wicker fence, typical of the Covurlui-North ethnographic subzone.

Source: <https://Galaticityapp.ro>



Figure 12: Traditional women's gathering for crafts and socializing

Source: Personal archive

Tourism development perspectives

From the perspective of territorial tourism planning, the resort represents the core of tourism activity. Through the activities carried out in resorts, tourism contributes to territorial systematization and economic growth within a specific economic, legal, fiscal, and urban planning framework. The sustainable valorization of the natural and cultural heritage of the administrative-territorial units in the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park is one of the priorities and will contribute to the development of attractive tourism products in this area. The areas adjacent to the Danube Delta should receive special attention, given that the Delta benefits from the ITI (Integrated Territorial Investment) financial mechanism to stimulate integrated territorial development in this region. This mechanism is based on the Integrated Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Danube Delta (Government Decision no. 602/2016), where under Pillar II – Improving the Economy, one of the components is Tourism.

The establishment of the Natura 2000 European network in Romania, which includes the studied natural park, has meant the introduction of useful tools for the inclusion and management of protected areas—an important step in conserving landscapes and biodiversity. It thus offers many opportunities in various fields of activity, including tourism, as sustainable tourism can be achieved by combining different agricultural, cultural-ethnographic activities with nature protection alternatives.

The number of accommodation units in Galați accounts for 0.50% of the national total, having registered a slight increase of about 8% over the last three years. Despite the increase in the number of accommodation units, the number of accommodation places they offer has shown variable trends over the past 10 years. At the end of 2014, there were a total of 20 tourist accommodation structures within the natural park, most of which were in the city of Galați. Over the last ten years, a tourist guesthouse and a small-capacity hotel opened in the commune of Tulucești, and an agrotourism guesthouse in Berești. Meanwhile, in the city of Galați, three new tourist guesthouses were opened, as well as the Brateș tourist complex, aiming to capitalize on the tourism potential of the lake, which is also part of the natural park. Thus, by the end of 2024, the total number of tourist accommodation structures reached 27, with a continuing upward trend.

With the increase in the number of accommodation units, the capacity to receive tourists has also grown. Although the variations are not considered significant and do not have major impacts on tourism in Galați County, over the past ten years, the total number of arrivals has increased, both within the natural park and at the county level (Fig. 10).

When referring to the tourism infrastructure base in the natural park, that of the Cahul District in the Republic of Moldova is much more developed, with a large influx of both domestic and foreign tourists, as well as a sustainable development strategy—utilizing tourism infrastructure in harmony with the natural and cultural environment, minimizing fossil fuel use, and conserving local vegetation and fauna.

Most accommodation units are found in the city of Cahul, with a higher number of beds, while in the villages within the natural park, rural and agrotourism guesthouses predominate, with lower capacity, located in the villages of Văleni, Colibași, and Slobozia Mare. The trend has been upward over the past ten years, with the accommodation capacity increasing by 282 places (Fig. 11).

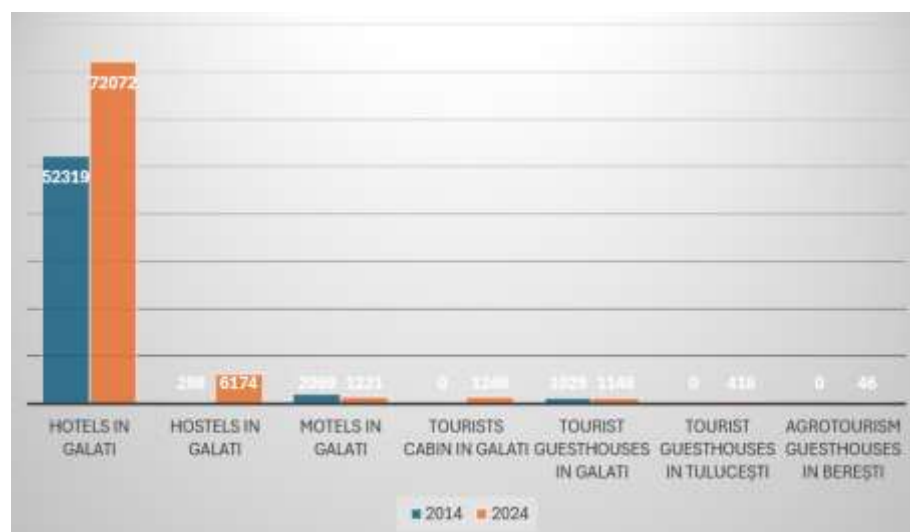


Figure 10: Tourist Arrivals in Accommodation Units in Localities within the "Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park", Years 2014 and 2024

Source: <https://insse.ro/> – Tempo Online

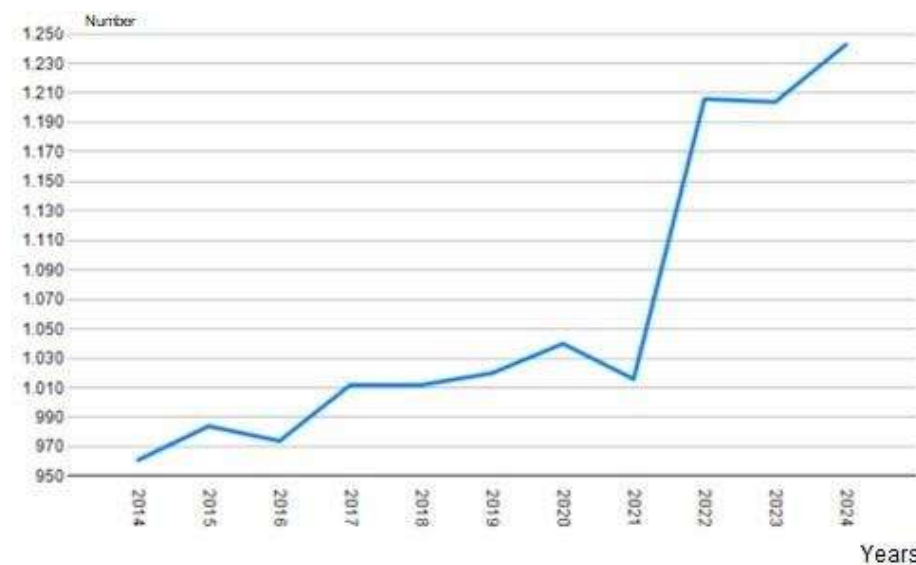


Figure 11: Existing Capacity of Collective Tourist Accommodation Structures with Lodging Functions, Cahul District, 2014–2024 (number of places)

Source: <https://statbank.statistica.md/>

Ecotourism

A major-impact perspective in the sustainable development of tourism in the studied area is ecotourism, also known as ecological or green tourism. It is a form of tourism that ensures the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Natural elements can be valorized through culture, for example, by engaging in various traditional craft activities specific to tourist destinations, such as woodworking, willow weaving, or loom weaving. At the same time, it is necessary to monitor the stages of raw material collection to avoid environmental overexploitation. The lower Prut sector has significant potential for the development of green tourism, but it is essential to ensure the development of environmentally friendly infrastructure and to apply environmental standards in the promotion and use of tourist destinations.

Ecotourism brings together conservation, communities, and sustainable travel, and can be successfully integrated with other forms of tourism such as rural tourism, agrotourism, gastronomic tourism, wine tourism, or cycling tourism (Fig. 12). This means that those who implement, participate in, and promote ecotourism activities should adopt ecotourism principles. Among the most important are: minimizing the negative impact on nature and culture, as such impact could destroy the tourist destination; ensuring tourism development does not exceed a certain threshold of social, cultural, or environmental change; and maximizing the economic benefits for local communities, businesses, and especially the residents of natural and protected areas.



Figure 12: Tourist Route – "Discover the South by Bicycle"

Source: <https://moldova.travel/>

Cultural tourism

From an ethnographic perspective, the localities within the natural park fall within the "Lower Danube" area, which is characterized, in terms of cultural heritage, by specific forms of expression. These are reflected in shared elements on both banks of the Prut River, among which traditional customs (such as *Colindul* – Christmas caroling, and *Plugușorul* – the New Year's plow ritual), agricultural rituals (*Paparuda*, *Caloianul*, *Lăzărețul*), traditional clothing, and gastronomy (fish-based dishes) stand out. This cultural foundation, which has crystallized over time, has taken on various stylistic nuances due to historical events, transhumance, migration phenomena, socio-political measures, etc.

These phenomena, particularly evident in the Cahul District, have generated a multicultural diversity that today constitutes a center of cultural and touristic attraction. The Eco Village tourist complex, which includes the museum "Traditional Peasant Courtyard – Casa Dorului" in Văleni, Cahul District, is a perfect example of both ecological and cultural tourism under the concept of "unity in diversity," where various ethno-folkloric activities and workshops are organized for both locals and tourists.

In the villages of Galați County, a landscape-based gradient can be observed—from the north (more traditional and conservative) to the south (more modern, corresponding to the area of influence of the city of Galați). Nevertheless, there is a strong attachment among villagers to preserving and perpetuating traditions, such as winter holiday customs. Another way of preserving and promoting traditions is through folk art museums and village collections, such as the “Petru Caraman” Village Museum – a traditional household in Tulucești, which reflects the rural life on both banks of the Prut. It also includes the Fishermen’s Area Museum, where various ethno-folkloric activities are organized, such as “La Dunăre de Sânzieni,” an event that highlights customs like *Paparuda* and *Caloianul* for the younger generation, with participation from folklore groups from the county, Cahul, and even Reni, Ukraine. In the village of Șivița, the “Vatra cu Dor” Museum offers interactive workshops in weaving, pottery, and making masks from natural materials, especially for student groups—both attractions drawing a significant number of tourists.

Intangible cultural heritage is passed down from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities and human groups in interaction with their environment and history, giving them a sense of identity and continuity, while promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The most relevant elements of intangible cultural heritage include customs, traditions, traditional performances, legends, gastronomy, ethnographic items, textile-based artifacts, paintings, traditional folk crafts, and traditional handicraft workshops (Fig. 13). Cultural tourism can be combined with other forms of tourism such as rural, museum, and educational tourism (Fig. 14).

Cultural tourism could be enhanced by developing ecotourism products offered by local communities, supported through efforts to maintain and perpetuate traditional local customs. This also includes integrating local folk festivals and agrarian celebrations—such as *Paparuda*, *Lăzărelul* and *Caloianul*—and related resources into a cross-border tourism circuit that promotes the cultural and ethnographic traditions specific to southern Moldova (Figs. 15; 16).



Figure 13: Weaving on a loom and reproducing a traditional mask; Folk craftsman Paul Buță with students.

Source: Cultural Association for Romanian Traditions and Customs „VATRA,,



Figure 14: The agrarian ritual "Lăzărelul," village of Văleni, Cahul District

Source: <https://luncaprutuluidejos.md/>



Figure 14: The Caloian's Journey to the Well, village of Odaia Manolache, 2025. Coordinator: Ecaterina Hulea.

Source: Personal archive.

METHODS

In the context of sustainable development efforts and the protection of tangible and intangible heritage, the questionnaire is an integral part of this research, aiming to investigate how local cultural values can be integrated into the management plans and practices of the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park.

The questionnaire is addressed to 60 residents living near the park (communes and villages in Galați County and Cahul District) as well as tourists. It seeks to capture a diverse perspective on how cultural heritage can be valued within the natural park. The objectives of the questionnaire are:

1. to identify community perceptions regarding the existing tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the park area,
2. to assess the level of awareness about the importance of cultural preservation within a protected natural area,
3. to gather suggestions for integrating local traditions, customs, and crafts into the park's development strategies,
4. and to determine general attitudes toward cultural-ecological tourism and its impact on the community.

The data collected will be analyzed both statistically and qualitatively, depending on the type of questions (closed or open-ended). The results will help identify general trends, strengths, and gaps in public perception, providing a solid basis for formulating practical recommendations on integrating cultural values into the management and promotion of the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park.

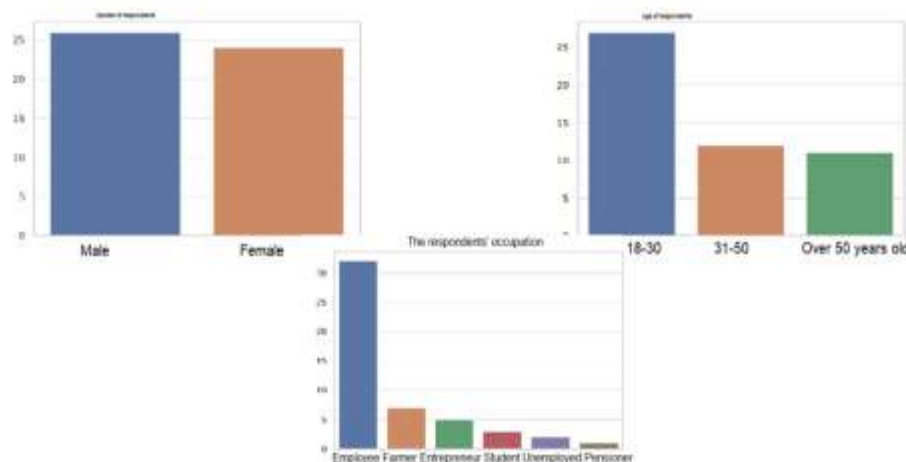


Figure 15: Socio-economic profile of respondents

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results highlight a high level of familiarity among respondents with the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park, as well as a significant degree of interaction through visitation. This represents an essential starting point for evaluating the park's role in the sustainable development of the region—not only from an ecological perspective but also a cultural one.

The predominantly positive perception of the park's impact on the local community suggests public openness to the potential benefits of the protected area. These benefits—such as biodiversity conservation, tourism development, and the creation of economic opportunities—were frequently mentioned by participants. These dimensions reflect a growing awareness of the multifunctional value of a natural park beyond its purely conservationist role.

On the other hand, the analysis reveals a perceived shortfall in the promotion and integration of local cultural values in the park's management. While respondents acknowledge the presence of a diverse cultural heritage (traditions, crafts, local customs), most believe it is not sufficiently known or promoted. Furthermore, the involvement of local authorities and the park administration is often seen as only partial, indicating an urgent need to strengthen institutional and community partnerships.

Respondents proposed various methods for integrating cultural heritage into the park's development project, such as the organization of cultural tourism routes, craft workshops, or themed events. These initiatives could strengthen regional cultural identity while also boosting tourism appeal and local economic development.

It is also worth noting the high level of declared attachment to the region's cultural values, which correlates with the recognition of the park's potential educational role. This correlation suggests fertile ground for cultural and educational interventions within the management policies of the protected area.

The research results indicate a generally favorable attitude toward the Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park, both in terms of its ecological impact and its cultural potential. At the same time, a clearly expressed desire from the community emerges—to better capitalize on existing cultural heritage.

The Lower Prut Meadow Natural Park has the opportunity to be not only a protected natural area but also a catalyst for local cultural revitalization. A participatory, community-centered approach is recommended for developing local and cross-border projects that actively and sustainably integrate cultural heritage.

The community demonstrates attachment to its cultural heritage and a desire to see it integrated into sustainable tourism development strategies. While the involvement of authorities is perceived as insufficient, the potential for collaboration is significant. It is evident that sustainable development in the region cannot be achieved without the active integration of local cultural values into the park's promotion and development strategies.

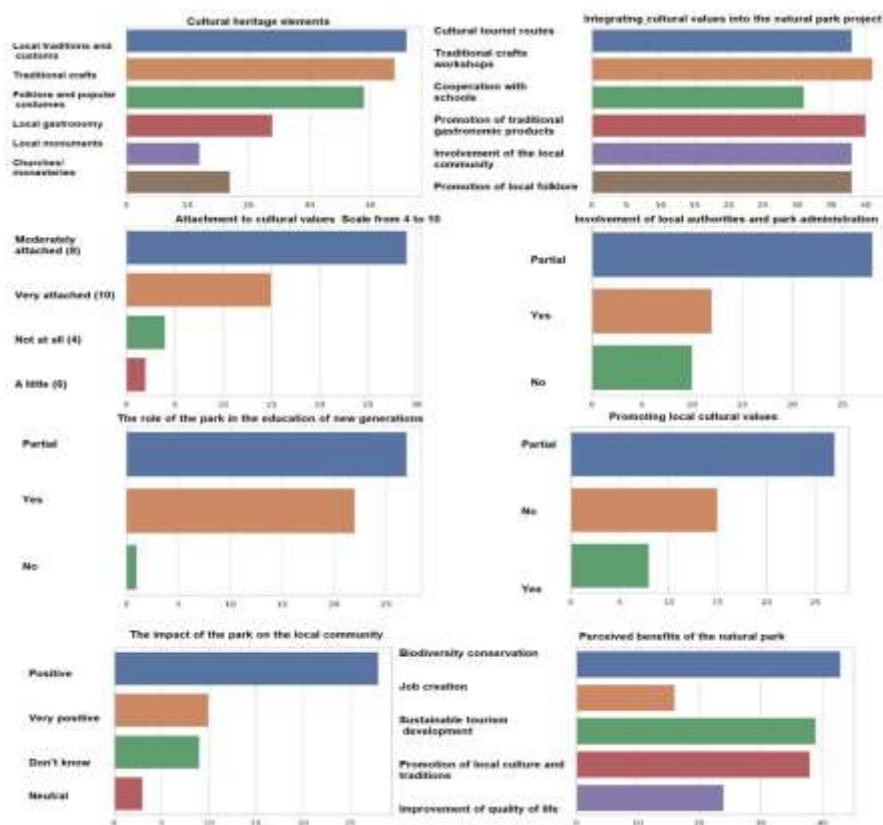


Figure 16. Results

CONCLUSIONS

This research highlights a complex and promising reality regarding the relationship between local communities and the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park. While there is a generally positive perception of the existence and functioning of the protected area, this perception is accompanied by a clear feeling that local cultural resources are not sufficiently valorized, promoted, or integrated into the park's development strategies.

Beyond its obvious ecological function, natural parks can and should play a crucial role in strengthening local cultural identity, fostering social cohesion, and supporting the local economy. Our study showed that residents in the area have a high level of awareness of natural and cultural values, expressing a significant attachment to them. However, their actual participation in the management and promotion of these values remains limited, indicating the need for a more sustained effort of openness and collaboration from the authorities.

Additionally, respondents put forward several viable and relevant proposals for integrating cultural heritage into the life and activities of the park, ranging from educational and tourism initiatives to cultural events and craft workshops. This demonstrates not only knowledge of the local potential but also a clear desire for active involvement. Thus, it becomes evident that managing a protected natural area cannot be conceived solely from an ecological perspective but must adopt a transdisciplinary approach that includes culture, education, the local economy, and active involvement of authorities.

In the long term, valorizing cultural heritage within a protected area such as the Lower Prut Floodplain would not only contribute to diversifying the tourist experience and strengthening economic sustainability but also reinforce a sense of local belonging and pride, generating more consistent community engagement. At the same time, such a model could serve as a replicable example for other protected areas in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, where the cultural component is often overlooked in conservation policies.

In conclusion, for the Lower Prut Floodplain Natural Park to fully realize its potential as a driver of sustainable regional development, it is essential to move from an exclusively naturalistic vision to an integrative one, in which nature and culture support each other. This transition requires political will, institutional commitment, ongoing dialogue with the community, and openness to social and cultural innovation.

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