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Ecomuseum *House of Batana – Casa della Batana*

How to preserve the maritime heritage on the Croatian Adriatic? Ecomuseums and interpretation centers as 21st century heritage practice

Abstract

The year 2003 was crucial for the development of global and local discourse on intangible cultural heritage. The adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage launched numerous heritage processes around the world, including a local initiative to preserve the Rovinj *batana* boat. In response to the decreasing presence of traditional wooden vessels in the Rovinj port, the local community founded the first Croatian ecomuseum, the *House of Batana – Casa della Batana*, in 2004. The ecomuseum, developed through a participatory approach of the community and experts, has become an example of good practice in the valorization of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The ecomuseum does not view the *batana* exclusively as a vessel, but as a carrier of knowledge, skills, customs, language, music and gastronomy, thereby realizing the fundamental idea of the 2003 UNESCO Convention – the preservation of living cultural practices. The paper also addresses the broader theoretical framework of the development of museums and ecomuseums, highlighting their transformation from elitist institutions to tools for democratic management of cultural heritage. The importance of *ecomuseums* and interpretive centers as spaces for inclusive heritage discourse, where the community actively participates in the preservation and interpretation of its own heritage, is particularly emphasized. Ecomuseums are not seen as a replacement for museums, but as flexible models adapted to local contexts.

Keywords: heritage practice, ecomuseums, interpretation centers, intangible cultural heritage, maritime heritage

1. Introduction

The year 2003 marked a turning point both for the global discourse on heritage, primarily UNESCO, and for the local efforts to preserve maritime heritage in Rovinj. That year, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted. Coincidentally, and independently of this global development, the idea of preserving the Rovinj *batana* boat emerged within the Rovinj community. Prompted by the realization that traditional wooden boats, once a key source of

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livelihood for the fishing community until the mid-20th century, the community recognized the *batana* not only as an economic asset but also as a cultural symbol. Although its use in commercial fishing had declined, the *batana* remained an active part of daily life for family fishing and leisure. In 2004, just a year after this idea took shape, it was brought to life through the establishment of the first ecomuseum in Croatia. The ecomuseum *Casa della Batana* was realized through a participatory process involving research, documentation and interpretation of Rovinj's maritime heritage. It was led by historian Marino Budicin, a member of the local community and bearer of traditional knowledge and skills related to *batana*, and heritage expert Dragana Lucija Ratković Aydemir, with the financial support of the City of Rovinj-Rovigno. The core principle guiding the ecomuseum reflects the very essence of the 2003 UNESCO Convention – behind every cultural object lies a set of knowledge, skills and values that are transmitted from generation to generation. While these traditions may evolve under social, political and environmental pressures, they continue to hold deep meaning for the local community. Recognizing that the revitalization of *batana* construction would only be sustainable if it found relevance in modern society, the Rovinj Ecomuseum structured its presentation and programmatic approach around the valorization of the construction of the *batana* and all the accompanying cultural elements associated with it: traditional fishing, *bitinada* as a unique local musical expression, the Istrian language, local gastronomy, maritime customs and rituals, sailing with lugsails and more. Many of these cultural elements have been passed down through generations and are now officially recognized in the Register of Cultural Property of the Republic of Croatia¹. Others, such as Mediterranean cuisine, are part of broader global heritage frameworks, and have been listed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.²

Both of these developments, each within its own geographical and social context, were highly significant. The 2003 UNESCO Convention has been ratified by 184 countries to date³. Despite criticism from the heritage profession questioning the real effects of protection (cf. Hameršak, Pleše, Vukušić (ed.) 2013:8–10), it has enabled the recognition, revitalization and preservation of cultural practices not only of representative communities, which often serve to reinforce national identities, but also of minority groups. Its implementation has contributed to varying degrees across member states to the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. Meanwhile, the Ecomuseum *House of Batana – Casa della Batana* has inspired, and in some cases even encouraged, a range of initiatives for the preservation of maritime heritage along the Croatian Adriatic coast. These include the establishment

¹ <https://registar.kulturnadobra.hr/#/>

² Although Istrian cuisine was not included among the “emblematic” communities formally involved in the nomination, as the professional manager of the Ecomuseum *Casa della Batana – House of Batana*, I have been promoting the local gastronomic tradition for years as part of the broader heritage concept of the Mediterranean diet, including the respect for seasonality, customs, and practices related to the cultivation, preparation, and consumption of food.

³ *State parties*, unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-safeguarding-intangible-cultural-heritage#item-2

of ecomuseums, interpretation centres or visitor centres. We also believe that the *Casa della Batana* played a role in the inclusion of the term “ecomuseum” in the Museums Act (Official Gazette 61/18), following letters we submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia in 2015 and 2017. Unfortunately, our broader proposal, which called for the development of a dedicated rulebook for ecomuseums (and potentially interpretation centers) that would recognize them as heritage practices based on participatory management models, without equating them entirely with traditional museums due to their different focus and methods, has not found fertile ground so far. While the Ecomuseum has served as a source of inspiration for many communities to initiate similar projects, the notable increase in interpretation centers (and to a lesser extent ecomuseums!) in Croatia over the past decade has been largely driven by development policies and funding mechanisms aimed at diversifying the tourist offering. In this context, cultural heritage was recognized as a development asset, i.e. a competitive advantage within Croatian tourism. However, reducing cultural heritage to a tourist product and making its financing dependent on tourism-related criteria, has had, and will likely continue to have, far-reaching consequences. This trend affects not only traditional culture, which has almost always adapted to social trends, except in the case of rituals practices, but also broader forms of cultural production. Acknowledging this is the first step towards critically examining and resisting tourism influence on culture, with the goal of empowering local communities and supporting their cultural expression. There are numerous examples of projects that began as a tourism product but through their programmatic activities in and with the local community, they have proven themselves to be more than a tourist product. Their success and sustainability stem from continuous, year-round engagement with the local community, with tourism being the secondary rather than primary focus.

2. Towards heritage practices of the 21st century

In this paper, heritage practices are understood as all activities undertaken with the aim of *heritagising* culture or as outcome of such processes. According to Harrison (2013), *heritagisation* is a broad term that describes the transformation of objects, places or practices into heritage. This process turns ordinary functional elements into something with meaning and/or cultural significance (Sjöholm 2016:87). In this sense, heritage represents a contemporary reflection of our relationship with the past and embodies a set of values intricately tied to processes of economic and cultural commodification. Heritage is ubiquitous, embedded within the power dynamics of every society and intimately linked to the construction of identity, both collective and individual (Harvey in Graham, Howard (ed.), 2008:19–20).

Shortly after the adoption of the 2003 Convention, Kirchenblatt-Gimblett put forward the thesis that *heritage is created through metacultural processes that apply museological values and methods (collection, documentation, preservation, presentation, evaluation and interpretation) to living people, their knowledge,*

practices, artefacts, social environment and everyday spaces. Heritage professionals employ concepts, standards and regulations to classify cultural phenomena and their practitioners within the domain of heritage. In doing so, they transform these cultural elements into metacultural artefacts such as “national living treasures” or “masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity”. Through this transformation, performers, ritual specialists and artisans experience a new relationship to their cultural expressions, a metacultural relationship towards something that was previously just a habitus (Kirchenblatt-Gimblett in Hameršak, Pleše, Vukušić (ed.), 2013:65). The author uses museological values and methods to explain how these processes reshape habitus, or systems of enduring and transmittable dispositions that serve as generative principles of behavior and thought within a society (cf. Bourdieu, 2013:72), into intangible cultural heritage.

2.1. Museology and heritagisation

However, similar impulses and processes led to the development of museology, as the first of many heritage practices. When a particular object, place or practice is perceived as holding a special place in society but is losing its primary function, a new pattern specific to the heritage community emerges. This pattern involves placing these objects (e.g., through the establishment of museums), places (via the UNESCO World Heritage List and/or the concept of the cultural landscape) and practices (through the formation of folklore societies or the establishment of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage) into a new context. This *heritage habitus*⁴, a new social pattern characteristic of the European cultural and intellectual milieu, originated in the Renaissance, when the heritage valorization of ancient culture first began. It is, therefore, nothing new. What changes over time are the objects of interest and the methods of *heritagisation*. As Gibson and Pendlebury point out, heritage values are “culturally and historically constructed”, meaning that *a fabric, object, or environment gains significance through externally imposed meanings that reflect the dominant cultural and historical values of a given time and place* (Sjöholm 2016:16). Given the authority that heritage institutions and practices build over time, the processes of inheritance have become so widespread that even those who, consciously or unconsciously, seek to reframe elements of everyday culture by assigning them new context and value, decide to inherit their cultural practices. As a result, museums

⁴ I use the phrase *heritage habitus* to denote a *system of lasting and transferable dispositions that function as principles for generating and shaping behavior and thought within a group*, in this case, a heritage community, which represents what Bourdieu refers to as “objective” social structures (cf. Meissner, 2021:51–57). Bortolotto makes a similar distinction in her research on the symbolic ownership of clay whistles, noting that the function of the whistles has changed, and that we no longer deal with them as cultural expressions perceived as *habitus*, but rather as objects and practices that local actors themselves already consider “heritage” with a “metacultural dimension” (Bortolotto in Hameršak, Pleše, Vukušić (ed.), 2013).

or stages now feature not only endangered, centuries-old or rare elements, but also interpretation of everyday culture within a heritage context. No matter how critically we may view these processes, the fact remains that without (eco)museums, cultural and folkloric societies, folklore and folklorism (cf. Ceribašić u Muraj, Vitez (ed.), 2008:259–270), and UNESCO conventions and instruments of protection, to name just a few, we would hardly be discussing today about constructing a *guc*, singing *bitinada* or sailing with Lateen and lugsails as living practices in the northern Adriatic. These terms would most likely be found only in rare historical sources, if any existed, and without the documentation of construction processes or singing techniques, historians might have overlooked their value, and folklorists might not have emerged as a discipline at all, had this heritage habitus not been awakened in the Renaissance man (or perhaps even earlier). Indeed, all these elements have continued to live precisely due to the idea of heritage and the processes of inheritance, some through the activities of cultural-artistic societies, others through efforts of heritage associations or (eco)museums. The same applies to archaeological, cultural-historical, artistic and other heritage. Thus, heritage is a discourse that has been evolving since the Renaissance, gaining particular momentum during the Enlightenment of the 18th century and the Romanticism of the 19th century, periods also shaped by a colonialist⁵ spirit, and has continued to transform up to the present day in response to socio-political, ecological, technological and economic forces. In this evolving context, the emergence of ecomuseums and interpretation centers represents a relatively new heritage practice, aligned with contemporary post-colonial heritage discourse, aimed to democratize access to, and interpretation and management of one's own heritage.⁶ Although the word *museum* (Greek *mouseion* – seat of the Muses) has existed since the 3rd century BC, it did not originally carry the same meaning it does today. The Museum of Alexandria actually represented a place for philosophical discussion and a library and was more akin to a university, rather than an institution devoted to preservation and interpretation of material culture. The word *museum* was revived in 15th-century Europe, where it was used to describe the collection of ancient sculptures organized by Lorenzo de' Medici in a sculpture park. His son, Cosimo I, continued

⁵ We (also) trace the development of museums through the lens of colonialism. As Brulon Soares emphasizes, *museums defined collections as their core component, while remaining deeply rooted in colonial structures. As descendants of the cabinet of wonders, where the objectification of the "Other" in representations of societies was a central practice, museums became integral to the colonial system, serving as tools of cultural domination through the accumulation of collections taken from people* (Brulon Soares, 2021:7).

⁶ Although ecomuseology has faced certain criticisms of (cf. Brulon Soares, 2021), these same arguments can also be reframed as counterpoints. Specifically, while the author situates ecomuseology within the context of new colonialism and calls for situated knowledge, one could argue that from the perspective of Southeastern or Central Europe, ecomuseology has in fact proven to be an effective tool or step toward democratizing access to heritage and empowering local communities, thereby contributing to the sector's multivocal character.

to develop the concept, installing a collection of paintings in the Uffizi Palace, which was already open to the public by 1581 (<https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/42619>).

In addition to the unique Florentine example as a precursor to the public museum, the 16th and 17th centuries saw the emergence of the *cabinet of wonders*, collections of unusual, often exotic objects that inspired admiration and fascination. These cabinets were the earliest forms of museums, though they were not open to the public; access was limited to selected individuals. The first museums available to the broader public began to appear in the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the earliest private collections referred to as a museum was that of John Tradescanto in Lambeth, England. In 1656, a catalogue of this collection was published under the title *Musaeum Tradescantianum*. In 1675, the collection became the property of Elias Ashmole and was moved to the University of Oxford. There, a dedicated building was constructed, and in 1683 it opened as the *Ashmolean Museum*, the first museum in the world to be permanently open to the public (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/museum-cultural-institution>). Museums as formal institutions began to develop in the 18th century, often evolving from private art collections, e.g., the British Museum in London, founded in 1753 based on the private collection of H. Sloane, was the first state museum institution.

A large number of public museums (the Glyptothek in Munich in 1816, the Archaeological Museum in Split in 1820) emerged after the French Revolution. These were often formed from donated private collections, the confiscated property of the Church or the aristocracy and opponents of the current political government, or even as war booty (<https://www.enciklopedija.hr/clanak/42619>). This brief history of museums reveals the dynamic and often problematic evolution of museums as institutions and heritage practices. They developed from elitist spaces and practices meant to entertain and astonish the few, to the repositories of confiscated private property and instruments of imperialist policies. To this day, museology, as the study of museums, has not resolved how to fully disentangle museums from colonialist and other problematic discourses that have shaped them for centuries. As Brulon Soares argues, “*decolonization cannot be based only on restitution or giving the right to some oppressed populations to enter the museum and access their confiscated goods; it is about inviting these groups and individuals to change our way of thinking, to reshape our own understanding of cultural heritage and to condemn violence which museums sometimes produce, and which is sometimes beyond the reach of us as scientists and museum professionals belonging to certain classes and ethnic groups*” (Brulon Soares, 2021:244). Although museology has yet to find concrete solutions for the decolonization of museums, current practice demonstrates that heritage is not only shaped solely through authorized heritage discourse (cf. Smith, 2006), as the dominant professional framework that regulates professional heritage practices, but also through what Kisić calls inclusive heritage discourse. This discourse encompasses various *critical, democratic, pluralistic and emancipatory efforts in the conceptualization, research and practice of heritage* (Kisić, 2021:22).

2.2. Ecomuseums

Ecomuseums are perhaps the most well-known example of new heritage practices that emerged as a response to the social and environmental challenges of the mid-20th century. These included political unrest, environmental disasters, and growing concerns over industrial pollution and nuclear testing. By the late 1960s, traditional museums were struggling to address the new questions being raised, particularly regarding their role in society, their responsibility in preserving natural heritage and their role in disappearing rural communities. In response, museum professionals, primarily in France, developed a concept of the ecomuseum, a new type of museum grounded in the principle of sustainability, a holistic approach to heritage, and the active involvement of the local community in preservation efforts. As Babić emphasizes, although many ecomuseums were inspired by the principles of open-air museums and, in some cases, resembled German *Heimat* (homeland) museums, which unfortunately like many other museums, were often used as instruments of political propaganda, the crucial distinction lay in how ecomuseums approached heritage and the environment. While the term itself often raised doubts about the institutions' true purpose, and the prefix "eco" was at times used strategically to attract funding in the second half of the 20th century when ecological terminology had become fashionable, ecomuseums represented a space for redefining the relationship between people, their environment and cultural heritage, and emphasized community engagement as a central part of the preservation process.

The new approach to museology reflects a shift towards the social responsibility of museums, redefining their role in contemporary society and emphasizing the importance of community participation in identifying issues and developing methods of preserving both cultural and natural heritage for future generations (Babić, 2009:51–52). Within this framework, museums are viewed as instruments for the development of local communities, in direct opposition to the colonialist understanding, in which museum collections were often assembled from oppressed groups. However, Brulon Soares argues that the concept of the *ecomuseum* – a museum without walls, or traditional collections, focused on a specific territory and its population – was not an adequate response. According to Soares, the issue lies not in presence of collections themselves, but in the violent methods by which many of them were acquired (Brulon Soares, 2021:251). While this conclusion is likely valid for a many (eco)museological contexts and ecomuseology cannot fully resolve the burden of the colonialist legacy embedded in numerous collection and presentation policies, Darko Babić PhD, citing Prof. Tomislav Šola, points out that ecomuseology should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it is best understood as a philosophy and a way of listening (Babić, 2009:50). Thanks to this flexibility, some ecomuseums, such as the *House of Batana – Casa della batana*, have emerged as internationally recognized examples of best practice in preserving intangible cultural heritage. At the same time, they contribute to preserving tangible heritage and highlighting the importance of preserving the natural environment in which, and with which, culture is realized.

2.3. Interpretation centers and visitors centers

In addition to ecomuseums, other heritage practices have also been developed on similar value principles. In Croatia, over the past fifteen years, interpretation centers and visitor centers have been developed, often initiated “from the top” as part of efforts to expand tourism infrastructure. Interpretation centers, as a heritage model, have their roots in the USA and its national parks. They have proven effective in making material heritage, such as monuments and archaeological complexes, closer to the wider public. In the Croatian context, interpretation centers have taken a distinctive form, frequently drawing on the principles of ecomuseology. This hybrid model has proven to be a highly promising heritage practice. Compared to museums, interpretation centers are administratively and legally easier to set up. Also, thanks to growing local awareness of the importance of preserving local heritage, a serious and innovative heritage movement has emerged around interpretation centers that empowers communities and fosters new approaches to preserving cultural and natural heritage.

The thematic and geographical diversity of interpretation centers, along with their multidisciplinary and participatory approaches to conceptualizing an exhibition, have enabled the effective identification and subsequent valorization of heritage, particularly maritime heritage. These efforts have stimulated a wide range of activities dedicated to its preservation. Both intangible and tangible heritage have benefited from well-designed preservation strategies. Examples include documentation initiatives under the *Mala Barka 2* and *Arca Adriatica* projects, and events such as traditional sailing regattas. In the latter case, this form of intangible heritage has been fully revitalized through coordinated regatta calendars and strong cooperation among the communities of the northern Adriatic. Additionally, nearly every interpretation center or ecomuseum holds a collection of objects donated by local residents. These collections carry an added layer of protection and meaning due to the emotional connection between objects and donors. From a museological standpoint, the often clearly documented provenance of such items adds further value. Interpretation centers have thus become home for artifacts that, until recently, were rotting in attics and storerooms. In some cases, they have even preserved exceptionally rare items, such as the *ladva*, now kept in DUBoak in Malinska. Given that most interpretation center buildings have been recently renovated and maintain stable microclimatic conditions, it can be argued that, in some cases, the artifacts are better preserved than those in traditional museums. However, as dr. Perinčić rightly points out (Perinčić, 2022:46–53), the future of these objects is uncertain, though arguably no more so than the future of objects held in museums.⁷ What serves as a mitigating factor for

⁷ According to the MDC report from 2021, 93% of Croatian museums do not have sufficient space for the proper storage of objects, and in ten years, an additional 44,786 m² will be needed. It is telling that 69% of museums do not deaccession a single object annually, even though deaccessioning is cited in the same report as one of the measures of effective collection management (Conference “Museum Storage Facilities – From Collection Care to Collecting Policy,” May 18–19, 2021. “The State and Challenges of Croatian Museum Storage Facilities,” Ivona Marić and Dunja Vranešević.).

interpretation centers is that they are not museums, and their core mission is not to collect, preserve, and display objects, but rather to interpret the cultural reality of a region and to facilitate active community involvement in these processes. It can, therefore, be assumed that they will not prioritize expanding collections, or acquiring new objects. Moreover, because the provenance of most objects is well documented, items can be returned to their original owners, with relative ease, which is an extremely complex, in the vast majority of cases impossible process in museums.

Even these few lines are enough to highlight the significant challenges facing the heritage sector. However, these challenges should be addressed individually, as each heritage practice operated withing specific modes of action. What is clear for now is that ecomuseums and interpretation centers have provided opportunities for self-representation, strengthened the community pride and contributed to the empowerment of local populations in advocating for and enjoying the right to culture, recognized as a fundamental human right. As a heritage consultant who, in recent years, has worked with numerous communities on the development of interpretation centers and ecomuseums, I have consistently emphasized that these initiatives should not be viewed merely as tourism projects, nor as substitutes for traditional museums. Instead, each cultural context and its associated heritage practice should be considered individually. By actively listening to the community and understanding the broader social context, it becomes possible to design year-round programming that addresses specific challenges and demands. To ensure relevance and longevity of heritage practices, continuous staff training and collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including local communities and heritage institutions, are essential. Innovation and adaptability must be embedded into the core of these practices. Finally, experience has shown that heritage practices, such as ecomuseums and interpretation centers, cannot be self-sustainable as tourism products, i.e. that they cannot survive solely on ticket sales. For these models to be sustainable, they require staff capable of securing diverse funding sources at the local, regional and national levels. This includes the development of innovative tourism offers and international cooperation, i.e. European projects. Equally important is the support of local governments, which must provide the basic financial foundation.

3. Ecomuseum *House of Batana* - *Casa della Batana* as good practice in maritime heritage preservation

The Ecomuseum *Casa della Batana*, with over twenty years of experience, stands as a genuine example of ongoing innovation. Over time, the Ecomuseum has become a key institution for the promotion and preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of Rovinj – Rovigno, particularly its maritime heritage. At the heart of this heritage is the *batana*, a traditional wooden boat that, thanks to the ecomuseological approach, has evolved into a symbol of this Istrian city. Founded in 2004 at the initiative of the local community, the Ecomuseum *Casa della batana*

initially operated within the legal framework of the Local History Museum of the City of Rovinj – Rovigno. This arrangement was a response to the growing need to protect the unique tradition associated with the *batana*. At the time, there was no clear legal framework for innovative heritage practices, so the ecomuseum's activities were carried out under the museum's institutional umbrella. However, the museological professional framework soon proved too limiting. By 2007 the Ecomuseum became an independent citizens' association, with the mission to preserve maritime heritage and foster the development of cultural tourism.

From the outset, *Casa della Batana* was focused on the development of sustainable tourism, offering visitors an immersive experience into the history and culture of Rovinj, particularly focusing on the everyday life of the local community through the use of *batana*. The association's decision to operate and sail the boats initially appeared to conflict with established conservation principles, which regarded such items as static artifacts. Yet, in valuing the *batana* as a living manifestation of intangible cultural heritage, the community not only justified their continued use but also reactivated a host of associated practices and traditions. The revitalization of the *batana* heritage is carried out through a range of physical and programmatic components, developed over the years. The central place for the valorization of the *batana* is certainly the *House of Batana – Casa della Batana*, locally called *muòstra*. As a central interpretation and documentation center with a permanent exhibition, it serves as a departure point for visitors, including school groups and retirees, interested in exploring Rovinj's maritime heritage. A year after its founding, the ecomuseum expanded with the establishment of *Spàcio Matika*, a unique venue for tasting, smelling, listening to and singing local heritage. Housed in a traditional tavern, or cellar, where fishermen and farmers once gathered over a glass of wine, *Batana* revived the vibrant spirit of these gatherings, emphasized in the basic function of the *spàcio* – socializing and valorizing the gastronomic and musical tradition of Rovinj – Rovigno. Boat construction and repairs take place at the Small Shipyard, locally known as *peìcio squèro*. The facility will soon be succeeded by the historic shipyard, the oldest and only remaining one of its kind, which has been entrusted to the ecomuseum. Preparations are currently underway to transform it into a workshop and exhibition space dedicated to large-scale shipbuilding.

The Rovinj Regatta of Traditional Boats with Lateen and Lugsails, commonly referred to as the Regatta, is the city's festival of boats, the sea and seafarers. Held annually since 2005, the Regatta is one of the key programs of the Ecomuseum. Through this event, the Ecomuseum has not only reinforced regional cooperation across the northern Adriatic, particularly with Italy, but has also reaffirmed its role as professional support for various communities engaged in heritage valorization. This is particularly evident in its ongoing work, since 2019, alongside partners from Rijeka and Betina on the nomination for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Several key programs have been added to the Batana Rowing Regatta, including the *Batanina* Walk mobile application offering a free virtual guide through Rovinj's maritime heritage, on both IOS and

Android platforms, and the *futalateina* Souvenir Shop. In recognition of the impact and the scope of these activities, the *Ecomuseum House of Batana – Casa della batana* was included in 2016 in the UNESCO Register of Good Safeguarding Practices for Intangible Cultural Heritage. In its decision (11.COM 10.C.4), the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee stated: “The Committee selects the Community Project for the Safeguarding of the Living Heritage of Rovinj/Rovigno – Ecomuseum Batana – as the program, project or activity that best reflects the principles and objectives of the Convention and commends the applicant State for highlighting the successful link between the revitalization of an element of intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development, with an impact on the entire community.” Despite this recognition, the Ecomuseum has continued to pursue new models of management. In 2022, it completed the renovation of its permanent exhibition, reinforcing its commitment to innovation and continued relevance.

Beginning in 2017, the Ecomuseum entered a phase of implementing financially demanding projects, which proved challenging under the organizational structure of a citizens’ association, especially given the uncertainty of funding, often not confirmed until April, and a lack of resources for basic operation. To ensure more stable financing and support the increasing scope of activities, inspired by Pogon – the Zagreb Center for Culture and Youth, as the then president and professional manager, I proposed establishing a hybrid institution, co-founded by the City of Rovinj – Rovigno and the Association *House of Batana – Casa della Batana*. Unfortunately, although the proposal was approved by the City and the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, it was rejected by the Ministry of Finance, which did not approve the entry of the proposed institution into the Register of Budget Users. According to Article 4 of the Ordinance on Determining Budgetary and Extra-Budgetary Users of the State Budget and Budgetary and Extra-Budgetary Users of the Budget of Local Self-Government Units, the Ministry of Finance cannot approve the registration of any entity whose co-founder lies outside the general budget system, as was the case with the Association. Nevertheless, in 2021, the Institution *Casa della Batana* was formally established as a municipal institution. Shortly thereafter, an Agreement was signed stipulating that the Association would remain the program authority, responsible for shaping and implementing program activities in partnership with the new institution.

We continue to disseminate our good practice as an accredited advisory association to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, through membership in the UNESCO ICH NGO Forum and active participation in the Association of Maritime Museums of the Mediterranean. The association is currently implementing the Creative Europe *Living Heritage Journeys* project in collaboration with five other UNESCO elements and best practices from Italy, Poland, Belgium and Sweden. The project’s aim is to develop meaningful and community-rooted tourist experiences. Constant work on international and national projects enables sustainable business and maintaining the relevance of heritage practice not only at the local, but also at the international level.

4. Conclusion

The Ecomuseum *Casa della Batana* stands as an example of successful heritage practice, highlighting the power of joint action by the local community in preserving and reinterpreting cultural heritage. Through an integrated approach, which embraces both tangible and intangible aspects, the Ecomuseum has emerged as a model of sustainable development and cultural participation. Despite facing challenges related to funding and institutional recognition, its impact on heritage policy and practice in Croatia has been significant, especially as it underscores the value of an inclusive approach in preserving identity and promoting cultural diversity. Ecomuseology has certainly had a strong positive impact on preserving the maritime heritage of Istria and the northern Adriatic, while *Casa della Batana*, following ecomuseological principles, has demonstrated how communities can take charge of the future of their heritage.

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