

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF PROXIMITY FOREST TOURISM TO COMMUNITY BUILDING AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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## *Abstract*

Environmental studies show that forests support biodiversity, climate change mitigation, and ecosystem services. Furthermore, regional and territorial studies have demonstrated that periurban forests contribute to local economic growth and residents' well-being and identity. Given these premises, the paper analyses how the touristic exploitation of forests and other wooded lands can contribute to community building and local development. More specifically, the paper analyses the touristic exploitation of the *Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa Safeguard Area* and the *Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino Protected Area* intending to explore the potentialities of proximity forest tourism as a lever of local development and community building, and discusses implications for tourism, forestry and territorial planning.

*Keywords:* proximity tourism, woods of chance, community building, forest land management, Italy

## **1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

In the first decade of 2000, a sequel of dramatic and unforeseen events such as economic crises, epidemics and terrorist attacks caused a sharp slowdown in the growth of international tourism. The collapse due to the Covid-19 pandemic was the most dramatic but not the most unique. In previous years, the news of international health emergencies (such as the SARS-CoV diagnosed in Asia in February 2003, the H1N1 “Swine flu” in 2009, and the Ebola epidemic in Africa in 2014) and murderous terrorist attacks (in the United States in 2001, in Spain in 2004, in the United Kingdom in 2005) have already periodically discouraged international journeys (UNWTO, 2021). Today, many tourists have thus already turned to make shorter holidays in closer destinations (UNWTO, 2021). Then, in the spring of 2020, the pandemic pushed National governments to adopt lockdown and social distancing strategies that caused an almost total suspension of international travel and tourism (UNWTO, 2020). “Global tourism suffered its worst year on record in 2020, with international arrivals dropping by 74% [...]. Destinations worldwide welcomed 1 billion fewer international arrivals than the previous year due to an unprecedented fall in demand and widespread travel restrictions”. According to the UNWTO “in 2020 the collapse in international travel represented an estimated loss of USD 1,3 trillion in export revenues – more than 11 times the loss recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis. The crisis has put between 100 and 120 million direct

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<sup>2</sup> The paper reflects the ideas and work of both authors. Nevertheless, Maria Giuseppina Lucia was responsible for sections 1, 2 and 3; Francesca Silvia Rota for sections 4, 5 and 6.

tourism jobs at risk, many of them in small and medium-sized enterprises” (UNWTO, 2021).

Nevertheless, the tourism sector has proved resilient, quickly returning to pre-crisis levels while acquiring greater awareness of the social and environmental threats of overtourism and long-range travel (Romagosa, 2020). “International tourist arrivals almost tripled in January-July 2022 (+172%) compared to the same period of 2021. This means the sector recovered almost 60% of pre-pandemic levels. The steady recovery reflects strong pent-up demand for international travel as well as the easing or lifting of travel restrictions [...] yet several challenges remain, from geopolitical to economic. [...] Now is also the time to rethink tourism, where it is going and how it impacts people and planet” (UNWTO, 2022)<sup>3</sup>.

Consistent with the studies that ask for structural change to decongest mass destinations and promote destinations that suffer from down-tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles and Al., 2019; Fletcher and Al., 2019), the restrictions on international flows have forced new solutions to manage tourist flows following sustainability standards and resilience.

One of the most significant opportunities highlighted by the pandemic crisis is the rediscovery of destinations close to the place of residence (Navarro Jurado and Al., 2020). In Italy, in particular, the urban and periurban green areas, which allowed walks and outdoor activities respectful of the lockdown and the social distancing restrictions, have earned new consideration (Human Company, 2022; Cresta, 2021). Likely, the preference of Italian tourists for green areas close to their homes represents a generalised trend that will continue, pushed by the combination of greater environmental awareness and economic constraints. Furthermore, the risks of economic recessions due to the rise in energy costs provoked by the Russia-Ukraine conflict determine a further downsizing of the Italian household’s disposable wealth and discouraging vacation. As a recent SWG survey demonstrates, in September 2022, 87% of the respondents were reconsidering their holiday habits (six months before, they were 76%)<sup>4</sup> because of the effects of the rising energy costs.

The paper thus examines the potential of periurban forests as a new emerging “proximity tourism” destination, characterised by a safer (i.e. less congested and exposed to the risks of virus diffusion) and cheaper offer. Practised since the 1950s and 1960s, proximity tourism is a dynamic promising segment of the modern tourism industry, recently renewed in demand and offer. At the origin of the success of this tourism, there is greater attention to sustainable local development and the aspiration to get in close contact with nature and the places of everyday life (Díaz-Soria, 2017). Proximity tourism intercepts the new demand by organising shorter travels to close-to-home domestic destinations, briefer but frequent stays in places far from mass itineraries, products and services that comply with ecotourism standards and allow intimate contact with the natural environment and the local cultural heritage

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<sup>3</sup> In his message to the World Tourism Day 2022, the UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili said: “Tourism continues to recover steadily, yet several challenges remain, from geopolitical to economic. The sector is bringing back hope and opportunity for people everywhere. Now is also the time to rethink tourism, where it is going and how it impacts people and planet”. Source: <https://www.unwto.org/news/international-tourism-back-to-60-of-pre-pandemic-levels-in-january-july-2022>

<sup>4</sup>Source: <https://www.agenziagiornalisticaopinione.it/lancio-dagenzia/swg-energia-sondaggio-l80-degli-italiani-ha-gia-fatto-o-sara-costretto-a-fare-a-importanti-rinunce-per-fare-fronte-al-caro-bollette/>

(Romagosa, 2020). Moreover, the destinations of proximity trips can be manifold: natural, cultural, historical, etc. Among them, periurban forests and wooded land emerge as promising yet underexploited destinations of proximity tourism. The research question of this study is thus twofold. Firstly, we ask: “what solutions/decisions can local governments assume to maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits of forest proximity tourism”. Secondly, we ask: “what threats may prevent the fulfilment of this aim?”. In this paper, we will not be able to give a final reply to these questions because the study is currently ongoing. Nevertheless, we will provide some theoretical and practical elements to frame and discuss the issue and proceed with a territorial analysis. As to the methodology, we adopted a case study analysis based on the comparison of two periurban forests in the Piedmont region (Italy), both characterised by the adoption – at a specific time in their history – of innovative forms of management involving the local community, but with contrasting results of valorisation.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 contains the review of the geographic and territorial literature on proximity tourism; section 3 discusses how the multifunctional dimension of forests can be valorised for touristic purposes and to get multiple advantages, including community building process and participatory local development; section 4 illustrate some main opportunities of the tourist enhancement of Italian forests as destinations of proximity tourism; section 5 introduces the two periurban forests selected as case studies and verify in them the presence of the multifunctional dimension discussed in section 3. The last section, the sixth, will then develop some preliminary conclusions based on the analysis conducted and trace the way for future research.

## **2. Geographic and territorial approaches to proximity tourism**

On an intuitive level, proximity tourism identifies domestic tourism that requires limited travel distance from the habitual place of residence. However, the definitions of proximity tourism provided by the literature are manifold. Some authors, for instance, identify this type of tourism in the short-range routes to reach the destination and in the limited duration of the stay, which can be a weekend or a single overnight. Other authors also consider visits lasting for four-hour or more and associate proximity tourism with innovative practices and low-impact means of transport (Wynen, 2013). While significant attention was devoted to international tourism and exotic destinations, proximity tourism has been underestimated (Jeuring and Díaz-Soria, 2016). The first reason for this limited debate is economic: proximity tourism traditionally has a less economic impact – especially on the local economy – than international tourism. The second reason is practical: proximity tourists are far more challenging to detect than international ones due to the often informal nature of close-to-home travel and stays. For instance, second homes tourism is quantified by measuring the variation in waste production and energy/water consumption. Moreover, the difference between tourists (overnight visitors) and same-day visitors is poorly relevant in proximity tourism<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Recently, OECD stated that “tourism refers to all activities of visitors, including both tourists (overnight visitors) and same-day visitors”. Source: <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=2725>. In this paper we agree with OECD vision, nevertheless, expert have contrasting opinions on this issue.

At the same time, feeding the debate emerges as relevant, especially today, that international mass tourism is showing its weaknesses, whereas proximity tourism is gaining new attention. The risks of international tourism have given new evidence to local tourism. They have awakened the interest of scholars, who are now highly engaged in the conceptualisation of the practice of proximity tourism and the empirical analysis of the preferences of this type of tourist (Richards, 2016).

Geography is prominent among the many disciplines that have developed a specific interest in proximity tourism. A common trait of geographical reflection on proximity tourism is investigating whether close-to-home destinations satisfy the search for novelty and extraordinary experiences, which is a crucial reason for tourism travel. More specifically, to demonstrate whether proximity tourism allows for a mental and physical evasion from everyday life, some scholars focus on the complex notion of distance and perception of the elsewhere, recalling notions contained in the geographic, sociological and psychological sciences (Salmela and Al., 2021). The distance in tourism is not only the physical space that separates two locations (Simandan, 2016). It implies many components that are also economic (the costs of transport), temporal (the duration of the travel) and subjective. A crucial category of distance refers to personal feelings: the so-called psychological distance, the subjective perception of one's distance/proximity from a given destination, of the *Here* and *Elsewhere*, regardless of geographical distance (Larsen and Guiver, 2013). In addition, studies on proximity tourism focus on another vital aspect of the decision to travel: the physical and mental regeneration that derives from removing the everyday life setting. The authors transfer this issue to the analysis of proximity tourism to ascertain whether this practice produces the same sensations as tourism in remote and culturally dissimilar destinations (Díaz-Soria, 2016; Jeuring and Haarsten, 2017). Even in an experience of proximity tourism, an emotional interaction occurs between the place of visit and the Self of the visitor, which turns the resident into a tourist and is used with a narrative and communicative intent to build the tourist imaginary attracting new visitors. The construction of the Otherness in the local, in the sense of the touristic experience of a familiar environment (Jeuring and Haartsen, 2017), configures the type of the tourist-resident, i. e. who satisfies the need to shift everyday life in his/her daily life. The case of a guided tour in the city of Barcelona has shown how residents may assume the gaze of external observers of their city, discovering the artistic and cultural heritage they have never looked at with a tourist's curiosity. Studies on second homes tourists, satisfying the need for estrangement by spending periods in a community different than the one they belong also confirm the figure of the tourist-resident and its balanced connection between Familiarity and Otherness (Díaz-Soria, 2016). Another issue in proximity tourism is the role of beauty, which is supposed to be more immediately perceivable in unfamiliar places. The arguments introduced on this point by some scholars is that taking an aesthetic look allows, also in everyday life, surprises of wonder and sensory experiences, which are typical of exotic destinations. At the same time, the attribution of an aesthetic value to the place of everyday life predisposes to sustainable lifestyles and a more outstanding commitment to caring for the environment (Rantala and Al., 2020).

Proximity tourism has engaged scholars not only in basic concepts but also in indicating the advantages and opportunities of this practice.

A wide range of advantages is associated with proximity tourism. Differently from long-distance travel, proximity travel reduces polluting emissions, contributes to contrast climate change, favours the seasonal adjustment of tourism, supports the care and conservation of local heritage (Díaz-Soria and Llurdés Coit, 2013), and promotes economic development with the participation of local communities (Rantala and Al., 2020).

Proximity tourism can help reduce economic imbalances between traditional congested destinations and marginal touristic areas, although endowed with cultural and natural resources (Bertacchini and Al., 2021). It can also help social inclusion since proximity trips are within reach of almost all social classes. Moreover, compared to international mass-tourism, the attraction of resident-tourists can play a leading role in local development because of a reduced environmental impact and a higher awareness (and respect) of the local social capital (workers, inhabitants, relationships etc.) and the characteristics of everyday places (Díaz-Soria and Llurdés Coit, 2013). In proximity destinations, external transfer of the produced wealth is also less frequent than in mass tourism ones because the local tourism sector is held mainly by local and domestic actors (multinational operators are rare).

The proximity approach in tourism fits with the movements promoting local products' consumption, i.e. agricultural and agri-food communities of practice. Also, it has relevant connexions with the broader approach of *bioregionalism*, which promotes the appreciation of the ecology, economy and culture of the place and asks for the adoption of choices that enhance everyday life places also for tourist aims, both for residents and nearby inhabitants. Consistent with these arguments, some scholars have assumed the term "locavore", which means "local eater", to cony the expression "locavist" to indicate the local spectator who looks at the places of everyday life with curious and admiring eyes. At the same time, "locavism" came to indicate the tourist practice of the "locavist" (Hollenhorst and Al., 2014). In the paper, we assimilate "locavism" to proximity tourism as they both consider the bond with our socio-ecological community a touristic experience as valuable and gratifying as the experience of distant exotic destinations (Hollenhorst and Al., 2014).

### **3. The multifunctionality of peri-urban forests from the perspective of proximity tourism**

Proximity tourism that is respectful of the environment and society and supports the local development processes and residents' identity (see section 2) can be considered sustainable. However, not all destinations are equally considered in the literature on proximity tourism. Periurban forests, for instance, are among the most neglected ones, despite their important contribution to sustainable tourism.

In our research, we define the *periurban forests* as forests and wooded areas that are easily accessible from the urban settlement and that are perceived as components of the local landscape by the urban residents.

In Italy, forests are widespread and easily accessible from almost every city. So, they can provide an innovative offer that combines amusement, sports, cultural, educational and therapeutic activities and is addressed to both external and local visitors. The residents, in particular, can better comprehend the history and identity of the places they belong by visiting the forests surrounding their homes and cities. Forests can host activities and events that strengthen local community ties and

construct the basis for participatory processes of local development. Moreover, urban<sup>6</sup> and periurban forests produce a wide range of ecosystem services that serve the urban economy (Berglihn and Gómez-Baggethun, 2021).

Thanks to their urban-rural setting, the peri-urban forests provide visitors with an offer more comprehensive than remote forests. At the same time, their closeness to the place of residence sometimes prevents them from being perceived as touristic destinations. The informality of the touristic practices that occur in forests makes it difficult to detect and quantify them.

In this section of the paper, we will go deeper into the different perceptions, services and activities (sports, nature, entertainment, culture, health) allowed by periurban forests because their comprehension is propedeutic to the case study analysis that will follow in section 5.

### *3.1 The tourist-resident gaze on forests*

As a symbol of mystery, a place of refuge and worship, a protective entity, and a metaphor for life, the forest reflects the human relationship with nature (Antonelli and Al., 2020). According to past tales and traditions, forests were places hosting divinities, satyrs, and nymphs; they were the theatre of erotic or cruel acts by these supernatural entities, sacred places of initiation for ancestral civilisations, training grounds for overcoming obstacles and empowering in fairy tales. Although diverse in origins and scope, all these narratives transmit the feeling of a fascinating experience in an environment that is “other” than everyday life.

Consistent with the literature that discusses the subjectivity of distance and the perception of the Elsewhere in tourist experience, peri-urban forests thus suffer less than other destinations the risks of a weaker interest/commitment by the tourist-resident because of their intrinsic “extraordinary” and wild dimension. At the same time, the presence of a touristic demand and offer can turn them into refuges from everyday urban life, places for recreational activities, outdoor sports, environmental education and in-depth knowledge of the history of places. In this sense, the tourist use of the forest is a potential tool for local development and a stimulus for the rediscovery and strengthening of identity and community ties.

### *3.2 Forest products and ecosystem services*

From the literature, we realise that urban and periurban forests produce a wide range of ecosystem services that advantage the urban economy. The most important of these services include climate change mitigation, the preservation of biodiversity, the maintenance of the quality of water, air and landscape, the regulation of the dynamics of soils, waters and ecosystems, as well as the provision of timber, biomass and food. Other services include repair to animals and enhanced outdoor recreational opportunities (Lega Ambiente, 2020; Berglihn and Gómez-Baggethun, 2021).

However, if we consider forests as tourist destinations, the ecosystem services they produce also contain cultural services, symbolic and aesthetic; these services acquire economic and social value when recognised and planned as strategic assets in forest management. Moreover, they can sustainably valorise the local, territorial heritage and intercept the demand for a new type of tourism closer to nature and objectives of mental and physical regeneration.

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<sup>6</sup> As a result of urbanisation, in some cities forests got inscribed into the municipality borders, sometimes in close proximity with the dense urban fabric.

The orientation towards ecotourism is already a well-established reality in the United States, Canada and the Northern countries of Europe (Pröbstl et Al, 2008). In the Mediterranean countries, this trend has become widespread in recent years, also pushed by the increasing domestic demand for excursions in national and regional parks and daily outings in the forests and wooded areas nearby the urbanised area. For areas hitherto marginalised, proximity tourism can be an effective tool of local development: it can start a virtuous cycle of new recreational activities, increased tourist flows, and increased accommodation opportunities and facilities, which broaden local tourism attractivity. Finally, the eco-systemic services offered by the forest can be exploited by the tourist industry in a way that produces back benefits to the forest itself. The frequentation of natural areas, in fact, favours respect and care for the environment (to continue to enjoy it and pass it on to future generations) and a commitment to the forest heritage that involves economic operators, visitors, administrations and local communities.

### *3.3 Relax, sports, education and health care in forests*

The tourist activities to be developed in a wooded area are many. They generally fall within the category of outdoor activities, including recreational, sports and wellness (Regione Toscana, 2013). At the same time, we know that any classification – although useful to study forest services systematically – is insufficient because the same activity can be carried out differently and procure different advantages. For example, forest walking, which falls into the hiking category, can be considered a sport and a wellness activity.

Hiking tourism in forests is practised along equipped trails that provide tourists with signals, maps, travel times and information on the characteristics of the route and the presence of rest areas and services. It includes simple walking, nordic walking (i.e. walking with the help of sticks similar to skiing sticks), jogging, training, running, cycling, and even downhill on sloping paths. The outcome of these activities is health, wellness and amusement. Equipped paths and trails are tangible signs of a fruitful relationship between forests and tourism. The various services offered by the forest are directly experienced by hiking. Hiking along equipped trails allows for enjoying the natural and cultural landscape in safety, combining physical activity with knowledge. Moreover, responsible hikers protect the forest ecosystem and safeguard nature's ecological value outside the trails.

Other sports activities in a wooded area include horseriding, archery and orienteering. Also, playful attractions are adventure parks that combine outdoor sports, fun and relaxation<sup>7</sup>. **Special** equipment, including ropes, Tibetan bridges and nets, allow of all age visitors to climb, walk and make acrobatic routes among the trees.

In many countries, outdoor activities practised in forests can also be successfully associated with coherent hospitality proposals. Bed & breakfasts, farmhouses, chalets and tree houses, designed with sustainability criteria and respectful of the local ecosystem/landscape, can make the local touristic offer more varied and attractive. Examples are emerging nearly everywhere. In Italy, too, there are some interesting experiences, especially in Trentino Alto Adige, Umbria and Calabria (Sessa, 2019). The demand for accommodation facilities in forests is also linked to the recognition

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<sup>7</sup> Forest Parks Adventure (FPA) originated in the United States and in France in the Sixties of the twentieth century and rapidly spread in all European countries (Falchetti, 2011; Notaro et Al., 2012).

of the positive therapeutic function of forests on physical and mental pathologies. According to Meneguzzo and Zabini (2020), creating a network of structures for therapy, combined with raising awareness for the protection of the forest environment, creates significant opportunities for the local economy.

Furthermore, economic and social opportunities for the local community also come from the cultural valorisation of forests. Periurban forests, notably, can host activities such as thematic itineraries, libraries in the woods, green classrooms, laboratories, and nursery schools to teach, play, do physical activity, and explore and experiment in contact with nature. Pedagogy and didactics activities held in forests have already proved beneficial for subjects of all ages – particularly autistic children – by developing empathy, autonomy and self-esteem (Friedman et Al, 2022). In addition, forest libraries allow reading in scenic and relaxing settings for all types of tourists, including residents.

#### **4. Opportunities of proximity tourism in Italian forests**

Modern proximity tourism<sup>8</sup> appeared early in the XIX century in response to European and US upper classes' growing demand for leisure, relaxation and healthcare in contexts not far from home. On the one hand, esteemed existing destinations of international tourism, such as ski and sea resorts, wellness and thermal centres, and well-known historical and cultural sites, started to be also visited by local and domestic tourists nearby. On the other hand, new tourism destinations appeared, specialised in short-range and second-home tourism.

In Italy, a critical input to the diffusion of proximity travels came in the 1950s and 1960s, firstly, by the diffusion of the automobile in households; secondly, by the rapid expansion of the second/holiday homes market. Then, an essential stimulus came from the national tourism industry, which began orienting the offer towards domestic local demand, and the policies of remote, barely touristic areas, promoting tourist attractiveness as a lever of economic growth. As a result, tourism became accessible to all social classes and preferences (leisure, health, sports, education, and culture).

In the past, having a vacation home in the countryside or seaside was a privilege of the aristocracy (e.g. the Savoy family owned a system of hunting residences all around Turin) and rarely passed through the market since proximity tourists relied on the hospitality of friends, relatives and acquaintances.

In Italy, periurban forests are widespread and easily accessible. Therefore, their extension is relevant in all regions. Table 7.1 shows the extension of forests, other wooded lands and the total wooded area, elaborated by the third Italian national inventory. As the table shows, “the total wooded area in Italy is estimated to be 11.054.458 hectares, of which 82,2% is classified as forest (9.085.186 ha) and 17,8% as other wooded land (1.969.272 ha)<sup>9</sup>. The total wooded area covers 36,7% of the

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<sup>8</sup> Suppose proximity tourism is any period of vacation and leisure spent in places spatially close to the usual residence; in that case, the origins of proximity tourism could be traced back to the ancient Greeks and the Romans, whose rich families owned luxury villas in the countryside outside the city for these purposes. However, the subject of our analysis is proximity tourism as an economic and policy sector. For this, we use the term modern proximity tourism and set its beginning in the XIX century when the tourist practice had already ceased to be an elitist activity of European aristocrats.

<sup>9</sup> By the category ‘other wooded land’ the Italian National Inventory means short trees forests, sparse forests, scrubland, shrubs and the residual category of ‘not accessible or not classified wooded area’



country area; forest covers 30,2%, and other wooded land covers 6,5%. At the regional level, forest cover varies considerably, going from 7,4% in Puglia to 63,3% in Liguria, and it is above 40% in five regions (Provincia di Bolzano, Provincia di Trento, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Toscana and Umbria)” (Gasparini et Al, 2022: 154; our translation).

Region	Forest	Other wooded land	Total wooded area	Wooded area as % of tot area
Piemonte	890.433	84.991	975.424	38% (forest: 35%)
Valle d'Aosta	99.243	8.733	107.976	33% (forest: 30%)
Lombardia	621.968	70.252	692.220	29% (forest: 26%)
Prov. di Bolzano	339.270	36.081	375.351	51% (forest: 46%)
Prov. di Trento	373.259	33.826	407.086	66% (forest: 60%)
Veneto	416.704	52.991	469.695	26% (forest: 23%)
Friuli - Venezia Giulia	332.556	41.058	373.614	48% (forest: 42%)
Liguria	343.160	44.084	387.244	71% (forest: 63%)
Emilia Romagna	584.901	53.915	638.816	28% (forest: 26%)
Toscana	1.035.448	154.275	1.189.722	52% (forest: 45%)
Umbria	390.305	23.651	413.956	49% (forest: 46%)
Marche	291.767	21.314	313.081	33% (forest: 31%)
Lazio	560.236	87.912	648.148	38% (forest: 33%)
Abruzzo	411.588	63.011	474.599	44% (forest: 38%)
Molise	153.248	20.025	173.273	39% (forest: 35%)
Campania	403.927	87.332	491.259	36% (forest: 30%)
Puglia	142.349	49.389	191.738	10% (forest: 7%)
Basilicata	288.020	104.392	392.412	39% (forest: 29%)
Calabria	495.177	155.443	650.620	43% (forest: 33%)
Sicilia	285.489	101.745	387.234	15% (forest: 11%)
Sardegna	626.140	674.851	1.300.991	54% (forest: 26%)
<i>Italia</i>	<i>9.085.186</i>	<i>1.969.272</i>	<i>11.054.458</i>	<i>37% (forest: 30%)</i>

*Table 1: Forest and other wooded land area in Italian regions.*

*Source: modified from Gasparini et Al., 2022: 154*

Compared with other countries, however, Italy’s forest is highly fragmented and intertwined with urbanisation (Fig. 1).

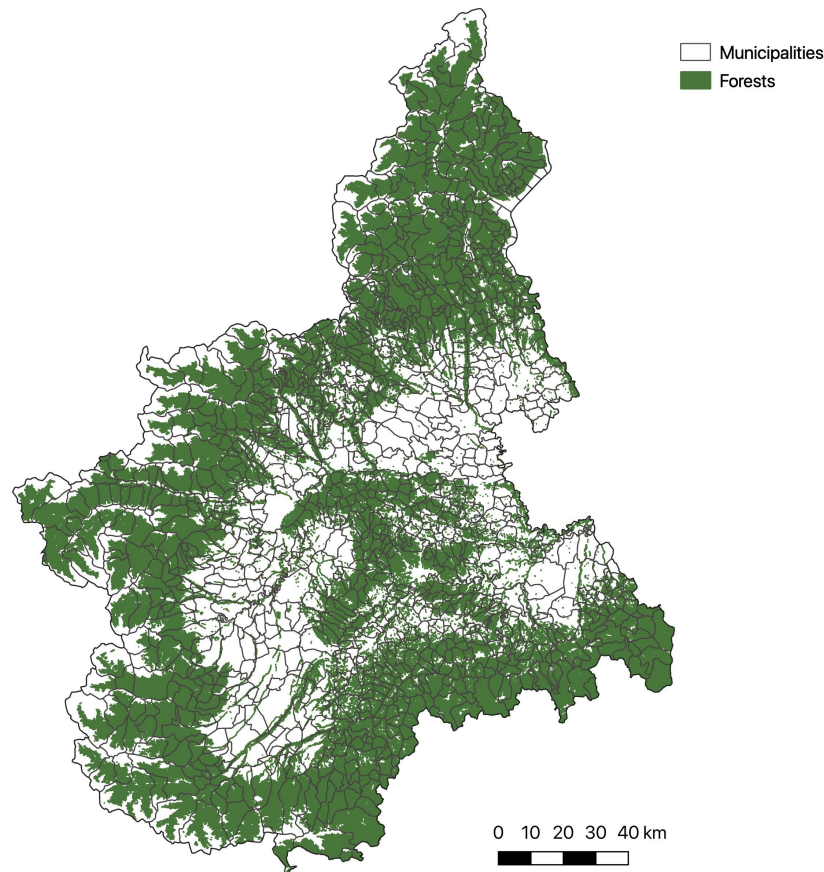
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(Gasparini et Al., 2022).



*Figure 1: Localisation of forests and other wooded land areas in Italy*  
*Source: Gasparini et Al., 2022: 160*

Also favoured by a reforestation process that has lasted since 1990, most Italian municipalities are now in close accessibility to a forest or a wooded area (Gasparini et Al., 2022). To make an example, the map in figure 2 represents the localisation of forests in Piedmont in 2016: from this map, we realise that the municipalities totally excluded are around 10 (of 1.181 total municipalities in Piedmont), mainly localised in the Vercelli plain such as: Livorno Ferraris, Cigliano, Bianzè, Crova, San Germano Vercellese, Salasco, Rive, Pertengo, Pezzana, Praloro and Borgo Vercelli.



*Figure 2: Localisation of forests and other wooded land areas in Piedmont (Italy)*  
*Source: Regione Piemonte, 2022*

Coherently, forests (and urban and periurban forests, namely) are gaining attention in Italy from the perspective of constructing a more balanced and sustainable relationship between urban and rural areas. This trend, also fed by the increasing demand for outdoor activities, hiking and biking in forests that followed the covid-19 lockdown, involves scholars, practitioners, and policymakers and led to the production of a growing number of studies, events and policies.

Among the most active actors that push the national policy towards a greater attention to forests we can mention: AUSF Italia (Associazioni Universitarie degli Studenti Forestali d'Italia), Coldiretti, CONAIBO (Cordinamento Nazionale Imprese Boschive), CONAF (Consiglio dell'Ordine Nazionale dei Dottori Ordini Agronomi e dei Dottori Forestali), Confagricoltura, Federforeste (Federazione Italiana delle Comunità Forestali), FSC Italia (Forest Stewardship Council), IPLA (Istituto per le Piante da Legno e l'Ambiente), PEFC Italia (Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification), UNCEM Italia (Unione Nazionale Comuni, Comunità, Enti Montani). For instance, the Central Hiking Commission of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI-Club Alpino Italiano) draws up updated reports on the state of hiking trails and signals and provides indications for their planning, monitoring and improvement to contribute to public health and well-being (CAI, 2010). Recently, CAI and Regione Lombardia (2020) have also proposed a quality mark for hiking trails as part of the Interreg Italy-Switzerland project. Its recommendation to local administrators is to enhance

nature's social functions and remove physical barriers that prevent access to people with limited mobility.

However, the trajectories for future development of the Italian forests are several and varied, moving from both the economy and the society. Entertainment and cultural services also show substantial development margins if we consider that forest adventure parks already exceed 200 units in the country and are widespread in all regions, particularly in Piedmont, Lombardy, Trentino Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna, and Tuscany (Associazione Parchi Avventura, 2020).

## **5. The cases of Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa and Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino (Italy, Piedmont Region)**

### *5.1 Reasons of the selection*

To investigate the touristic potential of periurban forests, the paper illustrates the cases of two forests localised in Piedmont region, between the provinces of Vercelli and Asti: Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa and Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino (Fig. 3).



*Figure 3: The localisation of Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa and Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino, Piedmont (Italy).*

*Source: our elaboration*

We selected these forests because they both were characterised in the past by a collective form of land ownership extended to the local community. The denominations themselves of the two woods of chance as “La Communa” (which means “common good”) and “Della Partecipanza” (which means “of the Participation”) which is the name of the local assembly of the owners; Borla, 1975) gives evidence of a long tradition of collective land management. The ancient

management practice of the Boschi delle Sorti, in fact, established that, yearly, each owner received by chance (i.e. via a lottery) the land area or “quartarolo” him/her assigned for the cutting of the woods.

From the perspective of our study, this type of shared property regime is an interesting condition concerning most of the elements that turn proximity forest tourism into a meaningful tourist experience, contributing to community building and sustainable local development – as indicated in sections 2 and 3.

Forest shared ownership demonstrates the fundamental nexus that links the practices of cultivating and managing forests for economic and territorial purposes with the local community’s social rules and cultural traditions. From such a perspective, the local community is, in fact, a crucial active actor in the development and valorisation of the forest (see the concept of “participant community”, used by Terzuolo in 1998 to describe the management of the Bosco della Partecipanza di Trino). Furthermore, a shared property regime reinforces the identification of resident tourists with the forest and their commitment. Moreover, when the regime becomes a best practice analysed and promoted at the international level<sup>10</sup>, it also helps the quality of the touristic experience and the attractivity of the local system.

In this paragraph, we will thus illustrate the elements that, present in the two forests assumed as case studies, may allow their valorisation not only as tourist destinations but also as a driver for community building. More specifically, using the information provided by the Natural Parks website<sup>11</sup>, we will classify them into natural, historical, economic and institutional factors. However – as highlighted in the Introduction – to verify the way the local community valorises these factors, we will have to wait for the results of the qualitative survey we are in train to start in the territories via interviews and questionnaires.

### 5.2 Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa

The Zona di Salvaguardia del Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa identifies a protected wooded area of 1.819 hectares instituted in 2001<sup>12</sup>. It is localised in the Provinces of Alessandria and Asti. The management authority is the Assembly of the six Municipalities occupied by the safeguarded area, i.e.: Alice Bel Colle, Bruno, Cassine, Maranzana, Mombaruzzo, and Ricaldone. The Zona di Salvaguardia del Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa develops between 118 and 311 metres above sea level, in a transition zone between the alluvial plain and the slopes that gradually rise towards the Apennine belt, made up of ancient floods and sedimentary formations. Within the Piedmont region, the Bosco delle Sorti is important because of the local residual traces of the *roverella* woods (a species of the genus *Quercus*), which used to cover the land between the regions of the low Acquese and Alessandrino, and the presence of *erica arborea* at its highest latitude. In addition, viticulture gives a strong landscape connotation to these hill territories<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The numerous data collected by naturalistic and historic surveys on the Bosco della Partecipanza make it today well known. DocumentAria film, for instance, produced a docufilm on the Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza by Valter Torri. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ExLLTakC2I>

<sup>11</sup> Source: <http://www.parks.it/vr.bosco.sorti.communa/map.php>

<sup>12</sup> See the Regional Law n.29 14/11/2001 and the Regional Law n. 19 14/10/03.

<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.parks.it/vr.bosco.sorti.communa/map.php>

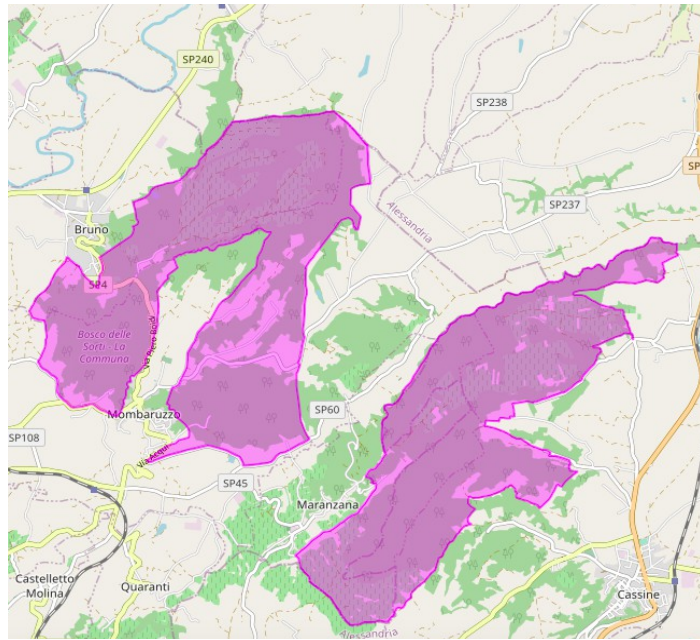


Figure 4: Borders of the Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa Safeguard Area.  
Source: Google Maps

*Natural factors.* In the ridge and most exposed areas, the vegetation consists of woods with a prevalence of *roverella* and *cerro* species; in the cooler areas, there is a dominant presence of *rovere*, *chestnut* and *farina*. The wooded cover has been fairly maintained in correspondence with the area formerly occupied by the Bosco delle Sorti (about 300 hectares). Elsewhere, the wooded areas are intermittently interspersed with vineyards, arable land and stable meadows. At the forest's edge weeds and/or exotic plants such as the *robinia pseudacacia* tend to prevail. The faunal potential is high. The most frequently observed mammals are wild boars, foxes, hedgehogs, squirrels, shrews, the European hares, and some species of bats. As for birds, there is the presence of the red and green woodpecker, the owl and some species of hunting interest such as the pheasant, the grey partridge, the quail, the mallard.

*Historic factors.* The first documented traces of the Bosco La Communa date back to the 15th century and refer to the Bosco di Cassine. In a document of 1456, Guglielmo di Monferrato commits himself to preserve and maintain the wooded territories called "Communa" against the extension of the cultivated territories and the demographic expansion of rural communities. Although a document elaborated in 1599 shows the exact geographical delimitation of the area, the topographical and territorial denomination "Communa" has been maintained over time under two different connotations. On the one hand, it identifies the community-managed area of the Bosco delle Sorti, whose original common fund was parcelled and privatised from the 18th to the 19th century. On the other hand, it identifies a territory (*Tenimento delle Zerbe*), which was definitively sold to private owners by the Community of Cassine in 1874.

*Economic and institutional factors.* There are many cultural and architectural sites in the area that could be of tourist interest if integrated into the local territorial offer. Currently, the tourists visiting the Protected area are mainly one-day tourists or resident-tourists. For the residents, the local municipalities organise periodic events in the woods that surround the residential area. For instance, the Church of the Nativity is frequently used for events co-organised by the Municipality of Mombaruzzo. Conversely, external tourists find few opportunities to accommodate and make activities: only six structures are listed on the website <http://www.parks.it/vr.bosco.sorti.communasog.php><sup>14</sup> for hotels, agritourism and holiday apartments.

Besides tourism, the wood provides ecosystem services and products including timber and fruit trees (above all *nuts*) and the *erica arborea*, traditionally used to produce brooms and pipes. Also, it keeps on providing an essential protective function against the spread of agriculture, which preserves the quality of the landscape and its variety (Fig. 5).



*Figure 5: Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa landscape*

*Source: Photo by <http://www.parks.it/vr.bosco.sorti.communasog.php>*

The actions implemented in the safeguarded area range from the protection of the local natural environment to the enhancement of the cultural heritage, the local traditions, the local economies and the recovery of the material and urban heritage.

### *5.3 Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino*

It identifies a small but vital forest, protected under the regimes of the “Zona Speciale di Conservazione” and the “Zona di Protezione Speciale Bosco della Partecipanza di Trino”. It occupies an area of 1.075 hectares in the Vercelli plain, 3 km North of the Po river (Fig. 6). The forest is part of the territory of the Municipality of Trino. However, the management is held by a regional authority, i.e. the Ente di gestione delle Aree Protette del Po Piemontese. The Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino (from now on referred to as “Bosco della Partecipanza”)

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<sup>14</sup> The official link to the Bosco <http://www.boscosorti-lacommuna.it> does not work at the time we wrote the paper.

is a valuable relict forest of about 600 hectares, with a further 480 hectares of protection area created when the Natural park, in 1991, partly occupied by artificial reforestation carried out after that date. It is one of the most extensive planitial forests of the Padan Plain with a prevalence of *querco-carpineto* plants. Except for the area occupied by a modest relief called the “coast”, the wood cover almost entirely lays at an altitude of 144 meters above sea level.

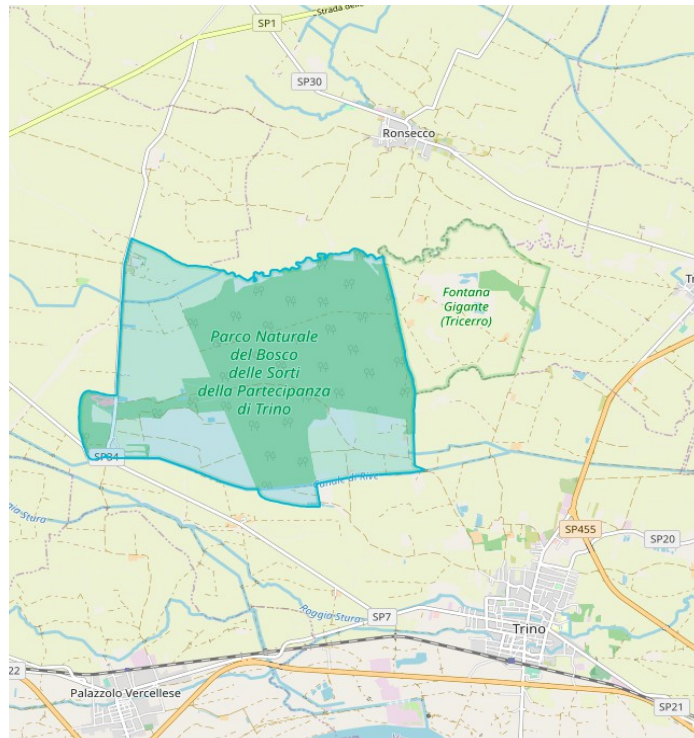


Figure 6: Area of the Parco Bosco delle Sorti della Partecipanza di Trino  
Source: Google Maps

*Natural factors.* From an ecological point of view, the Bosco della Partecipanza is an *oak-hornbeam* forest with predominant *mesophilic facies* and a significant presence of *hygrophilous facies*, *ash* and *black alder* (Allegro et Al, 2016). In addition, the increasingly invasive presence of the red oak, a North American species planted along the internal roads at the end of the 1950s, is now being fought with specific cuts<sup>15</sup>. The Bosco della Partecipanza is well-known among historians and natural scientists thanks to the several studies that analyse the high-level ecological and faunistic species it hosts (Allegro et Al, 2016). The Bosco della Partecipanza is, in fact, an vital remnant forest nucleus of the ancient Po valley plain, today strongly isolated in an agricultural context (Fig. 7). From a geographic point of view, Crosio and Ferrarotti (1993) defined it as “raft floating on the rice fields”. On the top of the “coast” and the South-facing slope, the forest is influenced by the warmer and drier climate and hosts various plant species exclusive to this area. In the Northern part, conversely, the land is marshy for most of the year, and some resurgences have facilitated the diffusion of the black alder wood.

<sup>15</sup> For information on general ecological (climate, geology and pedology) and historical aspects, please refer to IPLA (1999) and the works by Casale (1983), Crosio (1976), and Crosio and Ferrarotti (1993).





*Figure 7: Bosco della Partecipanza Landscape*

*Source: Photo by <https://www.alecology.it/parco-naturale-del-bosco-delle-sorti-della-partecipanza-di-trino/>*

The ecological isolation characterizes this forest, which “has come down to the present day, albeit with many troubles, with a precious cortege of flora and fauna now almost completely extinct elsewhere in the plain” (Corbetta et Al, 1988 cit. in Allegro et Al, 2016: 190; our translation). As to the flora, at the beginning of the century, the botanist Giovanni Negri reported over 400 species that survived until the present day. Among the fauna species, the Bosco della Partecipanza hosts the viper, the thunderbolt, the grasshopper and a local carabid fauna of relevant scientific interest (Allegro et Al, 2016). Finally, some basins of artificial origin used for sport fishing and partly abandoned constitute environments of a small aquatic fauna of relevant faunistic, biogeographical and ecological interest because of their ability to be indicators of the environment quality (Stork, 1990; Thiele, 1977; Brandmayr et Al, 2005). Considering the adjacent areas (that host wetlands, conservation areas, open areas and rice fields), the avifauna species registered are 153, including forest ones such as the goshawk, the sparrowhawk, the woodcock and the honey buzzard. In addition, the black woodpecker (which is typical in mountain areas) is also colonising this forest. The forest is also close to an important area for the migration of many species (Toffoli, 2008).

*Historic factors.* The forest survived with its original flora thanks to the traditional system of collective management (Partecipanza dei Boschi) that has lasted in the area since 1275. From generation to generation, the participants have safeguarded the forest, yearly regulating the cuts and other forestry activities according to rational

and impartial allotting criteria (the “fates”). To date, the Regional Forest Plan still provides the general policy framework. In contrast, the local management plan (Piano di Assestamento Forestale), based on the principles of natural silviculture, has recently expired. Thus, if the forest “escaped cutting and destruction”, it happened “thanks to the sacredness of the wood in Roman times and, from 1200 onwards, thanks to the foresight and ‘sustainable’ management of the Partecipanza and the people who came into possession of it in 1275 by concession of the Marquis del Monferrato Guglielmo the Great” (Corbetta et Al, 1988 cit in Allegro et Al, 2016: 190; our translation) rather thanks to policy effectiveness.

*Economic and institutional factors.* The forest has walkable trails equipped with signals for tourists and trekkers. These are slightly gravel dirt tracks, mostly flat or with a slight slope. There are also four play areas, a life path, six equipped picnic areas (without drinking water and toilets), and the possibility of renting the Cascinotti and Cascina Gugliemina for recreational, educational purposes and scientific uses, with a barbecue area and beds.

## **6. Some preliminary remarks**

The two forests considered in the study enjoy different visibility. In particular, the Bosco della Partecipanza vastly overwhelms the Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa regarding reputation and tourist attractiveness. However, from the point of view of the interest they arise in local communities, the situation appears more balanced. Although the undivided ownership ended, the forest continues to be loved and frequented by the local inhabitants, who thus act as tourist residents (see Jeuring and Haarsten’s definition in section 2, 2017). It also offers more outstanding landscape quality and diversification (food, culture, heritage, nature, and landscape are all part of the local offer).

In this sense, the Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa is located on the margins and intersects a portion of the Unesco buffer zone (Fig.8).

The Bosco della Partecipanza, on the other hand, is more isolated: the presence of rice fields limits access from the surrounding urban areas working as a constraint and a protective barrier. Therefore, it remains to investigate the appeal the two analysed forests have on the inhabitants of the neighbouring territories. Waiting for the interviews that will take place in the first months of 2023, the evidence collected with this preliminary study makes us confident that successful proximity tourism can complement the traditional services the forest offers (nature, sports, and relax) with adequate cultural, food and wine and sports activities, the periodic organisation of public events and the presence of a diversified set of accommodation solutions, viable to all visitors. A critical advantage for the periurban forests can come from the provision of equipped trails and the organisation of educational activities, public events and local projects in the forest for all types of tourists, including children, the elderly and people with limited mobility (Schenetti, Rossini and Salvaterra, 2015). An important point is to provide packages that organise all the elements mentioned above (activities, places, events, accommodation) with transport accessibility, in a way that needs to be viable, and easy-to-use, easy-to-find.

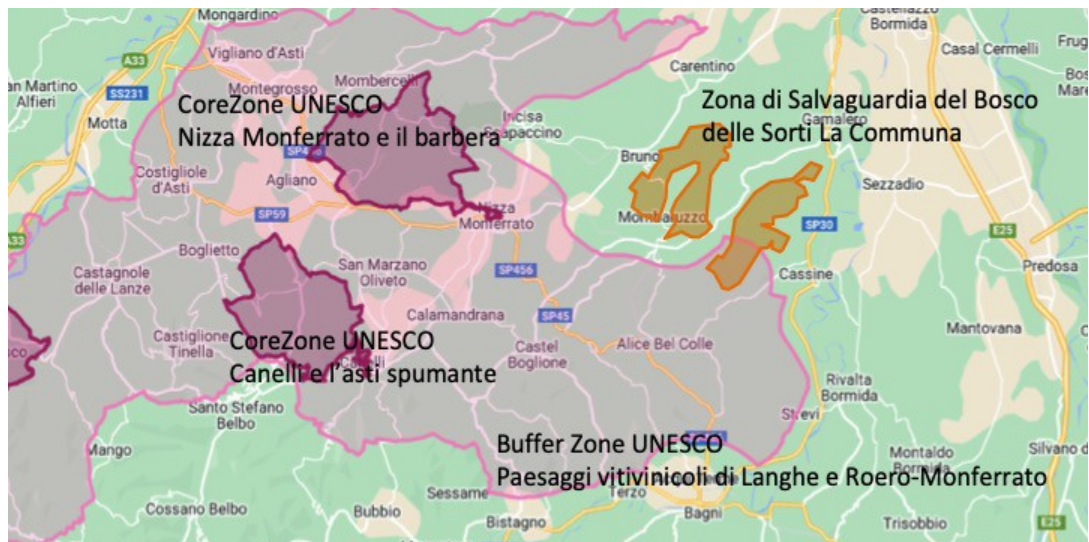


Figure 8: Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa Safeguard Area and UNESCO Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato

Source: our elaboration on <https://www.paesaggivitivinicoliunesco.it>

Finally, the positive territorial effects of the touristic valorisation of periurban forests are expected to be greater if the forest is part of the local heritage (Cottini et Al, 2021) and a recognised territorial endowment of the local community (see, for instance, the concept of territorial embeddedness; Rota, 2020), institutionalised within a specific perception of nature. Sector and local cultural initiatives are thus two inseparable components of an action aimed at enhancing the peri-urban woods as proximity tourism destinations.

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