



0.1.1. Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region

MYSTICAL DANUBE

**GREEN AND MYSTICAL DANUBE
STORYTELLING ROUTE – Transnational
valorisation of natural and intangible
cultural heritage for socio-economic
development of rural areas in the Danube
Region**

Specific objective 1:

**Strategy for valorisation of natural and intangible cultural
heritage in rural, less visited areas**

Activity 1.3

**Creating a Strategy on how to valorise mapped natural and
associated intangible cultural heritage as a touristic
resource for the creation of sustainable community
tourism services and products**

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1. Introduction

The **MYSTICAL DANUBE project** is an initiative aimed at enhancing the socio-economic and cultural development of regions within the transnational Danube Region, with a particular focus on sustainable tourism, preservation and valorisation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as environmental protection. The main objective of the project is to develop a coordinated joint transnational approach in the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage as tourism resources in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. The **Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region** is envisioned as a key output of MYSTICAL DANUBE project that will guide sustainable tourism development across the Danube Region's rural and less visited areas. Therefore, the main objective of Strategy development process is to prepare **a joint document on how to transnationally valorise natural heritage sites and associated intangible cultural heritage as a touristic resource through community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region**. Strategy will set a model for the valorisation of natural and associated intangible heritage and development of sustainable community tourism and associated services and products with strong community involvement on regional and national level, which will lead to **transnational impact** of the Strategy.

Special emphasis is placed on the inclusion of local population, especially vulnerable groups (youth, elderly, women, people with disabilities, minorities) in the design of new tourism products and services as a way of developing the **community-based tourism model**. In this context, the MYSTICAL DANUBE project envisages the creation of a **new transnational thematic route across the Danube Region** as an innovative model that connects natural and intangible cultural heritage with local community into an integrated tourism offer - **Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route**. That thematic route and a heritage valorisation model with community-based services acts as a **new social innovation** of the project. Local community involvement in development of new thematic route will enhance economic development, social inclusion and social innovation in the Danube Region.

The transnational character of the Strategy is reflected in the **joint work and exchange of experiences** of project partners, the incorporation of examples of good practice from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Serbia, as well as the implementation of pilot activities in ten selected pilot areas. After its development, the Strategy will be disseminated and implemented at the regional, national and macro-regional levels, thereby achieving its **transnational impact** for the entire Danube Region.

The Strategy builds on and contributes to the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**, in particular the **Priority Area 3 – Culture and Tourism**. This ensures national coherence with the European strategic framework, while strengthening local and regional development policies. Special emphasis is placed on sustainability and the circular economy, as this model can ensure more efficient use of resources, reduced waste and longer product life cycles, which is necessary to achieve climate neutrality and preserve natural resources.

The MYSTICAL DANUBE project partnership prepared a transnationally coherent strategy reflecting the collective insights and data from all project partners, highlighting both common challenges and localised opportunities within the Danube Region. The document contains implementable and actionable recommendations, with clear objectives, measures and actions that stakeholders can use for the development of new community-based tourism products, services and policies in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. Thus, the Strategy will become a model of sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, with the potential to contribute to the development of inclusive, innovative and resilient tourism in the entire Danube macro-region, along with enhancing economic development, social inclusion and social innovation in the Danube Region.

2. Methodology

The main purpose of the *Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region* is to define objectives, measures and actions that will act as a cohesive set of actionable recommendations to ensure that natural and intangible cultural heritage are effectively leveraged as development resources, particularly in the form of community-based tourism services and products. These objectives, measures and actions, in their joint framework and integrated implementation, contribute to the **development of the best and most sustainable model on how to valorise mapped natural and associated intangible cultural heritage for the creation of sustainable community-based tourism services and products with a strong focus on the transnational context.**

According to the settings of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project, the Strategy is based on the conclusions of the previously conducted analytical steps that were carried out within the project implementation activities. Therefore, the development of Strategy was based on the results and conclusions of Action 1.1. *Mapping and collection of natural and associated intangible cultural heritage in the project's rural and less visited areas on which the Strategy will be based*, Action 1.2. *Mapping and analysis of examples of good practices in the Danube and broader region on projects and activities that deal with sustainable community tourism development* and Action 1.3. *Creating a Strategy on how to valorise mapped natural and associated intangible cultural heritage as a touristic resource for the creation of sustainable community tourism services and products.*

The process of preparing the Strategy initially required the implementation of an **analytical process** of researching development issues, opportunities and the potential of community-based tourism, which will be based on the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. This process began with the preparation of a **Territorial Analysis** within Action 1.1. Each partner within the MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership prepared a Territorial Analysis for their respective area (previously defined territorial scope) by providing local data and sharing information from mapping and analysis phase. This step involved the analysis of state of both natural and intangible cultural heritage, as well as current practices in their sustainable valorisation. These information are summarised in the Strategy to gain a '*big picture*' relevant for whole Danube Region. Main conclusions from each partner were used for participative process to co-create the proposal of objectives, measures and actions together with relevant stakeholders. Another analytical step was a **mapping and analysis of good practices** within the Action 1.2. Each partner within the MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership conducted a research on good practices that may serve as examples of successful community-based tourism initiatives and heritage

valorisation projects that can be adapted or replicated in the context of Danube Region. Conclusions and results of good practices mapping and analysis were used as motivation and inspiration for the preparation of the Strategy, especially during the participative process to co-create the proposal of objectives, measures and actions together with relevant stakeholders. Based upon these two analytical segments, members of the MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership conducted **a series of workshops and meetings with various stakeholders** (including local, regional and national decision-makers, sectoral agencies, NGOs, SMEs, local communities, EUSDR PA3 stakeholders, etc.). **Extensive participative approach** was focused on discussing the conclusions and results of previous Activity 1.1. (Territorial Analysis) and proposed best practices from Activity 1.2., and translating these results into concrete actions that will valorise natural and associated intangible cultural heritage as a community-based touristic resource in rural, less visited areas in the Danube Region. Drawing on these previous analytical activities, together with stakeholder consultation process and results, partners suggested how to boost sustainable community-led development. Each partner proposed objectives, measures and actions based upon their participative process, and the main Strategy was made by interpolation of proposed elements. The results are manifested as a joint transnational Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region, which was built as a **joint transnational heritage valorisation model**, structured around implementable objectives, measures and actions that support development of community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas in the Danube Region.

During these analytical steps, partnership emphasised **horizontal topics** that were considered while preparing the Strategy. To be aligned with **circular economy principles**, the Strategy incorporate actions that minimise environmental impact while maximising resource efficiency. Therefore, Strategy will encourage the principles of re-use, repair and recycle, as well as reducing the pressure on natural resources and reducing waste. Through the Strategy, partnership promotes eco-friendly infrastructure, green mobility solutions and tourism services that align with climate-neutral goals, contributing to the **climate neutrality**. Since the community-based tourism initiatives are in the focus of the Strategy, the proposed objectives, measures and actions supports local communities by strengthening local capacities, especially among **vulnerable groups** (youth, elderly, minorities, women and people with disabilities). Partnership recognises that for the valorisation of intangible cultural and natural heritage and its use to increase the well-being of local communities is necessary to implement capacity-building activities of local community stakeholders. Therefore, the objectives, measures and actions proposed by this Strategy are **socially inclusive** and **environmentally sustainable**.

The Strategy is hierarchically structured with one joint vision of Danube Region and the 'pyramid' of integrated objectives, measures and actions. **Vision** represents the overarching, long-term shared aspiration for how natural and intangible cultural heritage can be integrated into community-based tourism which could boost sustainable development, community well-being and

cross-border and transnational cooperation in the Danube Region. Vision was made based upon the proposal of each partner involved in the project, in accordance with the results of the participative consultation process. The vision then branches out through **main objectives** which serve as strategic priorities on target areas that contribute to realisation of the vision. Each objective focuses on a strategic priority that is important for MYSTICAL DANUBE thematic scope, but also to the supportive topics. Structuring the strategic approach to building heritage valorisation model into distinct objectives helps ensure that all critical aspects of heritage valorisation are addressed in a structured manner. Within each objective, **measures** are prepared as a sub-goals or a specific approach format that breaks the broader objective into more manageable parts, which helps to organise the implementation of the objective. Measures provide clearer direction and make it easier to track progress toward each objective. Further, each measure defines **actions** as concrete tasks or interventions that should be carried out to implement the measure and achieve the targeted result. Actions transform high-level ideas into tangible steps and they are essential for successful implementation. Using this hierarchical structure, Strategy aligns transnational vision to concrete tasks, while also ensuring flexibility and adaptability to different strategic and implementing frameworks across the Danube Region.

Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube region

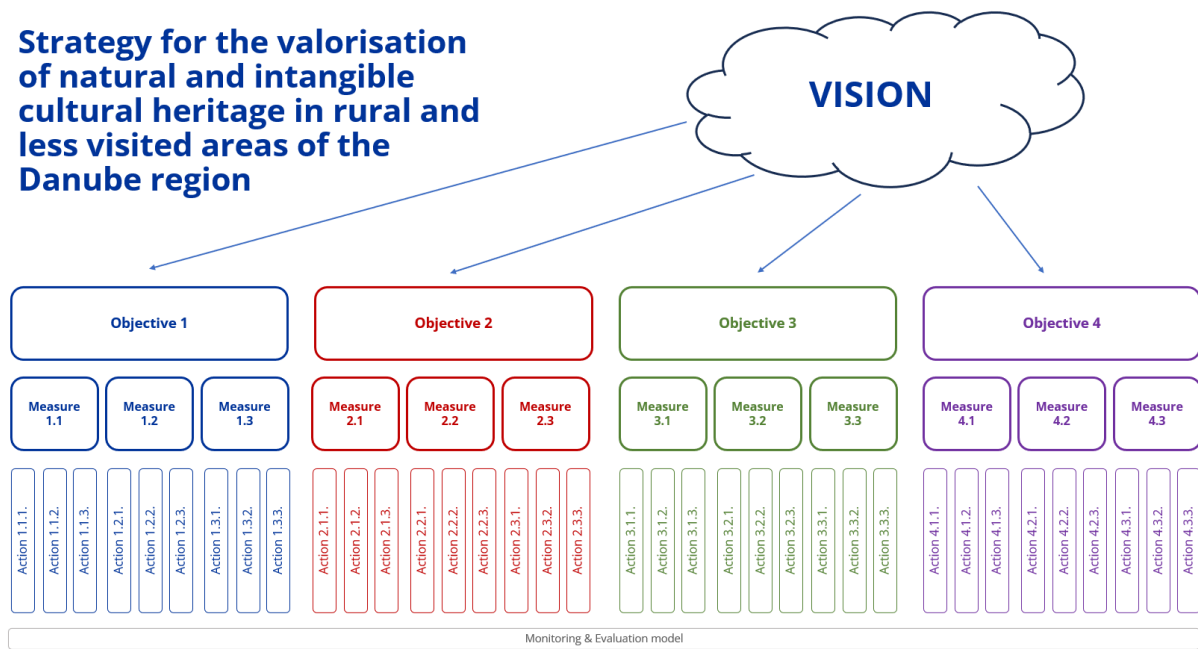


Figure 1. Sketch of a hierarchical structure of objectives, measures and actions of the Strategy

3. Territorial Analysis

Summary

The Territorial Analysis of the Danube Region was prepared by MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership members. It was prepared as a *Deliverable 1.1.1. Report on territorial analysis and collected data*, under the *Activity 1.1. Mapping and collection of natural and associated intangible cultural heritage in the project's rural and less visited areas on which the Strategy will be based*. Although the analysis did not cover the entire Danube Region, it included broader regional data from project partners, which provided insight into the state of individual parts of the macro-regional area. The selection of analytical areas spans a broad geographical range, which provides a **representative cross-section of the natural, demographic and cultural diversity of the Danube Region**. Given the geographical and socioeconomic diversity, analytical sample reflect a variety of spatial, socio-economic, environmental and cultural contexts, and thus provide a relevant foundation for identifying key strengths, weaknesses, development potentials and obstacles related to the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. The following chapters present brief summary of the conclusions drawn from the integrated analysis prepared by the MYSTICAL DANUBE project partners.

3.1. Geographical description of the area

The Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region was developed for the entire area of Danube Region.

Danube Region represents an EU macro region which includes 14 countries:

- EU-member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and part of Germany (regions of Baden-Württemberg and Bayern);
- accession countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia;
- neighbouring countries: Moldova and part of Ukraine (regions of Chernivetska Oblast, Ivano-Frankivska Oblast, Zakarpatska Oblast, Odessa Oblast).

Danube Region possesses a number of unique territorial characteristics that contribute to its cohesion as a **macro-region**. Spanning a vast and diverse area, it largely corresponds to the territory of the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)** and includes the Danube River Basin as well as surrounding mountain systems such as the Carpathians, the Balkans and parts of the Alps. Together, these areas cover about one fifth of the EU's landmass and are home to around 114 million people. While the region is marked by environmental variety, socio-economic disparities and rich cultural diversity, these differences should not be viewed as obstacles. On the contrary, they represent significant **development potential and opportunities for cross-border and transnational cooperation**. Shared natural systems, especially those related to the Danube River and its tributaries, create **functional transnational area** that require joint planning and coordinated management for long-term sustainable development.



Figure 2. The geographical scope of the Danube Region and the implementation scope of this Strategy

Danube Region is marked by **extraordinary diversity of cultural and natural heritage**, ranging from transboundary Danube basin and protected habitats to rich traditions, crafts and intangible cultural heritage shaped by centuries of interaction among different cultures, nations and civilisations. While some heritage elements are already integrated into well-known tourist destinations, a significant number of rural and less-visited areas remain **under-valorised with untapped potential**, despite their high potential for sustainable development. Key challenges include fragmented management structures, limited sectoral cross-border cooperation and insufficient investment in innovative, community-based models for heritage promotion. In many areas, tourism infrastructure and heritage valorisation efforts remain concentrated in capital cities,

coastline areas or established tourism hotspots, leading to **regional imbalances and missed opportunities for inclusive and territorially harmonised growth**. At the same time, the region hosts numerous cross-border ecological corridors, extensive wetland systems and flagship species habitats that require **joint protection efforts**. Transnational cooperation is essential to address issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change impacts, and fragmentation of cultural and ecological landscapes. Danube Region holds a **significant and still untapped potential for developing sustainable tourism based on its rich heritage**¹.

3.2. Communities and stakeholders

Within the analysis, MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership highlighted the importance of involving key stakeholders in developing sustainable community-based tourism, underscoring the **importance of building inclusive and participatory frameworks** that actively involve public authorities, civil society, private actors and local communities in valorising natural and intangible cultural heritage. Their participation ensures diverse perspectives, interests and expertise are integrated into decision-making, enhancing the future Strategy's legitimacy and community support. Community-based tourism depends on active local involvement, creating tourism products and services that respect local values and promote the preservation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Stakeholder ecosystems differ in complexity and maturity, but many share similar challenges: **fragmented coordination, limited community participation, generational gaps in engagement and the need for tailored communication strategies**. Despite these obstacles, regional analyses reveal encouraging trends and growing awareness of the value of cross-sectoral and bottom-up collaboration.

Despite regional differences, a common narrative emerges: **the successful valorisation of both natural and intangible heritage is deeply dependent on the active engagement of local communities and the strategic cooperation among diverse stakeholders**. Whether rooted in rural areas with fragmented governance or urbanised centres with developed institutional networks, each territory highlights that inclusive participation is essential. **Communities that are involved in shaping their own tourism models and heritage initiatives are more likely to generate authentic, resilient and place-based solutions**. All stakeholders must be viewed both as implementers and as co-creators of sustainable development pathways. This includes recognising and activating the potential of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, many regions expressed a need to move from *ad hoc* cooperation toward more structured, long-term governance models. While isolated projects and local initiatives can yield positive results, lasting

¹ Danube Region Programme 2021-2027

impact will require the institutionalisation of participatory approaches within broader development strategies. Therefore, **encouraging dialogue, supporting community-led initiatives and embedding stakeholder cooperation into policy frameworks** is essential in unlocking the full potential of heritage valorisation in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region.

3.3. Economy and Tourism

Economic structure of the Danube Region reveals **significant structural diversity**. However, few commonalities exist, such as the **importance of agriculture**, the **growing relevance of tourism** and the **dominance of small enterprises**. These structural characteristics directly shape the potential for valorising natural and intangible cultural heritage, especially in rural and less visited areas.

Urbanised areas generally demonstrate stronger economic performance, supported by manufacturing, processing industries and services, while rural and peripheral areas rely more heavily on agriculture and face persistent socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, outmigration, ageing populations and underdeveloped infrastructure. In between these extremes are regions marked by shrinking industrial bases, low wages and fragmented enterprise structures. Labour market dynamics highlight sharp contrasts: diversified economies tend to have lower unemployment rates, while rural and agrarian areas face much higher levels of unemployment. Workforce shortages are becoming widespread due to ageing populations and migration, with inflow from weaker economies and outmigration into stronger ones. Wage disparities across the region drive '*brain drain*' effects, with younger and skilled workers leaving less competitive areas. In many rural and mountainous parts of the region, employment remains low and strongly tied to subsistence agriculture and seasonal labour, often complemented by emerging forms of rural tourism. Infrastructural deficits, especially in rural areas, limit market access and discourage investment. Moreover, the seasonality of tourism and lack of strategic coordination between sectors further constrain the capacity of heritage to become a meaningful economic driver.

Analyses emphasised that valorisation of intangible cultural and natural heritage through tourism can support diversification of local economies, especially in rural and shrinking areas. There is a huge opportunity to develop a community-based tourism built on traditional agriculture and exceptionally rich intangible cultural heritage to stimulate inclusive growth and solve local issues of outmigration or '*brain drain*'. Despite these potentials, key barriers are: tourism seasonality, lack of investment, poor infrastructure and limited marketing strategies. Therefore, the analysis highlights the **need to diversify local economies** by integrating intangible cultural and natural

heritage into sustainable tourism and agri-based services. Cross-border cooperation, especially along the Danube, should be strengthened through tailored community-based tourism models that valorise local traditions, crafts and landscapes. To address current challenges, intangible cultural and natural heritage must be embedded in broader development strategies, supported by targeted investments and regional cooperation. Unlocking the economic potential of heritage in rural and less visited areas will require place-based approaches that connect communities, tradition and territory through innovation, branding and inclusive tourism.

Danube Region have a great potential for the development of sustainable tourism, the foundations of which are visible in the **potential of valorisation of natural and both tangible and intangible cultural heritage**, as well as **rich enogastronomic offer, cycle tourism, wellness and outdoor offers**. Current tourism sector in the Danube Region demonstrates a rich yet uneven spatial and thematic distribution. While some areas benefit from established tourism infrastructure and high visitor numbers, there are some areas of untapped tourism potential with rich natural and cultural heritage. This duality, often visible in Danube Region, represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the region's goal of fostering sustainable and inclusive tourism in rural and less visited areas.

Like many other destinations, the Danube Region struggled during the COVID-19 crisis, but recovery was relatively swift, mostly due to the appeal of outdoor activities and favourable natural conditions. Danube Region offers **almost all-year-round outdoor offer** supported by other **selective modes of tourism**, attracting tourists and visitors motivated by new experiences linked with nature and culture. Trends generally indicate **positive tourism development**, with **development of special forms of tourist products and services**, while **increasing the quality of existing and building new accommodation capacities**. The improvement of tourist accommodation is also reflected in the increase of tourist arrivals. However, the issue of small share of spending on the culture, sports and excursion sector offer is visible, which indicates the **need for diversification and expansion of the tourist offer** through active arrangements that will encourage more tourist spending in the destination. One of the barriers to this is the **lack of visibility of rural and less visited areas in the tourism market**. Tourist services and information accessibility are gradually improving with domestic tours and day trips being available, but they are focused on more well-known attractions. The analysis emphasises the **need for better market branding and visibility of rural and less visited areas**, in which the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage can greatly help. The already developed tourist offer in larger cities can also help **redirect tourist flows towards rural and less visited areas**.

Danube Region has several recurring challenges that shape the tourism sector. Those are **issues of seasonality of tourism flows** (which limits the sustainable contribution of tourism to overall socioeconomic development), **centralisation of activities in a few hotspots** (reducing the

possibility of less visited areas for development), **lack of coordination between stakeholders** (which results in long-term unsustainable development with less benefits for community), **underutilised heritage assets** (which reduces their attractiveness to visitors) and **underdeveloped infrastructure in rural areas** (which should be the basis for tourism development). At the same time, opportunities lie in the **diversification of tourism products, strengthening of digital and promotional tools** and **development of heritage-based visitor experiences tailored to local communities and landscapes**. The strategic development of tourism in the Danube Region must therefore move beyond traditional models. Encouraging year-round tourism, supporting local entrepreneurship, improving the visibility and accessibility of cultural and natural heritage and fostering community-led initiatives are all crucial for rebalancing tourism flows. Moreover, transnational cooperation in developing cross-border cycling routes, storytelling trails and shared heritage itineraries could transform fragmented regional offers into a coherent and attractive Danubian tourism experience.

In conclusion, while tourism performance and capacity vary widely across the Danube Region, a shared foundation exists in the form of rich heritage, resilient communities and an emerging vision for sustainable and inclusive tourism. Connecting the complementary offer of natural and cultural tourism, enogastronomy (cuisine and wine) and wellness tourism is best done by means of cycle tourism and hiking trails, which was emphasised in the analysis.

3.4. Infrastructure and Mobility

Infrastructure and mobility have important roles in shaping potential for better heritage valorisation across the Danube Region. Territorial analysis reveal significant differences, ranging from well-developed transport systems to underperforming or fragmented ones, especially in rural and remote areas. A common challenge is the **lack of accessibility and flexibility of public transport**, as a major obstacle for better connection of different elements of natural and intangible cultural heritage. On the other hand, there is **growing awareness of the need to improve sustainable and green mobility** to support both local development and eco-conscious tourism. Most of these initiatives are related to green mobility in terms of pedestrian and bicycle traffic, as the most optimal forms of connecting natural and cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas, especially because of the **connection with outdoor activities, which are among the most important motivations for visitors to these areas**.

Most rural regions rely heavily on private vehicles due to **insufficient or underperforming public transport systems**. **Cycling and hiking infrastructure** is developing steadily, particularly in areas

with flat or scenic landscapes, but intermodal integration remains weak. Green mobility is increasingly recognised as a strategic opportunity, both for environmental reasons and as a means to differentiate tourism offers. To move forward, areas within the Danube Region need to build on their existing assets and **reinforce the connection between green mobility, tourism and community well-being**. This includes investing in multimodal hubs, expanding cycling and walking paths, modernising public transport and promoting collaborative solutions that bridge tourism, transport and heritage valorisation. Digital tools can play a transformative role in improving user experience, sustainability, as well the visibility of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas.

3.5. Environment - Nature - Climate

Danube Region represents a rich ecological mosaic shaped by diverse climates, hydrological systems, landscapes and anthropogenic pressures. From coastal and karst terrains to river floodplains and mountain habitats, analyses reveal both **unique environmental features and shared challenges**, particularly regarding the **climate change impacts**, which are visible across the entire Danube Region. Climate change pose urgency for integrated, sustainable environmental management based upon transnational cooperation.

The climate profile of Danube Region is diverse due to rich relief energy and the diverse climatic and microclimatic conditions. Coastal areas experience a Mediterranean climate with hot summers and mild winters, while mountainous hinterlands face snowy, forested microclimates. Inland areas feature temperate continental climates with increasing signs of warming, prolonged droughts and erratic rainfall. These changes impact water availability, agriculture, biodiversity and the frequency of extreme events such as floods, storms and forest fires.

Despite significant natural richness and biodiversity, many areas within Danube Region face pressures from insufficient waste management, low recycling rates, untreated wastewater, air pollution, soil degradation and biodiversity loss. **Infrastructure gaps**, particularly in water and sewage systems in rural and peri-urban areas, pose threat to environmental quality and risks for both ecosystems and communities. Illegal waste disposal and outdated communal infrastructure are recurring problems. At the same time, there are promising examples of **renewable energy use**, including solar, wind and biomass, though energy transition remains uneven and hampered by gaps in legislation and investment. Highland, river and wetland ecosystems in particular are identified as fragile and vulnerable to climate change. Rising temperatures, hydrological droughts, invasive species and forest fires are major concerns, while intensive agriculture and urbanisation

increase pressure on natural resources. **Climate-related stress** has also highlighted the importance of sustainable groundwater and surface water management, flood protection measures and conservation of rivers and wetlands. In some parts of the region, ecological frameworks are often limited by fragmented governance, insufficient infrastructure and inconsistent implementation of green policies. **Illegal waste disposals, sewage overflow and outdated infrastructure** threaten long-term sustainability. Despite the diversity of conditions, several cross-cutting themes unite the Danube Region. One of them is the **climate vulnerability**, which is increasing and affecting agriculture and tourism. **Public awareness and education** are emerging as key tools to promote behavioural change and community-led environmental stewardship.

The **Danube Region abounds with diverse natural heritage**, reflecting its ecological richness and cultural significance. Natural heritage sites are protected under various IUCN categories, with a particularly **dense network of Natura 2000 areas**, as well as numerous areas forming part of the **Emerald Network**. These designations highlight the region's importance for biodiversity protection, particularly in transboundary river and wetland ecosystems. These elements of natural heritage form the backbone of its ecological, cultural and socio-economic identity. Natural heritage in the Danube Region should therefore be understood in a broader context, considering numerous landscape and relief features of exceptional tourism value, such as: river areas, mountainous karst landscapes, wetlands, floodplain forests, highlands, etc. These areas reveal both immense ecological value and opportunities for community-based tourism and sustainable development. This Strategy recognises natural heritage as a preserved environmental asset and as a living landscape that interacts with people and culture.

Territories within the Danube Region span a wide range of natural habitats, most of them with **significant ecological and landscape value**. Key landscape types of outstanding ecological and tourism value include extensive river systems, mountainous karst landscapes, wetlands, floodplain forests and highland habitats. They represent preserved environmental assets, but also **a living heritage landscapes** where people and culture interact. Analyses confirm that these areas reveal both immense ecological value and opportunities for community-based tourism and sustainable development. Many landscapes are intertwined with local stories, crafts and traditions, illustrating the synergy between natural and intangible cultural heritage. This connection opens pathways for eco-tourism, heritage education and sustainable livelihoods rooted in community knowledge.

Despite the richness of natural heritage, a number of common challenges are visible. **Insufficient formal protection and limited institutional capacity hinder effective management** of many ecologically valuable areas. Large numbers of landscapes remain **unprotected or only nominally managed**, especially in rural areas, mostly due to limited financial, human and technical capacities. Another recurring obstacle is the **fragmented or underdeveloped interpretation and**

promotion of natural heritage. In many cases, these assets are viewed in isolation from other dimensions of tourism offer, especially intangible cultural heritage. Due to this issue, **natural sites are rarely integrated into broader tourism narratives**, while their potential for economic diversification and education remains largely **untapped**. This 'disconnect' weakens both their visibility and the capacity to generate local benefits. **Environmental pressures** further exacerbate these issues. Agricultural intensification, overgrazing, urban expansion, strong tourism growth and illegal waste disposal pose **threats to fragile ecosystems**, especially wetlands, floodplains and mountain habitats. These pressures are particularly pronounced in areas where planning instruments are outdated or where implementation mechanisms are weak. The **role of local communities** in managing and benefitting from natural heritage also remains **limited** in many parts of the Danube Region. Although community awareness of natural values is often high, there are few structured opportunities for people to participate in decision-making or to co-create tourism and conservation initiatives. This **lack of involvement** undermines long-term stewardship and reduces the sense of ownership over local landscapes, which is crucial factor in development of community-based tourism on the basis of natural and intangible cultural heritage. And most importantly, **effects of climate change** present specific issue. The impact of droughts, floods, biodiversity loss and forest fires is already visible in many areas, increasing **urgency for adaptive, climate-resilient spatial management**, which is now greater than ever.

Alongside these common challenges and issues, the analyses reveal a series of transnational potentials and common narratives that can inform a joint strategic approach. A particularly strong opportunity lies in the **synergy between natural and intangible cultural heritage**. Across multiple regions, natural landscapes are inseparable from traditional practices, local stories, seasonal rituals, crafts and community knowledge. This synergy is **key to creating authentic community-based tourism products**. Another important topic is the interpretation and visitor experience. Existing models of **interpretation and visitor infrastructure** illustrate how heritage can be meaningfully communicated and locally grounded. Transboundary frameworks offer additional opportunities to connect territories through **shared ecological identity and sustainable tourism development based on eco-tourism and eco-education**. Another important topic is **participatory of local communities** in valorisation of natural heritage. Experiences of project partners show the **strength of bottom-up methods** in identifying underused landscapes and developing tourism concepts with local relevance.

Natural heritage must not be approached only as a resource to be protected, but rather as a **living heritage landscape** that holds stories, traditions, identities and livelihoods. It must be seen as a dynamic platform where **ecology, tradition, tourism and community intersect**. Future strategies should prioritise the reinforcement of governance models that allow for participatory planning, encourage synergies between natural and cultural dimensions and support the development of sustainable economic activities based on local values and knowledge.

3.6. Socio-cultural Information

Danube Region, with its wide territorial and cultural span, is a living archive of Europe's layered historical evolution. It is a region that has been shaped like a palimpsest throughout history, with a **unique socio-cultural trajectory** shaped by prehistoric settlements, empires, wars, religious transformations and shifting borders. Such a turbulent history and historical development have resulted in an **exceptionally rich and diverse cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible**.

Archaeological traces of Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures across the region testify the deep historical roots of settlement and cultural development. These early societies laid the foundations for later urban and rural forms of life, many of which still shape land use, cultural memory and regional identities nowadays. Roman Empire left a defining imprint on the Danube Region through architecture, fortifications, road networks and artefacts, while later periods of Byzantine, Slavic, Ottoman and Habsburg influence brought new layers of cultural, religious and architectural heritage which strongly shaped cultural development of this region. During the Ottoman-Habsburg conflict era, almost whole Danube Region was shaped by defensive and fortification architecture, religious buildings and population dynamics due to turbulent war periods. Through the 19th and 20th centuries, modernisation, wars and state formations reconfigured the socio-cultural environment which also was reflected on shaping cultural identity and intangible cultural heritage. Whole area analysed by project partners was a part of socialist states in 20th century, which brought industrialisation, urban migration and new public institutions, often weakening traditional ways of life while introducing mass education and cultural infrastructure.

Despite these transformations, a strong regional and local identities persist in Danube Region. Oral traditions, folk music, religious practices and community gatherings continue to preserve the link between past and present. Religious and cultural sites remain important landmarks of identity and memory, serving both spiritual functions and as places of collective heritage. Many religious and cultural sites helped to nurture cultural identity during the turbulent past, serving as pillars of local identity and memory. These tangible cultural heritage assets offer both architectural heritage and spiritual continuity. Many of these sites remain active in religious life and community gatherings, adding a layer of **living heritage** to the material remains. Cultural infrastructure and institutions play a crucial role in maintaining this heritage. Many community initiatives led by local NGOs and associations show how local stakeholders are adapting and revitalising cultural spaces to contemporary contexts.

There are also significant challenges that partnership emphasises. Urbanisation and demographic shifts have **depopulated rural areas, causing some traditions to fade**. **Population decline** can be visible in almost every part of the Danube Region, which also **affects the cultural identity of**

the area. The impact of modernisation has also introduced **new cultural influences**, especially in terms of technology, education and communication, which have reshaped the social structure of the region. Younger generations are more exposed to global trends, contributing to the **slow erosion of some traditional ways of life**. However, there is also a growing awareness of the need to protect and celebrate the region's socio-cultural heritage, with local authorities and organisations working to maintain a **balance between modern development and cultural preservation**. The resilience of the local communities and their efforts to adapt to changing circumstances while preserving their cultural heritage offers hope for a sustainable future where the past and present coexist harmoniously.

Diversity of rural landscape, preserved unique folk art, customs and folklore, creates favourable prerequisites for the development of rural tourism and agrotourism. On one hand, **the rise in ecotourism has brought renewed interest in the area's natural beauty and cultural heritage, prompting efforts to preserve local traditions and restore historical buildings**. On the other hand, the **influx of visitors has sometimes led to commercialisation**, with concerns about the dilution of authentic cultural practices. **The delicate balance between tourism promotion and the preservation of authenticity is important challenge**. Partnership emphasises that the valorisation of heritage is not only about conserving assets and stories; it is about empowering people and communities to reclaim and reinterpret their identity through meaningful cultural experiences.

The Danube Region is a richly diverse cultural space where traditions, crafts, music, folklore, gastronomy and local knowledge are deeply rooted in the daily lives of communities. The whole region presents a captivating mosaic of intangible cultural heritage, intricately interwoven into the fabric of everyday life and the collective identity of local community. This rich tapestry of heritage encompasses a multitude of elements, spanning from oral traditions and performing arts to social customs, rituals and profound knowledge and practices associated with nature and the universe. Each of these facets serves as a repository of stories, symbols and values that have been transmitted across generations, making them **indispensable components of the cultural landscape of the Danube Region**. However, intangible cultural heritage is also an underutilised driver for sustainable tourism and socio-economic revitalisation, particularly in rural and less-visited areas.

During the analysis process, project partners identified a wide range of intangible cultural heritage across the Danube Region, covering categories such as oral traditions and expressions (including language), performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge related to nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. All these categories are richly represented in the region, reflecting its layered and turbulent historical development. A common narrative running through the analyses is the **richness of local traditions** and the **strong link between**

communities and their cultural practices. Many elements of intangible cultural heritage continue to be practiced today, although they are increasingly threatened by modernisation, globalisation, depopulation, migration and generational gaps. Despite these pressures, many traditions are actively protected and promoted at local, national and international levels. Through community initiatives and institutional support, this heritage is preserved and transmitted to future generations, safeguarding the richness and diversity of the cultural heritage of this area. Intangible cultural heritage also represents an exceptional potential for the development of **continental, cultural and community-based tourism, complementary to rich natural heritage and ecotourism.** Traditional trades and crafts, if strengthened and renewed, can provide authentic tourism experiences. Education and capacity-building initiatives are essential in this process, empowering communities to take ownership of their cultural heritage and equipping them with the tools and resources needed to safeguard it effectively and to valorise it sustainably. Intangible cultural heritage of the project area is a priceless legacy that must be cherished, protected and celebrated. As custodians of this cultural heritage, the responsibility of local communities is to ensure its continuity and vitality, safeguarding it for posterity and sharing its beauty and significance with the world.

Particularly important is the **close link between natural and intangible cultural heritage.** Agricultural and food-related traditions, the use of medicinal plants, seasonal festivals tied to natural cycles and legends or myths connected with landscapes illustrate how cultural practices are embedded in the natural environment. This symbiosis provides **opportunities for developing authentic and heritage-based tourism products** that connect people to both nature and culture.

Several common challenges persist across the region. Intangible **cultural heritage is often underrepresented in official strategies,** and institutional support remains fragmented. Documentation is insufficient, leaving many traditions undocumented or poorly recorded, which increases the risk of cultural erosion or extinction. Even in regions with rich cultural resources, many practices remain oral or experiential and are not systematically archived. There is a clear need for better documentation activities, community-based documentation, digital storytelling, open-access archiving systems, etc. Demographic changes and globalisation exacerbate these vulnerabilities, while **intergenerational transfer of knowledge is weakening,** as younger generations migrate or turn to global cultural trends. In many rural areas, some traditions are at risk of disappearing due to declining populations and the absence of mechanisms for transmission. Therefore, in many rural areas, some specific traditions are at risk of extinction due to **lack of public support, declining population or absence of younger generations willing to continue the practices.**

Valorisation of intangible cultural heritage through community-based tourism is seen by the partnership as one of the possible ways to strengthen its protection, but challenges remain.

Limited visibility, insufficient interpretation, weak integration into tourism products and lack of targeted promotion have resulted in underutilisation of this resource, especially in less-visited rural areas. Intangible cultural heritage is often overshadowed by more visible tangible monuments or mass tourism attractions. At the same time, there is a **risk of over-commercialisation**, where cultural practices are adapted for mass tourism in ways that disconnect them from their authentic context. **Balancing economic valorisation with authenticity therefore remains a key challenge.**

Nevertheless, numerous potentials have been identified. Festivals, cultural events and craft fairs provide opportunities for further development into **community-based tourism experiences** that foster intergenerational learning and strengthen community cohesion. There is also significant scope for **establishing regional and transnational networks of cultural practitioners**, NGOs and local administrations to exchange methods, collaborate on projects and **advocate for stronger policy support**. The creation of **thematic routes** integrating intangible cultural and natural heritage, supported by community-based storytelling, interactive presentations and branding initiatives, offers a way to increase visibility and ensure sustainable valorisation. Digital documentation, open-access archives and educational programmes focused on youth involvement are essential to safeguard this heritage and keep it for future generations.

3.7. National and macro-regional policies, strategies and projects

Across the Danube Region, the strategic and policy landscape reflects a growing recognition of the importance of cultural and natural heritage as drivers for sustainable regional development. The territorial analyses prepared by MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership highlight a diverse but converging policy framework at national, regional and local levels, strongly aligned with European macro-regional strategies of which the most important is the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Partnership agrees and acknowledges the importance of developing tourism that is sustainable, inclusive, responsible and community-oriented, rooted in the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Partnership identified that most recent local and regional strategies explicitly support eco-tourism, rural tourism and cultural tourism as mechanisms to diversify local economies, particularly in rural and less-visited areas.

Most important macro-regional policy document for the whole Danube Region is the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**, which is one of the four macro-regional strategies of EU.

Developed as a cooperation mechanism within the Danube Region, EUSDR aims at fostering economic and social development by strengthening the implementation of EU policies and legislation in the partner countries. Main objectives in the field of tourism and culture are: developing a Danube brand for the entire Danube Region; creating new cultural routes and supporting existing cultural routes in the Danube Region; developing green tourism products in the Danube Region; sustainable conservation of cultural heritage and natural values by developing relevant clusters and networks of museums, interpretation centres, and visitor centres in the Danube Region; strengthening cooperation and contacts between people of different backgrounds, encouraging creativity and fostering cultural innovation and economic development based on heritage, traditions, and tourism; enhancing the Danube Region as an important European tourist destination; and developing and expanding active and sustainable tourism. EUSDR serves as a strong and encouraging framework for joint transnational cooperation and development of cross-border heritage-based tourism, ecological and cultural routes and community-driven regional initiatives. Partnership identified strong alignment of local and regional strategic and policy documents within the Danube Region with EUSDR priorities, especially those concerning environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism. Most important strategic element of EUSDR for the development of Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region is the **Priority area 3: Culture and Tourism**, with most important actions that should be emphasised:

- *ACTION 1: Promote sustainable tourism in the Danube Region and capitalise on EUSDR projects in the areas of culture, nature and tourism;*
 - This action include: Promote investments in green and blue forms of tourism incl. all forms of ecotourism, cultural tourism, cycling, hiking and activity tourism as well as innovative SMEs active in this area; Develop effective destination management systems: develop integrated approach to sustainable destinations, providing synergies among all stakeholders, stimulating development of coherent destination management (through trainings, etc.); Establish excellence centres for innovation in interdisciplinary product design (sub forms of selective tourism forms, etc.).
- *ACTION 2: Support and promote cultural tourism in the Danube Region;*
 - This action include: Develop relevant clusters and networks of museums and galleries including interpretation and visitor centres on both tangible and intangible heritage within the Danube Region and develop interpretation, communication and marketing strategies for its touristic valorisation. Awareness raising campaigns to be organised to stimulate an integrated approach to cultural heritage presentation and interpretation for wider tourism audiences and visitors. Visibility of heritage to be stimulated through innovative sustainable tourism promotion. Promote the UNESCO heritage in the member countries, raise awareness about the tentative lists in the respective countries, organisation of events / festivals with impact on regional level, which promote the cultural heritage of the region.
- *ACTION 3: Invest in sustainable quality products, services, innovative forms and infrastructure in the fields of tourism and culture, promote skills, education and creating jobs in the related areas;*
 - This action include: Stimulate cross-sectoral partnerships/projects/initiatives; invest in knowledge management and human resource development, facilitate mobility schemes for people active in or studying the areas of tourism or culture; stimulate expert-to-expert exchange in order to enhance

transparent innovation in cultural tourism initiatives, creating, supporting and implied the SMEs, NGOs from related areas.

- **ACTION 5: Promote and encourage the development of the cultural activities and creative sectors;**
 - This action include: Enhance cooperation of science and research with the cultural heritage (including underwater heritage), natural heritage and tourism sector; promote strategies, concepts, networking and investments in new technologies/digitalization in the area of culture and culture/multicultural and natural heritage; digitalise the cultural resources for promoting and preserving the cultural identity of the Danube Region, develop and promote intercultural and multicultural activities and exchanges among the Danube basin.

- **ACTION 6: Promote cultural heritage in the Danube Region;**
 - This action include: Build on cultural diversity as strength of the Danube Region, develop new and support existing Cultural Routes, protecting of cultural values; Investigate, revive and promote cultural heritage, traditions, folklore, handicrafts, contemporary arts and other authentic activities of ethnic communities along the Danube Region – showcasing and valorising the region's richness and cultural diversity - for preservation, safeguarding, identity building, intercultural dialogue, multicultural community development, communication and storytelling. Enhance the visibility of rural/local, less visited areas, cultural tangible and intangible heritage sites as well as underwater areas and communicate their value; strengthening cooperation and contacts between people of different origins, encouraging creativity and entrepreneurship and stimulating cultural innovation and ethnic as well as economic development, based on cultural heritage, traditions and cultural tourism. Promoting cultural heritage through knowledge transfer, digitalisation, innovation and technology with the aim of stimulating the competitiveness of the creative economy and promoting cultural tourism. Particular interest will be given to the interpretation of cultural heritage by contemporary arts and new technologies with the aim of developing new narratives.

In addition to the EUSDR as the fundamental macro-regional strategy on which the Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region must rely, it is also important to mention the **EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)**. Although it does not cover all territory covered by our future Strategy nor the whole EUSDR scope, this macro-regional strategy is important for the part of the Danube Region that includes the countries: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. In their context, it is necessary to harmonise the aspirations of both strategies in order to achieve the desired goals of sustainable development. In that case, most important pillars of EUSAIR are those focused on sustainable tourism (*Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism*) and environmental quality (*Pillar 3 Environmental Quality*). Pillar 4 Sustainable Tourism focuses on developing the sustainable and responsible tourism potential of the Adriatic-Ionian Region, through innovative and quality tourism products and services. It also aims at promoting responsible tourism behaviour on the part of all stakeholders. Its objectives include the diversification of tourism products and services along with tackling seasonality of tourism demand, as well as improving the quality and innovation of tourism offer and enhancing the sustainable and responsible tourism capacities of the tourism actors. Pillar 3 Environmental Quality includes objectives of ensuring a good environmental and ecological status of environment, contribution to biodiversity protection and reducing pollutions. It is more important for natural heritage protection. Therefore, EUSAIR promotes the valorisation of natural and cultural heritage as drivers of sustainable development, encourages diversification of tourism

products beyond coastal hotspots and supports the development of thematic routes and eco-tourism in rural and less visited areas. Additionally, the strategy emphasises community engagement, cross-border cooperation and innovation in tourism services.

As well as EUSAIR, the third relevant macro-regional strategy is the **EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP)**, which is important for part of Danube Region that includes the countries: Slovenia, Austria and Germany. This strategy promotes sustainable economic development, environmental protection and the valorisation of cultural and natural assets in mountainous and rural areas. EUSALP encourages the preservation of Alpine cultural identity and supports innovative tourism models that integrate local heritage and community participation.

Despite the abundance of strategies, some regions within the Danube Region report **barriers in translating policy into practice**, as well as **issues with insufficient implementation capacities**, especially at local level, which are often limited. In many cases, local authorities depend on external funding and NGOs to deliver specific results, while at the same time NGOs depend heavily on external sources of funding to be able to finance themselves at all, creating a *'vicious circle'*. This is also an **issue in terms of integrating natural and intangible cultural heritage in policies**. They are declaratively involved in sustainable development, but the concrete application of their sustainable valorisation often depends on EU funding sources. Also, while those policies often target one or the other type of heritage, holistic strategies that combine both elements for community-based tourism remain rare. This can be explained with the **issue of lacking the strategic coherence**. Another challenge is the **fragmentation of strategic documents**, especially at the local level, since some local administration units lack specific sectoral strategies or rely on general development documents, which do not always prioritise heritage or tourism. There is also a challenge of *'top-down'* governance structures in some countries, which rely on centralisation of decision-making, leading to **low responsiveness to local needs and reduced public participation**. Funding options are lacking and coordination between levels of governance is weak, reducing effectiveness of strategic planning.

Despite those barriers, Danube Region offer many examples of promising practices and strategic alignment. Best example is the omnipresent **cyclotourism development**, which is a **strong transversal priority** across most countries of Danube Region. Partnership identified higher level of implementation of cycling infrastructure development in the context of tourism development, and even in **linking natural and tangible cultural heritage with various walking and cycling routes**. Cultural routes and festivals are being used effectively to promote both tangible and intangible heritage within the strategic measures. Ecological and cultural revitalisation projects show how integrated approaches can valorise heritage while fostering sustainable tourism and environmental education. Policies, strategies and projects across the Danube Regions show a **growing convergence around the sustainable use of cultural and natural heritage**. However,

better coordination, stronger local implementation mechanisms and integrated heritage approaches will be key to unlocking the full potential of community-based tourism. There is a lot of projects that partnership mentioned, which are good examples of sustainable valorisation of natural, tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Their brief overview is given in chapter 4. *Good Practices Analysis conclusions.*

3.8. Summary of Territorial Analysis

Danube Region is defined by its great geographical, historical, cultural and natural diversity. The diversity of natural wealth is accompanied by cultural diversity shaped by centuries of interaction between different cultures and civilizations. Despite socio-economic inequalities and uneven levels of development within the macro-region, this diversity provides a strong basis for cross-border cooperation, sustainable growth and joint valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Shared ecological systems, especially those linked to the Danube, further reinforce the functional and transnational character of the area and highlight the need for integrated approaches to sustainable development management.

Economic structure of the Danube Region is extremely diverse. Urban centres record dynamic economic performance with diversified structures, while rural areas are most often oriented towards agriculture and face development challenges such as unemployment, population ageing and outmigration of young and educated people. Micro and small enterprises dominate the economic structure, but many operate in lower value-added sectors with limited innovation capacity. Wage differences and 'brain drain' weaken long-term competitiveness, especially in rural and less developed areas. Tourism plays an increasingly important role, but is territorially uneven. Cities and coastal destinations have developed tourism, while rural areas have largely untapped potential, despite their exceptional resources. Unlocking this potential requires a stronger inclusion of natural and intangible cultural heritage in sustainable tourism and sustainable forms of tourism (hiking, cycling, trekking, outdoor activities, etc.), as well as territorially based strategies that develop community-based tourism offers and community-based management of tourism development and branding. Changes in the tourism sector after COVID-19 have resulted in increased interest in forms of tourism based on nature and exploring new content based on cultural and experience tourism. However, challenges to development arise, such as the seasonality of tourism activities, spatially unbalanced tourism development, insufficient coordination and cooperation of stakeholders, insufficient interpretation of heritage, insufficient inclusion of heritage in the offer, as well as numerous infrastructure and transport shortcomings in rural areas (most notably the issue of accessibility by public transport). Opportunities for the

future development of sustainable tourism lie in the diversification of tourism offer and tourism products, the expansion of digital and promotional tools and the strengthening of community-based initiatives. Cross-border cycling and hiking routes, thematic trails and routes, and natural and intangible cultural heritage itineraries can connect fragmented local offers into a recognisable Danube tourism identity.

The Danube Region's natural wealth is exceptionally large and is characterised by a high quality of environmental conservation. The extensive network of protected natural areas, elements of the Natura 2000 network and the Emerald Network areas underline the European importance of the region for the conservation of biodiversity. Natural heritage is not only an environmental value, but also a **living heritage landscape** in which ecology, traditions and culture are intertwined. The challenges associated with the conservation of natural values arise primarily from the increasing pressures of climate change. Climate change is manifested through prolonged droughts, floods, forest fires and the risk of biodiversity loss, which increases the urgency of adaptive and climate-resilient management. There is a strong synergy between natural and intangible heritage, which opens up opportunities for ecotourism, heritage education and sustainable community-based development. However, it is necessary to be aware of the risk of excessive tourist exploitation of natural heritage, which could put the preservation of natural values at risk. Therefore, it is necessary and a priority to develop environmental monitoring systems, as well as monitoring tourist activities and developing sustainable visitor management models.

Socio-cultural environment reflects a multi-layered historical evolution, from prehistoric settlements and Roman heritage to Byzantine, Slavic, Ottoman and Habsburg influences, socialist industrialisation and contemporary modernisation. These transformations have created a mosaic of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which is today visible in numerous oral traditions, rituals, crafts, songs, dances, legends, etc. Despite depopulation, globalisation and the weakening of intergenerational knowledge transmission, local communities show resilience through festivals, associations and cultural institutions. Intangible heritage has great potential for community-based tourism, but it is often under-represented in policies, poorly documented and overshadowed by more visible forms of heritage. Better documentation, digital storytelling, intergenerational learning and sustainable valorisation are needed. However, the first step is to implement measures to preserve, digitalise and archive intangible cultural heritage, so that it can be sustainably valorised in connection with natural heritage. It is necessary to be aware of the risk of touristification or '*disneyfication*' of intangible cultural heritage, therefore its interpretation must be in line with the preservation of the cultural values of the heritage and the local community that is its '*guardian*'.

Infrastructure and mobility are key to supporting the development of tourism in rural and less visited areas. Rural areas within the Danube Region have significant limitations in the context of

the need to modernise basic communal and transport infrastructure due to obsolescence and generally poor maintenance. The transport context is particularly important in the tourism context because it determines the accessibility of tourist facilities. Public transport is a fundamental disadvantage in most rural areas, which is why most of the area is only accessible by individual transport. However, the potential of sustainable green mobility (cycling, walking, etc.) is huge and is recognised as a strategic opportunity that must be valorised when developing community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas. Key investments are in intermodal hubs, pedestrian and bicycle paths, modernisation of public transport and digital tools that facilitate travel planning and heritage interpretation.

In conclusion, territorial analysis reveals both the wealth and vulnerability of the Danube Region. Common challenges include socioeconomic differences, emigration, seasonality, infrastructural deficiencies, climate pressures, fragmented heritage management and insufficiently valorised heritage resources, especially in the context of community-based tourism. At the same time, opportunities lie in community-based tourism, digital innovation, cross-border collaboration and integrated approaches that link natural and intangible cultural heritage. Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region must therefore focus on sustainable, inclusive and locally rooted models, which will confirm the Danube Region as a unique cultural and ecological region with a strong transnational potential for collaboration.

4. Good Practices

Analysis conclusions

Important part of the implementation of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project is the mapping and analysis of examples of good practices in the Danube and broader region on projects and activities that deal with sustainable community tourism development, with an emphasis on rural and less visited areas. The results of good practice analysis were prepared as a *Deliverable 1.2.1. Report on examples of best practices in sustainable community tourism development*, within the *Activity 1.2. Mapping and analysis of examples of good practices in the Danube and broader region on projects and activities that deal with sustainable community tourism development*. Main conclusions that are relevant for preparation of the Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region are shown in this chapter.

The analysis of good practices was carried out in order to identify key patterns, innovative approaches, challenges and potentials related to initiatives to develop sustainable forms of valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region, with special reference to the involvement of local communities and stakeholders in order to encourage the development of community-based tourism. The purpose of the analysis was to strengthen the basis for the creation of the *Strategy for valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas in the Danube Region*, through the identification and presentation of examples of good practice that, with their experience and proven models and activities, can support the creation of a model of sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. The objective for the measures and actions of the Strategy is to be based on previous experiences and conclusions of relevant projects in order to ensure the transfer of knowledge and support quality ideas.

Conducted analysis emphasised a great interdisciplinarity of relevant good practice examples of project, activities and initiatives. This is in accordance with the settings of interdisciplinary and integrated development of sustainable tourism in which natural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, local community, innovation and sustainability are intertwined elements. The most common synergies occur between the protection and valorisation of intangible cultural heritage and the involvement of the local community, as the transfer of knowledge, the preservation of skills and the interpretation of tradition are unthinkable without the **active participation of local**

community. Tourism in rural and less visited areas is strongly associated with the preservation of natural heritage and the sustainability of tourism activities, while innovations often act as horizontal elements that improves all other topics. These synergies confirm the **importance of a multidisciplinary approach** and show that sustainable tourism develops by respecting the cultural, ecological, social and economic dimensions.

Analysis emphasised several common features that can be highlighted within the Danube Region. Frequent **integration of multiple sectors** with the aim of creating comprehensive and sustainable tourism products have been observed, which, in addition to tourism, also include heritage protection, education and broader economic development. **Involvement of the local community** appears as a key prerequisite for the sustainable heritage valorisation model and tourism product. Analysed examples emphasised that the local community must not only be the bearer of activities or an observer, but must be **actively involved as a co-creator of content and generator of new innovative ideas.** This ensures the long-term sustainability and applicability of the created activities, even after the project financing has ended (if financed by external sources). Analysis emphasise the importance of **integrating local heritage as a resource for sustainable development** in rural and less visited areas, while some of the examples also highlight the importance and potential of **integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage.** Models that valorise this approach highlights that it creates an authentic tourist (visitor) experience that provides high visitor satisfaction, and also strengthens internal cooperation between local stakeholders, giving them a means of long-term sustainable development. **Innovations** are most often present in the form of various **digital tools**, while a special innovation is multisensory interpretation, which strengthens the connection of visitors with the destination, community and content due to the sensory and emotional interaction that multisensory content encourages. There is also an increasingly pronounced trend of **directing tourist flows towards rural and less visited areas**, which contributes to more balanced territorial development and reduces pressure on overloaded destinations.

On the other hand, through the research of good practice examples, challenges that need to be taken into account during the preparation of future projects and the planning of measures and actions for the development of the Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region have also been identified. It is necessary to be aware of the **risk of commercialisation of heritage** due to risk of inappropriately planned tourist content and activities, which could result in a **decrease in the authenticity** of the interpretative content (heritage). A common reason for the difficulty in implementing an innovation or continuing to implement activities created during the projects is the **lack of financial resources to support the further development of innovations**, as well as the **lack of professional (expert) capacity and infrastructure** in rural and less visited areas. **Those areas that invest significantly more effort in education and capacity building can expect better results in implementing innovations related to tourism and valorisation of local heritage.** In addition

to education itself, it is important to strengthen cooperation between stakeholders, but also to encourage cross-sectoral cooperation. In most cases, the challenge of **weaker intergenerational knowledge transfer** in local communities and **reduced interest** among younger generations in preserving, nurturing and valorising heritage, especially intangible cultural heritage, is evident. In order to overcome this challenge, it is necessary to raise awareness among all stakeholders, as well as to adapt the content to modern conditions, while closely monitoring the state of heritage in order to preserve it from external risks in the long term. In international and cross-border projects, the **challenges of transferring knowledge and innovations** arise due to the harmonisation of different legislative frameworks, methodologies and standards, which conditions the application of innovations in different contexts. It is particularly important to note that some practices are difficult to transfer to other areas due to their deep roots in the local cultural and natural context. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that **there is no one-size-fits-all solution** in creating a sustainable heritage valorisation model.

The analysis showed that the most valuable elements that can be transferred to other parts of the Danube Region are: **participative management models** in which the community plays a leading role; **integration of cultural and natural heritage into the tourism offer**; **application of innovative interpretation methods** (multisensory approaches, digital tools, interactive platforms); and **focus on long-term environmental sustainability** through **climate change adaptation** and the integration of a **circular economy** principles. Examples of good practice emphasise the importance of developing systematic **education and knowledge transfer programs** for all stakeholders, implementing activities to **strengthen the capacity of local communities**, developing financial models that would ensure **long-term financial sustainability**, encourage the **use of innovations** and **provide support to rural and less visited areas** with high potential for sustainable development.

Some of the examples of good practice that were explored during the implementation of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project are presented in the next table.

Table 1. Some examples of good practice from the area of the Danube Region relevant for the creation of the Strategy

| NAME | SHORT DESCRIPTION |
|------------------------|--|
| ADRION 5 SENSES | This was an innovative project that integrated all five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch) into the design of tourism experiences, fostering a deep emotional connection between visitors and destinations through multi-sensory interpretative content. Multi-sensory interpretation method is particularly effective in attracting and educating diverse target groups, including children and people with disabilities. It is the innovative project which integrated all five sense into the creation of a tourism brand and experience, fostering a deeper emotional connection between visitors and destinations, and increasing visitor loyalty. |
| ADRIONET | A network of authentic villages that revitalises rural areas through the promotion of authentic traditional architecture, customs and local products. The ADRIONET project is an example of good practice due to its innovative approach to addressing the marginalisation |

| NAME | SHORT DESCRIPTION |
|--|---|
| | and under-valorisation of small, culturally rich rural areas in the Adriatic-Ionian region. By creating a Transnational Network of 'Authentic Villages,' the project demonstrated how collaborative efforts can enhance social, economic and environmental sustainability while preserving unique cultural and natural heritage. A key aspect of ADRIONET's success lies in its community-driven approach. The concept of 'hospitable communities' empowered local population to become active custodians of their heritage, promoting slow and green tourism while enhancing community well-being. |
| Amazing AoE | This project represents transnational good practice that showcases how sustainable tourism can be rooted in the unique natural and cultural landscapes of the 'Amazon of Europe', which includes the Mura, Drava and Danube rivers. By developing flagship ecotourism products like River Trails and Hiking Trails, and implementing the Green Destination Tourism Impact Model, project demonstrates how responsible visitor management and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand. Through cross-border cooperation and the promotion of less-visited areas, the project revitalises rural regions using a circular economy approach, local value chains and community-based development. The AoE Academy and Business Hub further empower local stakeholders, providing a replicable model of sustainable destination development driven by community engagement. |
| Be.CULTOUR | The project introduces the 'Living Lab' concept in which local authorities, creative industries, research institutions, local communities and local stakeholders collaborate. Through the innovative governance model 'living lab', new approaches to heritage interpretation are tested, including interactive digital platforms, participatory workshops and the development of tourism product prototypes. The model of co-creation of products with the local community is particularly noteworthy, ensuring greater relevance and long-term sustainability. |
| Central Danube Tour | Project aimed at strengthening tourism development in the central part of the Danube Region through the creation of an integrated offer that connects the cultural, natural and multi-ethnic heritage of less-visited destinations. The cooperation of several local communities to create a joint tourist product is particularly noteworthy, which increases the visibility of smaller towns and encourages the dispersion of tourist flows from the main urban centres. The establishment of the Central Danube Tourism Network highlights the importance of collaboration among stakeholders, setting a precedent for other regions facing similar challenges. The use of events like the DanubeArt Festival further demonstrated how cultural activities could enhance visibility and attract visitors while fostering community cohesion. |
| DESTIMED PLUS | This was an innovative project that developed and tested a standardised methodology for measuring the ecological footprint of tourism packages in protected areas. By combining quantitative and qualitative indicators, it enabled destinations to monitor the environmental impact of tourism, including greenhouse gas emissions, resource consumption and biodiversity pressures. Model actively involved local communities in adjusting tourism products to match the area's carrying capacity, ensuring alignment with environmental sustainability and community interests. This approach creates long-term, sustainable tourism offers that protect natural heritage while supporting local development. |
| EcoVeloTour | It represents good practice example that promotes sustainable cycling tourism by integrating green transport corridors with the preservation and interpretation of natural heritage in the Danube Region. The project combines the development of cycling infrastructure with environmental education and digital tools, encouraging low-emission tourism and responsible visitor behaviour. By involving local communities in planning and management, EcoVeloTour empowers stakeholders and supports sustainable regional development while highlighting the natural values along the routes, as well as green mobility. |
| Folk Festival – Through the Eyes of the Young | Festival is an example of intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage through tourism. Young people take an active role in the interpretation of traditional dances, songs |

| NAME | SHORT DESCRIPTION |
|----------------------------|---|
| | and customs, while older members of the community act as mentors. This encourages the creative involvement of young people in the development of tourism products, which contributes to the sustainability and recognition of the destination. |
| HUMANITA | Project combines the restoration of degraded natural areas with tourism development activities involving the local community. It represents an example of good practice due to its innovative and participative approach to addressing human-nature conflicts in protected areas. The project integrates evidence-based methodologies with community engagement, creating a model that balances tourism development with conservation. |
| KATUN | Project focuses on the preservation of mountain pastoral settlements (katuns) and their associated traditional practices, including agriculture, animal husbandry and gastronomy. It stands out for its integration of intangible heritage into the tourist offer through accommodation facilities, themed routes and gastronomic offer. This approach contributes to a more active preservation of cultural identity, and ensures direct economic benefits for the local population through the development of sustainable forms of tourist activities. |
| Living Danube Limes | It represents an innovative heritage project that revitalises the cultural legacy of the Roman Empire through a 'living history' approach, combining archaeological research with interactive performances, workshops, and participatory events. By interpreting both tangible and intangible heritage elements (such as traditional knowledge, skills, and storytelling), project creates immersive experiences that engage visitors of all ages. It stands out for its effective integration of cross-border cooperation, community involvement, and eco-friendly tourism, resulting in a sustainable cultural route that supports heritage preservation while stimulating local economies. |
| REDISCOVER | Aimed at researching, documenting and interpreting the hidden Jewish heritage in the cities along the Danube, this project represents an example of detailed research work combined with a participative approach of the local community. By using modern interpretation methods and cultural tourism, the project succeeded in revitalising almost forgotten elements of cultural identity and including them in the offer of destinations. |
| Tocati | Tocati is an international festival of traditional street games that transforms public spaces into vibrant platforms for intercultural exchange, participative tourism and community engagement. Through interactive activities that involve visitors as active participants, the festival promotes the safeguarding of intangible heritage in an innovative and inclusive way. Its strong emphasis on youth involvement, intergenerational dialogue, and international cooperation ensures cultural continuity while enhancing social cohesion. Tocati stands out as a model of social innovation, where public spaces are revitalised and cultural diversity is celebrated through tourism that is both community-driven and sustainable. |
| Via Transilvanica | An ambitious project of a hiking trail of more than 1,400 kilometres through rural parts of Romania, connecting different regions, landscapes and cultural identities. The values that guide Via Transilvanica are community, diversity, care for nature, the celebration of rural heritage and slow tourism. It is an example of a successful way of connecting rural and less visited areas with a long-distance trail. |

More information about the projects, as well as more examples of other projects, can be found in *Deliverable 1.2.1. Report on examples of best practices in sustainable community tourism development*, which was created within the MYSTICAL DANUBE project.

5. Participative consultation process with stakeholders

Community-based tourism rests on the strong involvement of the local community and relevant stakeholders in the process of developing a sustainable offer, where the local community is the fundamental bearer and generator of development ideas, in this case the development of sustainable tourism in rural and less visited areas based on the integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Consultation process aimed to ensure that this Strategy is co-created with local communities, regional and national government and institutional stakeholders, NGOs, SMEs and various experts from across the Danube Region. During the MYSTICAL DANUBE project implementation, partnership organised various participative consultation events, including workshops, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In some cases, participative consultation process was complemented with questionnaire surveys and field interviews. Used methods combined *World Café*, thematic focus groups and semi-structured interviews, allowing both structured prioritisation and open exploration of real needs, barriers and opportunities visible from the perspective of involved stakeholders. Conducted participative consultation process with stakeholders engaged more than 200 stakeholders from across the Danube Region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. Geographical range of consultation activities covered diverse areas of the Danube Region, which ensured representativeness and appreciation of the challenges and needs of most spatial contexts in the Danube Region.

Participative consultation process within MYSTICAL DANUBE project showed **high level of agreement among stakeholders regarding the need for an integrated approach that simultaneously valorises natural and intangible cultural heritage and places local communities in rural and less visited areas at the centre of sustainable development through the community-based tourism development.** Through workshops, focus groups and interviews, partners systematised local experiences and proposals based on the previous conclusions of *Territorial Analysis* and *Good Practice Analysis*, and shaped them into operational framework of objectives, measures and actions. In this way, a transition was achieved from

analytical process to strategic process, which was shaped by relevant stakeholders from sectors that are key to the project topics (social and community development, preservation of natural heritage, preservation of intangible cultural heritage, development of sustainable tourism, development of community-based tourism etc.).



Figure 3. Details from the consultation process activities (clockwise from top right: (1) Podgorica, Montenegro, (2) Diósjenő, Hungary, (3) Brezovo, Bulgaria, (4) Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

In addition to achieving the goals of the participative consultation process, which included the **preparation of proposals for objectives, measures and actions by stakeholders**, a secondary goal of the consultation process was **to motivate stakeholders and local communities to understand and initiate the concept of community-based tourism and the integrated valorisation of the natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural areas**. For this reason, the process emphasised the benefits that can be realised through such development and directed them towards the long-term goals of sustainable development. In this way, stakeholders were simultaneously the creators of the Strategy concept, as well as target groups who develop awareness of more sustainable development and the importance of joint cooperation in this process. Through the participative consultation methods used, stakeholders jointly proposed and

groups (youth, women, elderly, people with disabilities, minorities), promoting the principles of circular management (reducing waste generation, reuse, repair, recycling), encouraging climate neutrality, developing green mobility, encouraging digitalisation, etc. This confirmed that the **model of community-based tourism must simultaneously strengthen social cohesion and reduce environmental pressure, with measurable benefits for the communities in which it develops.**

Implementation of participative consultation process is a source of great knowledge that needs to be applied in the Danube Region in order to achieve a common transnational approach to sustainable and integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage based on community-based tourism in rural and less-visited areas. This would create better conditions and opportunities for the rural and less-visited areas of the Danube Region to become more visible, competitive and resilient, without compromising on the protection of nature and culture that make them unique.

6. Strategic framework

6.1. Vision

Vision represents the overarching, long-term ambition that MYSTCAL DANUBE partnership and involved stakeholders and local communities want to achieve with this Strategy. It captures the shared aspiration for how natural and intangible cultural heritage can boost sustainable development, community well-being and cross-border cooperation throughout the Danube Region. Vision was developed based on proposals made from stakeholders involved in participative consultation process, and shaped by partnership according to the conclusions made from analytical parts of the project. The vision of this Strategy is:

Rural and less-visited areas of the Danube Region will become *'living heritage landscapes'* of natural value and cultural diversity in which empowered local communities, through the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, develop authentic, inclusive and climate-responsible models of community-based tourism, supported by innovation and cross-sectoral and transnational cooperation, which promotes balanced and sustainable territorial development of the Danube Region, strengthens social cohesion and improves the quality of life for current and future generations.

Vision directs the rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region towards becoming ***'living heritage landscapes'*** of natural values and cultural diversity, in which the local community is the active guardian of heritage and generator of valorisation ideas needed for sustainable development. Vision emphasises integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, understood as the joint recognition, interpretation and promotion of landscapes, ecosystems, traditions, skills, stories and customs, regardless of their formal level of protection. In practice, this

means that **whenever natural heritage will be valorised, the associated intangible cultural elements** (legends tied to places, traditional practices connected to nature, or community customs) **will also be taken into account and developed together as part of a single narrative** (and *vice versa*). This comprehensive approach strengthens the link between communities and their environment, preserves local identity and creates authentic experiences that are the foundation of **community-based tourism**. Through integrated perspective, local communities will become active, empowered and included actors who at the same time protect and safeguard their valuable heritage, and valorise it sustainably as a resource for innovative and sustainable socio-economic development. This vision also rests on the horizontal principles of the circular economy, efficient circular management of resources, green mobility and green infrastructure, climate neutrality and resilience, as well as the systematic inclusion of vulnerable groups. An important aspect of the vision is innovation (eg. interpretation through storytelling and digital tools), as well as cross-sectoral and transnational cooperation as mechanisms that enable coherent, long-term action at local, regional, national and macro-regional levels. In practice, this vision means that the protection and 'revival' of heritage is associated with the development of sustainable tourism products and experiences that create added value, encourage entrepreneurship and diversification of the local economy, reduce pressure on the environment and preserve the authenticity of destinations. This encourages balanced and sustainable territorial development, improves the quality of life of current and future generations, and ensures that the Danube Region is recognized as a sustainable, year-round, accessible and responsible destination based on valuable and protected heritage and strong communities. Through this innovative model of community-based tourism, it will contribute to the strengthening of local communities in rural and less-visited areas of the Danube Region.

6.2. Strategic objectives, measures and actions

That vision helped partnership to structure objectives that will serve as strategic priorities on target areas that contribute to realisation of the vision. 'Splitting' the Strategy into distinct objectives helps ensure that all critical aspects of heritage valorisation and community-based tourism development are addressed in a structured manner. Within each objective, few measures were prepared as a sub-goals or a specific approach format that breaks the broader objective into more manageable parts. Measures provide clearer direction and make it easier to track progress toward each objective. Each measure define actions as concrete tasks or interventions that will be carried out to achieve the measure. Actions transform high-level ideas into tangible steps and they are essential for implementation and monitoring.

The following chapter presents and describes the strategic framework, which was developed based on the conclusions of the analytical parts of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project, in particular through the results of the Territorial Analysis and the Good Practices Analysis, and was designed in cooperation with stakeholders and local communities from the Danube Region. The elements of strategic framework are linked to the overarching strategic planning acts at the macro-regional and transnational level, which are presented in this document. Each objective and each measure is described with regard to their purpose of implementation and contribution to the realisation of the vision and relevant objectives of transnational strategic documents.

OBJECTIVE 1. Protection, preservation and sustainable management of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural areas for long-term conservation of development resources

Rural areas of Danube Region face a series of challenges and risks that could threaten the preservation of natural and intangible cultural heritage as key development resources for the development of community-based tourism. Among the challenges highlighted in the analytical activities were the insufficient protection of valuable natural areas that are protected (as well as the insufficient recognition of the value of particularly valuable natural areas that are not (yet) formally protected), degradation of traditional landscapes, risk of forgetting and extinction of intangible cultural heritage (especially heritage which is not protected and documented), lack of

knowledge transfer of intangible cultural heritage, lack of systematic management and interpretation of heritage, as well as the limited involvement of local communities in the processes of protection and valorisation. A special risk is also the increasing pressure of tourist activities on the environment, often without adequate control, monitoring or involvement of the local population in decision-making. In addition, many communities do not have the capacity, tools or institutional support for long-term protection and sustainable use of heritage. In order to respond to these challenges in a unified way, the first objective was structured, which builds on the developed vision, and which encourages the improvement of a comprehensive approach to the protection and management of natural and intangible cultural heritage, which emphasises their mutual connection through interpretation possibilities and the active role of local communities in the sustainable valorisation of local resources. The objective is not focused solely on the protection and preservation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, but is also focused on encouraging responsible and sustainable management of it as a development resource of rural areas. The objective therefore strives to establish a balance between the preservation of the environment and the cultural values of the rural area and the creation of preconditions for responsible valorisation in the context of community-based tourism, in which the local community creates valorisation values, but also participates in the preservation, protection and promotion of heritage. This begins the creation of a strategic framework for the long-term preservation and activation of the resources of rural and less visited areas, while empowering local communities as key actors in their valorisation.

Measure 1.1. Contribution to the preservation, valorisation and sustainable management of natural spaces and traditional landscapes that represents natural heritage of rural areas

High-value natural areas and traditional rural and river landscapes form the core of natural heritage of Danube Region's rural areas, and as such represent fundamental development resources that must be sustainably valorised. Within the MYSTICAL DANUBE project, natural heritage is viewed from a broader perspective and also includes valuable natural areas that are not (yet) protected, but have great potential for protection and sustainable valorisation together with intangible cultural heritage. In future integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, natural and traditional landscapes could be included, as well as other forms of natural areas that can be valorised, and thus preserved from those uses that are inappropriate for the sustainable development of local community. It includes other natural areas that have the possibility of sustainable tourism valorisation, as well as those areas that may need protection according to the opinion of local communities that want to valorise them. Based on the results of

the *Territorial Analysis*, it has been clearly identified that many rural and less-visited areas within the Danube Region are rich in unique natural and anthropogenic (especially agrarian) landscapes that have been shaped by centuries of human activity. However, these spaces often remain insufficiently recognised and protected, and their interpretation and management are fragmented or non-existent. This measure is therefore aimed at the preservation and integrated valorisation of natural and traditional landscapes, with particular attention to linking these areas with intangible cultural heritage and involving local communities in their sustainable management and valorisation. Implementation of measure includes systematic mapping of natural heritage and other natural spaces and traditional landscapes, which are not officially protected for now, with the aim of their sustainable protection, interpretation and future connection with intangible cultural heritage (such as local legends, stories, customs, traditional beliefs, etc.). It is important within the measure to encourage the renovation and adaptation of these areas for visiting while ensuring minimal or zero impact on the environment, which would include the development of infrastructure guided by the principles of circular economy (recycled and natural materials) and eco-design (green infrastructure, natural materials, indigenous plants, harmonisation with landscape values, unobtrusive design, etc.). An important aspect of measure is encouraging preservation of biodiversity in natural areas, which would be achieved by planting indigenous and traditional plant species and green infrastructure that is in line with local environmental values. This would ensure the sustainable preservation of natural values of the area that the local community can sustainably use for its own sustainable development. Biodiversity protection is a contribution that helps achieve national and transnational objectives of environmental protection, nature, biodiversity and geodiversity. In line with the approaches recorded in the *Good Practices Analysis* and the proposals of stakeholders through the participative consultation process, this measure also include the revitalisation of traditional practices that contribute to nature conservation, such as collection and processing of medicinal plants, conservation of indigenous seeds, traditional mowing and grazing, traditional livestock farming (for example *transhumance*), maintenance of old vineyards, etc. These activities would strengthen local ecological resilience and encourage the development of strong cultural capital visible in intangible cultural heritage connected to natural heritage and the general environment in which human developed its culture. Such capital can be integrated into thematic tours, workshops and other forms of integrated valorisation and interpretation of heritage. Special attention is paid to the development and updating of management plans for key natural heritage areas, such as protected areas, Natura2000 sites and the Emerald network, defining activity zones, protection priorities and permitted forms of use. In this context, it is important to strengthen communication and information exchange among managers of natural heritage areas, while organising training and providing equipment for effective monitoring and implementation of management activities. It is also worth noting that during the participative consultation process, stakeholders from different parts of the Danube Region highlighted the need for stronger connections between local communities and natural resources, as well as for the creation of educational and interpretative content that brings the importance of nature conservation closer in an accessible way. This

measure, therefore, does not view natural heritage solely as a resource for tourism, but as the foundation for the sustainable development of rural communities, thus creating a balance between environmental protection, identity preservation and economic progress through responsible tourism, in this case through community-based tourism.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Mapping of natural heritage and other natural spaces and traditional landscapes with the aim of protecting, storytelling and connecting with intangible cultural heritage
- Restoration, development and adaptation of natural and traditional landscapes for visiting with minimal environmental impact
- Conservation of biodiversity through planting native, indigenous species and development of green infrastructure in accordance with the local environment
- Revive traditional practices which support biodiversity and conservation of natural environment (herbal medicine, sustainable grazing, seed preservation, vineyards)
- Develop, enforce and update management plans for key areas of natural heritage (protected natural areas, Natura2000, Emerald, etc.), including zoning, permitted activities and conservation priorities
- Increase communication and awareness among managers of natural heritage areas, with training and equipping to effectively conduct management and monitoring activities

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality*.

Measure 1.2. Monitoring the state of natural heritage that is valorised for tourism in order to preserve the natural values and quality of the environment

Given the increasing pressure of tourist activities on natural resources, especially in sensitive rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region, this measure emphasises the importance of systematic monitoring of the state of natural heritage with a view to environmental protection, sustainable use of resources and informed decision-making in heritage-oriented tourism planning. Idea of measure is to encourage active monitoring of the state of natural heritage that is valorised in the context of tourism activities in order to be able to monitor the load (quantity) of tourist activities and harmonise future activities with the possibilities of the area. The ultimate goal is to

preserve environment and to reduce potentially negative effects of tourist activities. Measure is primarily focused on environmental protection, but the data can be used for multi-level visitor management and achievement of optimal balance between environmental protection and sustainable development of local community through sustainable tourism activities. Measure arose from results of *Territorial Analysis*, which indicates significant differences in capacities for monitoring the environmental state within Danube Region, as well as from participative consultation process in which stakeholders highlighted need for reliable, accessible and modern monitoring systems, especially in context of biodiversity conservation and visitor management. Active monitoring of state of the environment and monitoring of tourist trends is essential for planning more sustainable tourist activities and content that will have a minimal impact on environment. Measure encourages development of innovative digital monitoring systems that will enable collection of data on state of natural resources and level of biodiversity, as well as the detection and mitigation of negative impact of tourism activities on the environment. Use of digital technologies, including real-time threat reporting systems, would enable rapid responses and preventive measures in protected and naturally valuable areas. Special emphasis will be given on developing an innovative AI-supported monitoring that could predict environmental impact of tourism activities. This innovative tool could help mitigate and avoid risks linked with overtourism of sensitive areas, and give support in decision-making process to create a best sustainable solution for valorisation of natural heritage, as well as integrated intangible cultural heritage. New AI monitoring tool could be a significant step forward in developing sustainable valorisation model. It is also planned to establish a data management system that will enable the collection, analysis and sharing of monitoring results with key stakeholders, including the local community, in order to ensure better and more objective conditions for decision-making on managing integrated heritage valorisation. One of specific proposals of stakeholders was the installation of educational and informative visitor counters in natural areas, made of recycled materials and equipped with solar power. Autonomous smart counters would be a suitable form of infrastructure for monitoring the state of tourist activities in natural and less accessible areas, and could also serve as information points for educating visitors about importance of natural heritage and the need for responsible environmental behaviour. Measure ultimately represents foundation of sustainable and responsible tourism because it ensures that decisions are based on real data and constant monitoring of the state of environment and tourism activities. Objective quantification is necessary for best possible preservation of natural heritage for future generations and ensuring long-term attractiveness of rural and less-visited areas, without negative impact of tourism on environment and resources.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Develop innovative digital monitoring systems to assess the status of natural resources and biodiversity, and mitigate the impact of tourism activities on environment (including real-time threat reporting)

- Development of informative (educative) visitor counters in natural areas (with built-in solar energy and eco-friendly/recycled material)
- Develop innovative AI-supported monitoring system that could predict impact of tourism activities on environment
- Develop data management system to collect, analyse and share monitoring results with stakeholders, policymakers, decisionmakers and local community involved in planning of integrated heritage valorisation

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA5 Environmental Risks*, *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality* and *PA7 Knowledge Society*.

Measure 1.3. Identify, map, archive, protect and restore elements of intangible cultural heritage and other valuable elements of heritage that are not protected (legends, myths, stories)

Intangible cultural heritage (stories, myths, legends, languages, music and customs), often remain outside formal systems of protection and valorisation, although they are crucial for preserving the identity and cohesion of local communities. Measure recognises urgency of identifying and protecting such elements, given their vulnerability due to the challenges identified in the analysis (globalisation, demographic changes and the weakening intergenerational transfer of knowledge). In the analytical phase of project, as well as during the participative consultation process, it was clearly highlighted that many intangible heritage elements in the Danube Region are not systematically documented, while local communities often lack the capacity or tools to preserve them and valorise them sustainably. Therefore, the goal of this measure is to enable the systematic collection, digitalisation and archiving of intangible cultural heritage, thus ensuring its long-term availability, but also the potential for its interpretation and valorisation through sustainable community-based tourism and connection with natural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is often not fully preserved, valued and documented in the same way in all countries of the Danube Region. That is why this measure encourages documentation of intangible cultural heritage in order to archive and preserve it in long term period, and an important element is the development of a digital repository and a digital database that would preserve information about intangible cultural heritage. Content being documented, such as speech and dialect, could be used in multimedia content to promote heritage and raise awareness of the importance of preserving and protecting culture. Objective is to preserve and responsibly value intangible cultural heritage to actively apply it in development of community-based tourism, so documenting and creating a database is an important prerequisite for achieving objective. This measure also has a

transnational effect, as it encourages creation of a common digital repository of intangible cultural heritage of Danube Region, which opens the possibility of developing cross-border and transnational collaborations. Such repository could be called the '*Mystical Danube Heritage Atlas*' and would contain multimedia content (text, sound, video), available in several languages and linked to heritage locations and values. Also, measure recognises importance of integrating intangible and tangible heritage, through development of comprehensive programs for restoration and protection of tangible cultural elements that are linked to local stories and customs, which creates a complete model of interpretation and valorisation of heritage. An important aspect of this measure also refers to the inclusion of local, regional and national authorities in the processes of recognition and protection of heritage through policies and strategic documents, which ensures institutional support, as well as prerequisites for financing future protection initiatives. This measure builds on the previous measure, considering how the MYSTICAL DANUBE project analyses intangible cultural heritage in a wider context, including those elements of heritage that are not officially protected, such as local stories, myths, legends, etc. Documenting and digitalising such forms of heritage is of great importance because it is often linked with natural heritage and natural elements. This is especially important because the entire Danube Region abounds in such forms of heritage due to its ethnic and cultural richness and diversity. And precisely such a measure contributes to the preservation of the cultural richness and diversity of communities and cultures.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Documenting, digitalising and archiving conversations, audio recordings, video recordings and other materials for the preservation and protection of intangible cultural heritage
- Research and documentation of legends, myths and stories of the Danube Region through a shared digital repository and narrative content
- Identification and assessment of cultural practices and intangible cultural heritage at risk of disappearing, with measures for protection
- Development of a digital repository of intangible cultural heritage of Danube Region with legends and myths included in wider heritage scope ('*Mystical Danube Heritage Atlas*')
- Support for the integration of traditional speeches and dialects into multimedia content (video/audio stories)
- Develop a comprehensive conservation and restoration programme for tangible cultural heritage linked with intangible cultural heritage and natural heritage identified for integrated valorisation
- Cooperate with local authorities and state government to include cultural risk prevention in strategies, policies and other framework

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*.

Measure 1.4. Strengthening community involvement in the preservation and nurturing of natural and intangible cultural heritage

Sustainability of preservation and valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage cannot be achieved without active participation of community that lives, valorise and transmits this heritage on a daily basis. For this reason, this measure focuses on strengthening the involvement of local community as a key actor in the preservation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, in line with objectives of participative and inclusive approach to sustainable development in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region. Participants in participative consultation process highlighted that many communities have emotional connection to their local heritage, but lack platforms, events and methods through which it can be expressed and nurtured. For this reason, it is envisaged to organise regular local events, such as '*Heritage Days*', which would include participative exhibitions, performances, narrations and other forms of shared expression of local community, with aim of strengthening sense of belonging and pride in local identity and heritage. In order to encourage long-term involvement of a wider range of stakeholders, measure also includes public awareness campaigns on value of natural and intangible cultural heritage, which would be implemented through local media, schools, social networks and public spaces, particularly targeting youth and vulnerable groups. In addition, communities are encouraged to establish civic initiatives and associations (NGOs) dedicated to heritage preservation, in order to take more organised and active role in local development. As important contribution to scientific and systematic approach to heritage preservation, measure envisages strengthening cooperation with scientific and academic community, especially ethnologists, anthropologists, ecologists, geographers and other experts in sustainable development. This cooperation could be achieved through joint projects on heritage research, fieldwork, student mentoring and development of scientifically based proposals for interpretation and protection of local heritage. Of particular importance is the involvement of community in voluntary actions for protection of natural heritage, such as cleaning natural areas, restoring trails, planting indigenous plants and installing interpretive content. Such activities have a direct positive impact on environment and contribute to creating a sense of shared responsibility towards heritage. Examples from *Territorial Analysis* and *Good Practice Analysis* show that local initiatives that combine education, community and creative expression have the greatest potential for long-term preservation and revitalisation of heritage. This measure therefore ultimately contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural resources, and the formation of active, proud and empowered local communities.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Hold regular '*Heritage Days*' in local communities, featuring participatory exhibitions, performances and storytelling, with the aim of developing a sense of connection with local heritage

- Public awareness campaigns to promote the value of heritage and encourage community involvement in its protection
- Strengthening cooperation with the academic community and universities with the aim of improving ethnographic research on intangible cultural heritage, as well as research and preservation of natural heritage
- Organisation of volunteer actions to clean up natural areas, landscapes and natural heritage

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA7 Knowledge Society*, *PA9 People & Skills* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

OBJECTIVE 2. Integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less-visited areas in Danube Region

Only after a clearly structured model of protection and preservation of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less visited areas, it is possible to approach the development of a model of joint integrated valorisation and interpretation of this heritage within the framework of community-based tourism in the Danube Region. What represents the initial challenge in such a way of presenting heritage in rural and less visited areas is the lack of a comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable model of valorisation and interpretation that would connect these two forms of heritage into a common narrative that would reflect the authenticity of local communities. This approach is therefore a novelty in the Danube Region, and given that the model would be based on strong local community involvement, it also represents a social innovation encouraged by this Strategy. Danube Region is rich in natural and intangible cultural heritage, especially its rural areas that have preserved traditional cultural identity and multicultural wealth, but the elements are often disconnected, uninterpreted and marginalized in tourism and development practice. Heritage is very often viewed fragmentedly without existing integration into a single identity and development framework (for example, natural heritage is often seen only as an area for protection, and intangible cultural heritage as an occasional folklore addition). This form of approach needs to be changed and directed towards sustainable formats of interpretation and valorisation. For this reason, this objective was created as a response to the stated challenges and potentials through the establishment of an integrated approach to the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, in which the local community is placed at the centre as the main bearer of identity and driver of sustainable development. Focus is on the development of

participative models that enable the joint recognition, documentation, interpretation and touristic design of heritage through contemporary narratives and technological tools, but based on tradition, landscape and identity. Objective places special emphasis on the development of concept for an innovative interpretive model based on storytelling, where elements of natural and intangible cultural heritage are integrated into unique interpretive experience. This creates new, authentic tourism products based on heritage and opens up a space for the expression of local communities through the creation of cultural and educational content in the function of development of tourist products and services. The centre of interpretation model creation is the development of a cultural route of Danube Region that integrates natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas - **Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route**. This transnational cultural route is the 'crown' of the MYSTICAL DANUBE partnership's contribution to the long-term development of community-based tourism, creating an example of how to approach valorisation in a sustainable and inclusive way. This enables multi-level recognition of heritage of rural areas in Danube Region, strengthens the market viability of the common tourist product and contributes to a more balanced regional development. Ultimately, this objective contributes to the establishment of a new model of integrated heritage valorisation, based on community, identity, participation, creativity and sustainability.

Measure 2.1. Initiating joint valorisation and interpretation of the natural and intangible cultural heritage of the Danube Region with local community as key actor

This measure lays the foundation for the development of a common and sustainable model of interpretation and valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region, whereby the local community is clearly positioned as the main generator of initiatives. It is based on understanding that without the inclusion of local voices and stories (especially those arising from everyday practices, customs, memories and language), interpretation would remain superficial, touristically instrumentalised and disconnected from the local context. It is in this context that the concept of community-based tourism stands out, as it is firmly emphasised in vision. Whenever natural heritage will be valorised, the associated intangible cultural elements (legends tied to places, traditional practices connected to nature, or community rituals) will also be taken into account and developed together as part of a single narrative (and *vice versa*). This comprehensive approach strengthens the link between communities and their environment, preserves local identity and creates authentic experiences that are the foundation of community-based tourism. This is the basis of integrated heritage valorisation model highlighted by this measure. Measure includes the organization of so-called '*heritage labs*'.

participative workshops and meetings in which local community members and stakeholders, with the help of experienced and creative experts, would jointly define which heritage elements they consider to be the most valuable, how they want to interpret them, what potential there is for their integration into the tourist and cultural offer and what benefits for local community wants to be achieved. Special attention will be paid to the revitalisation and creative interpretation of lesser-known elements of heritage and local tradition, such as local stories, myths and legends, which are often transmitted orally and have not been systematically documented so far, but are often linked to natural heritage and the environment. Measure encourages the connection and cooperation of the local community with artists and creatives, so that traditional content can be interpreted in modern and innovative ways, adapted to sustainable tourism valorisation and interpretation. In this way, natural and intangible cultural heritage will be shaped into an authentic cultural product that can have educational, tourism and economic value, while still maintaining authentic traditional heritage values. In order to successfully implement this, it is also necessary to strengthen the skills of local storytellers and tradition bearers, through various education, workshops or similar activities. Measure will also encourage forms of digital storytelling interpretation in which local youth will have the creative freedom to present intangible cultural heritage through contemporary forms of creativity and thus increase digital visibility of rural and less visited areas. This will also approach younger generations in order to increase interest in preservation and sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. As part of this measure, the creation of a common public database of natural and intangible cultural heritage from the entire Danube Region is foreseen, whereby the elements of heritage identified through a participative process would be linked to sustainable community-based tourism initiatives. Database would be publicly available and would serve as a basis for interpretation, education, promotion and connection of different localities within Danube Region. Ultimately, measure will contribute to initiating an understanding of the importance of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and build the capacity of communities to creatively design such an offer and create a basis for authentic tourism products of community-based tourism.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Organise a series of '*heritage labs*' with local communities to format a sustainable and responsible integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, including local stories, myths, legends and other underrepresented natural and cultural heritage elements with high potential of joint interpretation
- Support partnership of local community with artists and creatives to develop creative ways of heritage interpretation through music, theatre, video, installations, acting, souvenirs etc.
- Support local communities in organisation of creative interpretation models, interactive exhibitions and guided tours focused on joint interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage

- Support local storytellers and offer skill-building opportunities on storytelling techniques and performance
- Encourage digital storytelling projects of local youth to blend natural and intangible cultural heritage with contemporary creativity and to increase online visibility of rural and less-visited areas
- Include local narratives in interpretation models, as well as in online and offline marketing materials
- Creating a common online public database with the identified natural and intangible cultural heritage elements in the Danube Region, identified for integrated valorisation with community-based tourism initiatives

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality* and *PA9 People & Skills*.

Measure 2.2. Development of an innovative storytelling model for integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage

Development of an innovative storytelling model is a key tool for the integration of natural and intangible cultural heritage into contemporary tourist, educational and cultural content, especially in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. This measure results from a strong consensus among stakeholders who, through a participative consultation process, recognised storytelling as the most potent form of integrated interpretation of local heritage that can simultaneously stimulate a sense of identity, increase the visibility of rural and less-visited areas and strengthen sustainable forms of community-based tourism. Measure provides technical and organisational support in the development of an innovative storytelling model that would be applied for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region. It would be supported by development of a '*Step-by-step guide*' (manual) that would consolidate all the conclusions and findings of MYSTICAL DANUBE project and encourage its application in a long-term context. Guide will be a tool for local communities, schools, cultural institutions, entrepreneurs and tourism organisations, providing a clear framework for identifying, structuring and presenting local stories that connect natural elements with intangible cultural content. Given the exceptional potential for an innovative approach to storytelling, measure focuses on the development of digital content, including virtual walks, digital stories, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) and other forms of immersive storytelling, which were found successful in identified good practices. Modern technologies will enhance the experience of heritage and improve the attractiveness of the offer. In addition, interpretative storytelling model of integrated

valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage will also be applied through the development of thematic educational trails and routes, which will connect natural sites (natural heritage, valuable natural spaces, flora, fauna, valuable landscape) with cultural points of interest (e.g. objects of historical and cultural significance, tangible cultural heritage), while also including intangible cultural elements (myths, legends, stories, intangible cultural heritage). This would enable the development of authentic tourism products such as cultural routes, eco-trails, gastronomic events, traditional skills workshops and more. It is therefore important to integrate local natural and intangible cultural heritage into thematic tourism products supported by community-based tourism. Through a participative consultation process, stakeholders proposed the creation of '*heritage centers*' that would serve as the local centre of interpretation, education and development of new community-based tourism services based on integrated heritage. These centers, conceived as a kind of '*heritage incubators*', would enable members of local community to develop their own ideas based on integration of natural and intangible cultural heritage and turn them into tourist products and services through cooperation, education and creative work within framework of community-based tourism. Additionally, through a participative consultation process, it was proposed to establish small '*heritage corners*' in public spaces such as schools or libraries, so that children, youth and visitors can experience heritage through technology and interactive educational content. These corners may include, for example, headsets for audio stories, VR devices, tactile elements (adapted for people with disabilities and visually impaired people) and educational panels that interpret local heritage in an educational way. To encourage live interpretations or performances, measure also envisages the organisation of '*living museums*' or demonstration zones where local storytellers, artists and craftsmen would perform traditional practices, tell stories and involve audience in the reconstruction of customs and intangible cultural heritage linked with natural heritage. This would interpret heritage through a new dimension by including local community in interpretation, strengthening the emotional connection of visitors to the destination. Measure further encourages the strengthening of accessibility of content for vulnerable groups through the adaptation of interpretative content and infrastructure to people with disabilities, elderly and children, while at the same time connecting it with green mobility (cycle paths, walking routes), thereby further strengthening sustainability of rural tourism offer. Innovative storytelling model that will be developed will enable a comprehensive connection of rural area, tradition, people and experience into a unique, locally rooted and transnationally relevant story of rural and less-visited areas of the Danube Region through experiential content created by the local community.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Creation of a '*Step-by-step guide*' for the application of the storytelling model of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage based on the results of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project

- Development of digital content such as virtual walks, digital storytelling, immersive storytelling (VR/AR) and other innovative content to increase local heritage interpretation experiences, including legends, myths and stories linked with natural heritage
- Design and promote thematic educational trails and routes that connect natural sites, cultural landmarks and intangible cultural heritage elements (experiences, crafts, arts, legends, myths, etc.), highlighting less-visited areas through storytelling and interactive experiences emphasise on linking natural with intangible cultural heritage
- Integration of local natural and intangible cultural heritage into thematic tourism products (cultural routes, eco-trails, culinary experiences, craft workshops, etc.)
- Preserve and showcase unique local traditions, crafts and culinary practices to create authentic visitor experiences
- Link integrated valorisation and interpretation model to green mobility infrastructure (bike, hiking, etc.)
- Adaptation of interpretation content and infrastructure to vulnerable groups
- Development of heritage centres that will jointly interpret and valorise natural and intangible cultural heritage and provide space for community members to develop tourism products and services based on integrated heritage (integrated '*heritage incubator*')
- Create '*heritage corners*' in public spaces (schools, libraries), enabling technology-driven and interactive heritage experiences
- Organisation of '*living museums*' or demonstration zones for live performances of local community storytellers and heritage interpreters

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA7 Knowledge Society*.

Measure 2.3. Development of a cultural route of the Danube Region that integrates natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas - Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route

Fundamental contribution of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project to the sustainable integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas will be realised through the development of a transnational cultural route - **Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route**. Development of route represents a strategic framework for connecting the most valuable elements of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less-visited areas

of Danube Region into a unique interpretive touristic product of local community. This measure builds on earlier measures aimed at identification, interpretation and valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, and operationalises them through the creation of a concrete transnational cultural route that unites contact points, interpretative heritage contents and stakeholders into a coherent whole with a recognisable visual and narrative identity. In this way, a concrete model of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage will be created, which will serve as an example to other rural and less visited areas for inclusion in the route and/or development of similar tourist products based on community-based concept. Measure was created to support the creation of a cultural route, but also to encourage its long-term and active use through a long-term management plan and the creation of a set of indicators that will monitor the contribution of route to the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and sustainable rural development. Thus, in future, the effect of the cultural route on integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in the function of community-based tourism could be assessed. In the future, the network of contact points would be expanded to include new partners and stakeholders according to their interest. Measure have a direct contribution to valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, as well as support for the development of community-based tourism through the creation of a basis for the integration of innovative tourist content and community involvement in the development of sustainable tourism. Route is based on development of sustainable interpretation and visitor infrastructure at key points ('*contact points*') that have been identified and modelled within project. At these points, it is planned to install physical infrastructure (information panels, rest areas, educational elements, etc.) that will be eco-friendly, accessible to vulnerable groups and aligned with the principles of sustainable visitor management. One of key elements of measure is the development of thematic storytelling content related to each contact point, which includes natural and intangible cultural heritage with local stories, legends, customs, specificities of the natural landscape, biodiversity, etc. These contents will be available through digital platforms and interpretive media, including text, recordings, audio guides, video materials, AR/VR contents and other innovative interpretative formats. Special attention will be paid to the inclusion of local community in the process of content creation and development, which ensures the authenticity of the interpretation and strengthens community ownership of the route, which directly contributes to the initiation of community-based tourism development in rural and less visited areas. Measure also foresees the unique marking of contact points within the route with common visual elements and QR codes leading to a centralised digital interpretation system. This enables visitors to have unimpeded and high-quality access to information about natural and (intangible) cultural heritage at the location and within the route, in multiple languages and with accessible formats, uniform within the MYSTICAL DANUBE content. Measure also includes the organisation of annual meetings of partners involved in the route, with the aim of exchanging knowledge and experience, harmonising the interpretive approach, improving the offer and strengthening transnational cooperation at the level of the Danube Region. These meetings will enable joint development of capacities, standardisation of tourist products and services, as well as strengthening the visibility of the entire route as a branded

heritage itinerary of the Danube Region. As stakeholders highlighted during the consultations, the storytelling route can become a recognisable face of the Danube Region, as a channel that interprets the rich natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less visited areas, but also drives the sustainable development of rural communities through community-based tourism, providing new tools for long-term sustainable development and resilience.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Development of sustainable interpretation and visitor infrastructure at contact points within the planned Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route
- Development of thematically related storytelling content related to contact points within the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route
- Actively engage local community members in co-creating content and leading storytelling activities within the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route
- Marking of contact points within the route with common and uniform visual elements and QR codes for access to a common digital interpretation content (text, audio, video, VR/AR, etc.)
- Development of a long-term management plan for the common cultural route with indicators for monitoring the contribution to integrated community-based valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less-visited areas
- Expanding the network of contact points through collecting expressions of interest from future partners to participate in the project
- Organise annual knowledge and experience exchange visits and meetings among partners included in route to align, standardise and uniform touristic product, services and interpretation approach

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility*, *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA9 People & Skills* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

Measure 2.4. Advanced promotion of the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route

Once established, the new *Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route* needs advanced forms of active promotion in order to initiate its visibility among the target audience, i.e. to adequately position the route on the tourist market and ensure maximum effect on the sustainable

development of local communities. The idea of the measure is to ensure adequate visibility of the new cultural route that will jointly valorise the natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less visited areas of Danube Region through format of community-based tourism. For this reason, measure is aimed at comprehensive, coordinated and multi-level promotion of newly created route at local, regional, national and transnational level. Considering the specificity of the topic of cultural route, it is necessary to implement a model of joint market presence, which includes a strong branding strategy for the entire route, but also the creation of action plans for each contact point, in order to ensure local adaptation within the framework of a common visual and communication identity. Measure also includes intensive promotional activities at national and transnational levels, including social media campaigns, direct marketing to tourist agencies, production of multilingual promotional materials, as well as cooperation with digital promoters and influencers who can further enhance the reach towards younger and digitally oriented audiences. In order to officially launch and create visibility, it is planned to celebrate ceremonial opening of the route and the included contact points, which will symbolically and operationally begin the functioning of the route as a unique transnational tourist and cultural product. Openings can be organised as local events with participation of local communities, cultural performers and heritage interpreters, which further strengthens the sense of ownership and community, and will be linked in a common transnational promotional visibility. Through a participative consultation process, stakeholders recommended the organisation of the annual *'Mystical Danube Festival'* as an event that would bring together contact points through performances, exhibitions and presentations of local communities from across Danube Region, celebrating the common transnational cultural route and the heritage it represents. Festival would serve as a framework for transnational networking of stakeholders, but also as an attractive cultural event for domestic and foreign visitors. Festival would also create a form of presentation and sale of tourist products and services that the local community will develop based on natural and intangible cultural heritage (including traditional crafts, products, souvenirs, etc.). One of the key activities within this measure is the appearance and presentation of route at international tourism fairs, congresses and other related events in order to present route as an innovative and sustainable product of Danube Region, intended for selective and culturally motivated tourists. This would achieve a significantly wider visibility of route and encourage arrival of a wider range of target audiences. Through all mentioned activities, stakeholders will direct their efforts towards local producers and service providers to include them in the tourism offer related to the route, thus expanding positive economic impact of route on local economy. With this measure, the visibility of new cultural route will be achieved, which will encourage development of community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region, and thus support sustainable rural development, as well as more territorially balanced tourism. It also contributes to a better presentation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, which strengthens awareness of the importance of their preservation. Effect will be visible on a transnational level because the visibility and development of rural and less visited areas will increase through the valorisation of currently less valorised forms of heritage. This measure ultimately ensures market viability, economic profitability for the local

community and a long-term positive image of Danube Region as a region of rich, living and authentic natural and intangible cultural heritage with an active community that encourages the development of sustainable tourism (as a form of community-based tourism).

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Celebrating the official opening of the contact points and their connection into the 'Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route'
- Promotion of the cultural route at international tourism fairs, congresses and other events
- Promotion of the cultural route among local producers and service providers with the aim of their inclusion in the tourist offer of the cultural route
- Conduct national and transnational promotion of cultural route with social-media campaign, direct marketing toward tourist agencies, multi-language promotional materials and collaboration with digital promoters and influencers
- Develop a model of joint market presence with strong marketing strategy for overall cultural route, as well as action plans for contact points
- Organize annual '*Mystical Danube Festival*' featuring performances, exhibitions, and community events, celebrating joint transnational cultural route and heritage included in it

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

Measure 2.5. Develop a certification system to recognise and promote tourism providers that support integrated valorisation of local heritage

In order to further promote quality and authenticity in the offer of common tourist product of the Danube Region (especially the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route), this measure envisages the establishment of a joint certification system that will recognise and promote those service providers who actively contribute to the preservation, interpretation and valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in a sustainable and integrated way. This would ensure the visibility of the developed heritage valorisation model, as well as encourage better valorisation of rural resources. Central activity of the measure is the development of a common quality label (certification label) that will be awarded to local stakeholders, including small renters, guides, travel agencies, artisans, cultural associations and other stakeholders who demonstrate commitment to the principles of sustainability, authenticity and connecting local natural and intangible cultural

heritage. Certificate would represent a guarantee of quality, but also a tool for positioning on the market and strengthening visibility inside and outside the Danube Region. The certification system should also provide non-financial benefits for the involved stakeholders in order to achieve additional benefits. Compensation may include benefits such as free training, opportunities to participate in study trips, promotion through joint channels or priority in inclusion in tourist routes and projects. This would simultaneously, in addition to recognising the work and contribution to community-based tourism, contribute to capacity development and networking of certified stakeholders. As part of the measure, special attention will be paid to the education of small renters, who often represent the first contact of tourists with the local community. Planned activities include workshops and consultations on how to integrate local heritage, for example through consultation on traditional accommodation interior design and arrangements, development of traditional breakfast offer (traditional recipes), information on local stories, customs and areas of natural heritage, as well as connecting with local interpreters and guides. This strengthens the authenticity of experience for visitors, but also increases competitiveness of local tourist offer. Certification system will be developed in a participative dialogue with local communities and stakeholders, respecting diversity of Danube Region and the needs of service providers. Benefits will be multiple and visible in supporting the development of community-based tourism, as it encourages inclusion of tourism providers in rural and less visited areas in development of the offer based on the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. In long term, system will serve as a mechanism for standardisation, quality assurance and promotion of best practices in the field of sustainable and community-led tourism based on integrated heritage valorisation.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Establish a common certification label for authentic and sustainable content that interprets natural and intangible cultural heritage in an integrated manner
- Development of a non-financial compensation model for service providers who valorise and nurture local natural and intangible cultural heritage (additional educations, study visits, promotion opportunities, etc.)
- Education of small renters on how to promote natural and intangible cultural heritage through accommodation facilities

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises* and *PA9 People & Skills*.

OBJECTIVE 3. Development of a sustainable and inclusive model of community-based tourism with authentic tourism products and services in rural and less-visited areas

Community-based tourism is based on active role of the local community in the creation and development of tourist products and services through which they provide an authentic interpretation of local heritage, and on the basis of which they achieve benefits needed for long-term sustainable development. In this context, rural and less visited areas of Danube Region face multiple development challenges that must be addressed and approached in a functional way. Community-based tourism can be a model for approaching the challenges of reducing economic activities of rural areas of Danube Region, depopulation, limited employment opportunities, lack of a recognisable tourist identity, etc. At the same time, precisely these areas possess a rich natural and intangible cultural heritage, a strong identity and potential for the development of specific, authentic tourist products that can contribute to sustainable local development. However, valorisation of these resources is often sporadic, fragmented and artificially encouraged from higher management levels, without the active involvement of local communities. Such an approach results in a loss of identity, insufficient visibility of destinations and a lack of real benefit for local population. An additional challenge lies in the fact that local communities are often without adequate resources, knowledge, institutional support or space to express and interpret their own heritage. This prevents the development of a sustainable, inclusive tourism model that would position local actors as real carriers and beneficiaries of tourism development. It is for this reason that an objective was structured that responds to these challenges by creating an inclusive and sustainable model of community-based tourism based on active participation of local community in development of tourist products and services based on integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Objective is to encourage development of a tourist offer that will be created by the local community based on experiences, stories, traditions and traditional everyday life of local people, connected to the natural heritage and natural values. This enables the creation of an emotional connection between visitors and the destination, which increases the quality of experience and strengthens visitor loyalty. At the same time, local added value is created through inclusion of craftsmen, producers, artists, young people and guides in tourism, which encourages circular economy and creates new jobs. An important aspect would be inclusion of vulnerable groups in order to ensure equal opportunities for participation and to contribute directly to improvement of socioeconomic situation in rural areas of Danube Region. In addition to the creation of products and services, objective also focuses on creating a stimulating strategic and financial framework for local initiatives. This responds to the need for available funding sources, institutional support and integration of community-based approaches into relevant development policies at national and EU level. Ultimately, objective contributes to the establishment of a sustainable, resilient and inclusive tourism model in rural

and less visited areas, through which heritage is not consumed, but lived, interpreted and shared in a way that benefits local community, visitors and natural environment.

Measure 3.1. Integration of tradition and heritage in the development of tourism products and services of the local community based on the creation of experiences and connections with the natural environment

Community-based tourism is based on active role of the local community in the creation and development of tourist products and services through which they provide an authentic interpretation of local heritage, and on the basis of which they achieve benefits needed for long-term sustainable development. In this context, it is necessary to strengthen sustainable models of community-based tourism by encouraging authentic tourism products and services. Therefore, a measure has been created to encourage local community to use local natural and intangible cultural heritage as a basis for designing tourism products and experiences, which offer visitors content that is simultaneously educational, participatory and focused on experience and emotions. Measure emphasises the active participation of the local community in the development of thematic tourism products, as well as in the design of guided tours that connect biodiversity, landscape, local customs and everyday life, i.e. that connect natural and intangible cultural heritage and are interpreted through the eyes of local community. This model enables local residents to play an active role in tourism, ensuring the transfer of knowledge and increasing income within the community. Authentic experiences can include traditional craft workshops, folklore performances, culinary presentations and tastings of local specialties, which allow visitors to have direct contact with the tradition and life of the community. Connecting narrative packages with the gastronomic offer, such as stories about local dishes and customs, further enhances the experience and distinctiveness of the tourist offer, and connects visitors to the destination on an experiential level. Measure also envisages the inclusion of local craftsmen, artists, winemakers, farmers and other small producers in tourism packages, which develops a circular local economy and reduces the outflow of income and benefits outside the community. This creates added value for both tourists and local stakeholders. Revitalisation of traditional customs and rituals through intergenerational participation is particularly encouraged, which strengthens social cohesion and transmits intangible values to new generations. This practice can be included in cultural events, outdoor events and thematic festivals and contributes to the preservation and visibility of intangible cultural heritage that is at risk of being forgotten. Measure also encourages promotion of traditional skills and crafts as an integral part of the life of local community and their cultural identity. Their involvement in tourism products contributes to preservation of intangible cultural heritage, but also to the opening of additional sources of income for local population and for artisans who are

guardians of intangible cultural heritage. This measure encourages the development of tourism, which will also be a tool for preserving local identity and community activation, with an emphasis on integrating natural and intangible cultural heritage into tourist products and services, based on the development of experiences and connections with the natural environment and heritage of the destination.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Develop authentic tourism products and thematic experiences, developed from or co-designed with local community members
- Support local community in organisation of guided tours highlighting biodiversity, landscape and local traditions
- Integration of heritage into tourism products through authentic experiences such as craft workshops, folklore performances, and culinary traditions, with local community as a generator of activities
- Link storytelling packages with local gastronomy, with food and drinks prepared by local community
- Inclusion of local craftsmen and producers (artisans, winemakers, farmers) in tourism packages
- Revitalisation of traditional customs and rituals through community engagement and intergenerational participation
- Promotion of traditional crafts and skills as part of cultural events and tourism products

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality*.

Measure 3.2. Develop a model of heritage ambassadors

Measure represents an innovative proposal that emerged as a result of a participative consultation process, which highlighted the potential of activating local '*heritage ambassadors*', i.e. individuals who would be a key link between local community and creation of a community-based tourism model based on the sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. These ambassadors would be individuals who have a strong capacity and motivation to present rural heritage and who would also be involved in promotion at national and transnational levels. Heritage ambassadors act as local interpreters, guides and promoters, but also as educators within their own communities, thereby contributing to strengthening awareness of the value of natural

and intangible cultural heritage. Measure is therefore based on identifying and empowering local stakeholders with the potential to actively participate in the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. By mapping potential heritage ambassadors from local community and developing a structured model of their role, the foundation for sustainable and authentic heritage management is being created. Actions include organising workshops and study visits to strengthen the knowledge and capacities of these ambassadors, with aim of promoting a participative approach to preserving and presenting local heritage. This model contributes to creating a strong connection between community and its own cultural and natural heritage and ensures its long-term sustainability through the engagement of local knowledge and experience holders. Measure focuses on empowering local communities and stakeholders in order to implement the community-based tourism model with integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. This also gives the potential for valorisation and presentation at the national and transnational level, as ambassadors would be encouraged to actively participate in international gatherings and conferences that promote nurturing of the heritage of rural areas. By developing this model, the strategy strengthens the long-term capacity of the community to manage its own resources independently and responsibly, with heritage ambassadors becoming key actors in connecting local heritage with contemporary forms of tourism and cultural expression.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Mapping of local stakeholders who have the potential to be involved in the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Development of a model of heritage ambassadors (local community members who have great potential for involvement in the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage)
- Conducting workshops and study visits for heritage ambassadors and representatives of the local community with the aim of strengthening capacities and knowledge on the possibilities and forms of valorisation and interpretation of heritage

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA9 People & Skills*.

Measure 3.3. Development of a tourist offer based on events, festivals and fairs organized by local communities and through which natural and intangible cultural heritage is presented

During the participative consultation process, stakeholders expressed considerable interest in shaping the tourist offer around local events and manifestations that would present and valorise local heritage and include local community in interpretation, considering the high potential of enriching existing tourist offer. Measure therefore emphasises importance of local events, festivals and fairs as means of interpretation and promotion of local heritage and their key role in development of tourist offer of rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. Through festivals, fairs and events originating from the local community, presentation of the rich intangible cultural and natural heritage is enabled in an authentic and experiential way, which encourages participation of local population and strengthens identity of community, creating a basis for strengthening community-based tourism and development of new tourism products and services. Through implementation of this measure, the organisation of events that integrate elements of natural and intangible cultural heritage will be supported, for example, festivals dedicated to medicinal herbs, fairs of traditional crafts, gastronomic events based on local recipes, music and dance performances that revitalise forgotten customs and showcase traditional rural life linked to the natural environment (heritage), etc. Special focus is placed on experiential forms of tourism, through which visitors actively participate in local practices, whether it is participating in handicraft workshops, cooking dishes prepared according to traditional recipes, or participating in staging of local legends and customs. This creates a strong emotional connection between visitors and destination, which contributes to greater loyalty and promotion through *'word of mouth'* and social networks. In order to strengthen the quality and professionalism of these events, measure also includes support for connecting local community with cultural institutions, creative industries and entrepreneurs, which enables the exchange of knowledge, professional production and sustainability of events. Events should also be a channel for presentation and sale of traditional products, handicrafts and products originating from local farms and crafts. An important segment of measure is inclusion of young people and artists in process of reinterpreting heritage through contemporary expressions, such as music, theatre, performance or film, thus transmitting heritage to new generations and interpreting it in an innovative way, reaching younger generations and those people who were not otherwise interested in heritage. By implementing the measure, tourism offer becomes dynamic, seasonally diverse and aligned with the principles of sustainable development, while local community gains a new platform for expression, promotion and economic development based on its own resources and identity.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Organise and support events highlighting the integration of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less-visited areas
- Organisation of cultural events to revive cultural customs or rituals in community
- Use festivals as traditional culinary tastings and marketplaces for local goods and services, with emphasis on traditional crafts
- Design and promotion of experiential events (festivals, workshops, re-enactments) that allow visitors to actively engage with local culture
- Support the local community in building collaboration with cultural institutions, creative industries and local businesses to support and upgrade events, festivals and fairs
- Invite local artists, musicians and youth to reinterpret old rituals through music, theatre or film
- Organise hands-on workshops and demonstrations of traditional crafts and gastronomy for visitors and locals

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*.

Measure 3.4. Branding a traditional life and living in rural areas to increase interest of key tourist groups

Life in rural areas has a special value and charm that can often be neglected due to the modern way of life. Strategic approach in the presentation of rural area and its values encourages potential visitors to activate motivation and interest in tourist arrivals in rural and less visited areas. Emphasis should be placed on strengthening the visibility of culture and intangible cultural heritage, which is deeply woven into the life of rural areas. The aim of this measure is therefore to create a recognisable brand of rural life, based on the authentic values, everyday life and customs of rural communities in the Danube Region, with a particular emphasis on experiential tourism and the promotion of traditional lifestyles as an attractive product for visitors seeking deeper and more meaningful connections with the destination. Measure is based on the growing demand for authentic, slow, green and sustainable tourism experiences, and rural areas are positioned as key places where such experiences can be offered. This measure encourages the organisation of festivals and events that showcase traditional ways of life in the countryside, including displays of traditional crafts, customs, village gatherings, local stories and other heritage that is connected to the natural rural environment. Outdoor spaces can be transformed into '*storytelling stages*' or meeting points where local residents present their way of life through storytelling, music, song and

culinary presentations. Important component of the measure is the preservation and valorisation of ambient authenticity, through the renovation and adaptation of local gathering places, old houses, rural households and homesteads, based on intangible cultural heritage content that is recognised as valuable and special (e.g. traditional construction, interior and exterior design and arrangement, etc.). This simultaneously contributes to the tourist attractiveness and the preservation of local identity and a sense of community pride. Measure also recognises the importance of small-scale renters as key actors in heritage interpretation, encouraging them to use a storytelling approach in presenting tradition through accommodation, decoration, activities and a special approach to their guests. This transforms touristic households into small spaces of interpretation of the natural heritage and cultural landscape, where visitors can experience traditional rural life. As part of the implementation activities, it is also planned to collect and promote traditional recipes and dishes prepared for holidays, seasonal celebrations and other special occasions, thereby strengthening the gastronomic and wine offer of rural areas, and connecting them with the narrative of natural and intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the culinary diversity of the Danube Region. Measure also includes the development of experiential programs '*live like a local*', which include activities such as visiting farms, participating in harvesting, planting, preparing traditional dishes, as well as volunteering in local communities. This gives tourists an opportunity for authentic experience, and for the local community a new form of heritage interpretation and interaction with visitors. Measure can have multiple benefits at all levels, including national through a contribution to more territorially balanced tourism development (by strengthening the visibility of rural destinations), and transnational through increasing interest in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Initiate festivals and provide space for presenting the way of life in rural areas of Danube Region (outdoor spaces for presenting the way of life - storytelling stages)
- Adapting and preserving the ambience of individual meeting points of local community, based on recognised intangible heritage content
- Empower small-scale renters to present heritage through storytelling
- Collection and promotion of traditional recipes and dishes for special occasions to improve the gastro and wine offer of rural areas
- Offer visitors opportunities to '*live like a local*' (farm visits, harvest participation, etc.)

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's PA3 *Culture & Tourism*.

Measure 3.5. Support the 'survival' and development of traditional activities and crafts

Measure is aimed at the preservation and revitalisation of traditional knowledge, skills and crafts that form an integral part of the identity of rural communities in Danube Region. Traditional activities and crafts are less and less present in everyday life, although they represent a strong potential for sustainable development of the community through cultural and economic dimensions. Most of the stakeholders involved in participative consultation process expressed concern about the risk of 'extinction' of old trades and crafts that nurture traditional skills, products and craftsmanship, which are protected as intangible cultural heritage in some parts of the Danube Region. In this context, the need to preserve and support such traditional activities and crafts is highlighted, especially through the simplification of regulations for the production and selling of traditional products, as well as the creation of a flexible framework for payment in jobs based on traditional skills and crafts. Measure therefore includes the representation of the interests of artisans with regard to the legislative framework, especially in the context of the simplification of regulations for the production and sale of traditional products, which is often an obstacle to their formal sustainability. This would reduce administrative burden, which is an obstacle for many people who want to engage in traditional jobs and activities. In many cases, traditional knowledge and skills are not recognised through formal qualification systems or regulation, which further complicates their financial sustainability. In order to preserve and encourage work in jobs based on traditional knowledge, it is recommended to establish a framework for rewarding and financially compensating work based on this knowledge, for example through grants, vouchers, local certificates of excellence or public procurement for the benefit of local craftsmen. This stimulates the further transfer of knowledge and skills to new generations, and creates long-term sustainability of traditional activities in rural areas. Measure encourages the provision of systematic support to traditional artisans and craft workshops, through the development of physical and virtual spaces for the presentation, promotion and sale of their products and services. Such spaces could include local interpretation centres, houses of tradition, fairgrounds, but also online platforms and digital catalogues linked to the stories and origins of products. This enables greater visibility and market accessibility of traditional products, as well as their inclusion in the tourist offer. One of the key elements of the measure is the development of guided thematic tours and visits to artisans and craftsmen, such as the *'Meet the Master'* program, where visitors would have the opportunity to see craftsmen at work, hear their stories and actively participate in workshops. Such experiences would enable the transfer of awareness about the importance of preserving traditional knowledge and skills, as well as increase visitors' emotional connection to the local community, culture and heritage.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Supporting traditional artisans and craft workshops, with creation of supporting spaces (physical and virtual) for showcasing, promoting and selling traditional products and services of rural areas
- Arrange guided themed tours and 'Meet the Master' artisan visits
- Easing regulations for the production of traditional products
- Provide a framework for rewards/payments for jobs based on traditional skills

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises*.

Measure 3.6. Development of supportive tourism products and expansion of the offer within the rural and less visited destinations

Independent development of community-based tourism in rural areas without the development of supportive selective forms of tourism would be very difficult. Rural areas of Danube Region have great potential for the development of selective forms of tourism, and the idea of the measure is to support a wider framework of tourism development, within which community-based tourism will be highlighted. This measure is therefore aimed at expanding and connecting the tourist offer of rural and less visited destinations in the Danube Region, particularly encouraging development of tourism forms that are complementary to community-led tourism and the model of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Rural and agrotourism, cycling tourism, hiking and mountain tourism, gastrotourism, wine tourism, ecotourism and other selective and thematic forms of tourism represent the potential for creating diverse and authentic experiences, which are adapted to contemporary trends of sustainable and responsible travel. *Territorial analysis* and the conclusions of the participative consultation process identified the challenge of inconsistency of tourism offer within and between destinations and the problem of competitiveness that fragments the tourism offer and does not enable the full potential of tourism development through cooperation. This measure therefore seeks to strengthen the synergy between stakeholders and between existing initiatives, tourist routes, local products, products based on natural and intangible cultural heritage, in order to form an organised system of tourism offer that enables easier orientation of visitors and stronger promotion of the destination. By networking local producers, guides, accommodation capacities and heritage sites, a coherent synergy would be created that would provide visitors with an experience of the region based on the local story and common values. Better cohesion of tourist activities would provide better

support to the general tourist development of the Danube Region. Special emphasis will be placed on the integration of new forms of valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage into existing tourism products and services in rural areas, which will upgrade the existing offer and create a competitive and differentiated tourism destination that meets the interests of modern travellers. Measure contributes to the achievement of the objective of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage because it contributes to the general tourism development of rural and less visited areas and creates a basis for the advanced development of community-based tourism. The benefits of this measure will be visible in the economic context, as well as in the organisational one, through a better connection of the tourist offer of rural and less visited areas.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Promote the development of rural and agri- tourism, as well as selective tourism forms complementary to community-based tourism and integrated heritage valorisation model (such as cycling, hiking, gastrotourism, rural, agritourism, etc.)
- Link separate initiatives to create organised system of tourism offer
- Enhance current tourism offer by linking it with storytelling routes, live craft demonstrations and authentic cultural expressions available to visitors

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*.

Measure 3.7. Encouraging eco-friendly tourism products and services

Measure supports the strengthening of the sustainability of tourism activities, products and services in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region by promoting environmentally friendly practices and a circular economy in all phases of the development and provision of tourism products and services. In the context of increasingly pronounced climate challenges and pressure on natural resources, it is crucial to direct tourism development towards models that minimize negative impacts on the environment and strengthen the resilience of local communities. Examples of good practice indicate that the development of green forms of tourism offer can be an additional motivation for environmentally conscious tourists and visitors to come to the destination. Measure focuses on promoting eco-friendly and circular economy practices, i.e. the introduction of green standards in tourism development, for example by encouraging the use of natural local and recycled (or recyclable) materials, energy-efficient forms of mobility, reducing waste and consumption within tourism activities and accommodation, and generally through more sustainable resource management, in particular with safeguarding natural resources. Measure

encourages the preparation, development and promotion of guidelines for organising 'zero waste' events and festivals, which would contribute to a more sustainable format of tourism activities through the preservation of the natural environment, the reduction of negative impacts and the education of visitors and organizers on responsible behaviour towards nature and the environment. Development of professional support, mentoring and the development of co-financing opportunities for local initiatives and entrepreneurs to direct the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage towards green and circular formats is encouraged. Inclusion of such initiatives in the overall tourism offer enables the creation of competitive products with added value, while responding to the increasing market demands for sustainable tourism. As part of this measure, it is also planned to implement educational campaigns for visitors, local stakeholders and tourism operators with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of sustainable consumption, waste reduction and responsible behaviour within the destination, thereby contributing to the formation of collective responsibility towards the environment. Through promotional activities, interpretive signs and the introduction of local rules of responsible behaviour, visitor awareness of the importance of respecting local values and the natural environment will be strengthened, which in long term contributes to the development of responsible tourism based on the integrated valorisation of local heritage. Furthermore, measure encourages application and recognition of environmental certificates, such as the EU Ecolabel and Green Key International, as well as the labelling of natural and local products, thereby contributing to greater visitor confidence in the quality and sustainability of the offer.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Promote eco-friendly and circular economy practices within tourism operations to safeguard natural resources
- Develop and promote standardised guidelines for 'zero waste' events and festivals
- Provide support (consulting, grants, mentorship) for launching and developing green and circular economy community-based initiatives
- Organize educational campaigns on responsible consumption, waste reduction and sustainable transport for tourists and stakeholders
- Promotion of the use of local materials and seasonal products
- Promote eco-certification standards, labelling of natural products and adoption of eco-labels (EU Ecolabel, Green Key International)
- Raising public awareness of sustainable habits and sustainable measures for the conservation of natural resources and cultural values
- Enhance visitor awareness and responsibility by promoting respectful tourism practices, such as tourism guidelines based on local values or signage and info elements at key sites

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA2 Sustainable Energy*, *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA5 Environmental Risks* and *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality*.

Measure 3.8. Encouraging the financial and strategic framework for the development of local initiatives and community-based tourism

Sustainable development of tourism in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region largely depends on access to financial resources and institutional support for local stakeholders, which would enable the launch and growth of local projects while at the same time strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of rural areas. Measure is aimed at creating a long-term financial and strategic framework that will support the development of community-based tourism and the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less visited areas. Measure aims to create a stimulating financial and strategic environment for the development of small local initiatives in this context. Key focus is on strengthening community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas through establishment of micro-grants, micro-incentives and the use of available mechanisms such as *'seed money'* funds, which through INTERREG have stood out as very useful and flexible tools for supporting smaller projects of local communities, from the experience of stakeholders involved in participative consultation process. Measure also includes advocating tax incentives for sustainable models of heritage-based tourism, implementation of national promotional campaigns, as well as strategic positioning of the topic in EU, Danube Region and national development policies. In order to strengthen sustainable tourism in long term, advocacy for the inclusion of a community-based approach in the programming documents of the next financial perspective of the European Union (2028–2034) will be supported, with an emphasis on models that valorise natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas. Such positioning will enable better recognition of the importance of community-based tourism in rural development, environmental protection, culture and tourism policies at all levels of governance. At the same time, an additional dimension will be given to the implementation of this Strategy. In order to ensure the quality and relevance of the further development of the offer, measure also includes establishment of tools for collecting and analysing feedback from tourists, including the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism. Such tools would enable continuous monitoring of results, adjustment of Strategy's measures and ultimately improvement of tourist experience, while strengthening accountability and transparency in management of community-based tourism. System of indicators would be used in monitoring implementation of measures within Strategy and their evaluation at the end of implementation. Benefits of this measure will mostly be seen in strengthening the transnational cooperation through strengthening of the strategic framework and its connection between national and transnational elements. It will also

have a great effect on local communities and entrepreneurs who will apply heritage valorisation model in their business, and will support long-term revitalisation of rural and less visited areas.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Support for the development of a system of micro-grants, micro-incentives or micro-financing for small local initiatives related to the sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Encouraging the use of 'seed money' and 'small-scale' financing through transnational programs for smaller local initiatives in the context of sustainable valorisation of local heritage
- Encouraging the creation of a program of tax incentives and benefits for community-based tourism models that valorise natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Advocacy for the development of community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas in the new EU program period (2028-2034)
- Establish tools for gathering and measuring tourists' feedback - tourism's social, economic, and environmental impacts

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

OBJECTIVE 4. Empower local communities and stakeholders to actively support community-based tourism initiatives and effective integrated valorisation of local heritage

Successful development of community-based tourism largely depends on knowledge, skills and organisational capacities of local community and relevant stakeholders, given that the idea of community-based tourism is that initiatives for the sustainable valorisation of local heritage and the development of related tourist products and services come from local community itself. It is therefore important to strengthen local communities in order to create necessary skills and knowledge for active participation in joint shaping of the tourism offer based on sustainable valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. However, within the framework of analytical activities, challenges of lack of local community capacity, but also awareness of the opportunities and benefits that community-based tourism offers, were identified. Although it is the local community, small entrepreneurs and civil society organizations

that possess the specific knowledge, skills and authentic stories that form the basis of community-based tourism, their role in shaping and implementing tourism initiatives often remains marginalised due to a lack of awareness, knowledge, capacity, institutional support or supportive financial instruments. Therefore, an objective was created that responds to these challenges by creating a stimulating social, institutional and entrepreneurial environment in which local communities and relevant stakeholders are empowered to take a proactive role in development of sustainable community-based tourism with integrated valorisation of local heritage. Instead of a 'top-down' approach, this objective encourages the 'bottom-up' diversification and decentralisation of tourism development where local stakeholders become generators of change, guardians of heritage and drivers of local economic development. For this purpose, the Strategy through this objective foresees a series of measures aimed at strengthening awareness, developing knowledge and skills, supporting local initiatives, increasing entrepreneurial capacities and strengthening institutions so that they can support the development of community-based tourism. The key starting point is to activate the interest of the local population, especially youth and vulnerable groups, for inclusion in the processes of preservation and interpretation of heritage. Furthermore, the objective includes systematic education and capacity building of all relevant stakeholders in order to acquire competencies for sustainable tourism management, heritage interpretation, development of tourism products and application of green practices. This strengthens communities' resilience and their ability to independently plan, implement and promote sustainable initiatives that derive from their resources and values. Support is also given to SMEs that want to operate in the domain of community-based tourism and valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. In addition to the capacity of local community, it is necessary to contribute to strengthening the institutional capacities at local and regional level, in order to ensure quality support for community initiatives from public bodies. Given its contribution to strengthening capacities and empowering local communities and stakeholders, objective represents a key prerequisite for the implementation of the entire Strategy, and enables the long-term sustainable development of community-based tourism even beyond the framework defined by Strategy.

Measure 4.1. Activating interest and empowering local communities to become active custodians and interpreters of local heritage

Members of local communities in Danube Region represents the foundation of community-based tourism, which development is encouraged by this Strategy, and which will give local communities the opportunity to be able to independently valorise local natural and intangible cultural heritage in a sustainable manner. As a first step in strengthening the capacities of local communities, it is necessary to activate their interest to become active guardians and interpreters of local heritage.

Territorial analysis, as well as the results of the participative consultation process, identified a visible challenge of lack of interest in certain rural areas. Problem lies in the fact that some local communities are not familiar with the potential that sustainable heritage valorisation offers, as well as benefits that can be achieved through development of community-based tourism. For this reason, the first measure is aimed at encouraging a sense of belonging, pride and active participation of citizens in processes of protection, valorisation and presentation of local heritage, with a special emphasis on inclusion of vulnerable groups and intergenerational cooperation. The very first step in implementing this measure involves raising awareness among local residents about the value of natural and intangible cultural heritage, which could be carried out through educational and information campaigns and promotional materials distributed at the community level. In this way, a collective identity will be built and a prerequisite will be created for active involvement of community in development of sustainable tourism initiatives. Through development of a manual for local stakeholders, concrete guidelines will be provided on methods, possibilities and models of participation in heritage interpretation and development of community-based tourism. Furthermore, measure encourages the organisation and implementation of training and workshops for local residents that will demonstrate benefits offered by interpretation through storytelling, as well as specific methods and techniques that can be applied in everyday practice, with the aim of motivating members of the local community and local stakeholders. Special attention is paid to supporting initiatives led by local citizens, especially women and vulnerable groups, through advisory and mentoring assistance. These initiatives may include small-scale heritage protection projects, interpretive activities, or presentations of local knowledge and skills. Creative involvement of young people will be actively encouraged through workshops tailored to their interests, ensuring the long-term sustainability of knowledge and traditions. It also paves the way for increasing young people's interest in heritage, which is one of the important challenges identified in the analytical phases of the project. Increasing the interest of youth would also increase the potential for innovative forms of heritage interpretation in line with modern trends. Examples of activities proposed within participative consultation process include souvenir-making workshops that interpret local heritage, revitalisation of music and dance traditions through educational programs and public performances, and the formation of tourist associations that would represent interests of local communities in the development of tourism. All of these activities contribute to increasing the interest and motivation of local community for the development of community-based tourism, which is why this measure is extremely important for preparing the implementation of Strategy. Significant emphasis in the future should be placed on intergenerational mentoring and education programs, through which older community members would pass on knowledge about intangible heritage to younger generations. Such programs would strengthen the sense of community, and would contribute to the preservation of local identity in context of increasing globalisation and emigration from rural areas.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Encouraging a sense of belonging and pride in natural heritage and intangible cultural heritage of the local community through awareness campaigns and through educational-informative materials distributed locally
- Creation of a manual for local stakeholders on active involvement in the interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and the development of community-based tourism
- Implementation of education for the local population on the possibilities and benefits of integrated interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and storytelling
- Supporting community-led initiatives for the safeguarding, interpretation and promotion of cultural and natural assets, with supporting the active involvement of citizens and vulnerable groups
- Support for women and vulnerable groups in rural areas for inclusion in interpretation activities
- Encouraging the development of workshops for young people that would be designed according to their interests for inclusion in the community and interpretation of local heritage in a creative way
- Organisation of creative workshops for local residents on the topic of making innovative souvenirs that interpret local heritage from the perspective of local community members
- Revitalisation of music and dance traditions through education and tourist presentations
- Support the formation of community tourism associations to advocate for local interests and build ownership of tourism initiatives
- Develop and implement intergenerational mentorship programs where youth learn intangible cultural heritage, skills, crafts, traditions and stories from older community members

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA9 People & Skills* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

Measure 4.2. Education and capacity building for local community and stakeholders for sustainable (community-based) tourism management

Successful development of community-based tourism largely depends on the knowledge, skills and organisational capacities of local community and relevant stakeholders, given that the idea of community-based tourism is that initiatives for the sustainable valorisation of local heritage and

the development of related tourist products and services come from the local community. It is therefore important to strengthen local communities in order to upgrade necessary skills and knowledge for active participation in the joint shaping of the tourism offer based on sustainable valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, purpose of this measure is to ensure systematic education and capacity building of all relevant stakeholders involved in the development and management of sustainable and community-based tourism. Actions include organisation of education, workshops and specialised training for local stakeholders (including tourist boards, associations and local action groups) with focus on development of innovative tourism products services, as well as effective techniques for heritage interpretation and promotion. Special focus is placed on circular and green practices that contribute to protection of natural resources and resilience of local communities. Measure therefore builds on the previous measure, but places emphasis on strengthening capacities for general tourism management. In order to support trainings, education and capacity building, support will be given to establish and improve centers, associations or organisations that will provide education and training. Support will be given to develop concrete educational and informal educational programs in sustainable (community-based) tourism management. Great attention will be paid to the training of local guides, interpreters and storytellers, whereby local heritage bearers will be engaged as mentors in the process of knowledge transfer. This ensures the preservation of interpretation authenticity and strengthening of the local identity within the tourism offer. Additionally, multilingual online educational modules could be developed that would provide access to knowledge to a wide range of users from different parts of Danube Region. During participative consultation process, stakeholders emphasised the importance of forming local educational platforms and training in cooperation with experts, but also the need for systematic support through adapted national financial mechanisms that would enable further capacity development at local level. Measure provides benefits to local stakeholders dealing with topic of tourism management, thus contributing to strengthening of capacities for cross-border and transnational cooperation. Measure contributes to strengthening the resilience and sustainability of local communities, increasing their ability to independently design and implement sustainable tourism projects based on their own natural and intangible cultural heritage.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Conduct training and workshops for local stakeholders to gain skills for developing innovative tourism products and services
- Conduct training sessions for local stakeholders on sustainable tourism development, marketing, hospitality, communication and innovative storytelling techniques, including circular and green practices in tourism
- Training of local guides, interpreters and storytellers for advanced and integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, with engagement of local heritage bearers as mentors

- Support for the development of concrete educational and informal educational programs in sustainable (community-based) tourism management
- Establishing and strengthening the capacity of centers, associations or organisations that will provide education for the local community and stakeholders, and that would support the local community in developing skills and knowledge for the creation of community-based initiatives and later their implementation
- Develop shared multilingual e-learning modules for capacity building in community-based tourism initiatives linked with valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Support for capacity development of stakeholders through adapted financial mechanisms at national level

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA9 People & Skills* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

Measure 4.3. Supporting SMEs operating in community-based tourism and integrated heritage valorisation in rural and less visited areas

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent important drivers of economic activity in rural and less developed parts of the Danube Region, especially when it comes to the development of sustainable, co-designed tourism, and as such represent key collaborators for the local community in creating community-based tourism, especially one that will be accepted by the market and will be financially sustainable. Measure is therefore aimed at strengthening capacities and creating an enabling environment for SMEs that operate and will operate in the field of community-based tourism and integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. Through targeted educational programs and workshops, local entrepreneurs will have the opportunity to improve their knowledge of local heritage, sustainable business models and innovative interpretation techniques, which will increase the quality of their offer and the competitiveness of the offer of rural areas in general. At the same time, measure encourages partnerships between SMEs and local communities in the joint creation of heritage-based tourism products and services, ensuring authenticity of the offer, adaptation to market needs and economic benefit for the community. This measure will also promote networking of entrepreneurs with local craftsmen, producers and cultural institutions, with the aim of developing creative models of interpretation, thus further enriching the tourist offer and creating a unique experience for visitors. An important aspect of this measure relates to the development of short local supply chains connecting food producers, service providers and tourism operators, thus stimulating the local economy, promoting healthy nutrition in tourism, and ensuring the authenticity and

sustainability of the overall tourism offer. Special emphasis should be placed on community empowerment for entrepreneurship based on traditional skills and storytelling, including encouraging young and vulnerable groups to participate in entrepreneurial initiatives and develop their own business ideas in the field of tourism and heritage. During the participative consultation process, stakeholders highlighted the need for concrete forms of support for SMEs in rural areas through education, networking, mentoring and joint access to markets together with members of local community. This measure directly contributes to the overall strengthening of the local economy and increasing the sustainability of tourism initiatives, especially those based on heritage.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Conduct capacity-building programmes for local SMEs to improve skills and knowledge on local natural and intangible cultural heritage and models of sustainable valorisation
- Support the partnership between SMEs and local communities in developing community-based initiatives that preserve and interpret natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Promotion of cooperation between SMEs, local communities, artisans and cultural institutions to support creative interpretational models
- Supporting the development of short local supply chains linking food producers (farmers), service providers and tourism operators
- Empowering the community for entrepreneurship based on traditional skills and storytelling
- Encouragement of youth and vulnerable groups to participate in local entrepreneurship and tourism-related projects and start their own business ideas

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises*.

Measure 4.4. Enhance the institutional capacities to support sustainable community-based tourism development

In order to successfully encourage and implement long-term sustainable development of community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas, with the active involvement of local community, NGOs and SMEs, strong institutional support is necessary, in an advisory, organisational and technical context. Measure is therefore aimed at strengthening local and regional institutions (including local and regional public administration, tourist boards,

development agencies, cultural institutions, nature protection institutions, etc.) so that they can effectively support community-based initiatives based on integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. First step of measure includes the implementation of an assessment of institutional capacities with aim of identifying deficiencies in management structures, coordination mechanisms and policy frameworks that should support development of community-based tourism. It is recommended, based on the results of the assessment, to develop capacity and competence strengthening programs in public bodies and institutions relevant for supporting community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas. Measure also places emphasis on strengthening logistical and human resources capacities of local associations, local action groups and other initiatives that directly or indirectly affect development of sustainable tourism, as well as strengthening the capacities of tourist communities in rural areas through education, networking and mentoring. Through establishment or strengthening of multi-stakeholder management platforms, better coordination between public sector, private entities and civil society will be ensured, thus creating an integrated support system for community-based tourism. Given the sensitivity of natural heritage, measure needs to improve the professional capacities, knowledge and skills of persons involved in visitor management within protected areas that are planned to be valorised in a community-based model. Special emphasise is put on the development of standardised indicators and systems for monitoring the impacts of community-based tourism on social, ecological and economic levels, including innovative tools based on artificial intelligence for forecasting and evaluating impacts. Application of AI tools would enable timely and objective decisions on visitor management models, with the aim of protecting natural resources and optimising tourism activities. It is also important to ensure that community-based tourism is integrated into all relevant strategic documents and development plans, at all levels, thus ensuring its long-term sustainability and inclusion in formal development frameworks. This measure directly responds to the needs identified during the consultation process, where stakeholders highlighted the lack of institutional support as one of the key obstacles to the development of co-designed tourism in the Danube Region.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Conduct institutional capacity assessments to identify gaps in tourism governance structures, coordination mechanisms and policy frameworks to support the development of community-based initiatives
- Develop and implement capacity- and skill-building programs for local governance staff, tourism boards or committees and other relevant public governance stakeholders relevant in supporting the community-based tourism development
- Strengthening the capacities of tourist boards in rural areas (trainings, workshops, etc.)

- Strengthening the logistical and human capacities of local associations, local action groups and other initiatives that support the development of sustainable tourism and the sustainable valorisation of heritage
- Establish or strengthen multi-stakeholder tourism governance platforms to ensure coordination among government, private sector and civil society in creating and supporting the community-based tourism development
- Improving the professional training of personnel involved in visitor management within protected natural areas and linked with intangible cultural heritage
- Develop standardised indicators and monitoring system to assess social, environmental and economic impacts of community-based tourism, including development of innovative AI monitoring tools
- Support the integration of community-based tourism in all relevant strategic development documents for sustainable overall and tourism development

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA9 People & Skills* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

OBJECTIVE 5. Improving access, infrastructure and digitalisation of rural and less-visited areas

Modern tourism development requires adequate transport and digital accessibility as well as developed tourism infrastructure. While accommodation infrastructure is mainly developed by the private sector, touristic signalisation infrastructure is in the domain of local government, which is why it is necessary to encourage the development of such infrastructure as a form of support for overall tourism development. One of the biggest challenges in the development of sustainable and inclusive heritage-based tourism in Danube Region is insufficient transport and digital connectivity of rural and less visited areas, while at the same time limited availability of basic tourism infrastructure in some areas. Results of *Territorial Analysis* and the participative consultation process showed that in many parts of the Danube Region there are significant physical, infrastructural and technological barriers that limit access to heritage sites and contents, hinder the development and promotion of the local tourist offer, and reduce the attractiveness of the destination for visitors, residents and potential entrepreneurs. Given that these are preconditions for the development of any kind of tourism, it is necessary to approach the strengthening and modernisation of infrastructure in a horizontal manner, contributing to general sustainable development. This objective therefore responds to identified challenges by encouraging

development of sustainable infrastructure, accessible and green forms of mobility, and digital transformation as key prerequisites for revitalisation and integrated valorisation of the natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less visited areas. Instead of selective development that only favours easily accessible destinations, Strategy advocates for a balanced and integrated approach to this objective, ensuring equal visibility and accessibility of heritage in all parts of the Danube Region, especially those that have so far been neglected or isolated in terms of transport, digitalisation and tourism. Development of digital infrastructure serves as a basis for introduction of advanced visitor management tools and destination sustainability, although the primary purpose of the development of digital infrastructure is to ensure the prerequisites for advanced digital interpretation and storytelling that will attract visitors and provide them with an immersive experience of rural area and heritage. Increasing transport accessibility of rural areas through green and sustainable forms of mobility facilitates the arrival of tourists and reduces pressure on already burdened destinations, contributing to territorially balanced development. By connecting different modes of transport, encouraging the use of electric vehicles and better informing users, an integrated approach to mobility is achieved. Development of touristic signalisation and interpretative infrastructure, which manages tourist flows, raises visitors' awareness of the value of natural and cultural heritage, promotes education and reduces impact on sensitive natural sites. Measures within this objective therefore have a transversal effect as they simultaneously increase the attractiveness and accessibility of rural and less visited areas and create a basis for the implementation of other objectives of the Strategy (development of community-based tourism, interpretation of heritage, etc.). Objective also strongly contributes to the goals of circular economy, climate resilience and social inclusion, ensuring that digital and infrastructure solutions are 'smart', adaptive and inclusive. It can be concluded that this objective is crucial for the activation of potential of less developed rural areas, providing them with a basis for equal participation in development of sustainable tourism in Danube Region.

Measure 5.1. Support the digitalisation process and digital innovations in integrated community-based valorisation of heritage in rural and less visited areas

Digital transformation plays a key role in the modern approach to the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, as it opens up diverse possibilities for heritage interpretation. Exceptional potential of digital development is also confirmed by numerous examples of good practices identified within the MYSTICAL DANUBE project. However, results of the *Territorial Analysis* and the conclusions of the participative consultation process have identified a lack of development and accessibility of internet and digital infrastructure in rural and less visited areas

of the Danube Region, which represents an obstacle to the development of digital content dependent on internet access. For this reason, a measure aimed at strengthening digital infrastructure and accessibility has been created to enable and encourage the development of innovations that would enable local communities to base part of their interpretation on digital content, and visitors to have easier access to interpretation content. As a basic prerequisite, measure includes strengthening the internet infrastructure, including the establishment of Wi-Fi hotspots in key locations where internet access is insufficient, and cooperation with telecommunications operators to modernise the networks. By developing the basic infrastructure and services, measure would further encourage development of innovative digital solutions, such as mobile applications for visitors, virtual tours and augmented reality (AR/VR) experiences, which offer real-time information on destinations, routes, services and attractions. One of important results of this measure is development of an interactive online guide and map of *Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route*, in which all products, services, thematic trails and heritage points included in route will be consolidated. On sites, visitors will be able to use digital information boards and QR codes that lead to interpretive content and encourage movement towards less visited areas, thus supporting diversification of tourist flows and relieving pressure on sensitive areas. Visitor management and sustainability are further supported by development of data-driven and AI tools, which could enable more precise planning and monitoring of the impact of tourism on environment and local community. Through educational activities, special attention is devoted to strengthening digital competences of local communities, entrepreneurs and vulnerable groups, in order to ensure their active involvement and equal role in the digital valorisation of heritage. Measure also have an important promotional dimension as digital tools would be used to increase the visibility of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural parts of the Danube Region, including content in multiple languages, available through online platforms and social networks. This opens up new opportunities for the international promotion of destinations that have so far been unrecognised by tourists, but are rich in valuable local heritage and stories waiting to be told.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Support for strengthening the capacity of internet infrastructure, including development of Wi-Fi hotspots in key locations and collaboration with telecom providers to modernise the infrastructure
- Encourage development of innovative app-based visitor guides, virtual tours and augmented reality experiences (immersive, AR/VR, etc.), with real-time information on destinations, routes and services in rural and less-visited areas
- Development of an interactive online tourist guide and map of Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route offer with all elements developed and linked to it (products, services, trails, routes, etc.)

- Integration of digital information boards and QR codes at key sites, with information that directs visitors towards less visited areas and areas of heritage valorisation
- Promote data-driven and AI-driven visitor management and sustainability monitoring tools
- Capacity-building programmes to improve digital skills among local communities, entrepreneurs and vulnerable groups
- Use digital tools and content to increase the visibility of natural and intangible cultural heritage elements in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA7 Knowledge Society*.

Measure 5.2. Increasing the accessibility of rural and less visited areas and areas of heritage valorisation by encouraging green and sustainable forms of mobility

One of key obstacles to the development of tourism activities in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region is the lack of transport accessibility, which is confirmed by results of the *Territorial Analysis* and the conclusions of participative consultation process. Sustainable visitor mobility is a key prerequisite for development of tourism in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region. For this reason, an important measure has been structured that approaches the challenges horizontally, but in a way that adopts the principles of green mobility. Measure aims to improve accessibility of rural and less visited areas of Danube Region through introduction and improvement of green modes of transport, while preserving environment and improving quality of life of local residents and visitors. Measure encourages development of intermodal transport hubs and connection of public transport with cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, thus creating a functional transport network in rural areas. In addition, introduction of low-carbon and zero-emission transport option will be promoted, such as electric buses and shared mobility schemes, which will enable environmentally friendly connections between touristic spots. Given the challenges of public transport accessibility in rural areas, need to strengthen dialogue with private transport operators is particularly highlighted, in order to achieve a better balance and complementarity of services, i.e. better accessibility of different transport options in rural areas. In addition, a single information system for routes, maps and services related to Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route is planned, making it easier for users to plan their trips and use multiple modes of transport. Physical infrastructure will also be upgraded through installation of charging stations for electric cars and bicycles near contact points of cultural route, as well as through

adaptation of infrastructure for universal accessibility for people with disabilities, elderly and families with children. This ensures inclusiveness and accessibility of heritage content to a wider group of users. Measure encourages relevant stakeholders to revitalise transport infrastructure in rural areas, including road and rail routes, with an emphasis on strengthening cross-border connectivity. Through all actions, it is necessary to ensure adequate traffic safety, therefore the measure encourages improvement of signage and infrastructure solutions along bicycle and pedestrian paths. Ultimately, the measure, through its implementation, would contribute to reducing the traffic load on sensitive areas and areas burdened by tourist flows, while redirecting tourist flows to rural and less visited areas due to their improved transport accessibility. This also provides support to rural areas by increasing regional connectivity and creating better conditions for life and tourism development.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Development of intermodal hubs and improved links between public transport, cycling and pedestrian networks in rural areas
- Promotion of low-emission and zero-emission public transport services, including electric buses and shared mobility schemes to provide sustainable connections between tourist sites
- Strengthening dialogue with private transport companies to achieve balance in public transport services to support rural areas
- Establishment of a unified information system for routes, tickets and services linked with Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route
- Installation of charging stations for electric cars and bicycles near contact points of Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route
- Adaptation of infrastructure to ensure universal accessibility for persons with disabilities, older citizens and families with children
- Support the revitalisation of road and rail infrastructure to improve regional and cross-border connectivity in Danube Region, with emphasis on increasing accessibility of rural and less visited areas
- Increase safety in traffic by improving signalisation and infrastructure in areas with biking and hiking routes

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility* and *PA2 Sustainable Energy*.

Measure 5.3. Development of visitor signalisation infrastructure for sustainable natural heritage valorisation

Visitor and signalling infrastructure are key of sustainable valorisation of natural heritage because it directs tourists to already developed infrastructure and those areas that are less sensitive, reducing impact of tourists and visitors on nature and environment. In this context, educational and interpretive trails that guide visitors and at the same time educate them about the importance of environmental protection are important. Some areas within the Danube Region are better touristically developed, while some areas have no infrastructure, which then has a visible impact on load on the area and risk of endangering natural heritage values. By developing visitor infrastructure, a uniform basis is created for a more advanced valorisation and connection of natural and intangible cultural heritage. For this reason, and based on examples of good practice and the results of a participative consultation process, measure has been defined that encourages development of signage and interpretative infrastructure as a key tool for directing tourist flows, reducing pressure on sensitive areas and increasing level of knowledge and awareness of visitors about natural and intangible cultural heritage. Special focus is placed on the integration of local community in the process of planning and shaping the infrastructure, which ensures the authenticity of interpretation and greater acceptance of the projects in the area. Measure includes the development of cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, with clearly marked routes connecting natural sites and cultural features, especially those linked to the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route. These routes will be equipped with signage and interpretive panels that include local stories and legends, often available via QR codes and in multiple languages, including local dialects and expressions. This approach enables visitors to gain a deeper understanding of local heritage and strengthens the sense of connection with destination. Measure also includes adaptation of interpretation content for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities and the elderly, through the use of innovative technologies such as virtual reality (VR), sensory elements (smells, touch) and sound guides. Potential of developing interpretive content for all senses is visible, which also realises possibilities of interpretation for people with disabilities. To preserve environment and promote education, establishment of educational-interpretive eco-trails in natural areas is encouraged, which will direct visitors to less sensitive zones, thus reducing negative impact on natural habitats. In addition, educational content will be developed on the flora and fauna characteristic of certain areas, thereby strengthening ecological awareness and encouraging preservation of biodiversity. Measure also envisages renovation of existing tourist infrastructure, applying principles of circular economy and ecological design, wherever possible. Measure is also important for transnational cooperation because it encourages all countries of Danube Region to develop infrastructure as a basis for sustainable valorisation of natural heritage.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Involving the local community in the development of visitor infrastructure and redirection of tourist flows
- Development of cycling and hiking (walking) infrastructure and routes with clear signage and waymarking, combining natural and cultural features
- Develop interpretation boards with stories from local residents and QR-linked storytelling guides in local and international languages (with local speech included)
- Adaptation of interpretive (storytelling) content for vulnerable groups (VR, smell, senses, etc.)
- Establishment of educational-interpretative eco-trails in natural areas, while directing visitors towards less sensitive areas
- Development of educational content about flora and fauna
- Develop and if needed renovate the existing tourism infrastructure, focusing on circular economy and ecological principles in design and building
- Create viewpoints, wildlife observation spots and resting places in nature, linked with interpretation content for natural and intangible cultural heritage

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility*, *PA3 Culture & Tourism* and *PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality*.

OBJECTIVE 6. Improving cooperation, networking and transnational positioning of Danube Region

Despite common challenges, resources and development potential, rural and less visited areas of Danube Region are still not sufficiently connected into a functional, visible and internationally recognised touristic entity. Results of *Territorial Analysis* and the participative consultation process clearly show that most local initiatives in field of sustainable tourism and heritage valorisation are developed in a fragmented manner, often without coordination with other sectors or international partners. Lack of structured cross-sectoral and transnational cooperation, as well as insufficient presence on the tourist markets, limits the effectiveness of existing efforts and prevents the full development of the Danube Region's potential. Therefore, an objective is structured whose measures respond to challenges by strengthening cooperation, networking and transnational positioning of Danube Region as unique transnational destination of sustainable community-based tourism based on integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. At the

centre of this objective is the creation of operational cooperation mechanisms that will ensure the horizontal and vertical connection of partners and stakeholders, at all levels of management. Part of the objective is aimed at building and strengthening functional partnerships and networks that will connect different sectors, different levels of government and different rural areas within Danube Region, achieving transnational and intersectoral dialogue and cooperation. Special emphasis will be placed on empowering local communities in decision-making and shaping joint initiatives, including strengthening their role at all levels, including transnational level. Second part of the objective is focused on joint transnational efforts to increase visibility and market presence of heritage destinations in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. Idea is to develop a common brand '*Mystical Danube*' and coordinate marketing activities together in order to achieve the common goals of the Danube Region as a whole. As a result of the implementation of this objective, the establishment of a functional collaborative network in Danube Region is expected, which enables synergistic action in the development, promotion and management of community-based tourism based on heritage.

Measure 6.1. Foster transnational and cross-sector collaboration to support new integrated heritage valorisation model and model of community-based tourism

Measure is aimed at strengthening transnational and intersectoral cooperation within the Danube Region, with the aim of long-term support for development of a common community-based tourism model based on the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage. At the centre of this measure is the need to nurture and promote a shared vision of sustainable community-based tourism, which transcends administrative boundaries and connects key actors in Danube Region. One of key actions is the establishment of a platform for dialogue, which will enable continuous communication and exchange of experiences, good practices, knowledge and innovations between different sectors and countries. Through transnational meetings and thematic events, stakeholders from entire Danube Region would gather to jointly shape guidelines for sustainable management of heritage and tourism, with a special emphasis on connecting natural and intangible cultural heritage. Measure also envisages the inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes, which ensures local relevance and acceptance of future activities and policies. Formation of partner networks and local associations that will coordinate tourist activities based on a common offer and interpretation will be supported, as well as the strengthening of capacity of destination management organisations (DMOs) aimed at sustainable valorisation of heritage. Also, development of new joint projects for promotion of integrated approach to valorisation of heritage in rural and less visited areas is foreseen, as well as conclusion

of cross-border agreements to harmonise conservation and tourism policies. It is crucial to establish regular transnational working groups and thematic networks, which will monitor the implementation of the Strategy, share results and ensure its long-term sustainability. Measure will have a special contribution to strengthening intersectoral, interregional, cross-border and transnational cooperation at the level of the Danube Region. This builds a regional identity and fosters a sense of community within the Danube Region.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Enhance cross-sectoral, cross-border and transnational collaboration and partnerships (dialogue platform) to support a unified vision for sustainable community-based tourism in the Danube Region
- Organise transnational meetings to bring together stakeholders from across Danube Region to facilitate exchange of good practices, knowledge and innovation linked to integrated heritage valorisation model
- Organise transnational events to celebrate shared heritage of Danube Region, fostering regional identity and collaboration
- Involving local communities in decision-making processes related to heritage management and tourism development (for example tourism working groups, local tourism councils, forums etc.)
- Formation of partnership networks bringing together municipalities, local community organisations, community centres, NGOs, SMEs, tourism associations, tourism boards and other stakeholders to support multi-sectoral cooperation
- Formation of local cooperatives and networks to coordinate community-based tourism initiatives and to optimise services, products and schedules
- Support the development of destination management organisations with the aim of supporting the development and promotion of community-based tourism focused on integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage
- Developing new joint projects for the development and promotion of community-based tourism focused on natural and intangible cultural heritage at the level of the Danube Region
- Develop cross-border agreements to harmonise tourism and conservation policies
- Establishment of regular transnational working groups and thematic networks to ensure monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy and exchange of good practices

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's PA3 Culture & Tourism and PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation.

Measure 6.2. Develop joint marketing and visibility strategy for community-based tourism in rural and less-visited areas of Danube Region

This measure aims to improve the recognition and market presence of the community-based tourism offer and the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited parts of the Danube Region. This contributes to the visibility of valorisation model created within the MYSTICAL DANUBE project. Key prerequisite for the successful promotion of these destinations lies in the development of a common brand and a coordinated communication strategy that emphasises the authenticity, sustainability and distinctiveness of local heritage. In this context, the creation and launch of the '*Mystical Danube*' brand is planned, which will unify all locations, products and services within the integrated tourist offer and highlight their value through a modern, visually appealing and value-based communication framework. Special attention will be paid to targeted promotional campaigns directed towards identified target groups and markets, with a particular focus on tourists seeking authentic, culturally enriched and sustainable experiences. Joint promotional materials will be developed in different formats (printed, digital, video content, social networks), and the promotional messages will focus on stories of local communities, experiences based on cultural tradition and natural heritage, and personal touches that make this region unique, which connect natural and intangible cultural heritage into a single whole. In addition, joint appearances at international tourism fairs under a single brand and with the support of national tourist boards will further contribute to international recognition of rural areas within the Danube Region. It is also envisaged to develop joint digital platforms and tools that will enable the promotion of services in real time, as well as to encourage national campaigns aimed at promoting lesser-known destinations and local initiatives based on sustainable tourism and heritage valorisation. Cooperation with national tourism organisations will ensure better inclusion of these destinations in wider tourism itineraries and increase the visibility of the offer coming from communities. The key to the measure is therefore to ensure that tourism products and services of community-based tourism based on the integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage find their place on the touristic map of Europe, and that the heritage values of rural areas of the Danube Region become recognisable, visited and valorised in a sustainable way.

This measure includes the following actions in its implementation:

- Design and launch the '*Mystical Danube*' brand and communication strategy emphasising authenticity and sustainability
- Create targeted marketing campaigns for target groups and key markets
- Develop joint promotional materials (online, print, video, social media) with local stories and experiences integrated into marketing activities
- Attend international tourism fairs under a shared Danube booth

- Collaborate with national tourism boards to integrate rural destinations into broader travel itineraries
- Shared marketing and promotion platforms to increase visibility of community-based tourism products at regional, national and transnational levels
- Encouraging national campaigns aimed at the promotion of rural and less visited areas and community-based tourism focused on integrated heritage valorisation

This measure supports the implementation of EUSDR's *PA3 Culture & Tourism*, *PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises* and *PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation*.

6.3. Suggested implementation level for actions

In order to more easily guide the implementation of measures and actions set out in the Strategy, this chapter proposes possible implementation levels for the implementation of individual action. Each action is assigned a possible implementation level with regard to the jurisdictions of the management levels and appropriate level of implementation of actions. Four categories have been defined: local, regional, national and transnational (at the level of the Danube macro-region). The indicated implementation levels can be adjusted to needs during implementation. Table is indicative.

Table 2. Suggested implementation levels for actions defined in the Strategy

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|--|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| 1.1. Contribution to the preservation, valorisation and sustainable management of natural spaces and traditional landscapes that represents natural heritage of rural areas | Mapping of natural heritage and other natural spaces and traditional landscapes with the aim of protecting, storytelling and connecting with intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Restoration, development and adaptation of natural and traditional landscapes for visiting with minimal environmental impact | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Conservation of biodiversity through planting native, indigenous species and development of green infrastructure in accordance with the local environment | ✓ | | | |
| | Revive traditional practices which support biodiversity and conservation of natural environment (herbal medicine, sustainable grazing, seed preservation, vineyards) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop, enforce and update management plans for key areas of natural heritage (protected natural areas, Natura2000, Emerald, etc.), including zoning, permitted activities and conservation priorities | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Increase communication and awareness among managers of natural heritage areas, with training and equipping to effectively conduct management and monitoring activities | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 1.2. Monitoring the state of natural heritage that is valorised for tourism in order to preserve the natural values and quality of the environment | Develop innovative digital monitoring systems to assess the status of natural resources and biodiversity, and mitigate the impact of tourism activities on environment (including real-time threat reporting) | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Development of informative (educative) visitor counters in natural areas (with built-in solar energy and eco-friendly/recycled material) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop innovative AI-supported monitoring system that could predict impact of tourism activities on environment | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Develop data management system to collect, analyse and share monitoring results with stakeholders, policymakers, decisionmakers and local community involved in planning of integrated heritage valorisation | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 1.3. Identify, map, archive, protect and restore elements of intangible cultural heritage and other valuable elements of heritage that are not protected (legends, myths, stories) | Documenting, digitalising and archiving conversations, audio recordings, video recordings and other materials for the preservation and protection of intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Research and documentation of legends, myths and stories of the Danube Region through a shared digital repository and narrative content | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Identification and assessment of cultural practices and intangible cultural heritage at risk of disappearing, with measures for protection | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Development of a digital repository of intangible cultural heritage of Danube Region with legends and myths included in wider heritage scope ('Mystical Danube Heritage Atlas') | | | | ✓ |
| | Support for the integration of traditional speeches and dialects into multimedia content (video/audio stories) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop a comprehensive conservation and restoration programme for tangible cultural heritage linked with intangible cultural heritage and natural heritage identified for integrated valorisation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Cooperate with local authorities and state government to include cultural risk prevention in strategies, policies and other framework | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|--|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| 1.4. Strengthening community involvement in the preservation and nurturing of natural and intangible cultural heritage | Hold regular 'Heritage Days' in local communities, featuring participatory exhibitions, performances and storytelling, with the aim of developing a sense of connection with local heritage | ✓ | | | |
| | Public awareness campaigns to promote the value of heritage and encourage community involvement in its protection | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Strengthening cooperation with the academic community and universities with the aim of improving ethnographic research on intangible cultural heritage, as well as research and preservation of natural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Organisation of volunteer actions to clean up natural areas, landscapes and natural heritage | ✓ | | | |
| 2.1. Initiating joint valorisation and interpretation of the natural and intangible cultural heritage of the Danube Region with local community as key actor | Organise a series of 'heritage labs' with local communities to format a sustainable and responsible integrated valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, including local stories, myths, legends and other underrepresented natural and cultural heritage elements with high potential of joint interpretation | ✓ | | | |
| | Support partnership of local community with artists and creatives to develop creative ways of heritage interpretation through music, theatre, video, installations, acting, souvenirs etc. | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support local communities in organisation of creative interpretation models, interactive exhibitions and guided tours focused on joint interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | | | |
| | Support local storytellers and offer skill-building opportunities on storytelling techniques and performance | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Encourage digital storytelling projects of local youth to blend natural and intangible cultural heritage with contemporary creativity and to increase online visibility of rural and less-visited areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Include local narratives in interpretation models, as well as in online and offline marketing materials | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Creating a common online public database with the identified natural and intangible cultural heritage elements in the Danube Region, identified for integrated valorisation with community-based tourism initiatives | | | | ✓ |
| 2.2. Development of an innovative storytelling model for integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | Creation of a 'Step-by-step guide' for the application of the storytelling model of integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage based on the results of the MYSTICAL DANUBE project | | | | ✓ |
| | Development of digital content such as virtual walks, digital storytelling, immersive storytelling (VR/AR) and other innovative content to increase local heritage interpretation experiences, including legends, myths and stories linked with natural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Design and promote thematic educational trails and routes that connect natural sites, cultural landmarks and intangible cultural heritage elements (experiences, crafts, arts, legends, myths, etc.), highlighting less-visited areas through storytelling and interactive experiences emphasise on linking natural with intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Integration of local natural and intangible cultural heritage into thematic tourism products (cultural routes, eco-trails, culinary experiences, craft workshops, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Preserve and showcase unique local traditions, crafts and culinary practices to create authentic visitor experiences | ✓ | | | |
| | Link integrated valorisation and interpretation model to green mobility infrastructure (bike, hiking, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Adaptation of interpretation content and infrastructure to vulnerable groups | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Development of heritage centres that will jointly interpret and valorise natural and intangible cultural heritage and provide space for community members to develop tourism products and services based on integrated heritage (integrated 'heritage incubator') | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Create 'heritage corners' in public spaces (schools, libraries), enabling technology-driven and interactive heritage experiences | ✓ | | | |
| | Organisation of 'living museums' or demonstration zones for live performances of local community storytellers and heritage interpreters | ✓ | | | |
| 2.3. Development of a cultural route of the Danube Region that integrates natural and | Development of sustainable interpretation and visitor infrastructure at contact points within the planned Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Development of thematically related storytelling content related to contact points within the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Actively engage local community members in co-creating content and leading storytelling activities within the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas - Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | Marking of contact points within the route with common and uniform visual elements and QR codes for access to a common digital interpretation content (text, audio, video, VR/AR, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Development of a long-term management plan for the common cultural route with indicators for monitoring the contribution to integrated community-based valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage of rural and less-visited areas | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| | Expanding the network of contact points through collecting expressions of interest from future partners to participate in the project | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Organise annual knowledge and experience exchange visits and meetings among partners included in route to align, standardise and uniform touristic product, services and interpretation approach | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 2.4. Advanced promotion of the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | Celebrating the official opening of the contact points and their connection into the 'Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route' | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| | Promotion of the cultural route at international tourism fairs, congresses and other events | | | | ✓ |
| | Promotion of the cultural route among local producers and service providers with the aim of their inclusion in the tourist offer of the cultural route | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Conduct national and transnational promotion of cultural route with social-media campaign, direct marketing toward tourist agencies, multi-language promotional materials and collaboration with digital promoters and influencers | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Develop a model of joint market presence with strong marketing strategy for overall cultural route, as well as action plans for contact points | | | | ✓ |
| | Organize annual 'Mystical Danube Festival' featuring performances, exhibitions, and community events, celebrating joint transnational cultural route and heritage included in it | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2.5. Develop a certification system to recognise and promote tourism providers that support integrated valorisation of local heritage | Establish a common certification label for authentic and sustainable content that interprets natural and intangible cultural heritage in an integrated manner | | | | ✓ |
| | Development of a non-financial compensation model for service providers who valorise and nurture local natural and intangible cultural heritage (additional educations, study visits, promotion opportunities, etc.) | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Education of small renters on how to promote natural and intangible cultural heritage through accommodation facilities | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3.1. Integration of tradition and heritage in the development of tourism products and services of the local community based on the creation of experiences and connections with the natural environment | Develop authentic tourism products and thematic experiences, developed from or co-designed with local community members | ✓ | | | |
| | Support local community in organisation of guided tours highlighting biodiversity, landscape and local traditions | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Integration of heritage into tourism products through authentic experiences such as craft workshops, folklore performances, and culinary traditions, with local community as a generator of activities | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Link storytelling packages with local gastronomy, with food and drinks prepared by local community | ✓ | | | |
| | Inclusion of local craftsmen and producers (artisans, winemakers, farmers) in tourism packages | ✓ | | | |
| | Revitalisation of traditional customs and rituals through community engagement and intergenerational participation | ✓ | | | |
| | Promotion of traditional crafts and skills as part of cultural events and tourism products | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 3.2. Develop a model of heritage ambassadors | Mapping of local stakeholders who have the potential to be involved in the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | | | |
| | Development of a model of heritage ambassadors (local community members who have great potential for involvement in the valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage) | ✓ | | | |
| | Conducting workshops and study visits for heritage ambassadors and representatives of the local community with the aim of strengthening capacities and knowledge on the possibilities and forms of valorisation and interpretation of heritage | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 3.3. Development of a tourist offer based on events, festivals and fairs organized by | Organise and support events highlighting the integration of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less-visited areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Organisation of cultural events to revive cultural customs or rituals in community | ✓ | | | |
| | Use festivals as traditional culinary tastings and marketplaces for local goods and services, with emphasis on traditional crafts | ✓ | | | |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|--|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| local communities and through which natural and intangible cultural heritage is presented | Design and promotion of experiential events (festivals, workshops, re-enactments) that allow visitors to actively engage with local culture | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support the local community in building collaboration with cultural institutions, creative industries and local businesses to support and upgrade events, festivals and fairs | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Invite local artists, musicians and youth to reinterpret old rituals through music, theatre or film | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Organise hands-on workshops and demonstrations of traditional crafts and gastronomy for visitors and locals | ✓ | | | |
| 3.4. Branding a traditional life and living in rural areas to increase interest of key tourist groups | Initiate festivals and provide space for presenting the way of life in rural areas of Danube Region (outdoor spaces for presenting the way of life - storytelling stages) | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Adapting and preserving the ambience of individual meeting points of local community, based on recognised intangible heritage content | ✓ | | | |
| | Empower small-scale renters to present heritage through storytelling | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Collection and promotion of traditional recipes and dishes for special occasions to improve the gastro and wine offer of rural areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Offer visitors opportunities to 'live like a local' (farm visits, harvest participation, etc.) | ✓ | | | |
| 3.5. Support the 'survival' and development of traditional activities and crafts | Supporting traditional artisans and craft workshops, with creation of supporting spaces (physical and virtual) for showcasing, promoting and selling traditional products and services of rural areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Arrange guided themed tours and 'Meet the Master' artisan visits | ✓ | | | |
| | Easing regulations for the production of traditional products | | | ✓ | |
| | Provide a framework for rewards/payments for jobs based on traditional skills | | | ✓ | |
| 3.6. Development of supportive tourism products and expansion of the offer within the rural and less visited destinations | Promote the development of rural and agri- tourism, as well as selective tourism forms complementary to community-based tourism and integrated heritage valorisation model (such as cycling, hiking, gastrotourism, rural, agritourism, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Link separate initiatives to create organised system of tourism offer | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Enhance current tourism offer by linking it with storytelling routes, live craft demonstrations and authentic cultural expressions available to visitors | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 3.7. Encouraging eco-friendly tourism products and services | Promote eco-friendly and circular economy practices within tourism operations to safeguard natural resources | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Develop and promote standardised guidelines for 'zero waste' events and festivals | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Provide support (consulting, grants, mentorship) for launching and developing green and circular economy community-based initiatives | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Organize educational campaigns on responsible consumption, waste reduction and sustainable transport for tourists and stakeholders | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Promotion of the use of local materials and seasonal products | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Promote eco-certification standards, labelling of natural products and adoption of eco-labels (EU Ecolabel, Green Key International) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Raising public awareness of sustainable habits and sustainable measures for the conservation of natural resources and cultural values | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Enhance visitor awareness and responsibility by promoting respectful tourism practices, such as tourism guidelines based on local values or signage and info elements at key sites | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 3.8. Encouraging the financial and strategic framework for the development of local initiatives and community-based tourism | Support for the development of a system of micro-grants, micro-incentives or micro-financing for small local initiatives related to the sustainable valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | | | ✓ | |
| | Encouraging the use of 'seed money' and 'small-scale' financing through transnational programs for smaller local initiatives in the context of sustainable valorisation of local heritage | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Encouraging the creation of a program of tax incentives and benefits for community-based tourism models that valorise natural and intangible cultural heritage | | | ✓ | |
| | Advocacy for the development of community-based tourism in rural and less visited areas in the new EU program period (2028-2034) | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Establish tools for gathering and measuring tourists' feedback - tourism's social, economic, and environmental impacts | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 4.1. Activating interest and empowering local communities to become active | Encouraging a sense of belonging and pride in natural heritage and intangible cultural heritage of the local community through awareness campaigns and through educational-informative materials distributed locally | ✓ | | | |
| | Creation of a manual for local stakeholders on active involvement in the interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and the development of community-based tourism | | | | ✓ |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|--|--|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| custodians and interpreters of local heritage | Implementation of education for the local population on the possibilities and benefits of integrated interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage and storytelling | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Supporting community-led initiatives for the safeguarding, interpretation and promotion of cultural and natural assets, with supporting the active involvement of citizens and vulnerable groups | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support for women and vulnerable groups in rural areas for inclusion in interpretation activities | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Encouraging the development of workshops for young people that would be designed according to their interests for inclusion in the community and interpretation of local heritage in a creative way | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Organisation of creative workshops for local residents on the topic of making innovative souvenirs that interpret local heritage from the perspective of local community members | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Revitalisation of music and dance traditions through education and tourist presentations | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support the formation of community tourism associations to advocate for local interests and build ownership of tourism initiatives | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop and implement intergenerational mentorship programs where youth learn intangible cultural heritage, skills, crafts, traditions and stories from older community members | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 4.2. Education and capacity building for local community and stakeholders for sustainable (community-based) tourism management | Conduct training and workshops for local stakeholders to gain skills for developing innovative tourism products and services | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Conduct training sessions for local stakeholders on sustainable tourism development, marketing, hospitality, communication and innovative storytelling techniques, including circular and green practices in tourism | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Training of local guides, interpreters and storytellers for advanced and integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, with engagement of local heritage bearers as mentors | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support for the development of concrete educational and informal educational programs in sustainable (community-based) tourism management | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Establishing and strengthening the capacity of centers, associations or organisations that will provide education for the local community and stakeholders, and that would support the local community in developing skills and knowledge for the creation of community-based initiatives and later their implementation | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop shared multilingual e-learning modules for capacity building in community-based tourism initiatives linked with valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Support for capacity development of stakeholders through adapted financial mechanisms at national level | | | ✓ | |
| 4.3. Supporting SMEs operating in community-based tourism and integrated heritage valorisation in rural and less visited areas | Conduct capacity-building programmes for local SMEs to improve skills and knowledge on local natural and intangible cultural heritage and models of sustainable valorisation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Support the partnership between SMEs and local communities in developing community-based initiatives that preserve and interpret natural and intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Promotion of cooperation between SMEs, local communities, artisans and cultural institutions to support creative interpretational models | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Supporting the development of short local supply chains linking food producers (farmers), service providers and tourism operators | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Empowering the community for entrepreneurship based on traditional skills and storytelling | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Encouragement of youth and vulnerable groups to participate in local entrepreneurship and tourism-related projects and start their own business ideas | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 4.4. Enhance the institutional capacities to support sustainable community-based tourism development | Conduct institutional capacity assessments to identify gaps in tourism governance structures, coordination mechanisms and policy frameworks to support the development of community-based initiatives | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Develop and implement capacity- and skill-building programs for local governance staff, tourism boards or committees and other relevant public governance stakeholders relevant in supporting the community-based tourism development | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Strengthening the capacities of tourist boards in rural areas (trainings, workshops, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Strengthening the logistical and human capacities of local associations, local action groups and other initiatives that support the development of sustainable tourism and the sustainable valorisation of heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Establish or strengthen multi-stakeholder tourism governance platforms to ensure coordination among government, private sector and civil society in creating and supporting the community-based tourism development | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| | Improving the professional training of personnel involved in visitor management within protected natural areas and linked with intangible cultural heritage | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Develop standardised indicators and monitoring system to assess social, environmental and economic impacts of community-based tourism, including development of innovative AI monitoring tools | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Support the integration of community-based tourism in all relevant strategic development documents for sustainable overall and tourism development | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 5.1. Support the digitalisation process and digital innovations in integrated community-based valorisation of heritage in rural and less visited areas | Support for strengthening the capacity of internet infrastructure, including development of Wi-Fi hotspots in key locations and collaboration with telecom providers to modernise the infrastructure | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Encourage development of innovative app-based visitor guides, virtual tours and augmented reality experiences (immersive, AR/VR, etc.), with real-time information on destinations, routes and services in rural and less-visited areas | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Development of an interactive online tourist guide and map of Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route offer with all elements developed and linked to it (products, services, trails, routes, etc.) | | | | ✓ |
| | Integration of digital information boards and QR codes at key sites, with information that directs visitors towards less visited areas and areas of heritage valorisation | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Promote data-driven and AI-driven visitor management and sustainability monitoring tools | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Capacity-building programmes to improve digital skills among local communities, entrepreneurs and vulnerable groups | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Use digital tools and content to increase the visibility of natural and intangible cultural heritage elements in rural and less visited areas of Danube Region | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 5.2. Increasing the accessibility of rural and less visited areas and areas of heritage valorisation by encouraging green and sustainable forms of mobility | Development of intermodal hubs and improved links between public transport, cycling and pedestrian networks in rural areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Promotion of low-emission and zero-emission public transport services, including electric buses and shared mobility schemes to provide sustainable connections between tourist sites | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Strengthening dialogue with private transport companies to achieve balance in public transport services to support rural areas | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Establishment of a unified information system for routes, tickets and services linked with Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | | | | ✓ |
| | Installation of charging stations for electric cars and bicycles near contact points of Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Adaptation of infrastructure to ensure universal accessibility for persons with disabilities, older citizens and families with children | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Support the revitalisation of road and rail infrastructure to improve regional and cross-border connectivity in Danube Region, with emphasis on increasing accessibility of rural and less visited areas | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 5.3. Development of visitor signalisation infrastructure for sustainable natural heritage valorisation | Increase safety in traffic by improving signalisation and infrastructure in areas with biking and hiking routes | ✓ | | | |
| | Involving the local community in the development of visitor infrastructure and redirection of tourist flows | ✓ | | | |
| | Development of cycling and hiking (walking) infrastructure and routes with clear signage and waymarking, combining natural and cultural features | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Develop interpretation boards with stories from local residents and QR-linked storytelling guides in local and international languages (with local speech included) | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Adaptation of interpretive (storytelling) content for vulnerable groups (VR, smell, senses, etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| | Establishment of educational-interpretative eco-trails in natural areas, while directing visitors towards less sensitive areas | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Development of educational content about flora and fauna | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 6.1. Foster transnational and cross-sector | Develop and if needed renovate the existing tourism infrastructure, focusing on circular economy and ecological principles in design and building | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Create viewpoints, wildlife observation spots and resting places in nature, linked with interpretation content for natural and intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Enhance cross-sectoral, cross-border and transnational collaboration and partnerships (dialogue platform) to support a unified vision for sustainable community-based tourism in the Danube Region | | | ✓ | ✓ |

| MEASURE | ACTION | SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| | | local | regional | national | transnational / macro-regional |
| collaboration to support new integrated heritage valorisation model and model of community-based tourism | Organise transnational meetings to bring together stakeholders from across Danube Region to facilitate exchange of good practices, knowledge and innovation linked to integrated heritage valorisation model | | | | ✓ |
| | Organise transnational events to celebrate shared heritage of Danube Region, fostering regional identity and collaboration | | | | ✓ |
| | Involving local communities in decision-making processes related to heritage management and tourism development (for example tourism working groups, local tourism councils, forums etc.) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Formation of partnership networks bringing together municipalities, local community organisations, community centres, NGOs, SMEs, tourism associations, tourism boards and other stakeholders to support multi-sectoral cooperation | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Formation of local cooperatives and networks to coordinate community-based tourism initiatives and to optimise services, products and schedules | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| | Support the development of destination management organisations with the aim of supporting the development and promotion of community-based tourism focused on integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| | Developing new joint projects for the development and promotion of community-based tourism focused on natural and intangible cultural heritage at the level of the Danube Region | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Develop cross-border agreements to harmonise tourism and conservation policies | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Establishment of regular transnational working groups and thematic networks to ensure monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy and exchange of good practices | | | | ✓ |
| 6.2. Develop joint marketing and visibility strategy for community-based tourism in rural and less-visited areas of Danube Region | Design and launch the 'Mystical Danube' brand and communication strategy emphasising authenticity and sustainability | | | | ✓ |
| | Create targeted marketing campaigns for target groups and key markets | | | | ✓ |
| | Develop joint promotional materials (online, print, video, social media) with local stories and experiences integrated into marketing activities | | | | ✓ |
| | Attend international tourism fairs under a shared Danube booth | | | | ✓ |
| | Collaborate with national tourism boards to integrate rural destinations into broader travel itineraries | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Shared marketing and promotion platforms to increase visibility of community-based tourism products at regional, national and transnational levels | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | Encouraging national campaigns aimed at the promotion of rural and less visited areas and community-based tourism focused on integrated heritage valorisation | | | ✓ | |

6.4. Alignment with EUSDR priority areas

This chapter provides a comparison of the direct or indirect contribution of individual measures to transnational priority areas in EUSDR (EU Strategy for the Danube Region). Strongest contribution is visible in *Priority area 3 Culture & Tourism*.

Table 3. Contribution of measures to EUSDR priority areas

| MEASURE | PRIORITY AREAS IN EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION |
|---|--|
| 1.1. Contribution to the preservation, valorisation and sustainable management of natural spaces and traditional landscapes that represents natural heritage of rural areas | - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality |
| 1.2. Monitoring the state of natural heritage that is valorised for tourism in order to preserve the natural values and quality of the environment | - PA5 Environmental Risks - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality - PA7 Knowledge Society |
| 1.3. Identify, map, archive, protect and restore elements of intangible cultural heritage and other valuable elements of heritage that are not protected (legends, myths, stories) | - PA3 Culture & Tourism |
| 1.4. Strengthening community involvement in the preservation and nurturing of natural and intangible cultural heritage | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA7 Knowledge Society - PA9 People & Skills - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 2.1. Initiating joint valorisation and interpretation of the natural and intangible cultural heritage of the Danube Region with local community as key actor | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality - PA9 People & Skills |
| 2.2. Development of an innovative storytelling model for integrated valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA7 Knowledge Society |
| 2.3. Development of a cultural route of the Danube Region that integrates natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas - Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | - PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA9 People & Skills - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 2.4. Advanced promotion of the Green and Mystical Danube Storytelling Route | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 2.5. Develop a certification system to recognise and promote tourism providers that support integrated valorisation of local heritage | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises - PA9 People & Skills |
| 3.1. Integration of tradition and heritage in the development of tourism products and services of the local community based on the creation of experiences and connections with the natural environment | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality |
| 3.2. Develop a model of heritage ambassadors | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA9 People & Skills |

| MEASURE | PRIORITY AREAS IN EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION |
|---|---|
| 3.3. Development of a tourist offer based on events, festivals and fairs organized by local communities and through which natural and intangible cultural heritage is presented | - PA3 Culture & Tourism |
| 3.4. Branding a traditional life and living in rural areas to increase interest of key tourist groups | - PA3 Culture & Tourism |
| 3.5. Support the 'survival' and development of traditional activities and crafts | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises |
| 3.6. Development of supportive tourism products and expansion of the offer within the rural and less visited destinations | - PA3 Culture & Tourism |
| 3.7. Encouraging eco-friendly tourism products and services | - PA2 Sustainable Energy - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA5 Environmental Risks - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality |
| 3.8. Encouraging the financial and strategic framework for the development of local initiatives and community-based tourism | - PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 4.1. Activating interest and empowering local communities to become active custodians and interpreters of local heritage | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA9 People & Skills - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 4.2. Education and capacity building for local community and stakeholders for sustainable (community-based) tourism management | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA9 People & Skills - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 4.3. Supporting SMEs operating in community-based tourism and integrated heritage valorisation in rural and less visited areas | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises |
| 4.4. Enhance the institutional capacities to support sustainable community-based tourism development | - PA9 People & Skills - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 5.1. Support the digitalisation process and digital innovations in integrated community-based valorisation of heritage in rural and less visited areas | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA7 Knowledge Society |
| 5.2. Increasing the accessibility of rural and less visited areas and areas of heritage valorisation by encouraging green and sustainable forms of mobility | - PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility - PA2 Sustainable Energy |
| 5.3. Development of visitor signalisation infrastructure for sustainable natural heritage valorisation | - PA1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality |
| 6.1. Foster transnational and cross-sector collaboration to support new integrated heritage valorisation model and model of community-based tourism | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |
| 6.2. Develop joint marketing and visibility strategy for community-based tourism in rural and less-visited areas of Danube Region | - PA3 Culture & Tourism - PA8 Competitiveness of Enterprises - PA10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation |

7. Conclusion

Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region lays the foundations for a systematic and long-term sustainable development model that meets real needs of local communities within Danube Region. Through a comprehensive approach that integrates the protection, preservation, valorisation and interpretation of natural and intangible cultural heritage, preservation of cultural diversity, active participation of local communities in rural areas, development of community-based tourism, development of an attractive storytelling model, as well as digital and infrastructural modernisation, Strategy establishes a **joint transnational strategic framework** within which local heritage becomes the starting point for the development of sustainable, innovative, authentic and market-relevant tourism products and services. Implementation of Strategy creates the **best and most sustainable model of valorising mapped natural and related intangible cultural heritage for the creation of sustainable tourism services and community products with a strong focus on the transnational context**. Such model contributes to preservation of local cultural identity and local values manifested through natural and intangible cultural heritage. At the heart of the model is the **local community**, as the bearer, custodian, guardian, interpreter and responsible user of heritage. Local community values and interprets heritage in an integrated manner through the format of community-based tourism, and directs the benefits it achieves into the sustainable development of its own community and the rural area in which it lives. It includes vulnerable groups of the population in order to ensure **social inclusion** and to create equal conditions for all members of the community, with the overall goal of improving the socio-economic situation and quality of life. This creates sustainability and resilience for the development of rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region. Therefore, the implementation of the Strategy achieves the sustainable development goals in the context of strengthening the capacities of local communities and stakeholders, creating new local value chains based on natural and intangible cultural heritage, developing innovative and sustainable tourism services and products, increasing the visibility of rural destinations at national, European and transnational levels, as well as preserving and transferring knowledge and cultural identity.

Strategy was developed based on the results of *Territorial Analysis*, which identified key challenges and potentials of Danube Region, as well as the *Good Practice Analysis*, which served as inspiration and motivation for design of realistic and applicable measures and actions. *Participative consultation process*, which included representatives of local communities, local authorities, stakeholders, civil society and experts in the field of tourism and heritage, ensured that the content of Strategy reflects real needs and enables its implementation through cooperation, networking and mutual trust. Additionally, drafting of the Strategy was harmonised with transnational and

macro-regional strategic documents, primarily with the *EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)*, which ensures relevance, compatibility and contribution to the wider European goals of territorial cohesion, heritage protection, cultural tourism development and overall sustainable development.

Strategy for the valorisation of natural and intangible cultural heritage in rural and less visited areas of the Danube Region represents a concrete starting point for the integrated, participative and sustainable development of heritage through tourism, encouraging transnational connections and positioning the Danube Region as a region where the local community, nature and culture together shape a unique and resilient tourism offer, contributing to sustainable development of rural areas. Its implementation requires continuous cooperation, political will and operational support at all levels (local, regional, national and transnational) in order to ensure the quality of life of rural communities in the long term and to preserve the values that make the Danube Region unique.