

Technical Note

Reconnecting Nature and Culture—The INCREAte Approach and Its Practical Implementation in the Island of Kythera

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Abstract: Integrated Nature Culture Approach (INCREAte) promotes the interconnection of culture and nature. This approach primarily targeted toward nature conservation managers but is also applicable to any agent working on nature–culture issues or area and resource management. The focus of this approach is to guide users to design more integrated and efficient conservation projects by working on issues related to culture while also addressing stakeholders’ participation and human wellbeing. Allowing users to be selective and flexible, such issues can also be incorporated in ongoing projects, making the INCREAte approach a practice-oriented guidance and toolkit rather than a “take it or leave it” option. It was developed by the Scientific Secretariat of the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (MedINA) that, since 2003, promotes joint management of natural and cultural heritage and the strengthening of the diachronic relationship between humankind and nature. This approach has been successfully tested in Kythera, where a strategy for tourism has been designed through a sequence of its relevant steps. The main focus of the strategy is the development of an integrated and innovative trail network, which, coupled with the accompanying activities of the programme, is designed to reveal and sustain the natural and cultural heritage of the island.

Keywords: nature–culture integration; heritage conservation; innovative trail network; Kythera

1. Introduction

Since the late nineties, part of the contemporary debate on the crisis of development has interrogated the very notion of what constitutes development. In this process, the potential contribution of culture to biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources still attracts an ever-growing level of interest, with key players including the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and its Mediterranean regional initiative (MedWet), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Nevertheless, earth and human sciences have not only lacked substantial experience in jointly managing sensitive sites but have also lacked coordination and even a common language [1,2].

As nature conservation expanded globally during the second half of the 20th century, it was made clear that it levied costs on indigenous people and local communities. Conservationists, on the other hand, have understood that community support and action were key requirements for sustainable conservation. This strengthened the economic analysis behind sustainable development. The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of interventions that cast natural resources and protected areas as

engines of development in order to engage local communities in their conservation mainly by placing monetary values on nature. Nevertheless, conservation approaches designed to share benefits with rural communities (for example, via ecotourism), payment for ecosystem services, or other similar incentives, do not appear to have resonated with many rural resource users and have often failed. Most conservation projects have endeavoured to convince local communities to conserve biodiversity deemed important by outsiders without taking into account the local communities' perceptions and needs by and for their surrounding nature. More extreme voices, such as that of Alcorn [3], argue that many conventional conservation initiatives create 'conservation refugees' by forcing indigenous and local people to remove from their traditional relationship with the Earth, in order to create parks, certified logging concessions, or concession areas for ecological service payments that directly benefit conservation agencies.

As a result of all the above, a part of the scientific community has begun to develop and support new ideas, which put culture at the heart of conservation programmes. According to Infield and Mugisha [4], a focus on culture and a cultural values approach to conservation—an approach that allows representation of the different values, beliefs and moral philosophies of different cultures—affords a rallying point for targeted, sustained, and more effective conservation action. Adoption of cultural approaches provides an opportunity to forge new types of partnerships for conservation by making conservation more relevant and meaningful to more people.

By no means, however, are all cultural aspects, ideas and practices good for nature, so the integration of cultural perspectives into mainstream conservation practice will require opportunities to be assessed on a case-by-case basis and always by espousing participative and transdisciplinary practices. Some cultural aspects can easily be integrated into conservation initiatives, others cannot.

The Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (MedINA) was founded in Athens, Greece in 2003 with the ambitious aim to contribute to the integrated management of natural and cultural heritage. Initially, MedINA focused on three major areas, namely the cultural values of wetlands within the broader framework of Ramsar and MedWet; landscapes and the Florence Convention, concerning mainly its ratification and implementation in Greece; and sacred natural sites through IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and the Delos Initiative. The valuable experience gained led to the realisation that (a) fragmented efforts were not sufficient and (b) an integrated approach was necessary. A review of related bibliography indicated that—although considerable work has been done at the interface of natural and cultural heritage—an integrated approach was not yet available [5–7].

All over the world, high-biodiversity areas are being managed in different ways—usually, by expert groups (belonging to various levels of government), by environmental organisations and in a few cases by local communities. It seems that an area of crucial importance is the importance of thinking in a much more integrated way about the linkages between sustainability strands. Nevertheless, instead of the social, cultural, environmental, and economic issues being integrated, several methods emerged as different disciplines, each with its own paradigm and discourse [8].

An integrated and sustainability-led approach must address the interrelationships of the sustainability aspects, facilitate the identification of alternative development options, examine all relevant strategic plans, encourage more participative approaches, and lead to a better-informed decision-making process [9]. It must also be simple and transparent, so that there is a clear indication of how and why certain policy options have been chosen—systematically, in order to ensure that all necessary aspects are considered, flexible of entry at any level and progressive so that they can utilise vague information as knowledge and expand experience. The sharing and coordination of thoughts, theories, conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches have always been a common view of communication, and this implies that discipline boundaries must become elastic and transcended [10]. The Integrated Nature CultuRE Approach (INCREAtE) approach is designed to provide the intellectual resources that will allow nature conservation managers to incorporate cultural heritage and human wellbeing in their work (see Supplementary Materials).

The difficulty of understanding that maintaining ecosystems over time is the foundation of human survival has been at the core of an ongoing discussion that places conservation against development. The road to sustainability must be built collectively, reflecting both the individual perspective and the common good, both today and in the future. The first step is to recognise and accept that environmentally sensitive areas are places where everything—natural and human—is interconnected.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. MedINA's INCREAtE Approach: Context and Objectives

During the last few decades, the international nature conservation community has gradually started to pick up on economic, social, and cultural considerations as a response to a multiplicity of challenges and imperatives. Various advances have been made towards promoting such integrated approaches, some of which focused more specifically on culture, yet integrated approaches in general, and the so-called “cultural responses” in particular, still face important impediments—the policy context is poorly enabling; funding opportunities are limited; public bodies’ competencies are fragmented; practitioners often lack capacity; methods are usually not known or adaptive; and cross-disciplinary cooperation is rarely practiced.

One has to also take into account that “culture” is a highly diverse and ever evolving concept. “Culture” is one of the two or three most complicated words in English usage [11]. In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn [12] listed 164 different definitions of culture, and the number has been increasing ever since. And yet, as Infield and Mugisha eloquently noted, “culture resists definition” [4]. Culture relates to different forms of human life [13], confers identity, meaning, worth, aspirations, and a sense of place [14], while it also comprises relationships between individuals, groups, ideas, and perspectives [15]. Thus, it is almost impossible to provide a generic definition of the term that would bridge all conceptual approaches. Many policy conventions and declarations define culture in a broad way, although in politics and public discourse, the term is often treated in a narrower sense. On a general level, culture is arguably formulated by two distinct sets of elements or resources, namely tangible and intangible. There are multiple ways to operationalise the incorporation of culture in conservation, which are not only a practical manifestation of diverse disciplines and conceptual strands, but also highly dependent on the context, scale and objectives of any individual conservation effort.

In this context, the MedINA, with the intent to contribute to the international community’s efforts for enhanced conservation practices launched an ambitious three-year project entitled “Integrated Nature CultuRE Approach” (“INCREAtE”). Financially supported by the MAVA Foundation for Nature, the project aimed, inter alia, to create an efficient and participatory approach—i.e., a methodology—to facilitate the integration of culture and nature for improved conservation outcomes. More specifically, the focus of the INCREAtE Approach is to guide users—particularly conservation managers—to design and plan more integrated, participatory and efficient nature conservation projects by incorporating cultural issues throughout this process. Such issues can also be taken into account in projects that are already active; in this sense, the INCREAtE Approach is not a “take it or leave it” option, but rather a practice-oriented guidance and toolkit that allows its users to be selective and flexible.

2.2. The Creation of the Approach

In order to develop the INCREAtE Approach, the MedINA project team followed a three-phase process. In Phase 1, the key methodological objectives and main steps were set, in conjunction with a thorough literature review on culture and nature–culture interconnections. This was supplemented by the identification and assessment of available approaches and tools. In order to examine their relevance to the key methodological objectives of the approach, this assessment was based in six criteria: data collection, data handling and interpretation, apprehension and communication of results, correlation with the approach, adaptability, and participatory nature.

Phase 2 focused on the development of a Management Standard (MS). The MS was built on a Principles and Criteria hierarchy, which, followed either comprehensively or selectively, provides the overall guidance for integrating cultural aspects in nature conservation design and planning. The development of a guide with explanations, instructions and tools for the implementation of the MS was the subject of Phase 3, creating the INCREAte Application Manual and Toolkit.

Initially, the MS contained a plethora of elements. Some of them were derived from the tools' assessment (Phase 1) and others were obtained from primary research. These elements were classified, ranked and evaluated by Med-INA's scientific team in order to reach the final set of principles and criteria, which provides a comprehensive overview of the approach, illustrating the sequence and relevance of steps. In other words, the main steps of the approach were not rigid and predefined. Rather, it should be seen as a two-way process as the main steps of the approach were designed in relation to the analysis and assessment of most of the relevant tools available in the literature.

As sketched out in Figure 1, the approach's main steps reflect a simple logic: in order to design a project or programme that incorporates culture into nature conservation while promoting social welfare, synergies, and adaptation, one has to first identify and assess the natural and the cultural environment and then examine the linkages between the two. This should be done with stakeholder participation and engagement from the initial analysis and throughout all consequent stages. If the whole process means embarking on something "new" (e.g., a project is just starting; a project team that has no prior involvement in an area; there is a new partnership, which expands its members' course of action), then some baseline work is required in advance, which will guide the following stages.

These steps are set in a successive mode for reasons of simplicity. In practice, however, the sequence of steps is actually non-linear and rather complex, with users normally needing to go back-and-forth. This back-and-forth process allows for the adaptability to change external or internal circumstances that may require revisiting specific stages and outputs; one to deliberately start to work from—or have a heavily focus on—specific steps, depending on expertise, objectives or project life-cycle; and the availability of data and resources to have a significant impact on the prioritising of actions and selecting appropriate tools. Therefore, like in any management cycle, this process should be seen as an iterative cycle, meaning that the core idea is to go through all steps and revise work over time, according to specific needs and changes.

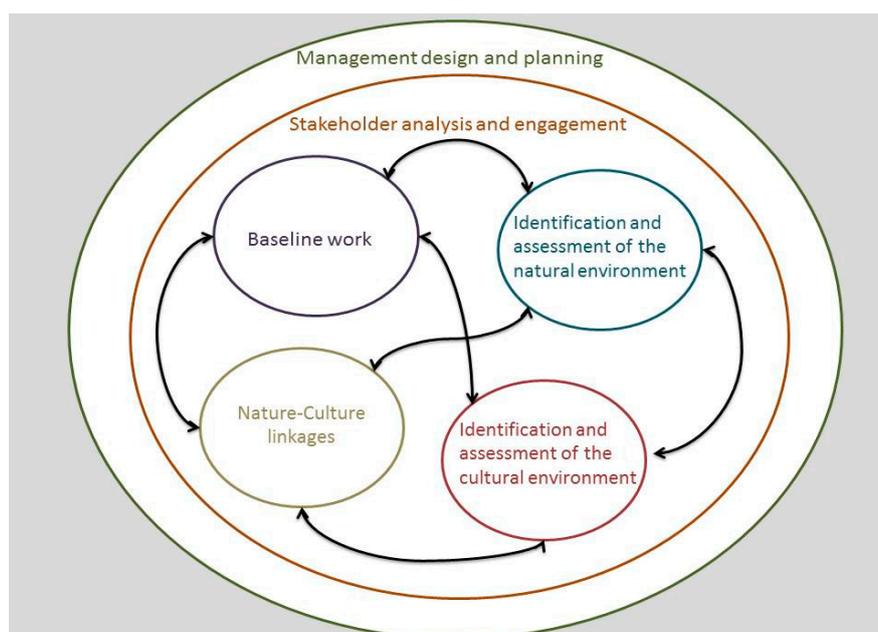


Figure 1. The steps in the INCREAte Approach.

3. Results

3.1. The Management Standard and How to use the Tools

As already stated, the manual and toolkit encompasses the application guide of the INCREAte Management Standard, which is structured in six Main Steps and consequent principles and criteria (see Table 1). The Approach is designed for web-use and its sections provide a description of each Step, including a short overview of what the step is about and why it is important; a brief description of each principle and all respective criteria within each principle, followed by a set of relevant recommendations that also stand as anticipated output indicators; and a set of recommended tools, accompanied with highlighted points and hints for their use. The user can easily navigate and consult all tools suggested, as each tool is accompanied with a hyperlink. The manual of the approach can be found on the INCREAte web platform (<https://increate.med-ina.org>).

Table 1. The Integrated Nature Culture Approach (INCREAte) Management Standard.

Steps	Principles	Criteria
1. Baseline work	1.1. Baseline work for comprehensive and adaptive management is conducted	1.1.1. Management's purpose, team, scope and vision are defined 1.1.2. A preliminary situation analysis is carried out 1.1.3. All potential stakeholders are identified
2. Identification and assessment of the natural environment	2.1. All important elements of the area's natural environment are appropriately reported	2.1.1. The ecological profile of the area is described 2.1.2. Important (critical) species, their habitats and relevant ecological processes are identified 2.1.3. Natural flagships (species and areas) of high social, cultural and economic importance are identified 2.1.4. Indicator species are identified
3. Identification and assessment of the cultural environment	3.1. All important elements of the area's cultural environment are appropriately reported	3.1.1. The cultural character of the area is described 3.1.2. Main cultural practices are identified 3.1.3. Main cultural assets are identified 3.1.4. Cultural flagships of high ecological, social and economic importance are identified
4. Identification and assessment of nature–culture linkages	4.1. Interrelationships between natural and cultural environment are appropriately reported	4.1.1. Nature–culture linkages are identified, evaluated and reported 4.1.2. The ecological, social, cultural and economic significance of identified linkages is reported
5. Stakeholder analysis and engagement	5.1. All stakeholders of the area are assessed according to their relevance and significance to management process	5.1.1. Stakeholders' attitudes towards management are recorded and existing relationships between stakeholders are mapped 5.1.2. The influence and importance of each stakeholder is evaluated and key stakeholders (including marginalised groups) are identified
	5.2. Key stakeholders are actively engaged throughout the management process	5.2.1. Key stakeholders' consent, participation, inclusion and collaboration is promoted 5.2.2. Local communities are actively engaged in the identification and assessment of the natural and cultural environment 5.2.3. Key stakeholders' engagement ensures capacity building 5.2.4. The participation strategy promotes the development of stakeholder networks

Table 1. Cont.

Steps	Principles	Criteria
6. Management design and planning	6.1. Social welfare and awareness raising are promoted	6.1.1. Local communities are given opportunities for employment, training, and other services 6.1.2. A volunteer programme responding to the management needs of the area is established or enhanced using existing structures 6.1.3. Public education and media campaigns are developed and implemented to raise awareness for natural and cultural heritage
	6.2. Plans and strategies that affect the area are taken into account and synergies are promoted	6.2.1. All relevant plans and strategies (e.g., on land use, conservation, resource management etc.) inform management design 6.2.2. Land tenure and customary use rights inform management design 6.2.3. Threats and opportunities related to tourism inform management design
	6.3. Comprehensive and adaptive management is in place	6.3.1. Management planning is properly conceptualised (targets, threats and opportunities, enhanced situation analysis) 6.3.2. Ecological and cultural significance of the area is linked to the management objectives and desired outcomes 6.3.3. Action plans are in place (goals, strategies, result chains and objectives) 6.3.4. Monitoring, operational and work plans are in place 6.3.5. The management provides a process of review and adjustment during its life-cycle through management effectiveness assessments 6.3.6. Staff training and skills are appropriate for the management needs of the site, and for anticipated future need 6.3.7. A long-term financing plan provides sufficient resources for the management of the area

3.2. Testing the Approach: the Kythera Pilot Site

Kythera Island still maintains its unique identity, sculpted by its key geographical location and tumultuous history. Several civilizations like Minoans, Venetians, and English have all left their mark, with the local population having crafted their own distinct traditions over the centuries. Kythera was selected as the INCREAte pilot site for a number of reasons but primarily because MedINA had no prior relation to the island. This was a deliberate choice as the INCREAte Approach had to be pilot tested in its entirety, from scratch. The Kythera programme was launched in June 2016, starting with the baseline work (Step 1 of the approach). The baseline preparation gathered and handled data concerning:

- Administrative structure
- Demographics
- Developmental features
- Land uses and cover
- Institutional framework of building and land use
- Residential network
- Transport links and networks
- Technical and social infrastructure
- Key facts about the natural and cultural environment

- Thematic data sources
- Stakeholder mapping and analysis

Regarding the stakeholder mapping, an enormous database emerged which was then filtered by their importance and their relevance to nature and culture conservation. Following that, step 2 and step 3 of the approach were implemented and two rapid assessments were created for the natural and cultural environment of the island respectively.

After the two assessments, MedINA's team proceeded to step 4 by identifying, evaluating and prioritising the interconnections between natural and cultural elements. This was done using the IMNC web toolkit developed by MedINA for this purpose.

It is not always easy to describe and evaluate the nature–culture interconnections. This weakness does not arise only from the general difficulty of recognizing these interfaces, but also by the different scientific fields and training of the persons who are trying to describe and evaluate them. Thus, the relevant perception of an environmental manager can be quite different from that of a cultural expert or by a user of a region that has no relevant scientific knowledge. In order to reduce subjectivity, both the recognition and, importantly, the evaluation of these interconnections should be made by a multidisciplinary group of scientists to complement the gaps in knowledge. Additionally, the linkages' evaluation should be also filtered out through the participation of the local community, where possible. However, equally difficult is the succinct presentation of these interconnections, although it is necessary, both as an analysis and design tool, and for general communication to the public. Therefore, the need for a single comprehensive presentation of the possible nature–culture interconnections, as well as for a quick evaluation and description of them led us to the creation of the "INCREAtE Matrix for Nature–Culture links" (IMNC) tool, which, in the case of Kythera, was used in both levels of the project design. The produced reports are available online and can be found at: <https://increate.med-ina.org/en/page/published-projects>.

The IMNC consists of a table (Matrix), in which all the effects (positive or negative) resulting from culture to nature, and vice versa, are reflected and prioritised. The IMNC matrix consists of two axes where the most important aspects of a site's heritage—both natural and cultural—are presented. In the horizontal axis (row), the natural aspects of the study area are presented, whereas the cultural aspects are placed in the vertical axis (column). The amount of information gathered (e.g., rapid assessments, workshops, interviews, etc.) led the research team to build the node trees for the nature and culture axes for the Kythera project. The matrix's cells show the nature–culture correlations and their significance using colours and numbers respectively. Colours depict correlations and assess the extent to which they are positive, negative, or element specific. The numbering reflects the significance of each correlation. There are no predefined rules and suggestions to rate each correlation. Therefore, "significance", in this case, is based on the subjectivity of the team's opinion.

The fuzzy mapping [16] is a more dynamic representation of the IMNC Matrix based on the "Nodes Tree" that has been previously developed. In addition, via the Fuzzy Mapping, one can create new links between elements of the same category, an option that is not provided in the IMNC matrix.

Along with the previous steps, the first participatory workshop was carried out on the island, which extended invitations to organisations and individuals identified as important during the stakeholder analysis phase. This workshop responded to many of the criteria in step 5 of the approach and helped to design the Kythera strategy, which took place in step 6, as all insights were put together and three priority intervention areas were identified.

4. Discussion

Following all steps of the approach, several conceptual models were designed for three priority intervention areas (i.e., water resources, terrestrial ecosystems and avifauna). Among these areas of intervention, tourism was identified both as an opportunity and a threat in all the conceptual models. Thus, tourism was selected as the most significant factor. Subsequently, a strategy for

sustainable tourism development in Kythera island was created, focusing on the capitalization and further development of an integrated trails network.

As in many Mediterranean islands, the tourist season in Kythera is highly concentrated in time and space, involving only specific areas and lasting only a few weeks in July and August. This phenomenon hinders the viability of local businesses while exhausting the carrying capacity of the island, especially its water resources. Hiking tourism is an alternative that helps to overcome the above. Generally, the decision to focus on the development of a trails network was related to the following facts:

- Trails were highly ranked as a desired activity in the community workshop.
- Traditional trails are part of the island's local heritage.
- Kythera has distinct and appealing landscapes.
- Hiking extends the tourist season to spring and autumn.
- Through hiking, tourism expands spatially on the island.
- There is potential for triggering grassroots natural and cultural heritage conservation—trails and their points of interest can become community assets.
- Trails provide potential to invest in alternative and sustainable tourism, avoiding mass tourism.

In order to implement the Strategy, the INCREAte Approach was used again. This time it was used selectively and with a different focus, namely supporting the project of upgrading and thematically enriching Kythera's trail network. A second stakeholder analysis was made, which identified the stakeholders directly related to the strategic goals. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between MedINA, the Kytherian Foundation for Culture and Development (KIPA), the municipal authority and the domestic property commission and through this partnership, the Strategy was further developed under the umbrella of the Kythera hiking project. steps 2, 3, and 4 of the approach were implemented again but on specific hiking routes. All natural and cultural Points of Interest (PoIs) were thoroughly recorded on fourteen (14) hiking routes, covering almost 100 km using a specially designed protocol. This resulted in the creation of a database of 280 points of natural and cultural interest. Then, following step 4 of the approach, the interrelations between the PoIs of nature and culture were recognized and evaluated using the IMNC tool. Moreover, qualitative ethnographic research methodology was used by MedINA's team to record local knowledge about traditional trail use, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), local intangible heritage and other stories connected with the trails and the PoIs. To this end, forty (40) in-depth interviews were conducted with elderly locals who lived at a time when trails were still the main road network on the island. This wealth of information will be primarily used to supply the necessary accompanying tools for the project, and, in particular, the Kythera hiking knowledge web platform and an innovative mobile application that, in addition to basic information on each route (length, degree of difficulty, altitude differences, "follow the track" map, etc.), enables a sound signal to be activated when the hiker approaches a PoI. In this way, the hiker can be informed that the sturdy thyme meadow he or she is crossing is connected with the traditional beekeeping of the island; he/she can learn that the abandoned stone building is not just a ruin but a traditional winery that also functioned as a home; that the caper plant which grows on the outskirts of the castle is the one used for the local pickles; that the stone remains used to be old limekilns linked with the geology of the area and the surrounding vegetation, which served as fuel, and so on.

5. Conclusions

To create the INCREAte approach, it was not necessary to re-invent the wheel. There were already methods and tools available that have been adapted for the task and developed within a reasonably integrated approach, along with newly created tools by MedINA's scientific team. All these tools and methods have been included in the Approach's Manual toolkit, helping the user to follow the INCREAte Management Standard. To the developers and authors of these tools, we express profound gratitude, as they have contributed with their work to the validity and usefulness of the approach.

The Approach Manual allows nature conservation managers to understand and appreciate the role of cultural heritage in the management of high-biodiversity areas, while also providing practical ways to take it into account an amalgam of existing tools with some newly created ones. Ultimately, enabling integrated management or, at the minimum, joint consideration of natural and cultural heritage can contribute to maintaining the manifold and diverse wealth of our planet.

Supplementary Materials: The Manual of the Approach can be found in the INCREAte web platform (<https://increate.med-ina.org>). The IMNC web toolkit developed by MedINA can be found on the INCREAte platform (<https://increate.med-ina.org/en/page/interactive-tools>). The two Rapid Assessments for the natural and cultural environment of Kythera Island are available in Greek in MedINA's website: (http://med-ina.org/TRANSVERSALPROJECTS/tabid/68/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/217/INCREAte_pilot_site_-_Kythera_Project.aspx).

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