SPOT-IT

PolicyBRIEF

SPOT
SOCIAL AND INNOVATIVE PLATFORM
ON CULTURAL TOURISM
AND ITS POTENTIAL TOWARDS
DEEPENING EUROPEANISATION

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SPOT-IT: concept, innovativeness, beneficiaries, and policy recommendations

For European, National and Local Policymakers

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This is the issue in a series of Policy Briefs that present the main findings and practical outcomes of an EU-funded research project SPOT (2020-2022). We inform all groups of stakeholders involved in the development of cultural tourism in Europe about what we have found out during our multi-national study implemented in 15 countries and share with you several policy-related recommendations and other results that might be useful in your professional work.

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Introduction

21st-century tourism focuses not only on the cultural values, conservation and economic potential of property or landscape. It is also influenced by (and influences) physical changes such as climate change; social and economic changes, including cultural differences and diversity; global crisis (e.g., Covid19), migration and opportunities for quick and easy movement from place to place; cross-border communication; and globally accessible information. These changes have also greatly impacted the definition of Cultural Heritage Tourism, its characteristics and its development. On one hand, there is a growing demand for it, on the other hand, there is an increasing concern about surpassing the carrying capacity and therefore harming cultural heritage sites and cultural landscapes. Social, ethical, and environmental issues became essential, and sometimes even more important than economic issues, which have characterized the tourism industry so far.

The changes that have taken place in the definition and characterization of cultural tourism require the creation of new measurement and management tools that can tackle all the issues that need to be considered when planning, marketing, and analyzing cultural tourism sites, their components, and the relationships between them.

In addition, as cultural tourism is not a widely identified identity, specific data is rarely collected. The purpose of the SPOT-IT tool is to deal with this complexity, and the lack of available data, by enabling to gather, in one platform, multiple information layers, pertaining to Cultural tourism development and management, at a high-resolution level and accuracy while leveraging technological advancement in GIS and machine learning, and involving multiple stakeholders. In particular, this tool can help support long-term planning that includes spatial elements, infrastructure, climate, zoning, and other considerations.

1. SPOT-IT: its concept, innovativeness, and contribution

SPOT-IT is a GIS-based innovative tool designed for planners, organizers, developers, and other stakeholders of cultural tourism. The tool was developed by a group of researchers and designers from Bar-Ilan University (Israel) and incorporates inputs from all 14 European teams and Israel that contributed with empirical data from their case studies and tested the tool with their local and regional stakeholders.

1.1 The concept of SPOT-IT

The tool is designed to endow power to its user and allows several sources of flexibility including the choice of data layers to be used.

The tool's general idea is to create an innovative GIS-based website that provides a decision support mechanism for developing **cultural tourism (CT) sites and infrastructure**. SPOT-IT is needed for entrepreneurs, local authorities, local residents, and others who wish to receive extensive and diversified information (visually and geo-references represented) regarding visiting, promoting, and initiating new projects of cultural tourism in a given area. It is required since this information is currently not well complied with, organized, presented, and processed in a manageable manner that allows for decision-making for the development of CT sites and infrastructure.

The **multiple data layers**, their **integration**, and their **spatial representation** stand at the heart of the tool. The more accurate and diversified the data the better-informed decisions can be made. Effective decision-making requires information on regional development aspects with a spatial context.

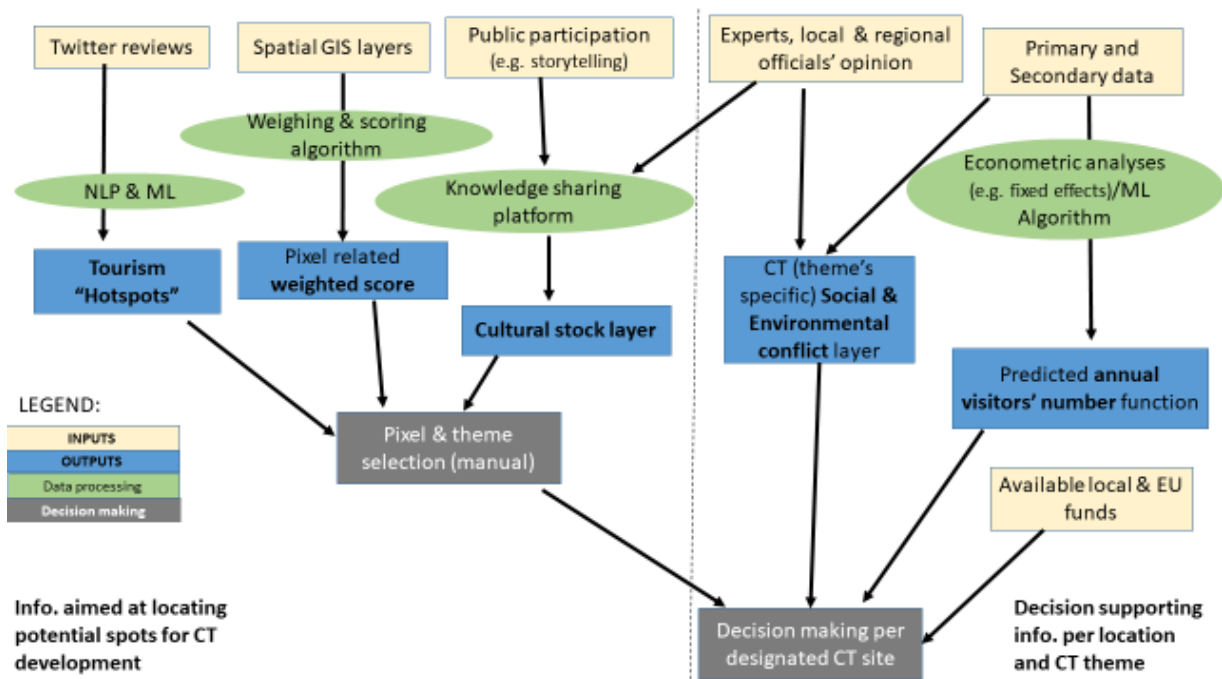The logical block scheme of the SPOT-IT tool can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Logical block scheme of the SPOT-IT tool

Based on the literature and experts' opinions, it was decided which data variables are relevant to the development and strengthening of CT, and how to integrate the desired social, economic, and environmental data. This is a challenging process given that some case studies consist of one municipality while others include several municipalities, also, some case studies are purely rural, while others are hybrid with an urban/rural mixture.

1.2 The innovativeness of SPOT-IT TOOL

The tool is innovative in its conceptualization. It delivers in one place, exhaustive and diversified information (data layers, which are visually, and geo-references represented) including, but not limited to, data on transportation and tourism-related infrastructure (including built and natural ones), zoning data, potential social and environmental tourism-related conflicts, micro-climate data, demographics and another socio-economic indicator on the location. These data layers can support initiatives for cultural tourism development and management. The data is provided on one user-friendly platform to facilitate decision-making.

In addition, to the multiple data layers, the tool provides:

(1) **Suitability analysis** component that allows the user to define the desired criteria for initiating, developing, and visiting cultural tourism sites, based on the location's peculiar attributes;

(2) **Visitors' prediction algorithm** that allows the user to receive an estimate of the economic performance of new initiatives in cultural tourism;

(3) Data layers that are based on **machine learning** tools operated on users generated content in social media.

(4) **Public participation platform** that allows the local community to actively participate in the process of cultural tourism development

1.3 What is the importance of SPOT-IT and who are its main beneficiaries

SPOT-IT can encourage a range of stakeholders to initiate cultural development activities from the personal/business level (micro) up to the regional and national levels (macro). The tool can benefit,

every entity that has an interest in developing cultural tourism, or that is affected by it, with a strong emphasis on peripheral and de-industrialized areas.

This includes, yet is not limited to

- Tourism officials, and planning authorities at the national, regional and local levels

- Local authorities and residents including ethnic and cultural minorities.

- Sponsors, and entrepreneurs to be able to evaluate the development potential of a given cultural heritage asset.

- Scholars of Cultural tourism in colleges and universities

- local and international visitors for trip planning using one platform, which includes most if not all the information required to optimize the experience.

Several examples of the importance of the tool are:

Rural and peripheral municipalities can be empowered and encouraged to cooperate since the tool can support combined decision-making processes.

The relatively wide access to the tool may lead to cross-ministries, cross-municipalities, and cross-regional initiatives, for joint, synergetic, cultural tourism projects.

The tool can also be used at the supra-regional level (district, national, global) by developing new attractions and pulling tourist human and economic capital to those less developed areas. The development momentum can potentially have impacts on a large scale, economically, socially and image-wise.

The tool allows a preliminary examination of a site in relation to its tangible and intangible cultural attractions, carrying capacity, accessibility, and available tourism services.

SPOT-IT encourages tourism planners to work with local communities, empower them, and put them in charge of cultural tourism through co-design with local stakeholders. It can help realize the local and regional economic (and other) benefits from cultural tourism.

The tool can help in marketing the area and the cultural tourism sites in it, by its ability to identify unique special propositions [USP] as well as clusters of compatible cultural assets, that may attract tourists to the region.

Updated information regarding opportunities for active travel (walking, cycling) can motivate visitors to visit the area and can reduce the negative impact of tourism whilst spreading the economic benefit.

The tool enriches the visit experience; it encourages the pre-planning of thematic tours. For example, a visit to several heritage sites related to a certain historical event, or a visit following an adventure or plot described in a book. Future extensions of the tool can include options for booking sites, communicating with site operators and other visitors, booking tickets for shows and festivals, leaving feedback etc**.**

Each type of cultural tourism being developed has its own infrastructure requirements. This is linked to planning issues and concerns with implementation issues. The tool can help in this process by providing visualized information on the already existing local infrastructure, and its spatial characteristics.

2. Policy recommendations

Following designing the SPOT-IT tool, we conclude with several policy recommendations

1. While the conceptualization of the tool is universal, its specifications should be place-dependent. Therefore, it is recommended to develop the tool for each location (e.g., city or regional councils and other urban and rural municipalities) based on its needs and specific characteristics.

2. It is recommended to involve stakeholders from the very beginning of the process and harness the local officials. The cooperation of local officials is essential for the successful implementation of the tool.

3. It is recommended to leverage the public participation platform to accommodate feedback and recommendation related to the current local, and regional, development policy and planning programs. The tool can promote structured idea exchange (thinking outside the box) between people involved in the cultural tourism industries and local administrations.

4. SPOT-IT includes an exhaustive yet limited set of components and features. It should not be offered to stakeholders as a 'one-size fits all' decision-making platform. It should allow for flexibility wherein potential users choose their optimal mix of components.

5. After the project ends, the responsibility for the operation of the tool, including its maintenance, and regular updates, should be granted to tourism departments/councils at the regional level, which have the resources to do so. **Procedures for regular and ongoing updates of the tool should be established**, for a pre-defined time period, (for example, a quarter). Such updates include data regarding new tourism sites or facilities (or the closure of existing ones), public or private. These can be received from local Business Licensing Departments, Nature and Parks Authority, Nature and Parks Authority, etc. Updates should also include data on new infrastructure (e.g., transportation), socio-demographical and economic data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, zoning updates from National, and regional planning authorities, climatic data from the Meteorological services, and so on. The entities responsible for the updates and maintenance of the tool should ensure that it is accessible to all stakeholders, yet, only authorized bodies can access to edit data.

6. Given the high variability between EU countries, regions, and within regions, and expected dynamics over time, the need for novel features and layers might emerge. There should be a structured channel through which ideas for novel features could be raised.

7. Given the tool's multiple layers and features, it is recommended to initiate annual workshops for potential stakeholders at the local level (in fact, everyone interested in tourism) to provide hands-on experience with the tool and receive feedback from users.

8. Extending and adding more layers based on content (visual and textual) analysis from social media is recommended. These layers provide more reliable information regarding tourism sites and landscapes (compared to TripAdvisor and Google ratings which might be biased). These layers have raised the interest of stakeholders in the case studies.

9. Technically speaking, it is suggested to transform the tool platform to an open code, because it can lower the cost of the tool by saving the yearly cost of the ArcGIS server license.

10. It is recommended to establish a mechanism through which tools of localities in the same region/district could communicate and share knowledge in a manner that allows better cooperation between nearby localities.

11. It is recommended to allow dialogue between tourism planners and planning (or other) authorities. For example, the suitability analysis of the tool may suggest locations with the optimal condition to succeed as cultural tourism sites, yet zoning may restrict it. The tool might open a path for dialogue between different entities to benefit responsible tourism development.

Project Identity

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