



Saint Flames! Between Rituals, Urban Safety, Roots Tourism and Heritage Regulation: The Italian Case

Ada Spiru^{1*}, Florenca Gjorduni², and Maria Buonarota³

¹ Faculty of Economy, University Metropolitan Tirana, Albania

² Department of Business Administration, Luarasi University, Albania

³ Department of Economics, Management and Territory, University of Foggia, Italy

Abstract

Rituals involving fire represent a widespread form of intangible cultural heritage across Europe, combining religious symbolism, collective identity and seasonal celebration. However, these practices increasingly face regulatory challenges related to public safety, environmental protection, and urban management. This study examines the governance of ritual fire traditions through the case of Foggia (Italy), where municipal authorities recently prohibited traditional bonfires associated with the celebration of the Immaculate Conception despite a regional framework in Apulia that formally recognizes ritual fires as elements of intangible cultural heritage and integrated into cultural and tourism strategies. The paper aims to explore how heritage preservation, risk management, and tourism development can be reconciled within contemporary governance frameworks. Using a qualitative policy analysis, the study examines institutional documents, regulatory measures, and tourism evidence, complemented by a comparative review of selected European fire festivals. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between ritual traditions and roots tourism, which increasingly values authentic local traditions and community-based cultural experiences. The findings suggest that prohibition represents only one possible governance response and that more balanced approaches based on heritage recognition, stakeholder coordination, and structured safety management can better preserve cultural practices while mitigating risks. The analysis also highlights the potential contribution of ritual traditions to local development and destination attractiveness, particularly in areas seeking to strengthen cultural and roots tourism. The paper concludes by proposing a practical governance framework that integrates cultural heritage protection, public safety, and sustainable tourism objectives.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Ritual Fires, Heritage Governance, Risk Regulation, Roots Tourism

1 Introduction

The governance of cultural heritage increasingly requires balancing the preservation of traditional practices with concerns related to safety, environmental protection and urban regulation. This challenge is particularly evident in ritual practices involving fire, which remain deeply embedded in cultural traditions across Europe and beyond. Fire rituals combine religious devotion, seasonal symbolism and collective participation, representing important expressions of intangible cultural heritage transmitted across generations (Turner, 1979; UNESCO, 2003). Within tourism studies, rituals are recognized as cultural performances that enhance destination attractiveness and visitor experiences (Lett Jr., 1983). Festivals and ritual celebrations provide opportunities to encounter local traditions, supporting heritage-based tourism and local economies (Getz, 2010; Richards, 2018). At the same time, tourism may reshape rituals by altering their scale, organization, and symbolic meaning, particularly under commercialization pressures (Chen et al., 2024; Yan & Bramwell, 2008).

Ritual fires represent a particularly complex interaction between tradition, tourism, and regulation. Bonfires, torch processions, and similar practices are commonly associated with purification, seasonal transitions, and social cohesion (Bell, 1997; Rappaport, 1999; Chen et al., 2024). However, they may also generate risks related to public safety, environmental quality, crowd management, and urban infrastructure, particularly in densely populated areas.

This tension recently emerged in Foggia, Southern Italy, where municipal authorities prohibited traditional bonfires associated with the celebration of the Immaculate Conception due to concerns regarding safety, traffic disruption, and environmental damage (Foggia Municipality, 2025). Conversely, the Apulia Region formally recognized ritual fires as elements of intangible cultural heritage through Regional Law No. 1/2018, promoting their preservation and integration into tourism strategies (Apulia Region, 2018). The coexistence of restrictive local regulations and heritage-oriented regional policies highlights broader governance challenges in managing traditional cultural practices.

The issue is particularly relevant in the context of roots tourism, understood as travel motivated by the desire to reconnect with places of family origin and ancestral heritage (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). In this context, Italy represents one of the leading destinations for diaspora tourism, with millions of people of Italian descent seeking authentic cultural experiences linked to local traditions and community life (MAECI, 2021; 2022). Ritual fire celebrations may therefore function not only as heritage assets but also as symbolic resources that strengthen ties between diaspora communities and their territories of origin.

Against this background, this paper investigates how ritual fire traditions can be governed in ways that reconcile cultural preservation, public safety, and tourism development. Specifically, it asks whether prohibition-based approaches are more effective than regulated heritage-management strategies in addressing the risks and opportunities associated with ritual fires. Using a qualitative policy analysis of the Foggia case, supported by a review of regional regulations and comparative European experiences, the study develops a governance framework aimed at balancing heritage safeguarding with risk management. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on intangible cultural heritage governance and provide practical recommendations for policymakers and local authorities.

2 Literature Review on Intangible Cultural Heritage, Roots Tourism and Governance

The relationship between traditional rituals and public policy has received increasing attention within the literature on cultural heritage governance. Ritual practices involving public space

and collective participation are recognized as elements of intangible cultural heritage, defined by UNESCO (2003) as practices and knowledge transmitted across generations that communities identify as part of their cultural identity. Beyond their symbolic value, these practices reinforce collective memory, social cohesion and cultural continuity (Smith, 2006; Bortolotto, 2011). Anthropological studies further describe rituals as mechanisms through which communities reproduce shared values while adapting traditions to changing social contexts (Frazer, 1922; Turner, 1979). More recent research highlights that safeguarding intangible heritage increasingly requires coordination between local communities, public authorities and regulatory institutions (Raj & Griffin, 2015; Bortolotto, 2011).

Table 1. Examples of Fire rituals, risk management and literature references.

Ritual / Event	Description	Risk Management / Regulation	Selected Literature
Las Fallas – Valencia (Spain)	Annual March festival culminating in the burning of large artistic sculptures (<i>fallas</i>) symbolizing renewal and purification. Major international cultural event.	Strict municipal safety plans, controlled burning zones, crowd management, pyrotechnic regulations; UNESCO intangible heritage recognition.	Richards (2018); Costa (2017); UNESCO (2016)
Up Helly Aa – Lerwick, Shetland (UK)	Viking-themed winter festival with torchlight procession and burning of a wooden Viking longship.	Organized procession routes, trained participants, fire safety supervision and controlled public areas.	Abram (2016); Jarvie et al. (2013)
Beltane Fire Festival – Edinburgh (UK)	Modern revival of a Celtic seasonal ritual celebrating the arrival of summer with fire, dance and symbolic performances.	Event licensing, controlled fires, ticketed attendance and professional safety supervision.	Ziakas (2013); Borer (2010)
Hogmanay Fire Celebrations – Scotland	New Year celebrations including torchlight processions, bonfires and fireworks rooted in Celtic and Norse traditions.	Urban safety regulations, crowd management plans and controlled fire displays.	Getz (2010); Hall (2005)
Fòcara of Novoli – Apulia (Italy)	One of Europe’s largest bonfires dedicated to Saint Anthony the Abbot, symbolizing purification and community identity.	Structured event planning, fire brigade supervision, safety perimeter and heritage recognition by regional authorities.	Bindi et al. (2022); Apulia Region (2018)
Fracchie – San Marco in Lamis (Italy)	Holy Friday procession carrying massive burning wooden torches representing religious devotion and community participation.	Controlled route, municipal authorization and safety monitoring by local authorities.	San Marco in Lamis Municipality (2018); Bindi et al. (2022)
Tar Barrels – Ottery St Mary (UK)	Participants carry flaming barrels through crowded streets in a centuries-old ritual linked to local identity.	Participants trained locally, risk warnings to spectators, emergency services presence.	Picard & Robinson (2006); Abram (2016)
Burqbrennen – Luxembourg	Spring ritual involving large bonfires on hilltops to symbolically drive away winter.	Municipal authorization, designated burning areas and fire brigade supervision.	Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012); UNESCO (2003)
Maslenitsa Fire Rituals – Russia / Eastern Europe	Slavic spring festival culminating in the burning of an effigy symbolizing the end of winter.	Organized festival areas, public safety monitoring and event regulation.	Helvin (2024); Humphrey (2018)
Burning Man –	Large-scale ritual event centered	Comprehensive event	Gilmore (2010);

Ritual / Event	Description	Risk Management / Regulation	Selected Literature
Nevada (USA)	on the burning of monumental wooden structures symbolizing creativity and transformation.	management, fire safety regulations, environmental protection rules and emergency infrastructure.	Kozinets (2002)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Fire rituals represent a particularly challenging form of intangible heritage because their symbolic significance is closely intertwined with public safety concerns. Fire has long symbolized purification, renewal and spiritual connection (Alexander, 2004), yet rituals involving open flames require increasingly sophisticated governance in contemporary urban settings. Several European examples demonstrate that preservation and safety are not mutually exclusive. Festivals such as *Las Fallas* (Spain), *Up Helly Aa* (United Kingdom), the *Beltane Fire Festival* (Scotland), the *Fracchie* procession and the *Fòcara of Novoli* (Italy) combine heritage recognition with structured safety measures, including controlled burning areas, municipal authorization, emergency planning and coordinated risk management (Richards, 2018; Costa, 2017; UNESCO, 2016; Abram, 2016; Ziakas, 2013; Bindi et al., 2022; Apulia Region, 2018). Similar governance approaches are documented for *Hogmanay* celebrations, *Tar Barrels*, *Burgbrennen*, *Maslenitsa* and *Burning Man* (Getz, 2010; Hall, 2005; Picard & Robinson, 2006; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012; UNESCO, 2003; Helvin, 2024; Humphrey, 2018; Gilmore, 2010; Kozinets, 2002). These comparative cases, summarized in Table 1, illustrate how potentially hazardous rituals can be preserved through regulated governance rather than prohibition.

The tourism literature similarly recognizes festivals and rituals as important cultural resources capable of strengthening destination attractiveness, local identity and community participation (Getz, 2010; Richards, 2018; Quinn, 2009). In the Apulian context, folklore festivals have also been interpreted as complex cultural phenomena that combine ritual participation, artistic performance, local identity and business activities, contributing to territorial promotion and cultural tourism development (Imbriani, 2026). At the same time, tourism may reshape ritual practices through commercialization and changing visitor expectations (Chen et al., 2024; Yan & Bramwell, 2008). Recent reviews highlight the growing relevance of ritualized experiences within cultural tourism (Chen et al., 2024), while examples such as the *Hindu* fire-walking festival in Singapore demonstrate that traditional rituals can successfully adapt to modern urban regulations without losing their cultural significance (Lang, 2026). Public policy therefore plays a central role in balancing cultural preservation, safety requirements and tourism development, as also illustrated by debates surrounding heritage protection in controversial cultural practices such as bullfighting (Costa & Rezende, 2024).

These issues are particularly relevant for roots tourism. Travellers seeking to reconnect with their ancestral places increasingly value authentic community traditions and local cultural practices (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Cannas et al., 2022). Given Italy's large global diaspora and institutional efforts to promote roots tourism (MAECI, 2022), ritual fire traditions may represent distinctive cultural experiences capable of strengthening emotional links between visitors and their territories of origin.

Despite the expanding literature on heritage governance, festivals and tourism, limited attention has been devoted to the governance of ritual fire traditions as a policy issue. Existing studies mainly adopt anthropological or tourism perspectives, while providing little

evidence on how local authorities balance heritage preservation with public safety, environmental protection and urban management. Moreover, the potential implications of these governance choices for roots tourism remain largely unexplored.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining the recent prohibition of traditional bonfires in Foggia and contrasting it with the heritage-oriented approach adopted by the Apulia Region. Rather than treating fire rituals solely as cultural performances, the study analyses them as governance challenges requiring the integration of heritage preservation, risk management and tourism policy. The comparative evidence presented in Table 1 provides the conceptual basis for the governance framework developed in the following sections.

3 Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how ritual fire traditions can be governed while balancing cultural heritage preservation, public safety, and tourism development. Building on the literature reviewed above, the analysis combines a conceptual governance framework with documentary evidence from the Italian case and comparative examples from other countries.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study integrates three complementary strands of literature: ritual studies and anthropology, cultural heritage governance, and tourism studies.

From an anthropological perspective, rituals are symbolic practices reinforcing collective identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity (Turner, 1979). Fire rituals have historically been associated with purification, renewal, and protection within seasonal and religious celebrations (Alexander, 2004). Such practices are increasingly recognized as forms of intangible cultural heritage, defined by UNESCO (2003) as practices and knowledge transmitted across generations and recognized by communities as part of their cultural identity.

Heritage studies emphasize that intangible cultural practices contribute to community identity and social memory (Smith, 2006; Bortolotto, 2011). However, preserving these practices raises governance challenges when rituals intersect with modern safety standards and urban regulations. Heritage governance therefore requires balancing cultural preservation with public safety through interactions among policymakers, experts, and local communities (Frey, 1997; Bortolotto, 2011).

Tourism studies provide an additional perspective by recognizing rituals as cultural experiences capable of enhancing destination attractiveness and visitor engagement (Getz, 2010; Richards, 2018). However, tourism may also transform traditional rituals by altering their scale, organization, and symbolic meaning (Chen et al., 2024). Within roots tourism, cultural traditions play an important role in reconnecting diaspora communities with their places of origin (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Cannas et al., 2022).

Building on these perspectives, this paper conceptualizes ritual fire traditions as governance challenges rather than solely cultural expressions. The analytical framework assumes that ritual practices simultaneously generate cultural value, public safety concerns, and tourism opportunities. Their long-term sustainability therefore depends on governance arrangements capable of integrating heritage preservation, risk management, and local development objectives.

3.2 Methodological Approach

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative case-study design based on documentary analyses and structured comparison. The case of Foggia was selected because it represents a clear institutional tension between municipal prohibition and regional heritage recognition. The empirical corpus includes municipal regulations, regional laws and registers, funding calls, institutional tourism reports, media evidence and selected comparative cases of ritual fire governance. Documents were selected according to three criteria: (i) direct relevance to ritual fire regulation, (ii) institutional reliability, and (iii) usefulness for assessing the relationship between heritage preservation, risk management and tourism development.

A deductive qualitative content analysis was conducted using five coding categories: (i) cultural heritage recognition, (ii) public safety and environmental risk, (iii) urban management, (iv) tourism/economic potential, and (v) governance coordination. Different contexts were reviewed to identify how ritual fires were framed, which risks were emphasized, which stakeholders were involved, and which policy instruments were proposed or absent. The analysis does not aim to establish causal effects, but to identify governance mechanisms and policy trade-offs. The main limitation of the methodology is the absence of direct interviews with municipal officers, emergency services and community representatives; therefore, the findings are based on documentary triangulation and should be interpreted as exploratory policy evidence.

By adopting a comparative perspective, the study considers events such as *Las Fallas* in Spain, *Up Helly Aa* in Scotland, and *Beltane Fire Festival* in Edinburgh. These comparative cases were selected because they represent well-established ritual fire traditions that have successfully combined heritage preservation with structured safety protocols, institutional coordination, and public regulation. Rather than providing a comprehensive international comparison, they serve as illustrative benchmarks for evaluating alternative governance models applicable to the Italian context.

Descriptive evidence on roots tourism further complements the analysis. Data from the Bank of Italy and institutional reports indicate that ancestry-related travel represents a growing tourism segment, creating opportunities for heritage-based local development. These data provide contextual evidence supporting the potential role of ritual traditions in strengthening local attractiveness for diaspora and roots tourism.

Figure 1 operationalizes the proposed analytical framework by illustrating the relationships between ritual fire heritage, governance responses, and tourism outcomes. It shows how ritual practices simultaneously generate cultural value and governance challenges, requiring policy responses that may range from prohibition to integrated heritage management. Effective governance can therefore transform potentially hazardous traditions into regulated cultural events capable of supporting cultural preservation, public safety, community participation, and sustainable tourism development.

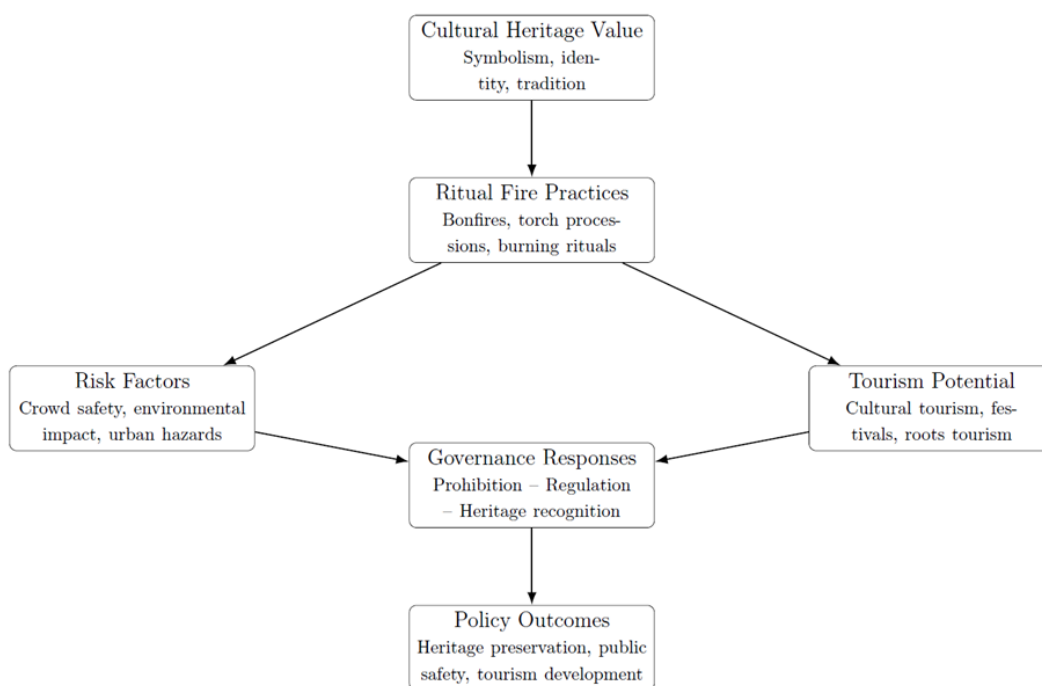


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking ritual fire heritage, risk governance and tourism development.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on literature review.

4 Economic and Policy Analysis: The Foggia Municipality Case of “Suppression by Ordinance”

This section analyses both the economic relevance of roots tourism in Italy and the policy implications of restricting ritual practices, focusing on the case of the prohibition of the traditional bonfires associated with the celebration of the Immaculate Conception in the city of Foggia in December 2025.

4.1 The Economic Dimension of Roots Tourism in Italy

Tourism represents one of the most important sectors of the Italian economy making a substantial contribution to national GDP and employment. Recent data from the Bank of Italy *Survey on International Tourism* confirm the strong recovery of international tourism flows after the pandemic. In 2024, spending by foreign travellers in Italy reached €54.2 billion, increasing by approximately 4.9 per cent compared with the previous year, while spending by Italian travellers abroad reached €33 billion. The resulting tourism balance recorded a surplus of €21.2 billion, corresponding to 1 per cent of national GDP, confirming tourism as one of the main contributors to Italy's external balance (Bank of Italy, 2025).

Table 2. Expenditure, number of inbound travellers and overnight stays by purpose of trip in Italy, period 2022-2024.

	Expenditure, number of inbound travellers and overnight stays by purpose of trip								
	Overall expenditure (millions of euros)			Number of travellers (millions)			Number of overnight stays (millions)		
	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024
	millions of euros			millions			millions		

	Expenditure, number of inbound travellers and overnight stays by purpose of trip								
Personal	37,844	44,303	46,303	61.4	70.8	73.6	311.1	341.7	338.9
<i>Holidays</i>	26,562	32,078	33,946	30.3	34.9	35.0	184.6	207.7	210.5
<i>Visiting friends and relatives</i>	6,741	6,996	7,205	9.9	11.1	11.2	78.6	76.8	75.4
<i>Others</i>	4,541	5,228	5,151	21.2	24.7	27.4	48.0	57.1	52.9
Business and professional	6,410	7,385	7,911	13.4	15.0	15.0	45.6	46.1	45.0
Total	44,254	51,688	54,214	74.7	85.7	88.6	356.7	387.8	383.8

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Bank of Italy - Survey on International Tourism, 2025.

Within this broader tourism economy, roots tourism is often approximated through the category Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) in international tourism statistics. However, the two concepts should not be treated as equivalent. VFR tourism mainly captures travel motivated by social and family visits, whereas roots tourism also includes motivations related to genealogy, ancestral identity, cultural memory and emotional attachment to places of origin. Therefore, VFR represents only the closest available statistical proxy for ancestry-related travel rather than a direct measurement of roots tourism.

Data reported in Table 2 show that international travel motivated by visits to friends and relatives generated approximately €7.2 billion in expenditure in 2024, with more than 11 million travellers and 75.4 million overnight stays. This corresponds to around 13.3 per cent of total inbound tourism expenditure and almost 20 per cent of total inbound overnight stays. The same data imply an average expenditure of approximately €96 per overnight stay for VFR travellers, calculated as total VFR expenditure divided by total VFR overnight stays. This value is used later in the paper as a conservative parameter for estimating the potential visitor-day expenditure associated with ritual events.

These figures suggest that travel motivated by family and cultural connections represents a significant component of Italy's tourism demand. Moreover, many travellers with Italian ancestry may visit the country for leisure or cultural purposes without explicitly declaring a VFR motivation, meaning that the actual economic relevance of roots tourism is likely greater than what is captured by official VFR data. Broader estimates indicate that the global population of individuals of Italian origin exceeds 60 million people (Confcommercio, 2023), while official data from the Register of Italians Residing Abroad (AIRE) report 6.4 million registered Italian nationals living abroad as of 1 January 2025.

Within this context, cultural practices and local traditions play an important role in shaping tourism experiences connected to ancestral identity. Ritual celebrations, festivals and traditional events provide opportunities for diaspora communities to reconnect with local culture and collective memory. Interpreted through the broader lens of roots tourism, the VFR evidence highlights the potential relevance of cultural initiatives aimed at strengthening ties between diaspora communities and their territories of origin.

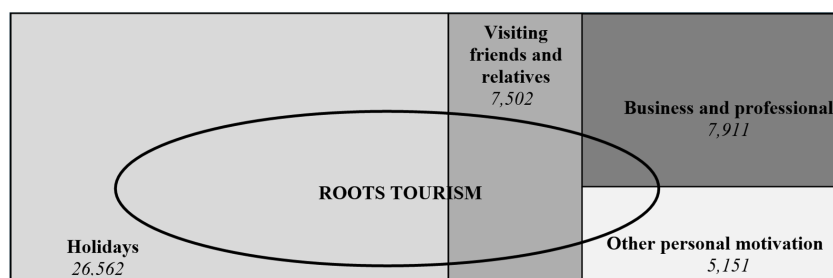


Figure 2. Conceptual positioning of roots tourism within international tourism expenditure in Italy.

Expenditure in million euros of inbound tourism by motivation, year 2024.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data of Bank of Italy (2025) and Confcommercio estimations in *Roots Tourism - Insights on dimensions and features* (2023). Notes: The category "visiting friends and relatives" represents the closest statistical proxy, but roots tourism also overlaps with leisure and cultural travel motivated by ancestral identity and heritage exploration.

4.2 Policy Analysis: The Suppression of Bonfires of the Immaculate Conception by Foggia Municipality

The Foggia case is not only a symbolic conflict between tradition and regulation, but also a case of risk-based urban governance. According to the Mayoral Ordinance No. 89/2025¹, The prohibition was justified by repeated problems recorded in previous years, including illegal accumulation of combustible material, waste residues after bonfires, overcrowding in specific urban areas, and episodes of conflict with law enforcement during control activities. Local media had previously reported violent episodes during the Immaculate Conception period, including attacks against local police with stones, firecrackers and Molotov bottles (Il Mattino, 2018²). The ordinance therefore framed the bonfires primarily as a problem of public safety, hygiene, urban decorum and environmental protection (Foggia Municipality, 2025), rather than as a cultural practice requiring structured management.

Bonfires linked to the Immaculate Conception have historically represented expressions of local identity and community cohesion in Southern Italy (Bindi et al., 2022). However, their spontaneous and decentralized character creates risks related to uncontrolled combustion, traffic obstruction, crowd management and emergency response. From a stakeholder perspective, the case involves municipal authorities, emergency services, regional institutions, local communities, religious groups, cultural associations, businesses, tourism operators and potential roots tourists.

Table 3. Governance approaches to ritual fires: prohibition, regulation and heritage recognition.

Ritual / Event	Location	Governance Approach	Main Policy Instruments	References
Bonfires of the Immaculate Conception	Foggia, Italy	Prohibition	Mayoral ordinance banning fires in public spaces to prevent safety risks, traffic disruption and environmental damage	Foggia Municipality (2025)
Las Fallas	Valencia,	Regulated cultural	Municipal event management,	Richards

¹ The ordinance was in force 00:01 on 7 December to 24:00 on 8 December 2025 and prohibited both the possession of combustible materials and the lighting of fires or bonfires on municipal territory. The municipality also cited previous safety concerns, including waste accumulation, overcrowding, environmental damage, and conflicts during control activities.

² <https://www.ilmattinoquotidiano.it/news/cronaca/40817/pietre-petardi-e-bottiglie-molotov-contro-la-polizia-locale-di-foggia-un-immacolata-da-guerriglia.html>

Ritual / Event	Location	Governance Approach	Main Policy Instruments	References
	Spain	event + UNESCO heritage	controlled burning zones, pyrotechnic regulations, UNESCO intangible heritage recognition	(2018); UNESCO (2016)
Fòcara of Novoli	Apulia, Italy	Heritage recognition and regulated festival	Regional law on ritual fires, inclusion in regional heritage register, fire brigade supervision and tourism promotion	Apulia Region (2018); Bindi et al. (2022)
Fracchie	San Marco in Lamis, Italy	Regulated religious procession	Municipal authorization, defined routes, supervision by local authorities and safety monitoring	San Marco in Lamis Municipality (2018)
Up Helly Aa	Shetland, UK	Community-managed ritual with formal safety controls	Structured organization, trained participants, controlled burning of Viking ship and crowd management	Abram (2016); Jarvie et al. (2013)
Beltane Fire Festival	Edinburgh, UK	Licensed cultural event	Event permits, controlled fire installations, ticketed attendance and professional safety supervision	Ziakas (2013)
Tar Barrel Festival	Ottery St Mary, UK	Traditional event with local risk management	Community governance, emergency services monitoring and public safety warnings	Picard & Robinson (2006)
Maslenitsa Fire Rituals	Russia/ Eastern Europe	Cultural festival regulated at local level	Organized public celebrations with symbolic burning of effigies in designated spaces	Helvin (2024); Humphrey (2018)
Burgbrennen	Luxembourg	Municipally authorized seasonal ritual	Designated fire locations, fire brigade supervision and environmental regulation	Hobsbawm & Ranger (2012)
Burning Man	Nevada, USA	Highly regulated large-scale ritual event	Temporary city governance model, environmental regulations, fire safety planning and emergency infrastructure	Gilmore (2010); Kozinets (2002)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Given that regional authorities emphasize heritage recognition and cultural valorisation, a further institutional implication concerns access to the regional heritage and funding framework. The Apulia Region links ritual fire recognition to registration in the regional register; therefore, prohibition may prevent the Foggia tradition from being transformed into a formally recognized and fundable cultural event³. In practical terms, if the ritual remains banned rather than regulated, local actors cannot easily structure an application for inclusion in the regional register or access regional contributions dedicated to ritual fire festivities. Thus, local communities, religious groups and cultural associations connected to the symbolic and

³ In addition to tourism-related opportunity costs, prohibition may also imply a missed institutional opportunity. The Apulia Region allocated €195,000 in 2025 for ritual fire events included in the Regional Register and announced €120,000 for 2026, divided between municipalities and non-profit organizations. Since eligibility is linked to registration, a prohibited or non-formalized ritual cannot easily access this heritage and tourism funding framework. This should not be counted as a direct economic loss, but as a missed institutional opportunity. Available: https://burp.regione.puglia.it/documents/20135/2664204/DET_157_18_6_2025.pdf/a3817fd4-6f3a-f99e-05a2-d6a8b860ffcb?version=1.0&t=1751902629889 and https://burp.regione.puglia.it/documents/20135/2798636/DET_139_7_5_2026.pdf/d30ea92a-1959-fa87-613c-08ef86c5e196?version=1.0&t=1779983489085

identity value of the ritual, as well as local businesses and tourism operators, may benefit from regulated cultural events. Diaspora visitors and roots tourists represent a further group potentially interested in authentic local traditions. The absence of a structured coordination mechanism among these actors helps explain why prohibition became the dominant municipal response.

Table 3 shows that prohibition is only one possible governance strategy. Comparative examples such as *Las Fallas*, the *Fòcara of Novoli*, the *Fracchie*, *Up Helly Aa* and the *Beltane Fire Festival* demonstrate that ritual fires can be preserved through regulated approaches based on municipal authorization, designated spaces, safety perimeters, emergency coordination and heritage recognition (UNESCO, 2016; Richards, 2018; Apulia Region, 2018; Bindi et al., 2022; Abram, 2016; Ziakas, 2013).

The Foggia case also reveals a vertical coordination problem. While the Apulia Region formally recognizes ritual fire festivities as cultural heritage and tourism resources, the mayoral ordinance adopted a restrictive approach focused on urban safety and public order (Apulia Region, 2018). This divergence suggests the need for governance frameworks that balance heritage preservation, risk management, environmental protection and sustainable tourism development.

From a policy perspective, restrictive measures may reduce immediate risks, but they can also weaken cultural traditions, community participation and tourism opportunities. More balanced governance should therefore combine safety rules, designated spaces, emergency coordination and heritage recognition, allowing policymakers to protect public safety while preserving the cultural and tourism value of ritual practices.

4.3 Policy Implications: Illustrative Estimation of the Opportunity Costs of Prohibition

While the mayoral ordinance adopted in Foggia primarily addressed public safety concerns, the prohibition of traditional rituals may also generate economic implications in terms of foregone visitor expenditure and local development opportunities. For this reason, the following estimation should be understood as an illustrative opportunity-cost scenario rather than as a precise measurement of economic loss.

A growing body of literature highlights that cultural events and festivals can produce significant local economic effects by attracting visitors and stimulating spending in sectors such as accommodation, food services, retail and transport (Getz, 2010; Richards, 2018). Special events may generate additional expenditure beyond the event site itself, although the scale of this effect depends on the number of non-local visitors, length of stay, local supply linkages and spending patterns (Dwyer et al., 2005; Fletcher, 1989; Stynes, 1997). At the same time, tourism impact studies should be interpreted cautiously, since multiplier-based estimates may overstate effects if leakages, substitution effects and displacement are not considered (Dwyer et al., 2004; Crompton, 2006).

Ritual fire festivals often function as localized cultural attractions capable of drawing both residents and visitors. As shown in Table 3, many comparable events across Europe, such as *Las Fallas* in Valencia or the *Fòcara of Novoli*, are integrated into local tourism strategies and contribute to destination attractiveness (UNESCO, 2016; Bindi et al., 2022). This interpretation is also supported by recent research on Apulian folklore festivals, which shows that these events combine ritual, social participation, artistic performance and economic activity, progressively becoming tools for territorial promotion and cultural tourism development (Imbriani, 2026). From this perspective, ritual fire events should not be considered only as local

customs, but also as heritage-based cultural products that may contribute to place identity, destination visibility and local economic activation. Figure 3 illustrates the *Fòcara of Novoli* held in Novoli, in the province of Lecce, Apulia, Italy.



Figure 3. The *Fòcara of Novoli*, held in Novoli, province of Lecce, Apulia, Italy.

Source: *Corriere della Sera*

Because no official visitor count exists for the Foggia bonfires, the scenario is intentionally conservative and does not attempt to measure the actual loss generated by the prohibition. The estimation is based on three conservative assumptions. First, only additional non-local visitors are considered, in order to avoid counting resident expenditure that would probably occur locally in any case. Second, the assumed visitor range is limited to 1,000–2,000 additional visitors, reflecting a small-scale urban cultural event rather than a large festival. Third, the average expenditure parameter is set at €96 per visitor-day, derived from the 2024 Bank of Italy VFR data reported in Table 2⁴. The assumed range of 1,000–2,000 additional non-local visitors is illustrative and substantially below the attendance recorded by major regulated ritual fire events in Apulia. For example, the *Fo'Cra* in 2026 in Grottaglie (Apulia, Italy) attracted about 30,000 people, including citizens, pilgrims, families and tourists from different areas of Apulia and Southern Italy (ANSA, 2026)⁵. This comparison supports the conservative nature of the Foggia scenario. If a regulated ritual celebration attracted between 1,000 and 2,000 additional visitors, direct tourism expenditure would range between €96,000 and €192,000 per event.

To account for indirect and induced effects, tourism impact studies often apply multipliers to direct expenditure that ranges from 1.6 to 2.0, although such values must be interpreted with caution (Dwyer et al., 2004; Vanhove, 2011). Applying the lower multiplier used in the sensitivity exercise produces an illustrative total impact between approximately €153,600 and €307,200 depending on the visitor-flow scenario⁶. It should be underlined that these figures do not represent a formal economic impact assessment and should not be interpreted as the exact economic loss caused by the prohibition. Rather, they provide an order of magnitude for the potential opportunity cost associated with suppressing a cultural event that could otherwise be

⁴ Using these assumptions, direct visitor expenditure can be estimated as follows: Direct expenditure = number of additional visitors × average visitor-day expenditure.

⁵ https://www.ansa.it/puglia/notizie/2026/02/02/focra-2026-a-grottaglie-30mila-visitatori-per-il-falo-di-san-ciro_c0040389-cd86-49a2-b4cd-f682c97ae193.html

⁶ The estimate excludes resident spending, displacement effects and leakages. For this reason, it should be interpreted as a lower-bound opportunity-cost scenario rather than a full economic impact assessment. The multiplier is applied only for illustrative purposes and should not be read as evidence of net local income.

managed under regulated conditions. The estimate also excludes intangible benefits such as place branding, community engagement, intergenerational transmission of traditions and reinforcement of local identity, all of which contribute to the long-term attractiveness of destinations (Richards, 2018).

Table 4. Sensitivity check for the illustrative economic impact of a regulated ritual fire event.

Scenario	Additional visitors	Average visitor-day expenditure	Direct expenditure	Multiplier	Estimated total impact
Low	1,000	€96	€96,000	1.6	€153,600
Baseline	1,500	€96	€144,000	1.6	€230,400
High	2,000	€96	€192,000	1.6	€307,200

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Bank of Italy (2025), Dwyer et al. (2004), Dwyer et al. (2005), Fletcher (1989), Styne (1997) and Vanhove (2011).

Such elements are particularly relevant in the context of roots tourism, where visitors are motivated by the search for authentic cultural experiences linked to local traditions, family memory and collective identity (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). From a policy perspective, these considerations suggest that governance strategies based exclusively on prohibition may overlook broader economic and cultural benefits. Alternative approaches based on regulated event management could allow municipalities to mitigate risks while simultaneously leveraging traditional practices as assets for sustainable tourism development.

4.4 Operationalizing a Regulated Governance Framework

The proposed framework can be operationalized through a regulated-event model based on six steps: (i) stakeholder mapping, (ii) risk assessment, (iii) permitting standards, (iv) event management, (v) tourism valorisation and (vi) post-event monitoring. Rather than allowing spontaneous and uncontrolled bonfires, the municipality could authorize a limited number of ritual fires in designated areas, under predefined conditions concerning materials, size, timing, safety perimeter, emergency access, waste management and supervision. This would transform the ritual from an informal risk-prone practice into a regulated heritage event eligible for monitoring, regional recognition and tourism promotion. The proposed operational framework is reported in Table 5.

Table 5 translates the proposed governance approach into practical policy instruments. The framework is organized as a sequence of operational phases, moving from the identification of relevant stakeholders to post-event evaluation. This structure shows that the management of ritual fires does not depend only on the final authorization or prohibition of the event, but on a wider process of planning, coordination, supervision and monitoring. Each phase identifies the main operational tool, the actors involved and the indicators that could be used to assess implementation. In this way, the framework provides municipalities with a practical roadmap for transforming informal and potentially risky bonfires into regulated cultural events.

Table 5. From prohibition to regulated governance: Operational framework for ritual fire events.

Governance phase	Operational tool	Main actors	Monitoring indicators
<i>Stakeholder mapping</i>	Identification of municipality, police, fire brigade, community groups, parish, tourism operators, regional offices	Municipality, Region, associations	Number of formal coordination meetings
<i>Risk assessment</i>	Fire-risk plan, crowd-risk plan,	Fire brigade, police,	Approved safety plan;

Governance phase	Operational tool	Main actors	Monitoring indicators
	environmental-risk assessment	civil protection	number of incidents
<i>Permitting standards</i>	Authorized sites, materials, maximum size, timing, supervision	Municipality, event organizers	Number of authorized bonfires
<i>Event management</i>	Safety perimeter, emergency access, waste plan, communication campaign	Municipality, organizers, police	Compliance rate; waste collected
<i>Tourism valorisation</i>	Inclusion in regional register, calendar, communication strategy	Region, DMO, tourism operators	Visitors, non-local visitors, media visibility
<i>Post-event monitoring</i>	Evaluation report	Municipality and stakeholders	Incidents, costs, visitors, resident complaints

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The framework also addresses the coordination gap observed in the Foggia case. A regulated model would require the municipality to act not only as an authority imposing restrictions, but as a coordinating institution capable of bringing together regional offices, police forces, fire brigades, civil protection, cultural associations, religious communities, tourism operators and residents. The inclusion of monitoring indicators is particularly important because it allows public authorities to evaluate the effectiveness of the event after its implementation. Indicators such as the number of authorized bonfires, recorded incidents, waste collected, visitor flows, resident complaints and media visibility would make it possible to assess whether regulation effectively reduces risks while preserving the cultural and tourism value of the ritual.

5 Conclusion, Limitations and Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study show that the governance of ritual fire practices should not be framed as a simple trade-off between cultural preservation and public safety. The central policy challenge is instead to design regulatory frameworks capable of integrating heritage protection, risk management, community participation and tourism development.

Ritual fires represent a form of intangible cultural heritage that contributes to local identity, social cohesion and collective memory. At the same time, their material and spatial characteristics create risks related to public safety, environmental protection, crowd management and urban order. The comparative evidence discussed in this paper shows that these dimensions are not necessarily incompatible. Several European and Italian cases demonstrate that ritual fire traditions can be preserved through structured governance models based on planning, designated spaces, supervision, emergency coordination and safety protocols.

Within this perspective, the Foggia case illustrates the limitations of a purely prohibitive approach. Although the mayoral ordinance was motivated by legitimate concerns related to safety, environmental damage and urban management, the suppression of traditional practices may generate unintended consequences, including the weakening of local traditions, reduced community participation and the loss of potential cultural and economic value. In contrast, the regional framework adopted in Apulia shows a more heritage-oriented approach, where ritual fires are formally recognized and potentially integrated into cultural and tourism strategies.

The connection with roots tourism further reinforces the relevance of regulated heritage management. Travel motivated by identity, memory and belonging represents an increasingly important tourism segment, although it cannot be measured exclusively through VFR statistics. In this context, ritual practices should not be treated as residual folkloric

expressions, but as contemporary cultural resources capable of strengthening the relationship between local communities, diaspora populations and territories of origin. Their valorisation may contribute to destination attractiveness, place branding and local development, especially in regions characterized by strong migration histories.

This study has some limitations. The analysis is based on a qualitative policy approach and focuses primarily on the Foggia case, supported by comparative examples and descriptive tourism data. The economic estimation is illustrative and should not be interpreted as a precise measurement of the losses caused by prohibition. Future research could strengthen this analysis through interviews with local stakeholders, visitor surveys and more detailed event-level data.

From a policy perspective, three main recommendations emerge. First, local authorities should move from a logic of prohibition toward regulated event management, defining clear rules on location, materials, timing, environmental safeguards and safety procedures. Second, stronger coordination between municipal and regional levels of governance is needed to align urban safety regulations with heritage policies and tourism strategies. Third, ritual fire traditions should be integrated into broader cultural and tourism planning frameworks, including roots tourism and community-based development initiatives.

Ultimately, the governance of ritual fires requires a shift in perspective: from viewing these practices as problems to be eliminated, to recognizing them as heritage assets to be managed. Such an approach would allow policymakers to reconcile safety requirements with cultural continuity, while also supporting the social and economic potential embedded in long-standing local traditions.

References

- Abram, S. (2016). *Culture and planning*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315575445>
- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy. *Sociological theory*, 22(4), pp. 527-573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00233.x>
- Apulia Region. (2018). *Regional Law No. 1 of January 25, 2018 - Interventions for the enhancement of festive rituals related to fire*. Available: <https://bussolanormativa.consiglio.puglia.it/public/Leges/LeggeNavscroll.aspx?id=13032>
- Bank of Italy. (2025). *Survey on International Tourism*. Available: <https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/indagine-turismo-internazionale/index.html>
- Confcommercio. (2023). *Turismo delle radici. Approfondimenti sulle dimensioni e caratteristiche*. Available: <https://www.confcommercio.it/documents/20126/2460756/Turismo+delle+radici+-+Approfondimenti+sulle+dimensioni+e+caratteristiche.pdf/86c301df-dc64-f896-9cb5-780102ce0d43?t=1700821992781>
- Bell, C. (1997). Preface. In *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195110517.001.0001>
- Bindi, L., Conti, M., & Belliggiano, A. (2022). Sense of place, biocultural heritage, and sustainable knowledge and practices in three Italian rural regeneration processes. *Sustainability*, 14(8), 4858. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084858>
- Borer, M. I. (2013). Being in the city: The sociology of urban experiences. *Sociology Compass*, 7(11), pp. 965-983. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12085>

- Bortolotto, C. (2011). *Le patrimoine culturel immatériel. Enjeux d'une nouvelle catégorie*. Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsmsmh.3545>
- Cannas, R. (2022). Roots tourism as a means to foster sustainable development of small destinations: A focus on Italy. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 20(2), pp. 91-105. Available: <https://johat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/5.pdf>
- Chen, H., Xu, S., Law, R., & Zhang, M. (2024). Ritual in tourism: Evolution, progress, and future prospects. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 52, 101258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101258>
- Costa, X. (2017). Festividade: Formas moderna e tradicional de sociabilidade. Ponto Urbe. *Revista do núcleo de antropologia urbana da USP*, (20). <https://doi.org/10.4000/pontourbe.3379>
- Costa, B. S., & Rezende, E. N. (2024). The Protection of Cultural Heritage in Brazil and Spain: The Case of Vaquejada and Bullfighting. *Veredas do Direito*, 21, e212641. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v21.2641>
- Crompton, J. L. (2006). Economic impact studies: Instruments for political shenanigans? *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(1), pp. 67-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287506288870>
- Dwyer, L., Forsyth, P., & Spurr, R. (2004). Evaluating tourism's economic effects: New and old approaches. *Tourism Management*, 25(3), pp. 307-317. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(03\)00131-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(03)00131-6)
- Dwyer, L., Forsyth, P., & Spurr, R. (2005). Estimating the impacts of special events on an economy. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(4), pp. 351-359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287505274648>
- Fletcher, J. E. (1989). Input-output analysis and tourism impact studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 16(4), 514-529. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(89\)90006-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(89)90006-6)
- Frey, B. S. (1997). The evaluation of cultural heritage: some critical issues. In *Economic perspectives on cultural heritage*, pp. 31-49. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25824-6_3
- Foggia Municipality (2025). Mayoral Ordinance no. 89 of December 5, 2025. Available: <https://portalehypersic.comune.foggia.it/cmsfoggia/portale/delibere/ordinanze.aspx?P=1100>
- Getz, D. (2010). The nature and scope of festival studies. *International Journal of Event Management Research*, 5(1), 1-47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17852951011029298>
- Gilmore, L. (2010). Theater in a crowded fire: Ritual and spirituality at Burning Man. Univ of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520945531>
- Hall, C. M. (2005). *Tourism: Rethinking the Social Science of Mobility*. Pearson Education. ISBN: 058232789X.
- Humphrey, C. (2018). *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*. Cornell University Press. ISBN: 9781501725722
- Helvin, N. (2024). *Ancestral Slavic Magic: Transcend Family Patterns and Empower Ancestral Connections*. Simon and Schuster. ISBN: 9781644119587
- Imbriani, E. (2026). Folklore festivals in Puglia. In A. Trono & P. Moira (Eds.), *Cultural Heritage Tourism and Circular Economy* (pp. 305–320). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-14082-1_17

- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from burning man. *Journal of Consumer research*, 29(1), pp. 20-38. <https://doi.org/10.1086/339919>
- Jarvie, G., Thornton, J., & Mackie, H. (2013). *Sport, culture and society: An introduction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203883808>
- Lang, N. (2026). Religion, Well-being, and Heritage: A “Mini” Hindu Fire-walking Festival in Singapore During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *The Oriental Anthropologist*, 26(1), pp. 98-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X261420883>
- Lett Jr, J. W. (1983). Ludic and liminoid aspects of charter yacht tourism in the Caribbean. *Annals of tourism research*, 10(1), pp. 35-56. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(83\)90114-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(83)90114-7)
- MAECI - Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (2021). *Primo rapporto sul turismo delle radici in Italia*. Eds.: Ferrari, S. & Nicotera, T. Milano: Egea editore. Available: <https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Primo-rapporto-sul-turismo-delle-radici-in-Italia.pdf>
- MAECI - Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (2022). *Scoprirsi italiani. I viaggi delle radici in Italia*. Eds: Gabrieli, M., Giumelli, R., Licata, D. & Sommaro, G. Rubbettino Editore. <https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Scoprirsi-Italiani.-I-viaggi-delle-radici-in-Italia.pdf>
- Quinn, B. (2009). *Festivals, events and tourism*. In T. Jamal & M. Robinson (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021076.n27>
- Picard, D., & Robinson, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Festivals, tourism and social change: Remaking worlds (Vol. 8)*. Channel view publications. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410490>
- Raj, R., & Griffin, K. (2015). *Festival and Event Management: An International Arts and Culture Perspective*. Routledge. <https://www.cabidigitallibrary.org/doi/book/10.1079/9781780645230.0000>
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (2012). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636>
- Rappaport, R. A. (1999). *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity (Vol. 110)*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814686>
- Richards, G. (2018). Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 36, 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005>
- San Marco in Lamis Municipality. (2018). *Ordinanza n. 9: Realizzazione delle Fracchie e processione della Madonna Addolorata accompagnata dalle Fracchie*. https://www.halleyweb.com/sanmarcoinlamis/po/attachment_news.php?id=669
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>
- Stynes, D. J. (1997). *Economic impacts of tourism: A handbook for tourism professionals* (pp. 1–32). University of Illinois, Tourism Research Laboratory.
- Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2003). *Heritage Tourism*. Harlow: Pearson Education. ISBN-13: 9780582369702.
- Turner, V. (1979). *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, pp. 157. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

- UNESCO (2003). Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Paris: UNESCO. Available: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>
- UNESCO (2016). Las Fallas of Valencia - Intangible Cultural Heritage. DECISION 11.COM 10.b.30. Available: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/11.COM/10.B.30>
- Vanhove, N. (2011). The Economics of Tourism Destinations. Elsevier Butterworth. ISBN: 978-0-08-096996-1
- Yan, H., & Bramwell, B. (2008). Cultural tourism, ceremony and the state in China. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(4), 969-989. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2008.09.004>
- Ziakas, V. (2013). Event portfolio planning and management: A holistic approach. *Event Management*, 17(1), 27-41. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599513X13623342048095>