

## **TOURISM ON THE ECOPISTAS AS A FACTOR IN THE PRESERVATION OF RAILWAY CULTURAL HERITAGE<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

Particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, multiple railway lines in Portugal were decommissioned. This situation resulted in the abandonment of most of the railway heritage found in stations and stops. To revive and breathe new life into these old railway lines, Infraestruturas de Portugal, in collaboration with local municipalities and the Revive fund, has been developing rail trails (Ecopistas) and advocating for the restoration of stations and stops, thereby fostering the cultural and social sustainability of these areas.

To assess the extent to which Ecopistas (rail trails) have contributed to the sustainability and preservation of railway heritage, an analysis of the restored stations and their current functionalities was conducted.

The creation of Ecopistas has inspired various organizations to renovate the stations and stops and safeguard the existing railway heritage, particularly the conservation of tile artifacts and the original architectural features.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to examine the local communities' perception of the impact of the restoration of these stations and stops.

**Keywords:** Ecopistas, Sustainability, Railway Cultural Heritage, Tile Heritage, Stations

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<sup>1</sup> Work financed by national funds through the National Science, Research and Technology Financing Agency (FCT) within the scope of TECHN&ART.IPT., within the scope of the CFPI2023/02 GAMwayTrain Project.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s and 1990s, Portugal witnessed the closure of several of its railway lines. This situation led to the complete abandonment of all the heritage located along these lines, resulting in their degradation. Even today, some places remain in ruins, while others require significant restoration work. To address this abandonment, Ecopistas were created, aiming to promote their use for cycling or walking. In a way, these pathways became associated with tourism, and this connection is particularly evident in some of these Ecopistas. It is based on this premise that the present investigation becomes relevant, as it seeks to examine how this connection occurs and whether it has an impact on the rehabilitation of stations and halts.

## 2. CHARACTERIZATION OF THE STUDY

### 2.1. Ecopistas

It is important to clarify from the outset that the use of deactivated paths, canals, and railway tracks constitutes a privileged support for the development of Greenways (Declaration of Lille, for a European Green Network, September 12, 2000). In Portugal, the term "Ecopistas" is used to refer to Greenways (IP, 2022).

Ecopistas are typically infrastructured with a continuous route, as they are implemented along former rail branches or disused railway lines. They provide safety from the outset, as the risk of getting lost is low, and the likelihood of accidents is greatly reduced since motorized vehicles, such as cars, are not allowed. From a landscape perspective, they offer a pleasant journey, connecting villages, and cultural heritage, or traversing through natural reserves (Costa, 2014).

In this context, Ecopistas are categorized within the typologies of Green Corridors, specifically in Recreational Corridors (Costa, 2014). In other words, the Declaration of Lille in September 2000 states that Green Corridors are exclusive routes dedicated solely to non-motorized transportation. They are designed in an integrated manner to enhance both the environment and the quality of life in the surrounding area. These routes must meet satisfactory criteria regarding width, gradient, and surface condition, ensuring they are easy to use and pose low risks for users of various abilities. In this regard, paths along canals and old railway lines are highly suitable resources for developing greenways (EGWA, 2000).

Recreational Corridors are typical routes that facilitate recreational and leisure activities, serving as an alternative to road networks and exclusively accommodating soft mobility modes (Castelão, 2017; Little, 1990). In this context, the present study was conducted based on the existing Ecopistas in Portugal. Geographically, it is observed that there are more Ecopistas in the northern part of the country compared to the central and southern regions, as depicted in Figure 1, specifically in the orange routes. The active railway lines are represented in black, and the future Ecopistas are highlighted in yellow (IP Património, 2024).

According to IP Heritage (2024), currently, the following Greenways exist: Alto Alentejo, Corgo, Dão, Famalição, Guimarães, Maia, Minho, Montado, Montijo, Mora, Sabor, Tâmega, Tua, Vouga, and Sabor (Table 1). Totaling 14 Greenways, their track

lengths vary from 3.100 km (Maia Greenway with the shortest length) to 76.800 km (Vouga Greenway with the longest length).

**Figure 1.** Map of Ecopistas Portuguesas



Source: IP Património (2024)

## 2.2. Railway Heritage on Ecopistas

During the 1980s and 1990s, Portugal witnessed the closure of several of its railway lines. These political decisions opened a gap in the preservation and maintenance of the built heritage supporting railway operations. Maintenance and preservation ceased due to associated costs and a lack of a strategy aimed at mitigating these expenses. Only later, when much of this heritage had already become vacant, did the concession to other entities begin.

In this context, it was observed that after the replacement of railway tracks as the primary means of transporting goods and passengers by roadways, a significant portion of the remnants from the railway era became obsolete, leading to numerous challenges in their preservation today (Kuhl, 2008). However, despite this substitution, Viñuales (2024) emphasizes that the infrastructure specific to this type of heritage has not disappeared. Railway towns, tracks, poles, chimneys, signage, and all kinds of structures (stations, halts, shelters, staff houses, cargo platforms, among others) and remnants that formed a new landscape remain in localities. However, they currently face various difficulties related to their preservation.

Therefore, incorporating the preservation of historical and cultural heritage into urban and regional plans and projects serves to align it with territorial development

policies, making implementation and funding more feasible. Preserving heritage involves integrating it into master plans, budgetary guidelines, multi-year plans, and other mechanisms, highlighting a form of coordination between conservation efforts and urban planning (Somekh, 2014).

In terms of built heritage, five of the Greenways (Maia, Minho, Montado, and Montijo) have only 3 stations/halts or stops/rail crossings each. In contrast, the Vouga Greenway has 38, Corgo has 29, Sabor has 26, Guimarães has 21, and Mora has 8 (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Ecopistas vs Railway-Built Heritage

Designation	Length (in KM)	Number of Stations/Halts and Stops/Rail Crossings
Ecopista do Alto Alentejo	14,000	11
Ecopista do Corgo	64,120	29
Ecopista do Dão	49,200	15
Ecopista de Famalicão	28,558	12
Ecopista de Guimarães	21,178	21
Ecopista da Maia	3,110	3
Ecopista do Minho	14,990	3
Ecopista do Montado	12,704	3
Ecopista do Montijo	10,770	3
Ecopista de Mora	31,000	8
Ecopista do Tâmega	39,204	19
Ecopista do Tua	43,963	7
Ecopista do Sabor	48,000	26
Ecopista do Vouga	76,800	38

Source: Adapted from IP Património (2024)

The railway heritage consists of resources capable of asserting a cultural identity and, thus, driving tourism in urban and regional contexts, serving as a means for development. Tourism activity generates economic and social impacts in the various regions where it is introduced, promoting job creation and income growth (Jenkins & Lickorish, 2000).

Service-oriented activities, such as railway tourism, with their capacity for generating mobility and regional outreach, start fostering economic activity in regions that are less privileged than other sectors of the economy. These areas often boast cultural and natural

heritage ready to be explored (Jenkins & Lickorish, 2000). Therefore, when coupled with tourism, Greenways, and the accompanying railway heritage tend to assume a crucial and advantageous role in the development of regions that face a shortage of other developmental resources (D’Agostini & Abascal, 2017).

It means that there is a vast railway heritage that contains stories and ethnographies dedicated to the experiences of the regions. Infrastructures such as industrial buildings, factories, and quarries to operate machines such as tracks, carriages, engines, stations, and associated engineering facilities and maintenance sheds. Often, the development of abandoned lines transformed regions into cultural and tourist attractions through railway stations (Bhati, Pryce, Chaiechi, 2014). For regions devastated by “deindustrialization”, the focus on tourist services offers a possible solution, through which local communities can improve their standard of living through the development of activities that favor an increase in visitors and preservation of railway heritage.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

At a methodological level, a survey of stations and stops (198) on lines without rail service and that were converted into greenways was carried out, during the months of September and October 2023. The services offered in restored stations and with new ones were classified. functionalities, within the areas of tourism. As such, 7 categories were created: Accommodation, Agritourism, Culture, Museum, Thermal Spa, Restoration, and Rail Bike.

A survey of the stations that are available in the “Fundo Revive Natureza” fund until April 12, 2024, was also carried out.

### **4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Ecopistas platform. However, only 8 (4.1%) are currently in operation until April 12, 2024. The criteria require each station to be rehabilitated for tourist activities and the maintenance of the building and tile heritage.

Regarding the stations rehabilitated for accommodation, 11 have been repurposed for this use, such as Castelo de Vide (1- Pensão Destino), Marvão-Beirã (2- Casa dos Corações and TrainSpot), Évora-Monte (1- Casas do Apeadeiro), Paradela (1- Paradela Eco Café - serving as a Pilgrim's Hostel), Celorico de Basto, Lourido, Codeçoso, Mondim (4). The latter are part of the Basto Stations project. However, in Cabeço de Vide (1 - Estalagem Rainha D. Leonor), between 2014 and 2022, there was also a project combining accommodation and catering, currently inactive. Lagoaça (1- Casa Rural de Lagoaça) contributes to 5.7% of stations/waypoints on Ecopistas accommodating the new lodging functionality.

There is an Agrotourism project at the old Vale do Pereiro Station, Pepe Aromas, representing 0.5% of the rehabilitated stations on Ecopistas.

In terms of Restoration, 9 (4.7%) stations/waypoints/rail crossings have been restored, namely Leões (2 – Clube de Cicloturismo Ferragial da Nora and O Pastor Snack-Bar), Vila Real Station (1- Cais da Villa), Pocinho Rail Crossing (1- Casas de Côro), Maia Station (1- Restaurante Estação), Paradela (1- Eco Café), Cepães Waypoint (1- Sociedade Recreativa Capaneses), Parada de Gonta (1 - Barba Azeda), Larinho Station

(1 – Estação de Larinho), Mondim de Basto Station (1- Bar). Lagoaça, during its rehabilitation, also functions as a restaurant besides accommodation (1 - Casa Rural de Lagoaça).

On the other hand, in terms of tourist animation activities, 3 stations/waypoints have been redeveloped with cultural-based functions: a Chocolate Factory with tours (Montemor-o-Novo Station 1 - Melgão), a Rail Bike project (1- Marvão-Beirã Station), and a thermal activity in Vidago Station (1- Balneário Pedagógico de Vidago).

Moreover, 9 (4.7%) Museums/Galleries are present: Moncorvo Station (1 - Gallery), Macedo de Cavaleiros Station (1- Sede Geopark- Terras de Cavaleiros), Bragança Station (1- Núcleo Museológico de Bragança), Chaves Station (1- Museu Ferroviário de Chaves), Mora Station (1- Museu Interativo do Megalitismo), Arco de Baúlhe Station (1- Núcleo Ferroviário de Arco de Baúlhe), Old Pinhal Novo Station (1- Museu A Estação), Celorico de Basto Station (1- Pousada da Juventude e Núcleo Intreperativo da Linha do Tâmega). The Estremoz Station was rehabilitated as a Railway Museum Nucleus but is currently inactive (Table 2).

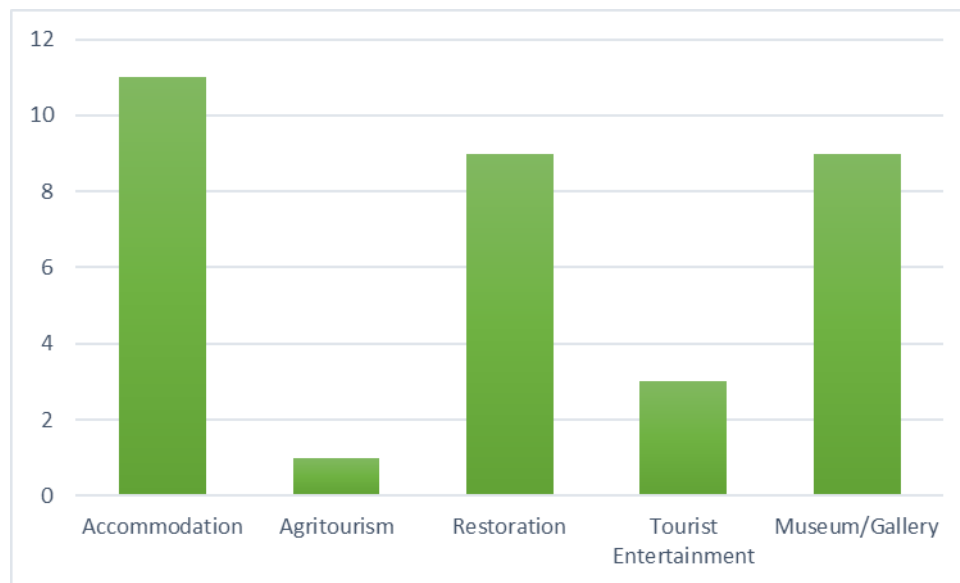
**Table 2.** Ecopistas vs Railway-Built Heritage

Designation	Number of Stations/Halts and Stops/Rail Crossings	Number of Stations/Halts and Stops/Rail Crossings Recovered for Touristic Purposes
Ecopista do Alto Alentejo	11	1
Ecopista do Corgo	29	3
Ecopista do Dão	15	2
Ecopista de Famalicão	12	-
Ecopista de Guimarães	21	1
Ecopista da Maia	3	1
Ecopista do Minho	3	-
Ecopista do Montado	3	1
Ecopista do Montijo	3	1
Ecopista de Mora	8	4
Ecopista do Tâmega	19	6
Ecopista do Tua	7	2
Ecopista do Sabor	26	2
Ecopista do Vouga	38	1

Source: 2024

In summary, 31 (17%) stations/waypoints have been restored for tourism purposes, with 11 allocated for Accommodation, 1 for Agrotourism, 9 for Restoration, 3 for tourist animation activities, and 9 for Museums/Galleries (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Recovered Stations/Waypoints by Category



Source: 2024

Beyond these projects, the Arraiolos station and the Sarilhos level crossing already have restoration projects with the aim of becoming restaurants. The Senhora da Graça station will be an accommodation with a restaurant according to the project presented by the entity that acquired the space. The Pedras Salgadas station is in the final phase of construction to bring to life the new Welcome Center. The Mirandela Station is already in the final phase of construction for what will be the House of Arts. There are also 5 more projects for the restoration of buildings to transform them into tourist accommodations and another for wine tourism activities.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that 193 stations and halts along the Ecopistas have been undergoing recovery to repurpose much of that heritage for tourism-related functions. Specifically, 31 stations/halts have been addressed. We await the results of applications to the Revive Nature Fund to assess both the attractiveness/adherence to it and to determine the areas of the projects. It is also noted that there are stations/halts in various stages of construction and others in the planning phase to host tourism-related activities.

Therefore, we tend to consider that the existence of Ecopistas on previously abandoned rail lines has spurred their rehabilitation, especially for tourism-related activities. This is notably evident in accommodation (11), restaurants (9), and museums/galleries (9).

The existing railway heritage, particularly the tiling, has been preserved in these recoveries, as stipulated by the concession criteria.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that there is a need for greater dynamism in the Ecopistas to invest in the recovery of the railway heritage along them to make it a more attractive heritage and tourist resource.

In the future, it would be vital to understand how the recovery/rehabilitation of railway heritage is perceived by the local community.

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*Journal of Tourism and Heritage Research* (2024), vol. 7, nº 2, pp. 106-114, Duarte, E., Lopes, E., Simões, J., Soares, J. & Figueira, M.C. “Tourism on the ecopistas as a factor in the preservation of railway cultural heritage”

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