


Article

Revitalizing the *Estrada do Paraibuna*: Exploring Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism Dynamics

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Abstract: Cultural heritage reflects accumulated memories, generational practices, and esthetic and cultural ideologies that shape identities. The inherent diversity and uniqueness of these identities define heritage elements, which, however, remain fragile, non-renewable, irreplaceable, and vulnerable. In regions affected by the significant devastation caused by contemporary socio-economic activities, policies often neglect the intrinsic historical and heritage value(s). The historical landscapes with tourism potential that experience decline, degradation, and destruction need even more protection and policies to aid their regeneration and preservation. This study seeks to develop a comprehensive framework for preserving a highly endangered historical road, along with its invaluable monuments and cultural landscapes, as a means to stimulate regional revitalization. The methodological approach relies on observation, field work, and semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the *Estrada do Paraibuna* (Paraibuna Road). This region has suffered significant degradation of its historical and natural assets as a result of intensive resource exploitation. This study underscores the heritage elements with strong tourism potential along the route between Ouro Preto and Barbacena, while underlining the critical need to combat landscape degradation. This study pursues to create a shared vision rooted in promoting sustainable practices that leverage natural and cultural resources, safeguard local culture, and encourage community collaboration in regenerative efforts.

Keywords: territorial revitalization; tourism; cultural heritage; sustainable use; historical route



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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is a testimony and a historical document that evidences the actions of societies over time in a particular place. It results from an accumulation of memories, generational actions, and esthetic and cultural elements that allow the construction of identities. The diversity and uniqueness intrinsic to this identity highlight heritage elements. However, cultural heritage, in its tangible or intangible aspects, is fragile, non-renewable, irreplaceable, and vulnerable.

Krleza et al. [1] focus on the rehabilitation of historical landscapes as a priority in response to the significant devastation they suffer within the context of the material and immaterial production mode of social life at its current stage. In 1972, UNESCO [2] claimed that heritage is often threatened by economic development and by policies that do not account for its intrinsic value (esthetic and symbolic use values), as well as by other pressures associated with natural causes of degradation, which accelerate deterioration,

particularly for heritage sites located outdoors. Based on the recommendations drafted for the safeguarding of historical areas, in 1976, UNESCO [3] emphasized that local and regional decision-makers should include protection measures for historical areas in their considerations and determinations of possible planned actions, given their relevance, including economic and social factors.

Salerno [4], referring to the intersection of landscape and heritage, both in their natural and cultural, tangible and intangible components, suggests that we are witnessing the emergence of heritage landscapes across all territories, and that it is necessary to understand them as assets for regional development. Concerning regional mining and its degrading exploratory drive, such assets will soon be reduced to being unviable, in whole or in part, with many such changes becoming irreversible in this process of spatial production. Therefore, with the projected end of mining on the horizon, tourism will become an activity without a foundation, as there will be no living heritage.

In the context of heritage valorization for economic development, the Burra Charter [5] addresses intrinsic values of territories and heritage, emphasizing that cultural and heritage significance stems from esthetic, historical, scientific, social, and spiritual factors related to a living past in places, reflecting the passage of time and historical continuity. It adds that these elements, resources, and values provide meaning to places. In this regard, safeguarding identity elements allows for emotional and experiential connections that bring substantial benefits to the relationship among local cultural resources, residents, and visitors. Furthermore, various international organizations highlight the importance of protecting heritage and landscapes for communities [6]. By creating the “Principles concerning Rural Landscapes”, they assert that these landscapes are vital components of heritage, exemplifying “living culture” and deserving the highest protection.

In this way, the European Landscape Convention [7] emphasizes the significant concern for the maintenance, preservation, and conservation of landscapes, which are some of the primary concerns in today’s world, amidst rapid environmental changes. Therefore, it is of utmost public interest (though not always of the State) to consider landscapes factors of human development and social well-being, with implications in education, culture, and civilization. Given these principles, there is no doubt that cultural and heritage landscapes can serve as opportunities for local and regional development, particularly through tourism and leisure-related activities and experiences.

The constant appeals for the protection of heritage and landscapes come from this perspective. However, while they are meant to achieve added value and face various confrontations with tourism, they can still be maintained, safeguarded, and conserved, unlike the productive relationships in mining that generate added value at the cost of environmental, heritage, and social degradation. Therefore, preservation efforts must be preceded and accompanied by educational actions that highlight the numerous environmental and anthropogenic risks inherent in some territories, which weaken heritage and its cultural elements. It is also crucial to accurately identify the agents responsible for irreparable losses—in this case, often mining corporations and many governmental institutions.

It was for this reason that in 2006, UNESCO [8] emphasized that the degradation, deterioration, or disappearance of cultural/heritage elements resulted in impoverishment for countries and societies. In 2008, ICOMOS [9] highlighted and recognized that assessing vulnerabilities and risks to heritage is a priority, as is implementing measures and monitoring them. Also in 2008, ICOMOS highlighted the importance of the new concept of cultural routes, which are emerging in the field of conserving and enhancing heritage values on a macro scale. This concept considers heritage located in extended spaces and crossing multiple territories, such as historical or even current cultural routes, as common heritage. It emphasizes that understanding cross-cutting and macro space values cultural elements

both individually and within the network they create, which confers them a heritage value as a whole. Thus, ICOMOS adds that cultural routes have significant social value in terms of fostering more streamlined market economies through tourism, ensuring interactivity and dynamism of territories through preservation, and reflecting the diversity and identity of places.

Scorza and Gatto [10] argue that experiential cultural itineraries emerge as the primary focus in strategies for regenerating territories, while Sahle and Saito [11] emphasize that roads are cultural, particularly the traditional and historical ones. In their case study, they conclude that these roads hold significant meaning for local communities, provide ecological and landscape continuity, and they collaborate with an economy based on artisanal activities, connecting rural territories to cities.

Those roads include also mountain roads, which promote other experiences. Dax and Tamme [12], in an approach to landscape attractiveness as a factor in developing tourist experiences, report that mountainous areas are among the most attractive destinations due to their esthetic, cultural, and spiritual appeal, offering spaces for emotional experiences as alternatives to urban massification.

In the academic field, studies on the subject are marked by significant polarization and interest, focusing on the ongoing destructive environmental occurrences and various human factors that cause extensive damage. Pentz & Albert [13] highlight changes caused by anthropogenic factors as one of the primary threats, resulting in irreparable impacts on cultural landscapes, reflecting consequences not only within the cultural sphere but also impacting natural landscapes and biodiversity domains.

As a result of this process, esthetic losses that impoverish such places occur, such as the disappearance of identity elements and historical values. The lack of distinctive assets, crucial for the attractiveness of regions and for other, particularly tourism-driven, forms of development, exacerbates the vulnerability and fragility of places and their communities. It is necessary to reverse these processes of landscape decline and appeal for the regeneration or rehabilitation of cultural landscapes through collaborative actions between organizations and some State institutions, such as the Ministry of Public Works.

Recently, the UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators framework has provided a comprehensive tool to assess cultural policies, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. These indicators focus on the role of culture in development and the implementation of policies that support cultural sustainability. Within this context, UNESCO Culture 2030 emphasizes measuring cultural sustainability by evaluating both environmental and socio-economic factors. This includes a reflection on how cultural practices and heritage preservation can be aligned with sustainable development, ensuring that cultural resources are protected while fostering long-term benefits.

These are key for promoting sustainability and resilience in cities, where it is crucial to harmonize cultural heritage with modern development. The goal is to maintain a balance that not only protects local identity but also fosters social well-being. By conserving historic landmarks, creating inclusive public spaces, and investing in cultural infrastructure, cities can cultivate adaptable environments that strengthen community cohesion and meet the evolving needs of contemporary society. Here, tourism can play a significant role.

Aligned with sustainability principles and strategic options for territorial development, regenerative design and development focuses on methods that harness the unique potential of a place and its communities. These approaches strengthen people's capacity to connect with resilient and thriving living systems. In this context, sustainable tourism is seen as a contributor to the overall health and well-being of both places and communities [14].

Recently, regenerative tourism has attracted attention, aligning with other regenerative concepts that emphasize value-driven strategies that focus on community-based tourism

development, aiming to improve local well-being by creating alternative pathways [14]. Communities and all territorial actors, including visitors, are essential in the local revival, revitalization, and regeneration. As Coll-Barneto and Fusté-Forné [15] argued, that regeneration occurs when tourists act as catalysts for change, playing a crucial role in protecting and maintaining the cultural and natural environments that form the foundation of their lives and livelihoods.

For regenerative development actions, it is crucial to understand how building community capacity can grow the community's development and increase participatory processes at the local level [16]. This cooperative approach encourages participation and the sharing of experiences among all parties, aimed at mitigating disasters and managing risks [17]. Authors studying this phenomenon highlight fundamental strategies and perspectives to guide interventions in territories and landscapes with untapped potential, yet impacted by human activities that lead to the degradation of natural and cultural resources. Some studies and authors who have explored this theme in the state of the art provide valuable insights that deserve attention. The selection of the following authors was made taking into account the state of the art and the similarity of the approach to this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Authors' perspectives on regenerative tourism and its role in territorial development, providing valuable insights and strategies for sustainable progress.

Omma [18]	Omma emphasizes that the regenerative approach in tourism highlights ongoing investments in three main areas: people, places, and nature, to support the development of healthy and flourishing social and ecological places by immersive experiences in nature. This approach encourages connections between people and nature, promoting appreciation, understanding, and care for the natural world among visitors [19]. In this context, the regenerative approach seeks to create sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships between humans and their surroundings, ensuring resilience and well-being for both.
Bellato, Frantzeskaki, and Nygaard [19]	Bellato, Frantzeskaki, and Nygaard present key principles for regenerative tourism. These include grounding regenerative tourism in an ecological worldview, utilizing living system thinking in design to foster healthy and transformative change, and exploring the unique potential of places and communities. They emphasize identifying synergies between stakeholders and communities to drive transformations, employing strategies to revitalize local culture, knowledge, and practices, and creating regenerative places and communities by enhancing capacities and embracing regenerative practices. Additionally, collaborative participation is deemed essential to the regeneration process.
Miedes-Ugarte and Flores-Ruiz [20]	Miedes-Ugarte and Flores-Ruiz highlight the potential of small communities to become hubs of innovation within regenerative tourism by revitalizing key local stories, which can serve as the foundation for unique tourism experiences. The establishment of a collaborative platform has been crucial in connecting these rural communities to broader European networks while preserving their autonomy over cultural narratives and assets, enabling local stakeholders to retain control. This approach integrates digital platform skills with heritage restoration, fostering connections through regional initiatives and international partnerships. Thoughtfully managing expectations ensures that a delicate balance between conservation objectives and tourism development is achieved.
Valero-Matas and Rivera [21]	Valero-Matas and Rivera emphasize the need for a localized tourism strategy that leverages cultural and natural attractions while addressing resource limitations. Success relies on sustainable investments, municipal collaboration, cooperative models, and preserving cultural heritage. Expanding activities like artisanal crafts and integrating native products into the local economy are key, along with an inclusive plan that balances growth with environmental conservation.
Fusté-Forné and Hussain [22]	Fusté-Forné and Hussain highlight the transformative potential of regenerative efforts by advocating for innovation that supports both ecological systems and the communities that depend on them. They focus on redefining leisure and tourism—not as a niche activity, but as a holistic framework that fosters meaningful relationships between people and nature. In their perspective, regeneration in tourism is approached with a dual purpose: improving the environmental and sociocultural well-being of host communities while maintaining sustainable practices. This approach also includes empowering communities to connect deeply with their environment, further aligning the goals of regeneration with shared prosperity and ecological stewardship.
Duxbury, de Castro, and Silva [23]	Duxbury, de Castro, and Silva argue that collaboration, participation, and inclusion are key values in projects that engage local creators, strengthen networks, and connect with visitors. Expanding local cultural policy involves adopting an ecosystemic approach that recognizes culture's interdependencies with other aspects of life. An integrated, holistic strategy focuses on long-term development, fostering community well-being, cultural vitality, and stewardship of place.
Revollo-Fernández et al. [24]	Revollo-Fernández et al. highlight key competencies for human capital: environmental education to identify biodiversity, tourism management for quality experiences, financial planning for economic feasibility, and resilience strategies. The author argues that success relies on collective action, equitable benefit-sharing, stakeholder collaboration, partnerships, and resource access to sustain nature-based tourism.

Key themes identified from these authors are essential to understand the regenerative tourism process. These include the significance of local communities, a focus on cultural heritage, the establishment of collaborative platforms, the promotion of sustainable invest-

ments, an integrated approach to environmental and cultural conservation, the application of ecological systems, the empowerment of communities, stakeholder collaboration, and the development of strategies for ecological and nature-based tourism (Figure 1). Communities, the environment, and local culture are essential pillars of sustainable and regenerative territorial development.

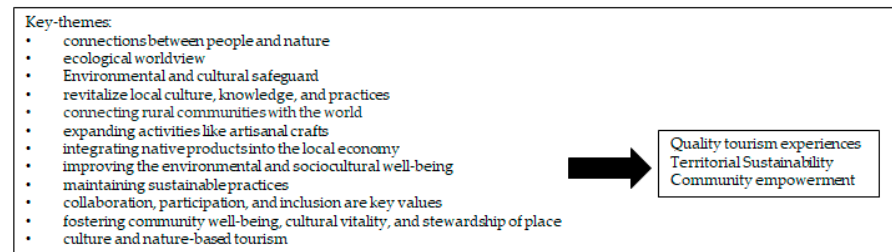


Figure 1. Regenerative tourism focus proposed by the authors.

In summary, as Sawu and Ridla [25] emphasize, regenerating a tourism destination is a complex process that demands systemic transformation, shifts in mindset, and the implementation of practical, long-term strategies aligned with a clear vision for destination development.

2. The Historical Road *Estrada do Paraibuna*

As Scorza and Gatto [10] and Dax and Tamme [12] argue, the cultural itineraries are an important key to territory strategies with multidimensional value, not only for economic benefit but also for cultural and ecological sustainability. Therefore, Fuste-Forn and Hussain [26] argue that the action of local actors is crucial for valorizing indigenous and more traditional elements that can enhance places, benefiting both the local population and visitors/tourists.

This historic road is constructed in the Iron Quadrangle, a mineral-rich region in Minas Gerais, Brazil, known for its abundant deposits of iron, gold, manganese, bauxite, quartz, and more. Intense mining activity in the area has led to significant challenges, including heavy use and severe degradation of the road. However, the region's rich cultural heritage presents an opportunity for landscape regeneration, offering a pathway to restore and preserve its unique character.

This historical road is located in the Natural Monument of Serra de Itatiaia, established by Decree-Law on 21 September 2009, and the State Park of Serra do Ouro Branco in 2019. The Natural Monument of Serra de Itatiaia, like the State Park of Ouro Branco, is part of the initial portion of the Espinhaço Mountain Range. Conservation units like these are legally designated territorial spaces designed to safeguard significant environmental characteristics through specialized management and legal protections, ensuring long-term biodiversity conservation. In fact, the State Park of Serra do Ouro Branco was defined by State Decree No. 45.180, encompassing 7520.79 hectares within the municipalities of Ouro Branco and Ouro Preto. With a perimeter of 67,517.77 m, this state conservation unit aims to preserve ecologically valuable landscapes while also providing opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and ecotourism. Its designation reinforces efforts to maintain natural ecosystems and scenic beauty, facilitating public engagement with conservation initiatives. These units play an essential role in Brazil's National System of Conservation Units (SNUC), serving as key instruments for the protection and sustainable management of natural resources. Their creation strengthens the commitment to preserving the country's extraordinary ecological heritage and promoting sustainable interactions between humans and the environment. Recognizing the importance of this geographical area, the Federal

University of Ouro Preto and the Portuguese University have developed a collaborative project to study a cultural route with immense potential for tourism development.

Parts of the historical roads of the region are located in The *Iron Quadrangle*, in the Minas Gerais district, a geological formation shaped like a square that covers an area of approximately 7000 km² extended from Ouro Preto and Belo Horizonte, historical cities in Minas Gerais. More than one hundred and fifty minerals have been identified in the direct vicinity of Ouro Preto, including many rare minerals which have exponentially increased mineral exploitation in this area since the 19th century [27]. Noteworthy are the explorations of gold, rare minerals, and precious stones, such as diamonds, emeralds, and topazes, among others. Several authors have highlighted the severe environmental problems arising from landscape and chemical impacts that seriously degrade the territory [27,28].

Rezende [29] argues that Minas Gerais remains an important mineral producer in Brazil with growth potential; however, the lack of adequate planning and failures in environmental control create socio-environmental and economic disturbances. On the other hand, mining dams are viewed as an outdated and cost-effective technology that poses significant environmental risks. These structures serve as reservoirs for solid waste from iron mining and other toxic substances, which have the potential to spill at any moment, as demonstrated by several catastrophic incidents in history [30].

The first and main historical routes mentioned by historiography in this territory are the *Caminho Velho* (Old Road), the *Caminho dos Diamantes* (Diamond Road), and the *Caminho Novo* (New Road), also known from the 19th century as *Estrada Geral da Corte* (Court Road) and, today, as *Estradas Reais* (Royalty Roads). The *Caminho Novo* replaced the *Caminho Velho*, providing easier and faster access from Ouro Preto to Rio de Janeiro, the total length of this route [31]. The path, in its most definitive form, was only completed around 1725, as indicated by studies for the creation of the State Natural Monument of Serra de Itatiaia [32]. In the 18th and 19th century, the *Caminho Novo* became the most used road for travelers between Rio de Janeiro and Ouro Preto, playing a key role in the growth of towns and cities along its course [33]. The Paraibuna Road is a part of this monumental route classified in 2021 as a Monument of National Interest.

These routes, which likely originated from ancient Indigenous trails, hold significant heritage value due to their use by Indigenous peoples, as well as by religious orders, explorers, and travelers to Brazil's hinterlands since the 16th century. Thus, the history of these paths involves identifying routes that had been used for millennia by human groups who had long inhabited Minas Gerais, before the Portuguese establishment in the 16th century [34]. These indigenous paths followed areas with limited accessibility and steep routes, which was a way for the indigenous population to protect themselves from threats posed by the local wildlife which the *Caminho Novo* still retains in its structure [34]. Consequently, they were of great importance for the occupation and expansion of the territory. The Royalty Roads were the main axes of the intense urbanization process of the central-south of Brazil and hundreds of settlements, villages, and towns emerged along their itinerary. Similarly, roads contribute significantly to the creation of landscapes and heritage. Villages emerge at stopping points, growing in accordance with local economic development. Bridges span river and stream crossings, among other elements that reflect human activity and daily life, shaping the landscape. It is worth noting that the *Estrada Real*, path of approximately 1410 km, provides cohesion to about 177 historical cities along its course and is one of the main tourism development initiatives in Minas Gerais, with significant investments that have been made in its influence area to restore and harness its national and international touristic potential [35].

The construction of this cultural road, The Paraibuna Road, between Ouro Preto and Barbacena, began in 1835 [32]. Nowadays only fragments of this historic road remain, as

the construction of a modern roadway transformed and destroyed sections of the older trail. This ancient path probably dates back to indigenous times, and it continued to be used during the Portuguese settlement and the gold mining era [36]. Due to the mineral resource exploitation and the industrial urbanization process, many historical sites remain highly abandoned and degraded, with villages facing socio-economic situations of great fragility. According to the PromoSAT report [37], in the last 50 years, Ouro Preto has experienced a population growth of over 60%. This demographic expansion has been paralleled to the growth of industrial activities, agriculture, infrastructure, and urban areas. As a result, this phenomenon applies significant pressure to the municipality's natural resources, including the expansion of urban areas, mining, and forestry exploitation.

However, these places retain their originality, and their history remains almost unchanged, providing significant material and immaterial heritage [38]. They are archeological sites of significant heritage needed for understanding the regional settlements and consequently, the local economic development; however, they now present a degraded landscape and an abandoned heritage. This historical road and its local heritage elements offer a unique opportunity to promote tourism as a way to mitigate the impact of unsustainable activities and shift economic interests toward more sustainable alternatives.

The path of Paraibuna Road crosses significant places such as the cities of Ouro Preto, Lavras Novas, Chapada, Itatiaia, Ouro Branco, and Barbacena (Figure 2). Most noteworthy is the city of Ouro Preto, classified as a World Heritage site since 1980 and a crucial city for tourism due to its significant and original historical heritage [35]. The entire region of Ouro Preto is also significant in the geotourism sector due to its geodiversity [39]. Lavras Novas, Itatiaia, and other municipalities, considering their isolation until 20th century, preserved their original features, such as their urban layout and the vernacular architecture of the buildings and monuments [38,40]. In particular, the proximity of Lavras Novas to major urban centers such as Ouro Preto, Ouro Branco, and Belo Horizonte has facilitated a revitalization of the area which, although insufficient, promotes tourism development [41]. These cities not only offer support for tourists, such as visitor information centers, guided tours, and cultural experiences, but they also feature historically significant centers. Their historical landmarks, architecture, and cultural heritage are on par with those recognized as World Heritage sites. Here, visitors can immerse themselves in traditions, admire monuments, and experience heritage and history. This highlights the need to enhance the condition of this historical road, ensuring its preservation for future generations.

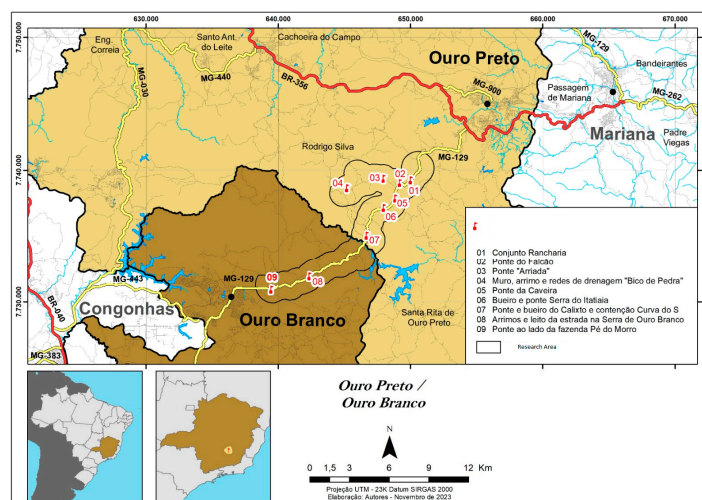


Figure 2. Map of Paraibuna Road.

Along the road the mountains are marked by ravines and peaks with extensive views of the surrounding mountains, such as the Lavras Novas mountains or the Itatiaia Park [40], which complement the cultural uniqueness of the cities, villages, and other cultural places and landscapes. The possibilities of geotourism are enormous as well as ecotourism, cultural and nature tourism, rural tourism, and gastronomic tourism among others [42]. Mucivuna [43] argues that the valorization of geosites as the places located around Paraibuna Road is essential for geoconservation strategies and helps to prioritize actions in the territorial management and environmental programs implementation.

3. Methodological Approach

To achieve the study's objectives, an observational analysis was conducted. Using this analysis approach, where researchers gain understanding and insights through observing, interacting with participants, asking questions, collecting documents, capturing visual information, and reflecting on these experiences afterward [44], the aim was to explore the potential for developing tourism as a means to revitalize a degraded area. This involved systematically watching and recording the characteristics of the Paraibuna old road to capture its key features and dynamics. The heritage and conservation conditions were described using audio-visual materials to complete the notes of the diary and other data record.

Following this methodology, field work was performed in four tour visits by the researchers in the Paraibuna Road sections; four sections were identified, according to Pimenta [32]. Field notes were developed using a set of key analytical categorized dimensions to systematically document and record observations. The initial key dimensions used were as follows:

1. Analyze and describe the natural and cultural environment around the Paraibuna Road.
2. Note the primary threats identified to the heritage along Paraibuna Road.
3. Identify priority actions that need to be taken to maintain or restore the conservation state.
4. Identify new cultural resources with tourism potential.

A diary documented the narratives of viewers and the impressions of residents during the tours through an unstructured interview process, serving as a complementary tool for analyzing and understanding the phenomenon [45]. Additionally, photographs were taken as documentary evidence.

Based on the narratives included in the diary, a categorization was performed to organize the qualitative data. To improve the accuracy of the qualitative research, a systematic categorization process was employed to transform raw data into broader, more general findings. This process, based on the approach proposed by Grodal, Anteby, and Holm [46], involved several reflexive steps.

4. Results and Discussion

The Paraibuna Road is a significant cultural and historical route, used by the Indigenous peoples of the region and the Portuguese settlers in the 16th century. Its conservation in the 19th century involved the construction of bridges and water canals, utilizing traditional engineering techniques [32]. However, it was found that certain parts of the Paraibuna Road remained abandoned and are now used as local roads serving rural areas, and other sections have been modernized and are now utilized by trucks belonging to mining companies. The abandoned, degraded and destroyed built heritage elements can be found in segments of the historical Paraibuna Road. During the field work, it was possible to find inventory bridges dating back to the construction of the road in the 19th century, built with traditional construction techniques, but in a state of degradation and abandon-

ment, such as Rancharia, Falcão bridge, Caveira bridge, Pé do Morro bridge, Arriada bridge (Figure 3) and Calixto Bridge (Figure 4).



Figure 3. From the left to the right: a bridge from Rancharia; Falcão bridge; Caveira bridge; Pé do Morro bridge; Arriada bridge. Source: the authors.



Figure 4. Ponte do Calixto and historical road of Paraibuna. Source: the authors.

The Calixto Bridge (Figure 4), built approximately 100 m from the Itatiaia waterfall, is in an active state of degradation and lies in ruin. From left to right (Figure 4): the parapet and roadway bed on the bridge, the downstream and upstream faces, and the soffit details in the right opening all exhibit significant degradation.

It is also possible to find water conduits and retaining walls that illustrate the engineering techniques from the 19th century (Figures 5 and 6), such as the stone-carved water drainage channel at Itatiaia.

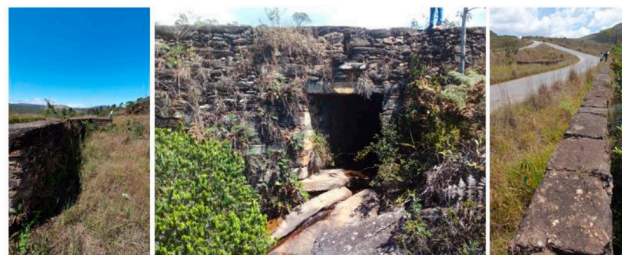


Figure 5. Itatiaia water conduits. Source: the authors.

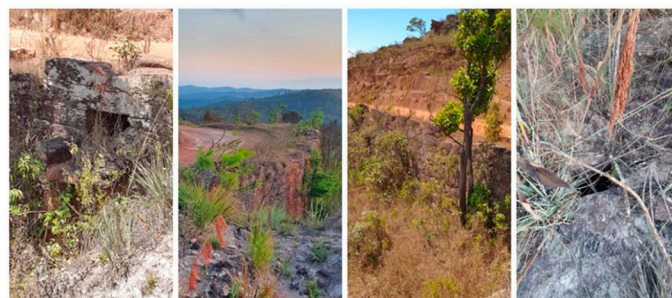


Figure 6. Drainage networks and retaining walls in the abandoned section. Source: the authors.

Despite all the physical and landscape features and the significant historical and cultural heritage, elements that could make this route a nationally and internationally relevant tourist attraction, the historical Paraibuna Road is completely forgotten: many remnants of the road are overgrown with vegetation and are targets of vandalism and/or misuse (such as the dumping of trash and debris).

The road with lacking berms, sharp curves, and numerous abrupt slopes due to the region's topographic characteristics has been taken over by trucks serving the mining companies. This significantly compromises the safety of users, residents, visitors, and tourists, and, also, degrades the landscape (Figures 7 and 8). From left to right: trash at the waterfall next to the set of bridges and retaining walls of Rancharia and waste on Falcon Bridge.



Figure 7. Historical built heritage and its current use as dumping sites. Source: The authors.



Figure 8. Heavy trucks using parts of the road.

The traffic on the road is substantial, particularly from heavy trucks, which have caused significant damage to the historical monuments along the route and destroyed the original roadway foundation, leading to the loss of ancient construction techniques.

Despite the unsustainable use of this historical road, in all sections of the road, both natural and cultural attractions were identified, offering potential for visitation and tourism development. In terms of natural heritage, trails, mountains, unique landscapes, rivers, streams, geologically significant sites, natural caves, ecological reserves, and beaches were identified and described as potential tourism products and attractions. Cultural tourism possibilities identified include rural areas, villages, historic cities, traditional ceramic industries, monumental bridges, various monuments, heritage farms, vernacular architecture, and a rich intangible heritage encompassing festivals, local cuisine, traditional craftsmanship, and storytelling tied to local legends.

The field notes improved with residents' inputs, were categorized following the Grodal, Anteby, and Holm [46] methodological proposal and three main categories organized the themes (Table 2). The residents were provided an opportunity to discuss resources with tourism potential, their importance for local development, and to identify the primary local threats to territorial values.

Table 2. Table of categorization.

Categorized Dimensions	Theme
Context description Key dimension: Analyze and description of the context around the Paraibuna road for tourism and local development	<p>Ancient trails of significance and historical use Mountain unique landscape Frequent waterfalls Rivers and streams that could be explored for tourism Natural caves and geosites, natural elements in the road context Ecological reserves Forests with significant biodiversity Beaches along rivers that could be interesting resources Natural Parques with nature protection and safeguard</p>
Culturally significant elements for tourism: Key dimension: Identification of cultural resources with economic potential	<p>Traditional villages with historical heritage, tangible and intangible in risk of disappearance by the population decreasing Saramenha ceramic Intangible heritage and storytelling linked with local stories and traditions Villages and places dating from the 16th century, from the first days of Brazil Farms, estates, and ranches dated from the 16th century Religious monuments—churches and monasteries Old and traditional villages of Lavras Novas, Chapada, and Itatiaia with wattle and daub architecture Road with remarkable beauty Beautiful landscapes Historical and traditional bridges, culverts, retaining walls, stormwater galleries, constructed, drainage networks, and cobblestone beds with traditional techniques The constructions (houses and churches) built with traditional stucco techniques are in ruins. The local festivities, many of which are no longer continued, were once enlivened by music bands. The old local shops that supported travelers are themes to be revived. The fountains that supplied the towns but also provided comfort to travelers. The agricultural plantations, which still influence local toponymy, also sold goods and artisanal products; for instance, in towns along the Road, they are examples of local exploitation and trade: cheese, cornmeal, coffee, and fruits. The local stories and legends, such as the “Mãe de Ouro” (Mother of Gold) or the “Mula sem Cabeça” (Headless Mule), or the events that marked the passage of known or strange people, are stories connected to the road that should be brought back. The connection of people to nature and the practice of using natural infusions as a cure for illnesses.</p>
Threat Identification Key dimension: Signalization of the primary threats identified to the heritage along Paraibuna Road	<p>Mining is a problem and it is the changing landscape, transforming those places into dangerous places. The pollution caused by intense mining, resulting in unpleasant odors Trucks in constant traffic. Heavy trucks using parts of the road significantly compromise the safety of users, visitors, and tourists and degrade the pavement. Dangerous road curves. Abandoned parts of the roads. Stonework artworks taken over by the forest. Part of the road is now a local road to connect different rural areas. Part of the historic road was paved. Part of the road came to be used by trucks serving mining companies Vegetation has practically taken over the Rancharia and Falcão bridges, as well as the ruins of the Arriada Bridge, making observation difficult. Many of the remnants of the road are overgrown with vegetation and are targets of vandalism and/or misuse. The old sections of the road contain waste and debris. The highway, without a shoulder, with sharp curves and many ascents and descents due to the topographical features of the region</p>

All the qualitative data were organized into three categories derived from a reflection on the qualitative content.

1. **Context Description:** This category analyzes the local setting, highlighting the historical significance of ancient trails within a unique landscape characterized by abundant waterscapes, including rivers and streams. The natural environment—featuring caves, forests, and river beaches—emerged as the most significant aspect, with a consensus on the need for its preservation due the relevance for tourism and local development.

2. **Culturally Significant Elements for Tourism and Local Valorization:** This category identifies cultural resources with economic potential that reflect the identity and historical heritage of the local culture in a prominent and meaningful way.
3. **Threat Identification:** This category encompasses all the primary threats to the heritage along Paraibuna Road and recognizes and addresses these challenges effectively.

The categorization analysis (Table 2) reveals a dichotomy in the road role, as reflected in the researchers' fieldnotes. On one hand, the road is seen as risky, primarily due to its use for mining activities. On the other hand, it is viewed as a historical monument in a region with cultural and natural tourism potential, however it faces considerable threats from ongoing mining activities.

The road's combination of natural, historical, and cultural resources makes it a destination for cultural, heritage, and ecological tourism. The Paraibuna Road crosses unique landscapes, offering opportunities for geotourism and adventure tourism and also recreational spaces that attract tourists looking for natural riverfront leisure, like river beaches and streams. The presence of natural parks along the route underscores the ecological significance and the road's potential for nature and green tourism. Villages from the 16th century, farms, estates, religious sites, and traditional communities like Lavras Novas, Chapada, and Itatiaia provide a sense of historical and cultural continuity. Storytelling and intangible heritage reproduce the lived experiences and traditional practices of the region, while elements like *Saramenha* ceramics or traditional architecture add artistic and artisanal value to the area. In particular, the historical road structures such as traditional bridges, culverts, stonework, and stone pavements demonstrate both historical engineering techniques and esthetic value. As a conclusion it is possible to state that integrating natural trails, river access points, and historical sites could attract tourists and generate conservation and preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

However, the road and its surroundings face numerous threats, largely from modern industrial and infrastructural activities. Mining activities cause pollution, particularly odors, and heavy truck traffic accelerates pavement degradation and compromises the area's visual and ecological value. Debris and trash are prevalent in the old road sections, reflecting a lack of maintenance and implementation of protection measures, which degrades the historic and esthetic value of the road. The pavement of some of the sections of the historic road has been paved and modified for modern use, which diminishes and destroys the original and historical values.

The challenge lies in balancing mining development with territorial sustainability, ensuring environmental preservation while fostering sustainable coexistence with other economic activities.

Regenerative tourism presents an opportunity closely tied to a governmental strategy for territorial development.

5. Conclusions

Regenerating territories through tourism in alignment with UNESCO's 2030 agenda demands a strong commitment and active involvement from all stakeholders. This collaborative effort is essential for the promotion and protection of heritage and culture, ensuring sustainable development that respects local traditions, preserves cultural identities, and fosters economic growth. By engaging communities, governments, businesses, and cultural organizations, tourism can become a powerful tool for revitalizing regions while safeguarding their unique cultural and historical assets for future generations.

For tourism to effectively contribute to the regeneration of degraded areas, it is crucial to implement strategic planning and sustainable management practices. This requires the active involvement of local communities and the development of collaborative efforts

among all local stakeholders. By fostering cooperation and ensuring long-term, responsible management, tourism can become a key driver of revitalization, promoting both environmental sustainability and socio-economic growth. The focus should be on balancing tourism, economic development, environmental conservation, and social well-being, ensuring that each of these aspects is addressed when promoting the integration of people, places, and practices [47]. Tourism can generate employment across a diverse range of sectors, including hospitality, accommodation, transportation, and tour guides, while also fostering the development of local crafts and both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These activities can help diminish economic dependence on natural resource extraction and contribute to sustainable economic growth. From another perspective, the need to accommodate tourists can lead to improvements in local infrastructure, including roads, public transportation, and water and sanitation systems, benefiting both visitors and residents.

Revenue generated from tourism can be used to implement environmental and cultural conservation and restoration projects, such as reforestation, habitat recovery, cleanup of degraded areas, or heritage conservation and restoration. On the other hand, it can raise awareness about the importance of environmental and cultural preservation among tourists and local communities. Heritage conservation can drive local and regional development through tourism by boosting activities related to leisure, hospitality, cultural and natural resource conservation, and biodiversity [48]. This creates a development cycle where tourism growth is supported by investments in heritage preservation and esthetic renewal. The Estrada de Paraibuna has significant tourism potential across historical, cultural, business, and gastronomic areas. However, realizing this potential requires coordinated efforts from stakeholders, as current tourism agents lack an understanding of governance and its benefits. The region needs informed and engaged stakeholders to implement effective tourism strategies.

We agree with Dax and Tamme [12] on the importance of mountain areas as niches for low-density tourism, closely linked to rural communities, their culture, and sustainable, ecological experiences based on the uniqueness of these landscapes. Policymakers and local stakeholders must recognize the value of these areas. Adopting mitigation/regeneration and adaptation measures is crucial for the successful development of cultural, natural, and experiential tourism. Additionally, today's ecological and sustainable social movements should guide governance changes in these areas [49]. This ecological perspective is further supported by the work of Bellato, Frantzeskaki, and Nygaard [20].

The impacts of resource exploitation, as well as events and climate change, encourage us to rethink and find solutions to improve community relationships with these places. As Omma [19] highlighted, the interconnectedness of people, places, and nature plays a vital role in fostering development.

Aligning land management with sustainable tourism is essential. Involving various stakeholders can help adopt best practices to enhance and develop fragile, neglected, and degraded areas. Issues like abandonment, low population density, and degradation can become opportunities to identify innovative resources and create unique experiences. In the context of sustainable development and the UNESCO 2030 Agenda, tourism can play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development goals and developing more resilient cultural landscapes for the future [47].

As the last testimony of gold records and nearly 300 years of history involving the old Paraibuna Road and its connection between the Minas region and Rio de Janeiro, it should be restored and preserved [31]. The network articulation in the Paraibuna Road, the subject of this research, has been shown to be deficient, with low coordination between public, private, and civil society sectors. Consequently, the relationships suffer from interferences that need adjustment to work on regional tourism through network formation

and decentralized management. The relational ties among social agents, including public, private, and civil society sectors, are insufficient to sustain a solid regional network for systemic actions in this region [50].

This study presents a proposal for the conservation and preservation of a highly threatened historical monument, Paraibuna Road, that lacks sustainable strategic planning. This territory holds significant tourism potential due to its scenic, historical, and cultural heritage value. Beyond its appeal as a route, the road serves as a vital connector between Ouro Preto, a UNESCO World Heritage city, and Barbacena, enhancing territorial cohesion. Encouraging tourists to venture beyond typical destinations, it opens up an extended region for exploration and appreciation. In the same way, establishing new tourist routes could be essential in connecting cities, villages, and other territories promoting regional integration.

According to Miedes-Ugarte and Flores-Ruiz [20], small communities like those along the Pirabuina Road have the potential to become hubs for territorial thinking and regeneration, anchored in key local narratives. Similarly, Valero-Matas and Rivera [21] emphasize that leveraging cultural and natural attractions, while addressing resource limitations, can foster territorial synergy through tourism. This approach is supported by the development of artisanal crafts, native products, and a commitment to environmental conservation. Another important focus, to develop and regenerate the territory based in tourism, starts with a collaborative and participative strategy involving all the territorial actors and empowering communities to connect deeply with their environment (Duxbury, de Castro, and Silva) [23].

A qualitative study explores complex phenomena, offering deep insights and reflections; however, it has certain limitations. Personal insights can influence data collection, analysis, or conclusions, making it challenging to ensure objectivity. Additionally, maintaining ethical considerations is crucial throughout the research process. Despite these limitations, qualitative studies remain an essential tool in research, particularly when exploring complex social phenomena, gaining deep insights. In the near future, a questionnaire and a focus group will be conducted to triangulate data, enhancing the effectiveness of the proposals for developing sustainable and regenerative tourism in an area facing heritage degradation and destruction.

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