Final Report Summary - POLARIS (Cultural and Natural Heritage in Arctic and Sub-Antarctic Regions for a Cross-Cultural and Sustainable Valorisation Process and Tourism Development: Siberia, Lapland and Patagonia)

POLARIS is an international and interdisciplinary research project dedicated to the theme of cultural and natural heritage in Arctic and Sub-Antarctic Regions (Siberia, Lapland and Patagonia) for a cross-cultural and sustainable valorisation process and tourism development. These regions have a series of common features as regards their natural and cultural heritage. They are going through similar changes due to global warming and globalisation. The protection and the promotion of cultures, territories and heritage strengthen a socio-economical development process for local communities. Such sustainable valorisation should generate high-level know-how and good practices that can be transferred to specific territories with national and international protection (National Park, National Reserves, UNESCO labels, etc.).

The POLARIS team has developed original methodologies in the form of two reports opening the way for innovative results with a positive socio-economic and societal impact. This concerns first of all the evaluation of cultural and natural landscapes. The methodology is based on the fundamental concept of secular pilgrimage developed by Walter Benjamin. The investigated distant territories and unique landscapes are seen as the objects of secular pilgrimages thus underlining the exceptional positions of the investigated objects within existing frameworks of traditional touristic destinations, the focus being on perception of various aspects of the environment. The precise complex methodology is based on the concepts of preferred landscape-environment by environmental psychology. According to these, a preferred environment will help to increase a person’s sense of well-being and also help the person to become more productive and effective. People who are in their preferred environment will feel more confident and competent as well as becoming more involved with that environment. The four initial aspects of landscape are traditionally evaluated from the point of view of its preference: legibility, coherence, complexity, mysteriousness. Investigations have drawn on indicators based on the theories and concepts of biophilia, information processing theory, the aesthetics of care, genius loci, topophilia, prospects-refuge theory, etc.. The investigated landscapes were evaluated from the point of view of complexity, coherence, disturbance, stewardship, imageability, visual scale, naturalness, historicity, ephemeria. The results allow the planning of touristic routes and destinations according to the desired psychological preferences/combinations of preferences.

The second methodological plan concerns the aim to establish a network of intangible cultural heritage information sources and preservation activities. It covers two major tasks needed to build up such a network. In the first place involved actors (stakeholders) need to be identified as potential partners that maintain the places (knots) of the proposed intangible cultural preservation network. These include public and private institutions and initiatives and their activities to preserve intangible cultural heritage. The second task consisted in developing a methodology of participative and collaborative research in identifying the intangible cultural heritage in order to establish a preservation network. The main methodological challenge in establishing a true partnership is how to acknowledge and incorporate indigenous epistemologies and methodologies into the research process in order to preserve multivocality and perspectivism endangered by purist and universalistic agendas emerging in the wake of colonialism. Indeed, the multiple transformations of the Arctic and Sub-Antarctic regions owing to climate change and development require new ways to view and consider the role and methods of science. There is an emerging trend to expand the role of science from merely knowledge-producer to one that directly aims at creating positive impacts on society. POLARIS takes a step further by aiming at conducting research from a fresh angle: it puts the research
method itself – equal partnership and collaboration – in the front as a means of mitigating and seeking solutions for the potentially competing usage of cultural heritage with the aim of safeguarding and transmitting unique Arctic and Sub-Antarctic heritage. Partnership is thus both a research method but also as a research object with the desirable outcome of enhancing the good quality of life in the Arctic.

To achieve these objectives, substantial preparatory work has been carried out: preparation of bibliographical references and other relevant sources, interviews with stakeholders on the subject of internal and external views of the cultural heritage studied within the framework of POLARIS, descriptions of cultural heritage sites and museum collections (in Sakha Republic, Russian Federation).

POLARIS' chief long-term objective consists in contributing to the development both of an International Network of Regional Tourism Observatories and a network of intangible cultural heritage information sources. This will be achieved by the development of a purpose-built tool incorporating GIS data leading to the establishment of a geo-spatial Observatory of Siberia's tourism development potential. The fieldwork to prepare this tool was concluded successfully. This research includes material on remote areas of Siberia that rarely feature in European studies on tourism development or for which it is difficult to obtain information based on internal, as well as external views, reflecting POLARIS' methodological aim to produce representative results as far as multivocality and perspectivism are concerned, two vital factors in view of environmental psychology and the idea of intangible cultural heritage sources. The Observatory is destined to become a part of the International Circumpolar Observatory founded in 2016.

The impact of this research is expected to be strong in terms of cross-cultural training transfers and valorisation processes applied to the fields of tourism studies and the tourism industries, as well as the regional development of cultural heritage sites and territories. The project's results are highly promising in this respect. They included rare multimedia reports and documentation co-produced by the researchers and indigenous experts who participated in the project.