CHAPTER VIII



Commemoration of the Dead. On the way to the cemetery. Florești, 2015.



Traditional Products Fair in Buzău, 2016.

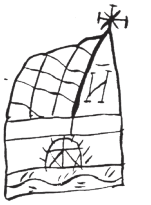
Cultural and Natural Heritage: A Resource for Sustainable Development in Buzău Land

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents another way of capitalising on the cultural heritage of the Buzău region, both tangible and intangible, through museum displays. It introduces the few museum displays already in the region, created by the regional authorities, such as the Vasile Voiculescu Memorial House in Pârscov and the Amber Museum in Colți. It also presents the Geopark's initiative to create several visitor and information centres, such as the "Time of Man" Museum in Mânzalești and the "Seven Fairy-tale Places" in Lopătari. The chapter focuses on the "Time of Man" exhibition, a "community museum," which is the result of a collaboration between the Geopark team, the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, and the local authorities. The article also introduces a number of other initiatives that are focused on promoting the local cultural and natural heritage. One of the key opportunities for the future of the region is the potential for establishing new visitor centres, in partnership with local authorities and private collectors in the region



Introduction

Less famous than regions that are highly mediatized in terms of cultural heritage, such as Maramureș or Bucovina, the area proposed for the establishment of the Geopark "Ținutul Buzăului [Buzău Land]" provided a pleasant surprise to the specialists involved in the process of putting together the application dossier for UNESCO International Geoparks Network. The team of ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant carried out a serious inventory of the region's tangible and intangible heritage in order to identify those elements that could have contributed to the region's sustainable development. This resulted in approximately 170 interviews with local people from more than 30 communities, 7.800 photographs and a documentary film of about 40 minutes about the custom of commemoration of the dead, the "Paștele Blajinilor" [Easter of the Dead] (filmed in Mânzălești).

The field research carried out between 2014 and 2017 revealed a very rich, vibrant and varied cultural heritage. In addition to the vernacular, secular and religious architecture within which we were able to identify numerous specific traditional elements, there is also a significant preservation of various crafts. These include: loom weaving, the sewing and decorating of traditional garments, the making of musical instruments, egg-painting, traditional pottery, as well as special crafts such as amber processing and the making of wooden or stone sideways crosses (see also Passima et al. 2010).

Sideway cross on the way towards Muscelu Cărămănești, 2014.



The legend behind the name of the village of Mânzălești, staged at the opening of the "Time of Man" Museum. Mânzălești, 2015.

During the research we observed that established local craftsmen—some of them already holding the title of "living human treasure"—are still striving to pass on these valuable intangible cultural heritage items to the younger generation in a process which is proving increasingly difficult in today's society. The intangible cultural heritage also includes the persistence of traditional music and dance, oral culture (stories, fairy tales, superstitions) and a special gastronomic heritage bearing the imprint of both Moldavian and Wallachian cuisine, due to its location at the confluence of Wallachia and Moldavia.

During the research we carried out, we found that the cultural heritage of the region targeted to host the geopark was only to a certain extent emphasized. Festivals and fairs organized by local authorities in the county seat or other localities within the same county only sporadically brought to light aspects of the cultural heritage in our area of interest. Somewhat more significant in this regard were the activities carried out within the Buzău County Museum, primarily at the ethnography section housed in the Vergu Mănăilă house (18th century monument), as well as some of the temporary exhibitions organized at the Art Galleries in the city. As one can easily notice, unfortunately, most of these activities took place outside the designated area of the Geopark.

Museums established in the 1980s

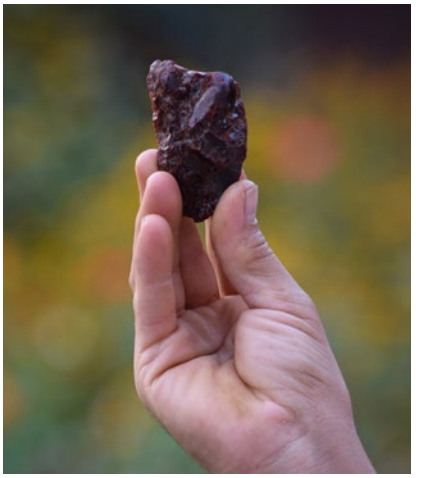
When we started our research, the only museum institutions we identified in the area of the future geopark were the Colți Museum Collection (later named "Amber Museum") and the Vasile Voiculescu Memorial House in Pârscov. Established in the 1980s, they functioned from the very beginning as sections subordinated to the Buzău County Museum.

At its inauguration, the Colți Museum Collection displayed across two distinct sections the cultural artefacts representative of the community. On the one hand, in an exhibition unique in the country, the history of the locality was documented in direct correlation with the resource that has made this area famous since the accidental discovery of the first nuggets: amber. In fact, more than 2 hectares of land in the Colți commune constitute a protected area (a geological and paleontological nature reserve) due to the large number of such amber pieces found both in the riverbeds and in the soil. In the museum, visitors could learn about the history of the extraction of this fossilized resin in the area over a millennia-long time span. The exhibition also included a significant number of valuable amber nuggets, as well as the tools used by the locals in the process of extracting, processing and transforming them into jewellery (pickaxe, chisel, hammer, wooden lathe). On the second floor of the building specially constructed for this museum in an architectural style specific to the area, a valuable ethnographic collection reflecting the traditional way of life in Colți was on display. Decommissioned in 2007, due to the deterioration of the exhibition space, this ethnographic section was already closed during the period of our research, and only the amber section was open to the public. The disappearance of this part of the museum has to some extent affected the degree of representation of the traditional identity of the Colți community within this museum site.

In 2020, after several stages of building restoration, the institution reopened its doors under a new name, "The Amber Museum." Built around this gemstone of organic origin, the museum's discourse is this time much more attractive, enhanced by innovative technological features. One segment of the exhibition that is a real crowd-pleaser is the story of the world's largest amber nugget, a 3,5 kg piece.



Photography from the “Amber Museum” in Colți
website: https://muzeubuzau.ro/muzeul-chihlimbarului-colti/.



Amber from Colți, 2016.



Searching for amber. Colți, 2014.

Dark in color, the piece, extracted from the bed of a stream in Colţi, displays the unique characteristics of amber from the area, which have led experts to classify it as a special sub-category, called "rumanite." The winding history of the huge nugget reads like a film script. Convinced it was a simple river boulder, the owners used it for years in their household to prop open a door. Once its inestimable value was finally recognised, the piece was acquired by the Buzău County Museum and placed in the legal category of "National Cultural Heritage Treasure."



Photography from the "Vasile Voiculescu Memorial House" website: https://muzeubuzau.ro/casa-memoriala-vasile-voiculescu/

Located in the commune of Pârscov, the "Vasile Voiculescu Memorial House" reconstructs the setting in which the famous figure was born and spent much of his life. A dedicated doctor and a writer whose unique talent was realized in works of great value in poetry, prose and drama, Vasile Voiculescu was also a victim of the communist regime. At the age of 74, he was imprisoned for his links with the intellectuals who formed the religious circle "Burning Bush." Accused of "conspiracy against the social order," he spent the next five years in Jilava and Aiud prisons, ruining his health, and dying a year after his release. Rebuilt according to the original plans of his family's home, the building houses a collection of ethnographic, documentary and decorative art objects, which reflect the family atmosphere and aspects of his private and professional life.

New cultural heritage centres

The discrepancy between the extraordinary potential that we noticed during our research and the under-represented cultural and touristic offer led the project coordinators geopark to initiate a process of promoting the region's heritage in all its forms, in the context of

greater community involvement. Consequently, through joint efforts, new centres of cultural and touristic interest started to emerge during the course of our research project. The new component of the cultural offering, developed under the "umbrella" of the Geopark, has proved to be much more dynamic and moreover, a catalyst for sustainable mechanisms of community and local development.

The "Time of Man" Museum in Mânzălești

Inaugurated in 2015, the first of these centres: The "Time of Man" Museum is located in the vicinity of the famous "Grunj"—the volcanic tufa that is a natural monument with the status of a nature reserve in the commune of Mânzălești. For the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant team this exhibition holds a particular significance, being the only one in the geopark territory in whose establishment we directly participated. From the preliminary activities of documentation, to the shaping of the concept together with geologists (especially Răzvan Gabriel Popa) and artists from partner organizations in the project and up to the arrangement of the permanent exhibition, we, a small team from the museum (Rodica Marinescu, Magda Andreescu and Anamaria Iuga) were involved in all stages of its realization. In this way we were able to observe "from the inside" how a community museum is made.





Fieldwork in Mânzălești village, 2015.

This is also because, unlike the museum points described above, "Time of Man" reflects to a large extent the identity imprint of the locals, who wanted such a museum and who actually participated in its creation (see also Andreescu and Marinescu 2018). At a closer look, we notice that a direct correlation can be drawn between the locals' sustained effort to preserve their heritage over a rather long period of time and the strong community involvement in putting together a local ethnographic exhibition nowadays.

An official initiative of the pre-1989 regime facilitated the emergence in the rural areas of museum sites designed to





Local ceramist at the opening of the "Time of Man" Museum. Mânzălești, 2015.

illustrate the official nationalist discourse through historical and memorializing ethnographic exhibitions. Established through a top-down approach, the exhibitions often did not allow the voices of community members to be heard and, as a result, the community itself did not perceive them as representative. The regime change in 1989 led to the rapid dissolution of the museum site in the commune of Mânzălești, but the community's need to express its identity and achieve cultural representation through the display of representative objects continued to manifest itself. The main driving forces were the teachers who, by mobilizing the community, built up a valuable local ethnographic collection. In order to set up a museum, the authorities requested the specialized assistance of the Buzău County Centre of Art and Culture, which led to the development and implementation of a conventional exhibition concept, centred on reconstructions of peasant houses. Inaugurated in 1998, the museum was decommissioned twelve years later in order to the refurbishment the building. This is why our team found here a favourable ground for the establishing a local museum: a newly renovated exhibition space, a collection of ethnographic artefacts, a mayor, Valeriu Beşliu—a former teacher—, who was deeply committed to efforts to express the specificity of the community through cultural heritage. And, last but not least, a community that wanted to re-establish the museum in the same space, but with a new focus.

The exhibition project agreed upon was an ambitious one centred on the community's material and spiritual landmarks. The key elements around which the museum's discourse was built were *the Tree of Life,* with its roots in the soil rich in salt, a mill—a technical installation, both utilitarian and a symbol of the passage of time—, and a pottery kiln, a reference to the time when Mânzălești was a famous pottery centre. Specific elements of the intangible cultural heritage—crafts, traditions, beliefs and superstitions—have been inserted into the museum's discourse so that the exhibition outlines a special world in which stories not only unify and lend coherence to the ensemble of cultural artefacts, but also help visitors who cross its threshold to make sense of it. A keen observer can detect echoes of the museological style created by Horia Bernea and established at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (see Bernea 2001). This is the reason we wanted "The Time of Man"



General view of the first exhibition hall at the “Time of Man” Museum. Mânzălești, 2015.



General view of the second exhibition hall at the “Time of Man” Museum. Mânzălești, 2015.

to be a museum unlike any other. To this end, we set a certain rhythm in the arrangement of the objects, organised in such a way as to ultimately create an active space that leaves room for stories, questions, wonder and opinions. Members of the community, from the elderly to local schoolchildren, have enthusiastically got involved in the creation of this museum, and this voluntary work has enhanced its representativeness. They provided information and objects, helped prepare the exhibition space, display the exhibits, and, last but not least, helped to organise a large-scale community celebration to mark the opening of the "Time of Man" Museum.

"7 Fairytale Places" in Lopătari

A year later, in 2016, the initiative group for the establishment of the geopark marked a new attraction on the map of the future UNESCO site: the non-formal education and visitor centre "7 Fairytale Places" in Lopătari. In this case too, a building was chosen which had previously housed a local ethnographic museum before 1989. Renovated and refurbished in the 2000s to accommodate the municipal library, the building proved to be a more suitable space for the new museum facility. Located in the centre of the village, with easy access from the main road, the building reflects the traditional architectural style. An emblematic identity feature for the community, the vernacular architecture has been preserved here to a greater extent than in other localities in the county, where modernization has led to a rapid dissolution of the built heritage. It is no coincidence that three houses from the beginning of the last century are listed in the Register of Historical Monuments in Buzău County as architectural sites of local interest in the commune of Lopătari. Through the involvement and with the constant support of local teachers, who mobilised the commune's pupils, the team of the Association Buzău Land managed to create a different kind of exhibition point. It is characterized by a modern and interactive interpretation of the way in which the elements of the intangible cultural heritage (stories, beliefs and superstitions) have developed and intertwined organically around the array of natural and geological elements and phenomena, rare or even unique in the country, found in this area. Through these stories, visitors of all ages can easily familiarize themselves in the "7 Fairytale Places" centre with: Mud Volcanoes, Trovants [*trovanți*—in Romanian; sandstone concretions], the Living Fire, the Giants' Wall, Salt, Amber, as well as Living and Dead Water and the beliefs related to them. The exhibition includes miniature reconstructions of the natural phenomena that led to the creation of the seven emblematic places in the region, creative installations designed by the team of geologists, together with the students, but also together with the community of Lopătari, under the guidance of Prof. Ioan Zota, passionate about promoting the cultural and natural heritage of the commune.



Information panels at the 7 Fairytale Places exhibition. Lopătari, 2016.



General view of the 7 Fairytale Places exhibition. Lopătari, 2016.

In addition to these installations there are two information panels for each of the natural phenomena on display: one featuring an image (or a suggestive drawing recalling local legends), and the other providing information about the legendary place, accompanied by the actual story, adapted for visitors. The panels are taken from an older exhibition, organized, in the autumn of 2012, at the National Peasant Museum at the Peasant Club, and entitled "Giants, Dragons and Living Water. Mysteries and Unseen Wonders of the Buzău Region." The exhibition was organized by the Geomedia center, under the coordination of Alexandru Andrășanu, as part of the AFCN funded project, "Immaterial on material. Seven fairytale places in Buzău Region," an early opportunity to promote the idea of a geopark, which was to take shape later on.

The Museum of Forms in Bozioru

The map of cultural and tourist attractions in the Buzău Region was enriched in 2018 with a new landmark dedicated to the geological formations known in the area as "living stones": the Museum of Forms in Bozioru commune. Shaped over time by natural factors (rain, wind), the trovants are deposits of sand and layers of cemented sandstone in a wide variety of shapes that can be associated with both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic silhouettes. Based on the fact that this commune is home to one of the most consistent micro-reliefs populated with trovants, the team from the Buzău Land Association displayed several



Museum of Forms. Photography from the Facebook page "Povestea trovanților", https://www.facebook.com/povesteatrovantilor/photos.

such formations and their stories in this centre. Thanks to the modern concept, which incorporates elements of Augmented Reality, the visitor experience is an interactive one.

The year 2025 marked a turning point in terms of this objective, because after a period of refurbishment, in July it reopened in an expanded format, under the name "The Story of the Trovants Visitor Centre." Through the joint efforts of the Geopark administration and the local community, and with the involvement of a significant number of volunteers (both local and from outside the area), a modern and interactive exhibition was created in two of the rooms, dealing with distinct issues but using the same tools offered by technology. In the first room (The Story of the Trovants), visitors can engage in a "dialogue" facilitated by Augmented Reality elements with six trovants. By telling their stories, they take the curious visitors on a journey through the different geological eras of the Buzău region, from the prehistoric delta and the retreat of the sea, to the period when the mountains appeared. A valuable collection of local fossils and rocks complements the discourse with information about local culture and elements related to prehistoric life in the area. This last aspect prepares visitors for the memorable experience of the immersive journey they are about to embark on in the second exhibition hall. This is because, with the help of ingenious animated panels using Augmented Reality, the fauna that existed in the region more than 25 million years ago "comes to life." The ancestors of giraffes, bears, rhinos, elephants, and extinct species of monkeys populate this space, where their natural environment is "recreated" to the delight of visitors of all ages. In the new section, built under the name "25 MILLIONS," features a life-size hologram that recounts the 25-million-year history of the Buzău Land as well as the long history of amber, the precious resource of the neighbouring commune of Colți. Beyond the advanced technology, "25 MILLIONS" also brings to visitors' attention an extraordinary exhibition of fossils, whose age far exceeds 25 million years. Each of the exhibits on display represents a key milestone in the history of the emergence of life in the planet's seas and oceans. These do not focus solely on species characteristic of the area where the geopark is located today, but cover a wider area encompassing distant regions and corners of the world: Morocco, Scotland, Mexico, China, etc.



Photography from the Facebook page "Povestea trovanților", https://www.facebook.com/povesteatrovantilor/photos.

Geo Gate in Sătuc

With the desire to create a "gateway" to the territory of "Buzău Land" that would inform and spark the interest of those who enter the UNESCO site, the implementation and management team of this site launched the *Geo Gate* project. To this end, with the financial support of the local authorities, a deserted house in Sătuc, in the commune of Berca, has been converted into a modern visitor centre. Situated on a road that is heavily travelled between Buzău and Brașov and by tourists on their way to the Muddy Volcanoes, *Geo Gate* offers a memorable experience to all who visit. This is because the organisers set out and succeeded in creating an interactive, welcoming space where visitors can discover in a multi-sensory manner key objects – clues relating to the geopark's tourist and cultural attractions. Using VR headsets, visitors can take to a whole new level by taking a virtual tour of the museums and geo-sites of the "Land." Educational laboratories complement the visitors' educational yet entertaining experience; using digital microscopes, they can explore fossils and geological artifacts, thereby learning more about the origin of volcanoes and the times when the places where today's "Buzău Land" was located at the bottom of a sea.

Aluniș Art Center

The activities carried out by the team of the Association of the Buzău Land, aimed at laying the groundwork for obtaining the accreditation of the area as a UNESCO site, have also boosted other initiatives carried out at the level of civil society. In the complicated context of the blockages and restrictions caused by the Covid 19 pandemic, the first significant public events were organized in the localities of Aluniș (com. Colți) and Bisoca village (com. Bisoca), foreshadowing the multitude of activities implemented since then in the two hubs with a cultural, tourist, educational and community profile developed by non-profit associations.

"Aluniș Art Center," founded by Iulia Sârbu in the village of her birth, brought new life to a community in dissolution. The abandoned school building of this village of only 50 inhabitants, close to the rock settlements, was renovated and became the host for events that have been going on at a rapid pace ever since. The cultural offer launched by this new point of interest on the map of the Buzău region is very varied: art exhibitions, get-togethers, poetry and literature evenings, folk, classical and folkloric music concerts, and workshops on crafts that are on the verge of extinction in the area. It is worth noting that these educational activities have developed organically, giving rise over time to weaving camps and the Colți Pottery School. The art camps organized here have acquired an international dimension through creative residencies attended by artists from abroad. Gradually, the centre has diversified its range of projects, involving local residents, children and young people in activities dedicated to preserving a clean environment: greening actions, nature exploration and observation camps. One of the association's most ambitious projects, entitled „Weaving Connections" was financed from European funds through Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. It aimed to research, document and revitalize the tradition of wool processing in the Buzăului Valley as a prerequisite for the creation of a local cultural brand, boosting responsible tourism in the area and revitalizing the local cultural heritage. One of the successful components of this approach has been the collaboration with the City Hall

of Pătârlagele in the organization of the Museum Collection, basically a local ethnographic museum, within the Pătârlagele Cultural Centre.

Zestrea bisoceană [Bisoca's Dowry] House

Set against the mountainous landscape of the commune of Bisoca, the second of the above-mentioned non-profit associations operates under the local brand "Zestrea bisoceană" [The Bisoca Dowry]. The three Cășaru sisters have built over time this hub, which they wanted to be "peasant and communitarian." The aim of this project was to develop the local community, create jobs for women over 30, while promoting the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the area. A special emphasis was placed in the association's work on handicrafts, due to their potential to develop sustainable economic activities, such as the production and sale of local handicrafts like the making and marketing of local specific handmade shoes and jewellery. The craft workshops organized here are complemented by other educational activities (e.g. traditional women's gatherings). The "slow" approach to both tourism and local gastronomy was another effort to encourage sustainable development. The promotion of hiking trails that respect and protect the natural and cultural landscape, and the creation of a local gastronomic point in addition to the existing one in Poiana Mărului are part of these efforts.



Photography presenting the "Zestrea Bisoceană" House, from the Museums and collections' section of the Buzău Land Geopark website: https://tinutulbuzaului.org/aventura-si-drumetie/muzee-si-colectii/.

The inauguration in 2020 of the "Zestrea Bisoceană House" marked the beginning of exhibition activities, a constant in the NGO's activity. An old Wallachian house was rehabilitated and reconfigured in order to create a library, but above all a place to visit. Here, a collection of ethnographic artefacts from the community, together with their stories, have been put together in the permanent exhibition *The Life of the Wallachian Peasant.* Following the implementation of a cultural project financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund, in 2023 the House of the Zestrea Bisoceană was developed through a temporary exhibition dedicated to a specific element of the cultural heritage belonging to the mountain villages on the upper course of the Râmnicu Sărat river: the "shirt in *broci*" (the model is sewn with wool thread dyed by hand using the root of a plant known locally as "broci," *Rubia Tinctorum*). The temporary exhibition, which also travelled to the Bucharest Municipal Museum, was designed to promote the cultural heritage associated with this type of shirt not only locally but also in other places in the country and abroad.

Conclusions

As can be easily observed, the scale and pace of efforts to use the natural and cultural heritage for the sustainable development of the region have not only not diminished since the accreditation, but quite the opposite. The local stakeholders—the geopark management team, local NGOs with a strong community character, and local authorities—have been involved in a synergistic process aimed at improving the quality of the environment and the cultural, social, economic and educational life of the communities in the 18 municipalities within the territory of the *UNESCO* site.

As with the case of its counterpart in Haţeg ("Ţara Haţegului Geopark"), which has proven its validity over time, Ţinutul Buzăului Geopark proves to be a model worthy of replication in terms of both preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the area, and in adopting innovative approaches to its use.

Confirming the validity of the approach proposed and implemented by the Ţinutul Buzăului Association with the support of its partners, including the Buzău County Council, the "Ţinutul Buzăului" Geopark received its UNESCO revalidation certificate in 2026. The success of its re-evaluation by international experts formed the basis for this decision, which, in accordance with UNESCO regulations, ensures its continued status for a further four years.

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General view from the second hall of the exhibition "Ținutul Buzăului. Priveliști. Rosturi. Povești" [Buzău Land. Scenery. Meanings. Stories], organized at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in 2017. The exhibition was inspired by the "Time of Man" Museum in Mânzălești.



Weaving workshop with Amelia Papazissu (Living Human Treasure), held during the exhibition "Ținutul Buzăului. Priveliști. Rosturi. Povești" [Buzău Land. Scenery. Meanings. Stories], 2017.