



TO CARE MED

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Destination Working Groups: sharing ideas and solutions via thematic transnational workshops

*Transferring Tourism Carrying Capacity Limits (TCCL) to Support Sustainable Ecotourism in
MED Destinations*

<https://tocaremed.interreg-euro-med.eu/>



Output 1.1

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Executive summary

The TO CARE MED project serves as a vital framework for transforming Mediterranean tourism from a model of high-volume, seasonal mass consumption into an environmentally resilient, socio-economically balanced ecosystem. By implementing the Tourism Carrying Capacity Limit (TCCL) tool across five distinct pilot destinations—Varna (Bulgaria), Monemvasia (Greece), Tifernum (Italy), Pula (Croatia), and Murcia (Spain)—the initiative establishes a scalable, data-driven governance blueprint.

At its core, this report evaluates how the project's Destination Working Groups (DWGs) actively facilitate cross-border knowledge exchange, foster intensive MED cooperation, and structurally align regional ecotourism strategies. The ultimate success of TO CARE MED lies not just in localized environmental interventions, but in its capacity to systematically upgrade the institutional capabilities of participating public authorities, NGOs, and tourism operators. By converting raw territorial data into actionable policy instruments, the project builds long-term administrative agility, leaving destinations equipped with the frameworks, skills, and transnational networks necessary to protect the Mediterranean's fragile natural and cultural identity for generations to come.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The Mediterranean basin remains one of the world's premier tourism destinations, celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, diverse coastal landscapes, and unique ecosystems. However, the traditional economic models driving this success have increasingly generated severe environmental and infrastructural strain. High seasonality, habitat fragmentation, water scarcity, and the degradation of historic landmarks threaten the very assets that attract global visitors.

In response to these compounding vulnerabilities, the TO CARE MED project introduces a coordinated, transnational approach to sustainable ecotourism. Funded under the Interreg Euro-MED framework, the project focuses on transitioning away from reactive management toward proactive preservation, ensuring that economic development exists in harmony with ecological limits.

1.2 The Tourism Carrying Capacity Limit (TCCL) Framework

Central to the TO CARE MED strategy is the transfer and adaptation of the Tourism Carrying Capacity Limit (TCCL) tool. Originally conceptualized under the ALTERECO project and validated within the Euro-Med Toolkit for sustainable tourism, the TCCL methodology represents a paradigm shift in how destination pressures are assessed.

Rather than viewing tourism impacts through a purely commercial or narrow environmental lens, the TCCL tool evaluates a destination as an integrated, living system. It measures the threshold limits of a territory across four fundamental dimensions:

- Ecological: The resilience of local biodiversity, coastal ecosystems, water resources, and air quality under visitor pressure;
- Socio-Cultural: The tolerance thresholds of local communities and the preservation integrity of historical monuments and traditions;
- Infrastructural: The structural capacity of waste management systems, transport networks, utility grids, and public spaces to absorb peak seasonal loads;
- Psychological: The tipping point where overcrowding diminishes the quality of the visitor experience and devalues the destination's brand.



1.3 Scope and Objectives of the Report

The purpose of this report is to analyze the operationalization of the TCCL tool across five highly distinct Mediterranean pilot zones, each facing unique territorial pressures:

1. Sts. Constantine and Helena Resort (Varna, Bulgaria): Balancing century-old thermal wellness traditions with expanding coastal mass tourism;
2. Monemvasia (Greece): Extending the tourism season in a historic medieval castle town without compromising cultural heritage or Natura 2000 ecosystems;
3. Unione dei Comuni Tifernum (Italy): Integrating fragmented regional governance and applying sustainability guidelines to traditional public events;
4. Valsaline Pilot Zone (Pula, Croatia): Revitalizing urban coastal green spaces through community-led, participatory spatial planning;
5. El Valle & Sierra de Carrascoy (Murcia, Spain): Managing high-volume recreational redirection in a highly protected, non-residential "green lung" ecosystem.

By examining the initial kick-off meetings and strategic frameworks established by each destination's Destination Working Group (DWG), this report highlights the mechanisms of knowledge exchange, regional alignment, and institutional capacity building that define the TO CARE MED project.



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Figure 1 Montagano - Tifernum



2. Report of all working groups of the Destination Areas

A primary limitation in sustainable destination management is the compartmentalization of data and localized expertise. TO CARE MED addresses this by creating a structured pipeline for cross-border knowledge transfer.

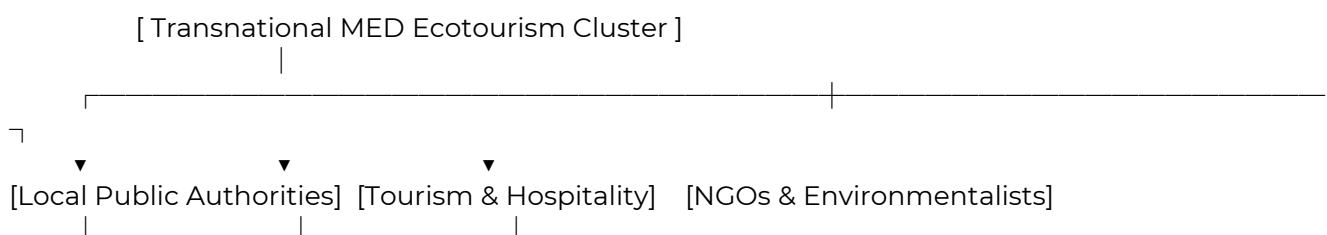
2.1 Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms

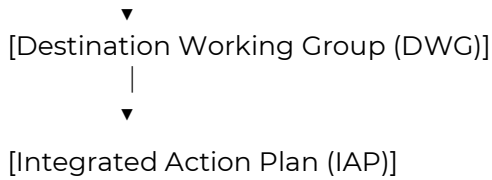
Through the DWGs, technical data is translated into practical policy instruments via peer learning channels:

- Joint Masterclasses and Workshops: Technical experts and local coordinators collaborate to harmonize indicators, ensuring that data collected in the urban coastal zones of Pula can be methodologically compared with data from the protected mountain ranges of Murcia.
- Shared Data Toolkits: Destinations utilize public Wi-Fi analytics, local questionnaires, and GIS mapping to build a common repository of visitor impact data, standardizing how Mediterranean destinations interpret "over-tourism."

2.2 Fostering MED Cooperation and Cross-Sectoral Governance

Ecotourism challenges do not adhere to administrative boundaries; coastal erosion, water scarcity, and seasonal tourism spikes are shared Mediterranean vulnerabilities. TO CARE MED operationalizes regional cooperation by shifting the governance paradigm from top-down regulation to horizontal, cross-sectoral collaboration.





The DWGs act as localized engines for broader regional networks. By design, each DWG breaks traditional institutional silos by uniting diverse actor groups:

Destination	Core Stakeholders Aligned	Primary Collaborative Mandate
Varna (Bulgaria)	Municipal authorities, spa operators, botanists (Ecopark Varna), marina managers	Mitigating summer mass-tourism pressures on thermal springs and coastal ecosystems
Monemvasia (Greece)	Municipality representatives, cultural heritage preservationists, local wineries/agritourism	Seasonality extension through low-impact athletic, cultural, and gastronomic events
Tifernum (Italy)	Unione dei Comuni Tifernum (UCT), event planners, local accommodation networks	Establishing a permanent coordination roundtable to unify fragmented territorial promotion
Pula (Croatia)	City officials, urban development planners, tourist boards, youth/community NGOs	Redesigning public spaces (Valsaline zone) independently of rigid pre-existing spatial plans
Murcia (Spain)	Regional environmental agencies, forestry services, fire/rescue operations, eco-centers	Managing visitor redirection in a zero-resident, highly sensitive protected parkland

By linking these five distinct territorial matrices into a single Mediterranean Ecotourism Cluster, the project enables direct peer-to-peer mentoring. For example, Murcia’s experience in navigating strict environmental regulations within a Natura 2000 network directly informs Monemvasia’s strategies for protecting its own natural reserves, while Varna’s structural approaches to high-volume infrastructure offer valuable lessons for the Unione dei Comuni Tifernum.

2.3. Aligning Regional Ecotourism Strategies

To achieve a durable impact, localized tourism initiatives must be strategically aligned with wider territorial, national, and European policy frameworks. TO CARE MED bridges the gap



between local action and high-level strategy through the co-design of Integrated Action Plans (IAPs).

1. Importance–Influence Matrixing: Utilized explicitly by destinations like Murcia, this tool maps out missing stakeholders, assesses institutional interests, and guarantees that community voices weigh equally against commercial operators. This alignment prevents policy friction during implementation.
2. Harmonized Sustainability Guidelines: Tifernum’s development of green criteria for public events and waste reduction provides a blueprint that can be integrated into the broader territorial strategies of the other partner regions, establishing a common standard for "eco-friendly festivals" across the MED zone.
3. Policy Integration: The IAPs generated by the DWGs are deliberately structured to feed into:
 - o The EU Green Deal and Circular Economy action plans.
 - o The Natura 2000 management guidelines for protected habitats.
 - o Regional spatial plans and municipal development agendas.

2.4. Increasing Institutional Capacity

The ultimate metric of success for TO CARE MED is the permanent upgrading of the institutional capacity of the organizations involved. Capacity building is achieved through tangible behavioral and operational shifts:

Before the intervention of the project, many pilot destinations managed tourist flows reactively or relied on anecdotal evidence. By embedding the TCCL methodology, organizations gain the technical capacity to read indicators, establish carrying capacity limits, and predict infrastructural strain before it reaches critical thresholds.

Participating municipal and regional bodies transition from isolated entities into agile, collaborative networks. The creation of permanent coordination roundtables (as seen in Tifernum) and the integration of digital tools (such as public Wi-Fi questionnaires in Pula) modernize how local government units interact with citizens and commercial operators.

By training local "multipliers"—including public administrators, NGO leaders, and tourism board directors—the project ensures that the expertise does not dissipate when the formal funding cycle concludes. Organizations are left with:

- Up-to-date stakeholder maps and clear documentation systems.
- Operational frameworks for drafting future sustainable development policies.
- An active network of international contacts, positioning them to successfully apply for future European territorial cooperation initiatives.

The TO CARE MED project demonstrates that sustainable ecotourism cannot be achieved in isolation. Through structured knowledge exchange, dedicated MED cooperation, and



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systematic policy alignment, the project elevates local Destination Working Groups into sophisticated management networks. In doing so, it successfully builds the long-term institutional capacity required to protect the Mediterranean's fragile natural and cultural identity for generations to come.



Figure 2 Matrice - Tifernum



3. Transnational Cooperation and Peer Learning

At the transnational level, partners engage in structured knowledge exchange through thematic workshops, peer reviews, and field visits. Each DWG contributes to and benefits from these exchanges, ensuring consistent application of TCCL across MED destinations. Key formats include: study visits, online webinars, joint methodological sessions, and peer review exercises. Each partner should assign delegates capable of transferring knowledge to their local group.

1. Thematic Workshops:

Purpose: These workshops focus on specific topics related to sustainable tourism and the TCCL tool, allowing partners to dive deeper into relevant challenges and solutions.

Activities: Interactive sessions featuring expert presentations, group discussions, and case studies that highlight successful implementations of TCCL in different settings.

Outcome: Participants gain insights into innovative approaches and strategies that can be adapted to their local contexts.

2. Peer Reviews:

Purpose: Structured peer reviews provide partners with the opportunity to present their progress and receive constructive feedback from fellow DWGs.

Activities: Each partner prepares a presentation that outlines their TCCL implementation status, challenges faced, and lessons learned, followed by a guided feedback session.

Outcome: This collaborative critique fosters accountability and encourages the adoption of best practices, enhancing the overall quality of TCCL applications.

3. Field Visits:

Purpose: On-site visits to other destinations allow partners to observe TCCL implementation in action and engage directly with local stakeholders.

Activities: Tours of relevant sites, meetings with local DWG members, and discussions on practical challenges and successes in applying TCCL.

Outcome: Partners return with tangible examples and inspiration for their projects, along with a strengthened network of contacts across the MED region.

4. Online Webinars:

Purpose: Webinars serve as accessible platforms for sharing knowledge and updates, especially for partners who cannot attend in-person events.

Activities: Presentations by experts, followed by Q&A sessions to facilitate dialogue among participants.

Outcome: Continuous engagement and knowledge sharing, allowing partners to stay informed about the latest developments and insights related to sustainable tourism practices.



5. Joint Methodological Sessions:

Purpose: These sessions focus on developing and refining methodologies for applying the TCCL tool, ensuring consistency and adaptability across different contexts.

Activities: Collaborative workshops where partners share their experiences, discuss methodological challenges, and co-create solutions that can be applied universally.

Outcome: A harmonized approach to TCCL application that respects local nuances while maintaining overall coherence.

6. Peer Review Exercises:

Purpose: To evaluate the effectiveness of the TCCL tool's implementation in various contexts and gather insights for improvement.

Activities: Partners engage in reciprocal evaluations, where each DWG reviews another's methodologies and outcomes, providing feedback and recommendations for enhancement.

Outcome: Enhanced learning and refinement of practices based on real-world experiences and critiques.

By actively participating in these structured knowledge exchanges, partners will strengthen their capacities to manage tourism sustainably, contributing to a robust framework for ecotourism development across the Mediterranean.



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Figure 3 Destination Working Group in Murcia



Annexes 1 - Planning and Organizing Eco-Friendly Event Series in TO CARE MED Destination Areas

To successfully extend the tourism season, celebrate local identity, and manage visitor flows without exceeding territorial thresholds, destination partners must shift from traditional event planning to Strategic Ecotourism Event Management.

The following recommendations provide a practical framework for Destination Working Groups (DWGs) to design, organize, and monitor a series of low-impact, high-value events aligned with the Tourism Carrying Capacity Limit (TCCL) methodology.

1. Pre-Event Planning: Aligning with TCCL Thresholds

Before launching any event series, partners must use the TCCL tool to define the operational boundaries of the venue and host community:

- **Establish Temporal and Spatial Carrying Capacities:** Define a maximum ceiling for daily ticket sales or registrations based on the site's most fragile resource (e.g., freshwater availability in Monemvasia, or ecological trail erosion in Murcia).
- **Conduct Time-Staggered Scheduling:** Decentralize event pressure by scheduling activities during shoulder seasons (autumn/spring) or off-peak hours (early morning or late afternoon). For example, distribute athletic trail runs in Murcia or wellness workshops in Varna across multiple weekends rather than a single concentrated festival block.
- **Implement the Importance-Influence Stakeholder Matrix:** Early in the planning phase, use the matrix to map out local actors who are highly impacted but have low influence (e.g., local residents living near the Valsaline zone in Pula, or small-scale farmers in Tifernum). Formally include them in the co-design phase to prevent community friction.

2. Operational Execution: Implementing Circular and Green Guidelines

Events should serve as active, real-world demonstrations of the EU Green Deal and circular economy principles. Partners can adopt and adapt the framework initiated by the Unione dei Comuni Tifernum:



Waste and Resource Management

- **Mandate Plastic-Free Zones:** Prohibit single-use plastics across all food and beverage vendors. Introduce a deposit-return system for reusable cups and plates;
- **Standardize Waste Sorting Stations:** Do not rely on standard public trash bins. Set up manned "Eco-Stations" where volunteers or staff guide visitors to correctly sort organic waste, paper, glass, and recyclables;
- **Source Hyper-Local Catering:** Partner exclusively with regional agricultural cooperatives and wineries (e.g., Malvasia wine producers in Greece or local culinary networks in Bulgaria). This drastically lowers the event's carbon footprint while maximizing economic retention within the community.

Mobility and Access Management

- **Establish Low-Emission Transport Corridors:** Restrict private vehicular access to sensitive zones (like the medieval castle town of Monemvasia or the reserve paths of Carrascoy). Map out peripheral parking hubs paired with electric shuttle services, bicycle rental stations, or organized walking routes;
- **Utilize Smart Mobility Data:** In urban pilot zones like Pula, leverage the suggested public Wi-Fi registration systems or dedicated event apps to send real-time notifications to attendees regarding parking availability, alternative transport options, and optimal arrival times.

3. Capacity Building: Upskilling the Local Hospitality Value Chain

Organizing sustainable events requires specialized skills that may currently be scarce within local tourism sectors. DWGs must use the project framework to build long-term local capacity:

- **Host "Green Event Production" Training:** Run focused TCCL workshops for local event planners, municipal staff, and cultural associations. Educate them on how to compute carbon footprints, manage eco-friendly procurement, and track supply-chain sustainability;
- **Train Hospitality Micro-Multipliers:** Partner with local hotels, spa resorts (Varna), and agritourism hosts. Provide them with digital promotional toolkits so they can pitch the low-impact event series directly to eco-conscious travelers, shifting the target demographic away from mass tourism.



4. Post-Event Evaluation: Data-Driven Impact Assessment

To increase institutional capacity, event data must be meticulously gathered, analyzed, and integrated into future municipal spatial plans and subsequent Integrated Action Plans (IAPs).

- **Deploy Digital and On-Site Questionnaires:** Mirroring Pula's strategy, capture visitor and resident feedback regarding perceived crowding, noise pollution, transport issues, and overall satisfaction;
- **Measure Ecological Footprint vs. Baseline Data:** Quantify total water consumed, waste generated, and traffic volume fluctuations during the event series. Compare these metrics directly against the baseline TCCL thresholds established during the initial DWG meetings;
- **Institutionalize a Permanent Review Roundtable:** Gather the cross-sectoral DWG partners within 30 days of the event series conclusion. Document "lessons learned," archive the data transparently within the MED Ecotourism Cluster, and refine the event indicators for the following season.

Destination-Specific Event Blueprints

To maximize territorial impact, each pilot area should design an event series tailored to its specific structural strengths and TCCL needs, here few suggestions:

- **Varna (Bulgaria):** *Off-Season Thermal Wellness & Eco-Heritage Weeks.* Focus on intimate, small-group mineral spa retreats, wellness seminars, and botanical tours within Ecopark Varna during autumn, shifting the focus away from crowded summer beaches.
- **Monemvasia (Greece):** *Historical & Gastronomic Cross-Country Trails.* Organize cultural walking festivals, agricultural harvesting experiences (olive oil and Malvasia grapes), and low-impact athletic races connecting the castle town to inland Natura 2000 sites during the winter or spring months.
- **Tifernum (Italy):** *Circular Economy Public Festivals.* Redesign traditional local food and heritage festivals into certified "Zero-Waste" events, utilizing permanent coordination roundtables to standardize sustainable governance across multiple neighboring municipalities.
- **Pula (Croatia):** *Valsaline Community-Led Green Space Activations.* Launch an outdoor series of youth-focused workshops, local producer markets, and pop-up acoustic concerts along upgraded promenades, testing flexible, creative uses of urban green spaces.
- **Murcia (Spain):** *Controlled Eco-Education & Soft Mobility Outings.* Establish tightly regulated, reservation-only mountain biking, climbing, or stargazing weekends centered around the El Majal Blanco Visitor Center, ensuring zero-impact on native protected bird and plant species.



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