FROM PRESERVATION TO RENEWAL: THE ROLE OF RURAL MUSEUMS IN SHAPING CULTURAL FUTURES IN PORTUGAL

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Resumo | Abstract

Rural regions across Europe are undergoing profound transformation, shaped by depopulation, ageing populations, economic restructuring, and the gradual erosion of cultural practices. In this context, rural heritage is increasingly recognised not simply as a legacy of the past, but as a critical resource for sustainability and renewal of rural areas. Yet, despite growing policy interest in heritage-led development, the role of rural cultural institutions in sustaining and reactivating these landscapes remains underexplored.

This paper addresses this gap by focusing on rural museums in Portugal, positioning them as more than custodians of artefacts—as active agents in the production, mediation, and potential revitalisation of rural culture. It interrogates how such institutions operate within fragile territorial contexts and asks what role they can play in fostering cultural continuity, community engagement, and place-based resilience.

Adopting a mixed method approach combining a national survey of rural museums, the collection of demographic and economic indicators, and interviews with five museums the research focused on four main areas: the characteristics of rural museums and their territorial context; the ways in which they safeguard and renew rural culture; the approaches used to connect visitors with rural culture; and the main challenges and opportunities affecting their work.

Overall the paper contributes to broader debates on rural heritage, sustainability, and cultural governance, offering a timely reflection on how heritage institutions can respond to socio-economic change. It invites a reconsideration of rural museums as dynamic spaces embedded within living landscapes, and as potential catalysts for more inclusive and sustainable rural futures.

Palavras-chave | Keywords

Rural museums; safeguarding; cultural renewal; visitor engagement.

Resumo biográfico | Short biography

Paula Leal de Matos has built a 30-years' career spanning academia, economics, management teaching, and European aviation in Brussels. She holds a PhD in Industrial and Business Studies from the University of Warwick and her background includes teaching

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economics and management followed by extensive work connected to European aviation policy and economics. She is now developing a new career in Heritage Management. Paula is concluding a Master's degree in International Heritage Management at the University of Birmingham, where she has focused particularly on heritage in rural areas. Her current interests centre on the preservation, interpretation, and sustainable development of rural heritage, especially the role of museums and heritage initiatives in supporting cultural continuity and local renewal.