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# The cultural labelling of natural tourist areas

Jean Corneloup, Philippe Bourdeau, Pascal Mao

Laboratoire Territoires, UMR Pactes, Grenoble  
Institut de Géographie Alpine  
www.sportsnature.org

philippe.bourdeau@ujf-grenoble.fr  
j.corneloup@libertysurf.fr  
pascal.mao@ujf-grenoble.fr

**Abstract:** Tourist sites in natural areas constitute a remarkable subject of study for better understanding the way in which the local area or territory participates in the production of a localised cultural system (LCS). Indeed, while the economic function of such sites consists in producing wealth for the entrepreneurs proposing multiple services to the tourists present on the sites, it seems simplistic to consider a tourist destination as being no more than a simple aggregation of actors. The existence of ties with the territory that can be qualified locally points to the presence of a cultural process that plays an important role in the creation of resources that

are essential to the efficient operation of such a system. Drawing on several examples of sports and tourist sites in the French Alps, we show how this localised cultural system is built up and how it takes shape. The study of the forms of development set up by the different service providers and of the sports culture of the tourists provides valuable insights into the make-up and practical organisation of these cultural resources in an outdoor recreational site.

**Keywords:** localised cultural system, system of cultural intelligence, territory, outdoor sports resort.

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When we talk about tourism in a natural setting, it is important not underestimate the importance of tourist sites and resorts (Vles, 1996) in the development of the leisure economy. The present study concerns the management of these tourist sites that bring together, in an organised framework, the various actors involved in the development of such areas. The objective is to show how social geography and sociology can provide valuable scientific approaches for analysing the factors conducive to sustainable territorial development. Our study concerns the analysis of nature-related sports cultures by attempting to show the existence of a territorial positioning of these cultures. Such cultures help to shape the sites where the sports are carried out and to create a territorial identity which enables tourists to become attached to a particular site. This positioning plays a role in the structure of the area's cultural resources, a structure that should be taken into account by local actors when preparing development projects.

## The nature tourist resort, a localised cultural system

Very often, the approaches adopted in economic geography or local development envisage going beyond an entrance via the market to understand the operation of the economy. By addressing the question via the notion of industrial district, innovative



environment, localised productive system or territorial network, a spatial approach can be adopted to demonstrate the presence of links, exchanges, mutual assistance, and mutual efforts to strengthen the capacities of entrepreneurs for innovation and adaptation to the market (Pecqueur, 1989). This type of operation is based on the presence of a territorial link that enables actors to group together to create a common space of goods within which agreements - which are very often informal - are defined, as well as professional groups, or even clubs or circles (Zimmerman, 1998). In participating in these actions, a localised professional culture is built up where the actors share common reference frameworks within a territorial development network. The approach consists in assuming that the quality of this organisation is based on the capacity to create an organised group of people that can help shape this territorial link<sup>1</sup>. This is the result of a shared investment in a collective project which allows the development of the area's resources. However, there are slightly different ways of perceiving this: for some, such organisation involves the development of project areas (Lafarge, 1999 ; Hazebroucq, 1999) within a structure of a formalised nature, while others are more in favour of the development of networks (Castells, 1996 ; Fourny, 2004) allowing the development of the « collective mind », resulting from practical interactions.

In considering the question of the market in natural tourism resorts, one is faced with a special configuration that differs from the classic entrepreneurial environment. Thus, the chief characteristic is the service economy, where product and equipment providers propose their goods and services for consumption on the production site itself. In this situation, local interaction is of prime importance in defining the value of the good that is co-produced and co-managed by the different parties involved<sup>2</sup> (Pigeassou, 1999). The nature tourism resort must thus produce a variety of services (accommodation, catering, entertainment, sports activities, reception,...) to meet the needs of its clientele. Certain tensions arise between the local actors in defining local organisational aspects, the cultural organisation of the resort, or the real estate policy via the management of agricultural land, but also with the tourists who are interested in the quality of the services proposed. Once again the question of governance is raised with respect to the way in which the local system of exchange is to be set up and regulated. Here again, some actors give priority to a centralised form of management with a resort director, a mixed trade association, a powerful tourist office or a strong municipal team, while others recommend more open cooperative arrangements in the form of a network or tacit agreements between the different parties involved (Peyrache, 2003).

Such differences set aside, numerous research studies have demonstrated the importance of a territorial culture that must play a role in the expression of local identity and in the development of an economic sector (Debarbieux, 1999 and 2004). Inspired by the theory of Simmel (1981) and intercultural approaches (Gauthey, 1990), such studies seek to show that culture plays a central role in a tourist service economy. In their studies, Peyrache-Gadeau (2003) and Gerbaux (1999) discuss the links that exist between public and private actors in shaping a tourist « territory », while Pecqueur (2004) observes the

1 • The notion of resorts territorial identity is developed in a scientific program supported by Rhône-Alpes region and managed by Emmanuelle Marcelpoil (CEMAGREF, Grenoble).

2 • That is the tourists, service providers and other local actors.



role of positive externalities, both cultural and local, in the setting up of a post-fordist economy. A cultural economic geography emerges that tends to view local development in a different manner, as a continuation of an alternative scientific approach to the management of sport (Corneloup, 1999).

All these approaches help to modify the vision of value, which produces profits in a given territory, because the resort is part of a territorialized globalised system characterised by increasingly strong competition between tourist destinations and countries. Consequently, faced with these multiple constraints and in order to better define its place within a market open to varied touristic styles, value (Jokung-Nguéna, 2001) and strategic marketing (Goutebel, 2002) is recommended by certain theoreticians to clarify the position and refine the territorial identity of tourist sites. The assessment of territorial resources (natural, technological-natural, heritage, symbolic, human, relational) on which the resort can base the evaluation of its « action » capital, is conducted with a view to determining the strengths and weaknesses of this tourist site, and to defining the most appropriate orientations. Others envisage a natural tourism resort as a localised tourist system (LTS), following on from the work of J. Perret (1994) and E. Marcelpoil (1999), enabling it to benefit from a local innovation process, mutual assistance and a fruitful symbolic universe. However, the construction of this LTS is not automatic. Research conducted by Peyrache-Gadeau (2003) insists on the presence of a logic of minimal consultation in that the « tested means of cooperation remain complex and often fragile », following on from local studies conducted by Bouahouala (2001) on outdoor recreation companies in the Vercors massif, or the work of Gerbaux (1999) on winter sports resorts. How can we explain the success of certain resorts which do not operate according to the model of perfect rationality and total management?

In our study, we examine the cultural capital of the resort, a fundamental resource for the successful operation of the territorial economy. But it is not easy to define. It is built on the cultural characteristics of the offer, in the way the site is presented (events, entertainment, various communications), and in the way specific practices are developed and supported. But it must also integrate the cultural characteristics of the tourists present locally. Unlike many approaches oriented towards the territorial economy of entrepreneurs and other actors, and aimed at improving governance, it seems to us not only possible but necessary to examine the localised cultural system (LCS) which enables the value of a site to be viewed in another way. Thus, value does not depend solely on the quality of services, property prices, or the environmental characteristics of the site, but also on the links, the social practices that emerge locally, the sporting style of the resort, the physical techniques and skills that are necessary on site, or the vision of nature.

Examining the characteristics of an LCS in a service economy means attributing importance to the socio-cultural territory that develops in a tourist resort. Knowing the value of an LCS does not depend on conducting an incidental evaluation among tourists (Faucheux, 1994) or observing or studying visitors, but on the possibility of evaluating the cultural strength of a territory produced by the type of clientele present on site. The development of loyalties to a territory or the attraction of a site are built up also on the capacity of the site to generate an atmosphere, a certain spirit or style that gives tourists the opportunity to experience strong sensations within a particular compensatory



elsewhere (Piolle, 1993; Bourdeau, 2003). We may like one place for its tranquillity, and another for its festive atmosphere or architectural heritage. We like to visit places where we are with people who share the same vision of the world as us and have common affinities (De Léséleuc, 2004). Many economists find it difficult to deal with this cultural force since it cannot be evaluated in terms of utility value even if it appears to be a motivating force in the attraction for certain destinations.

This cultural force can be measured by field studies among the actors involved with a view to better understanding how this enculturation process develops. The general approach involves evaluating the LCS and the cultural resources of a site by observing the logic of the actors' actions, the forms of development, the entertainment, the types of exchange, reciprocity and links between actors (Pecqueur, 2004) or a site's local project. The appraisal of these active resources in the development of the cultural process can be used to better define the development policy and site management. From another point of view, as in the operation of business networks (Castells, 1996), the understanding of this LCS is based on the study of tacit knowledge and explicit know-how from which the system of cultural intelligence peculiar to this LCS develops. Control of this cognitive and meta-cognitive capital is a key element in adopting a strategic approach and evaluating the quality of the cognitive territorial resources belonging to the LCS. The capacity of the LCS for change and innovation depends in part on this level of control of the common territorial resources. It makes it possible to generate new combinations of resources and new structures for cooperative arrangements. It also enables the production of new interactions with a view to adaptation to potential changes<sup>3</sup>. The cultural governance of a site requires organisational learning and the presence of a formal or informal group of people in order to reach agreement on the locally acceptable cultural form.

However, it would also appear necessary to examine this cultural labelling through studies conducted among tourists. The sports resort organised around tourist services is characterised by the fact that the value of the place depends on the consumption by the tourist of these intangible goods. It is thus the tourist who, « at the end of the chain », defines this local value in terms of his or her relationship with the cultural object. To evaluate this territorial link, we must examine the sporting style of the site. Moreover, this should be done not only with respect to the activities undertaken, the social uses and symbolic representations, but also in relation to the construction of this local social space, which produces links, exchanges, meetings, participation and a belonging to the spirit of the place.

## Development forms and cultural labelling of tourist destinations

During the numerous field surveys conducted in outdoor sports resorts (Mao, Corneloup, 2003), we were able to demonstrate that the cultural label of sites differed according to the forms of local development observed, regardless of whether a diachronic

3 • A translation step (in the sense used by Callon, 2001) is required in certain cases. It assumes the presence of mediators to provide direction towards a vision and of resources shared between the different parties involved in this LTS.



or synchronic approach was adopted. From a theoretical standpoint, the resort may be thought of as an economy of roles where different actors and publics defining endogenous and exogenous forces participate in expressing the local form of development. The forms observed relate to the different cultural orientations depending on the practices that produce particular geographic effects on the places concerned (Mao, Corneloup, Bourdeau, 2004). Whether it be at the level of the relationship with the natural environment, the choice of activities (recreational, competitive, contemplative), the physical commitment involved, the relationship with the local population, or the interest shown in heritage values, differences may be observed between the various territorial actors. These differences leave their imprint on the local development process. The observation of typical differences between development forms led to the identification of an 8-category typology of such forms (Corneloup *et al.* 2001), which constitutes the basis for sports resort management (Table 1).

In certain cases, a form is imposed on the site. In other cases, several forms exist side by side, creating considerable tension and in some cases a certain complementarity between local actors in an attempt to better meet the expectations and requirements of tourists. These differences appear, for example, according to the geographical polarity attributed to a site which in turn governs the cultural labelling of a destination (table 2). Thus, differences may be observed between those who value the presence of urban and indoor activities in a resort (group sports, keep-fit classes, circus activities, swimming pool, etc.), those who are looking for a development more oriented toward the natural environment (on periphery of the resort) with the provision of « aroundoor » activities (short hikes, canyoning, local climbing, adventure trails) and those who prefer to focus on the great outdoors (outdoor, « wilddoor » activities) by promoting certain activities such as mountaineering, ice hiking, mountain biking, or paragliding-hiking, trapper's life, etc.

In the context of a study conducted in the mountain resort of Les Arcs (France), differences were observed in opinions on the cultural orientation of the resort during the summer season. Although, according to certain actors, this tourist resort has been promoted as a recreational resort since the 1980s, offering a particularly large number of indoor activities, it is interesting to note the discourses of other actors who have observed an increasingly strong demand for authentic activities, which are closer to nature and more environmentally friendly - actors who are calling for a change in development strategy. It is thus the system of cultural intelligence that is called on in interpreting the LCS at Les Arcs, an interpretation whose reference to cognitive and geographic references varies depending on the actors and their position in local tourist space. Very often, this knowledge of local cultures involves fragmented reflexivities within the LCS. For most actors, it is based much more on sporadic field observations, the analysis of their specific market, close contact with clients, and references to national surveys than on an overall, collective, analytical approach to the local situation. We are therefore more in the context of a network of loosely connected and dispersed actors who put forward their points of view now and then, and sporadically exchange a few opinions on the « season » and the behaviour of clients, than in the context of an emerging formalised system of cultural intelligence at the level of the resort. However, the presence of a tacit cultural force that leaves its imprint on the place and contributes to its success should not be underestimated.



Forms of development						
	Républican	Technocratic legislative	Educational	Marketing	Entrepreneurial	Traditionalist and conservative
<b>Dominances</b>		Institutional and civic		Commercial		
<b>Acteurs</b>	State and local authorities	Législators and ministerial institutions	Teachers and youth workers	Business organisations Service providers	<i>Outdoor enterprises</i>	Families and local actors
<b>Publics a priori concerned</b>	Citizens and sports enthusiasts	Safe participants	Pupil and trainee groups	Every type of clientele	Profitable and efficient client	Elderly, local family, the traditionalist
<b>1° principle sporting (style) Identifiable activities</b>	Federation, public servant, member of Club Alpin Français Competitive and recreational sports	The Stickler Standardised activities, technopark	The pedagogue Educational activities	Manager of marketing product marketing product	The entrepreneur Profitable activities (canyoning, park, ...)	Family-type Traditional and former activities
<b>2° principle movement</b>	Stability	Submission to standards	Anti- consumer	Change, new trend	Progress, profitable innovation	Conservationist; traditionalist
<b>3° principle Relationship with nature</b>	Domesticated (planned garden)	Controlled and sterilized	Educative, pédagogical	Commercial (nature as a market)	Productivist (nature as a factory)	Heritage and conservationist
<b>4° principle Relationship with place</b>	Exogenous	Exogenous	Exogenous	Exogenous	Exogenous	Endogenous
<b>5° principle Economy Ethic</b>	Free-Licence Public	Technocratic	More or less fee-paying cultural	Fee-paying : the client Commercial	Fee-paying : the client entrepreneuriale	Free or Fee-paying Heritage
<b>6° principle Rationality</b>	Republican procedure ; digital culture	Expertise approach	Transmission of knowledge, heuristic	Market study, strategic marketing	Instrumental rationality, Innovation	Local know-how, preserving family firm
<b>7° principle Common higher principles Touristic sites</b>	Collective good and public utility	The law and the rule	Education and citizenship formation of individual	Competitive advantage and market share	Financial profits, profitability and efficiency	Family, heritage and, power
<b>Touristic sites</b>	"Republican"	"Normative"	"Knowledge"	Market,	Industrial	Domestic
<b>8° principle Management and decision</b>	Centralised and pyramid structure	Quality assurance, technostructure,	Educational project, pedagogical team	Plan marketing, Equipe de projets, étude satisfaction	The manager, efficient organisation	Patriarchy
<b>Examples of emblematic places</b>	National parks, peri-urban and federal sites	Safe sites, Natura, 2000, labelled sites iso standards	Centres and holiday camps, interpretive paths, scouts	Holiday centres (Maeva, Center Park, etc.)	Leisure parks, Ski resorts, Transmountain	Guide offices, ski schools, Le Pleyne




Table 1. Multicriteria typology of forms of development (Corneloup and Mao)

## Evaluation of cultural labelling of natural sports resorts

Faced with this strategic uncertainty concerning the definition of a legitimate activity, it is interesting to examine the presence of cultural labelling in sports resorts according to the sporting style of the tourists present on the site. In a summer survey on mountain sports activities, we hypothesised that there would be a cultural labelling of tourist resorts depending on the tourists present. To examine this hypothesis, we selected three resorts in the French Alps (Les Arcs and Peisey-Nancroix in Savoie, Vallouise-Ailefroide in the Hautes-Alpes department and Chamonix in Haute-Savoie) to conduct a sample survey<sup>3</sup>.

3 • Our sample comprised 887 interviewees. The questionnaires were completed in summer 2002. The survey methodology has been described in a previous article (Corneloup, 2004).



	Indoor	Aroundoor	Outdoor	Wildoor <sup>1</sup>
<b>Characteristics</b>	Inside the resort	On periphery of resort (between town and "nature")	In the depths of nature (far from the town)	In the wilderness
<b>Relationship with time</b>	Nature "on show"	Domesticated nature	Wild nature	Extra-wild nature
<b>Rapport au temps</b>	Hour or half-day	Half day	One day	Over several days
<b>Economic relationship</b>	Dominant for fee-paying activities			Dominant for free activities
<b>Development</b>	Highly developed			Not planned
<b>Safety/risk ratio</b>	Passive safety, sterilization			Active safety, multiple dangers
<b>Examples of activities</b>	Circus, swimming pool activities, gym, traditional sports...	Mountain biking, adventure park, short hikes, off-piste, recreational canyoning...	Mountaineering, long hikes, ski trekking, orienteering, trekking, camping in the wild, bivouacking...	Mountaineering in Himalaya, polar expeditions, round the globe sailing, wilderness camps, bivouacking...

**Table 2. Types of relationship with nature for sports tourist sites (Corneloup, 2004)**

<sup>1</sup> • This notion has been borrowed from Ph. Bourdeau (2003) who extended the triptyque with this geographical category.

From a methodological standpoint, it involved preparing a questionnaire that could be used to assess the sporting styles of the tourists attracted to the resort. Style represents a structure around four logics: social logic (profession, age, sex...), sporting logic (methods of participating, sports experienced), social usages (sociability, reading matter, purchases, relationship with institution...) and representations (images, conceptions, opinions). These categories were used to organize the different parts of the questionnaire. To determine the preferred actions, we presented interviewees with a list of different practical situations encountered outdoors<sup>5</sup>. A five-point scale was used to evaluate the intensity of practice of these sports situations. In terms of representations, a semiometric approach was recommended whereby the interviewee had to express attraction or revulsion for words evoking different symbolic dimensions of the mountains (fear, joy, God, confrontation, danger, amusement, sexuality...). Using a 10-point scale (not very strong / very strong) according to the self-assessment method (Loubet, 1989), we were able to define the symbolic map of representations of the mountains.

To find out more about the cultural labelling of the resorts and to test our hypothesis, we processed our sample according to site (figure 2). A cultural territorialisation of tourist destinations was identified, where figures of the imaginary do have the same symbolic referents, but depend on the participants using a particular site. Strong opposition was found between Chamonix and Les Arcs, with Vallouise-Ailefroide in an intermediate position. We were able to show how participants become part of a localised cultural system within which a particular representation of this activity space is created. The

<sup>5</sup> • The aim was to assess the position of the cultural dimensions of sports activities: preference for high-risk or safe activities, family or individual activities, morning or evening, energetic or contemplative, supervised or unsupervised...).

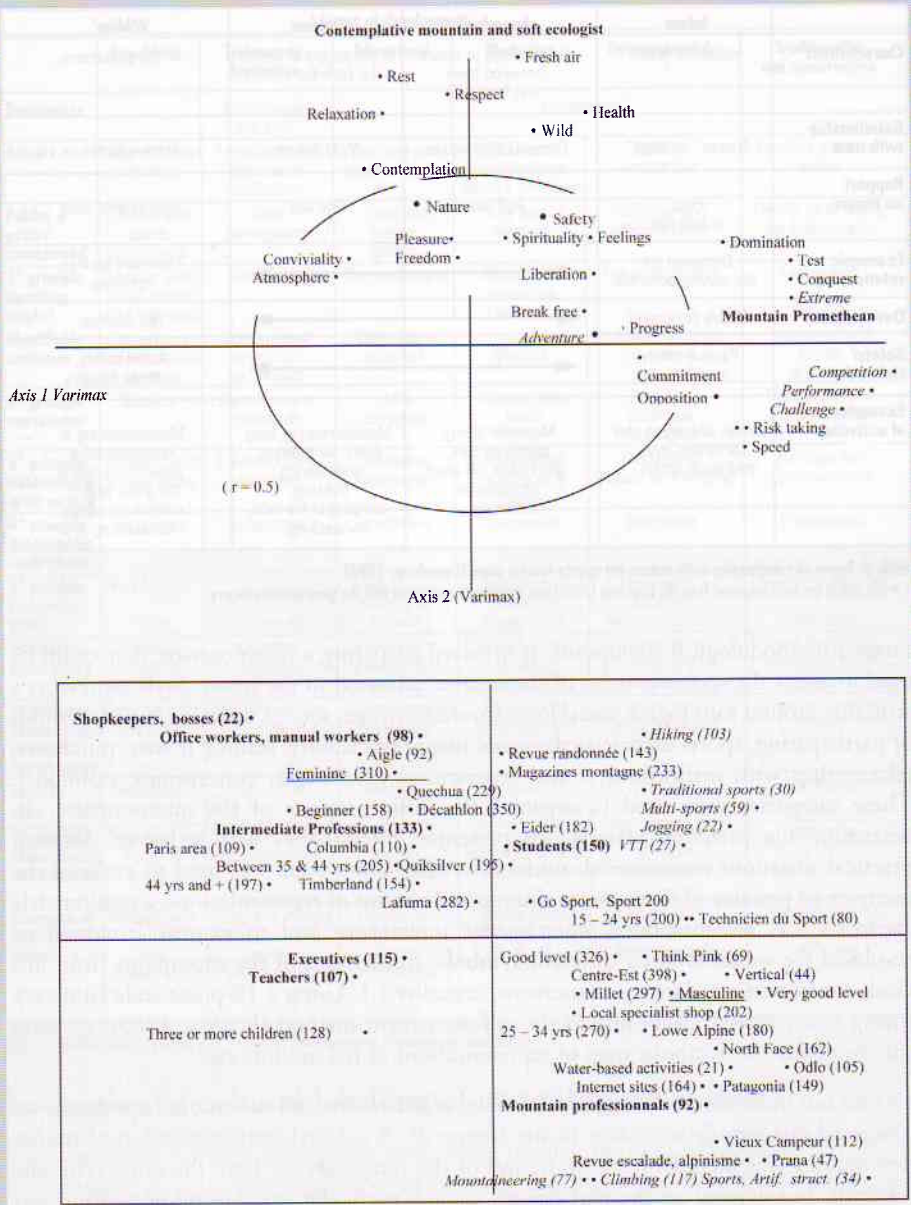


Figure 1. The space of activity styles in mountain sports resorts.



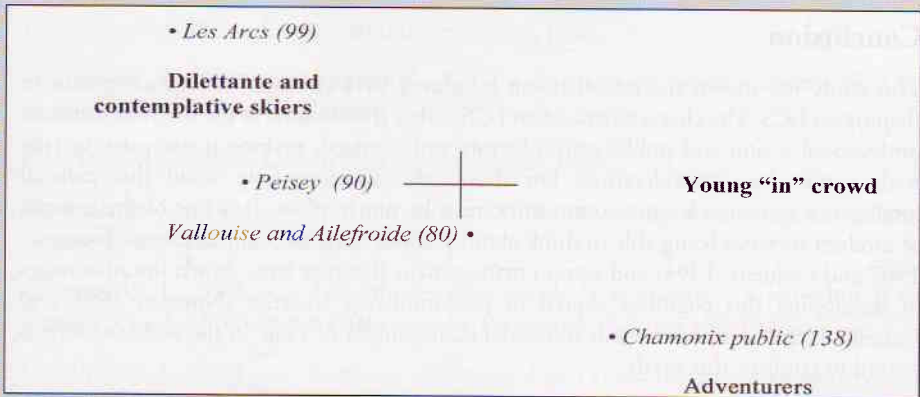


Figure 2. Cultural labelling of sports nature resorts (Corneloup, 2004)

tourist site is thus like a geographical construction that requires the consideration of the notion of geographical object, theorised by Debarbieux (2004) as a process whereby the symbolic relationship with a tourist site is categorised. The symbolic territorialisation of resorts takes place through the attraction for certain symbols and the rejection of others in relation to the tourist activities preferred. The forms of sports practised cannot therefore be dissociated from the symbolic referents in the territorial construction of a site.

In terms of development, the touristic objects (roads/paths, architecture, sites for practising sports...) must be entered in the territorial symbolic configuration, in the same way as should be done in the design of products and tourist activities. This cultural labelling can be seen as a territorial resource that is linked first to this idea that the public has a specific cultural capital (in the sense of Bourdieu, 1987) to produce this vision of the place in relation to the preferred activities and second to the presence of a professional, infrastructural and ecological configuration that helps produce this label. The LCS thus produces a territorial link between actors and publics that qualifies and directs the symbolic crafting of the place. In the case of Les Arcs, for example, actors were found to have differing opinions as to how the cultural orientation of the resort should be defined. As a tool for helping to decide upon and define the resort project, this type of study demonstrates the importance of looking closely at the way the LCS is created and of sensitising actors to the cultural position of the tourists at their site.



## Conclusion

This study has shown the role that can be played by a cultural intelligence system in shaping an LCS. The characteristic of an LCS is that it is situated at the interface between professional action and public action (actors and tourists), making it necessary to take both parties into consideration. For those who want to help build this cultural intelligence system, a learner community must be put in place. It is one of the features of modern societies being able to think about possible acceptable orientations (Touraine, 1967 and Giddens, 1994) and certain management theorists have shown the advantages of developing this cognitive capital in post-industrial societies (Nonaka, 1991 and Castells, 1996). A trend towards territorial management of value in the years to come is bound to confirm this need.

With respect to nature resorts characterised by a necessity to innovate and reorganise, it may be thought wise to strengthen the structure of this cultural intelligence system within the created LCS. Certain resorts have chosen this orientation, like Chamonix<sup>6</sup>. This resort, after a great many meetings between local actors in the 1990s, is studying the cultural process that characterises the development of a tourist site with a view to suggesting an action strategy for better controlling and orienting the local cultural system. If the policy/politics/ sometimes (or quite often) fails to structure the interplay of actors on a territory concerned with the practice of sports, the theoretic point of view presented here consists in thinking that culture can play a strong political role in federating the territorial collective good between the different parties involved and in convincing entrepreneurs that without territorial culture, the economic value of goods is not sustainable.

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6 • Document entitled « Une stratégie pour Chamonix Mont-Blanc » (A strategy for Chamonix Mont-Blanc) published in 2002 by the municipality and addressed to all local partners. The document describes the different territorial resources of the site.



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