



The Last Sacrifice: The Potential of a Revived Venetian World

Allison Zurfluh

KEYWORDS: Venice Lagoon, sustainability, fishing, wild-life, tourism

With a deep knowledge of, and respect for, the city of Venice, its people and environment, Allison Zurfluh curates bespoke educative itineraries into Venice's northern lagoon. She has worked for twenty years as a translator in *Classical Music and Olympic Sport*; is the chief editor of *DeluxePad*, the luxury lifestyle magazine for private aircraft, and has contributed to international publications such as *Condé Nast Traveller UK*, *Swiss Universe* in-flight Magazine, *InTime Venice & Veneto*, *Swiss Style*, and *Legendary Stein* in Salzburg. Zurfluh is also the author of *The Veremonda Resurrection* which traces the revival of a seventeenth-century Venetian opera (Gli Ori, 2016), and of a children's book on Venice *Lia Leaves the Library* (Lineadacqua Edizioni, 2017).
allisonzurfluh@gmail.com

Introduction

The sun is beginning to sink over Torcello as I navigate my way back toward Burano. It is Sunday, and the weekend is mercifully coming to an end. I round the south corner of Isola Santa Cristina and pull up to a nesting *barena* (saltmarsh mudflat) that is home to a family of small white seagulls, known in dialect as *cocài*. About three weeks ago, I met two tiny nestlings there while picking up trash that floats in from the mainland and have gone to observe quietly and unobtrusively twice a week, careful not to stay too long or disturb their habitat.

Italy had a four-day holiday this week, and an unprecedented number of leisure boats speeding their way into the north. I was surprised and felt uneasy with the endless drone of motors and uninformed traffic in this protected and delicate environment.

They parked off the nesting *barena* and used it as a beach. They amped up their holiday music and picnicked where the hatchlings usually hide in the brush. The mamma gulls flew worried overhead, not for a few minutes twice a week, but for four full days straight, with more boats coming every day. If lockdown served as a harbinger to a more sustainable future, with undisturbed waters and the return of wildlife to the city, the reality seems far different than the world had hoped.

Over the past two years, I'd been feeling a growing tension. Cruise ships were increasing in number, while accidents surrounding their presence in the delicate city alarmed Venetians with growing intensity; the city was flooded with visitors to the point of suffocation, and the days of the occasional traveller from out of town were in the past. It was a new order and it was choking out the real, day-to-day life of one of the world's most unique and beloved destinations. With an uptick in short-term rentals leading to inflated housing costs for locals, overwhelmingly clogged streets and useful businesses closing doors to make way for more trinket shops, long-term inhabitants were being pushed out. It was a vicious circle, and an exodus was looming on what felt like an inevitable horizon. But how to resolve the problem? Venice relies heavily on tourism, and it seemed impossible to do an about-face at this late stage, now that so many livelihoods were sustained by it. I observed and listened to the experts in Venice debate the issues and tried to formulate thoughts of my own. I vacillated between introspection and rage and tried to find a way to influence a turn-back in trend. "You cannot save the Lagoon," Massimo Tagliapietra, a Buranello fisherman, had said. And likely he was right. Who was I to presume to be able to make a difference? Just a regular person who had fallen into the passionate net of Venice's traditions, friendship and beauty; what could I do about it? Leave it to the scientists, the politicians, the professionals. In fact, perhaps I was actually contributing to the problem just by being here. These were the questions going over and over in my head. And then the novel Coronavirus pandemic hit, which no one saw coming.

I tie up my boat and disembark to walk the perimeter of the tiny island. Trash has washed up from the mainland and picnickers have littered the salt marsh, which is officially off-limits to leisure activities. I walk as carefully as I can in order not to disturb the habitat. Plastic bottles, tin cans and pieces of broken glass are strewn across the island. During that four-day holiday weekend, I had avoided approaching the island completely. Local fishermen explain that nesting *barene* are home to a rich variety of seabirds, whose nestlings live among the plant life growing on the marsh floor. Parent birds flying overhead feed them three to six times a day, with invertebrates, small fish and other organic materials, without which they cannot survive and grow. Four long days of picnickers result in only one thing.

I approach the tiny beach on the far end of the island, filling my bucket with trash as I go. To my horror, I find that both *cocài* seabirds are dead. One is near the beach where the boats were, and one has been carelessly tossed aside, near a makeshift camp they had made. I

fall to my knees in disbelief; I lay my hands on them and stroke their feathers; I speak to their panicking mammas in the sky, apologizing for what has been done; I call up Massimo to ask why they had died. Had they eaten some of the broken bottles that were scattered about? Had someone given them potato chips or other human food? “Maybe,” he replies, “but more likely it is because when so many people crowd the nesting *barena*, the adult gulls cannot feed them, and they were surely over-stressed by so many people.” This is an example of what is happening in the Lagoon. If we use the *barena* for our enjoyment, the native animals will leave us. If we use Venice as our amusement park, a living and thriving population will also go. And then where will we be?

I untie my boat and head back to Burano to dispose of the trash. This year, there are more leisure boats in the northern Lagoon than ever before. They moor up on the *barena* and inside the delicate *ghebi*. They launch their boats into the Lagoon, unstudied, and plough across *paludi* (marshlands) in yachts with motors so powerful they are appropriate only for sea navigation, many so ignorant they believe the *bricola* road markers are for beautification purposes. Patrols can be seen on the weekends, handing out an occasional ticket, but often only to local boats with small motors that have been amped up by twenty horsepower or so. To the hundreds of leisure boats navigating at breakneck speeds in canals with restricted limits, rarely is a fine imposed. My experiences are not based on a scientific study or methodically-acquired data, though I have been documenting things for my personal use these past years. They are the result of being on-site and out on the water, of spending days and months learning about the traditional fishing traditions—in the fishing “valleys”—from local fishermen, of observing wildlife and habitat, and being part of the maritime traffic, for better or worse. And from what I can see, the situation has not improved with the global shut down, indeed it is only getting worse.

General Issues Facing the Venice Lagoon

We drop anchor in a canal near Lio Piccolo on a hot summer day. A clutch of locals, we’ve brought along some *sisoè* (dialect for jujubes) from someone’s island to munch as we lie in the sun and take turns swimming. Such are the days Venetians wait for all year—to enjoy their Lagoon in its gentle simplicity (Figure 2). I dip my body over the side of the boat and slide into the water. It clouds around me with its soft coolness; I look up at the sky and float; I close my eyes and let time pass, expecting to stay there for a while. “Elison!” I hear a muffled call, and then another. “Ragazza!” I lift my head from watery drowsiness and look around. My surroundings have changed dramatically, I’m no longer anywhere near the boat. The current has carried me away with such speed that I can hardly swim back. Drove of sea walnut jellyfish float by, innocuous but increasing in number every year as the Lagoon water warms. My friends toss me a Perry buoy as I get closer.

In this present reality of Venice, in the swirling debate on what is damaging and contributing to its demise, the group that is least listened to but

perhaps the most informed is the Buranello fishermen (Figure 3). With a love for their environment, they are the last true guardians of this place, the ever-present, behind the scenes observers of the non-political aftermath of intentional political choices. They bear the brunt of every single decision made regarding the Venice Lagoon.

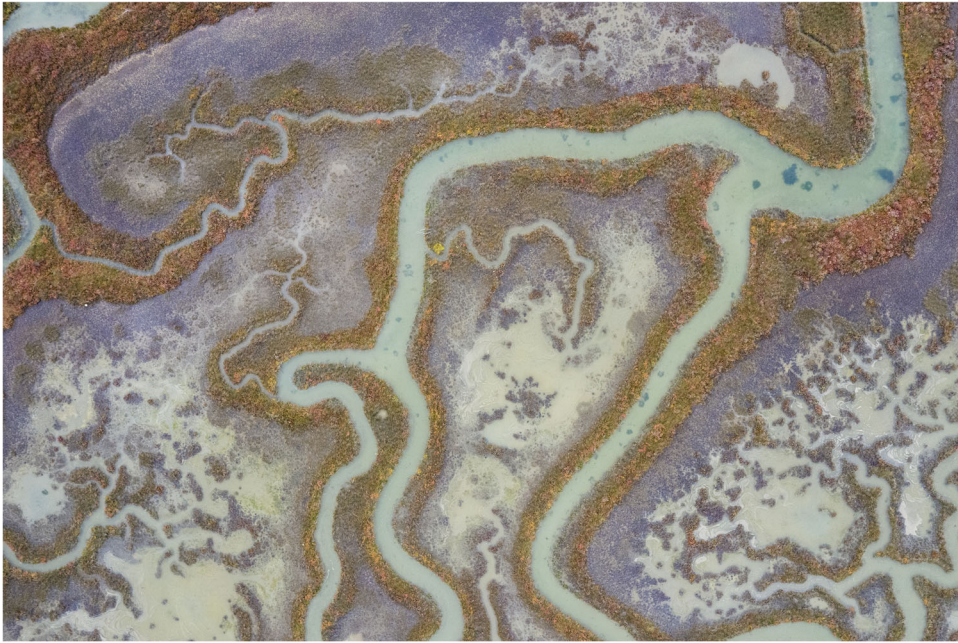
From their perspective, with the excavations that began in 2003 in preparation for the as yet unfinished MOSE (Experimental Electromechanical Module), a multi-billion-euro project created specifically to protect Venice and its Lagoon from flooding through a series of underwater gates that rise with the onset of an impending high tide,¹ a project whose effectiveness and operating lifespan remain dubious, the Lagoon currents and underwater geography have been altered dramatically. Due to a narrowing of the inlets into the Lagoon, the speed of water flow has increased, making fishing now impossible in large parts of the northern Lagoon. By contrast, specific areas of the Lagoon are silting up, for example directly behind the MOSE near Sant'Erasmo—areas that lead northward to Lio Piccolo. Where before the area was full of fish, the habitat is no longer able to accommodate them.

Perhaps, however, the most alarming consequence of the project is the swift erosion of the *barene*, which are sensitive to rapid currents, and to the different types of waves that splash up against the salt marshes or erode through an underwater suction force created by high velocity maritime traffic. I climb back into the boat and we linger over Prosecco as the sun sets on the horizon. To the west, a magnificent display of orange and pink over glassy waters that roll and reflect with mirrored clarity. To the east, a massive tanker moves toward the Adriatic Sea, its black polluting lines trailing out a last goodbye, reminiscent of one of Venice's major threats.

One cannot write about damage to the Lagoon without a brief mention of the shipping industry. Jane Da Mosto, environmental scientist and founder of We are Here Venice, a “non-profit association that addresses Venice's challenges as a living city and advocates evidence-based approaches to policy making,” is an unparalleled source of information on ecological indicators in the Venice Lagoon. Da Mosto's scientific foundation complements the hands-on knowledge of the fishermen who were born on the water, and whose expertise is made up of vast amounts of experience.²

In a 2017 article in *ArchDaily*, Da Mosto explains that Venice has long cultivated a relationship between the sea and the city:

When the lagoon first started to silt and navigation became difficult, the city diverted whole rivers further south or further north of the lagoon so that less sediment came in so they could keep the channels deep for the galleons. Subsequently, during Austrian occupation at the end of the 19th Century, the entire coastline of the barrier islands to Venice were reinforced and proper inlets were built to ensure that access to the lagoon was deep and wide.³

**Figure 1**

Aerial view of part of the northern lagoon showing its intricate waterways. Photo © Roberto Nangeroni robertonangeroni.com.

However, the long-term consequence of extensive excavation is the extreme modification of the very nature of the lagoon to a sea or bay environment. In recent years, with deeper channels being dredged for the shipping industry, the biodiversity and ecology of the Lagoon continues to change, causing substantial morphological deterioration, such as the deepening of tidal flats, marshland erosion and sediment loss,⁴ and this can be felt and observed quite simply by taking a swim on a hot summer day.

We turn the *bragozzo* toward home and sail into the gathering darkness. Dotting the canal are a series of poles, which when secured in groups of two or more are called *bricola/e*. These are the road markers that map out the underwater canals so that boats and ships will not run aground on one of the treacherous Lagoon sandbanks. Made of solid oak, with a diameter of 20–40 cm, they have a life span of about 5–10 years. By that time, tiny molluscs and microorganisms living at the water line have carved their way dangerously through, requiring the *bricole* be replaced.

Before the days of mass tourism, locals relate that not one *bricola* was ever missing, anywhere in the Lagoon. Now, gaps in the line grow bigger every day, creating two major hazards: first are the heavy logs that break off at the water line and float away in the water. Referred to as “crocodiles” by locals, they are hard to see after dusk or in the thick Venetian fog, and boats often crash into them unknowingly. The second hazard is the pointed stump that remains implanted in the Lagoon floor



Figure 2

Limonium, or sea lavender, rises from the marshland in late summer. Photo © Allison Zurfluh.

and, depending on the level of the tide, can hide just under the water's crust. If too many *bricole* are missing, a driver may easily stray from the canal and collide with one of these, causing the boat to sink. Much like car accidents, these often result in serious injury or death.

Why, if we want to promote a living, sustainable Venice, are basic road markers not made a priority? As we approach Burano's lighted shore, we recall friends and family that died in such accidents; to the Buranelli the lack of *bricole* seems a testament to the authorities' utter disregard for the safety of their loved ones, not to mention that of inexperienced visitors navigating the Lagoon. "There is no way you can save the Lagoon," they repeat as we tie up for the night, "it is already lost."

The Post-COVID Era: A Fragile Frontier

As restrictions lift after lockdown and life begins to flow outdoors again, I blink in the glaring sunlight of a levelled economic future. To a city that



Figure 3

A traditional “*bilancia*” fishing net hovers in the background of a landscape made of water, islands, saltmarshes and mudflats. Photo © Allison Zurfluh.

has built its livelihood on tourism, a tourist-free year rolls out like a foodless banquet. I pay attention as the conversation turns from Covid to canned goods, to the ability to fill larders, to paying rent, and how to reinvent oneself and a failing profession. If Venice has crippled itself with tourism, how can it do better in the future? This is a dialogue I can only listen in on, but as I do, one theme emerges: a chilling suggestion that I had hoped no one would consider—sustainable tourism.

Long passionate about finding a way to help protect the Lagoon of Venice, one would think that a sustainable future would be a welcome concept; and it most certainly would be if the definition of “sustainable” were properly interpreted. However, in the justifiable angst of the post-Covid aftermath, there appears to be a misconception of what sustainable means. I am hearing sustainable means nature, thus a focus on nature, thus exploitation of the least-touched part of the Lagoon, the north. I cringe and hope I’ve heard wrong.

The word “sustainability” means: “conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources, able to be upheld or defended.”⁵ Am I suggesting that tourist activities in the northern Lagoon are always detrimental to it? If I turn the argument on myself, any time I take my boat into the Lagoon, I damage it in some way, no matter how

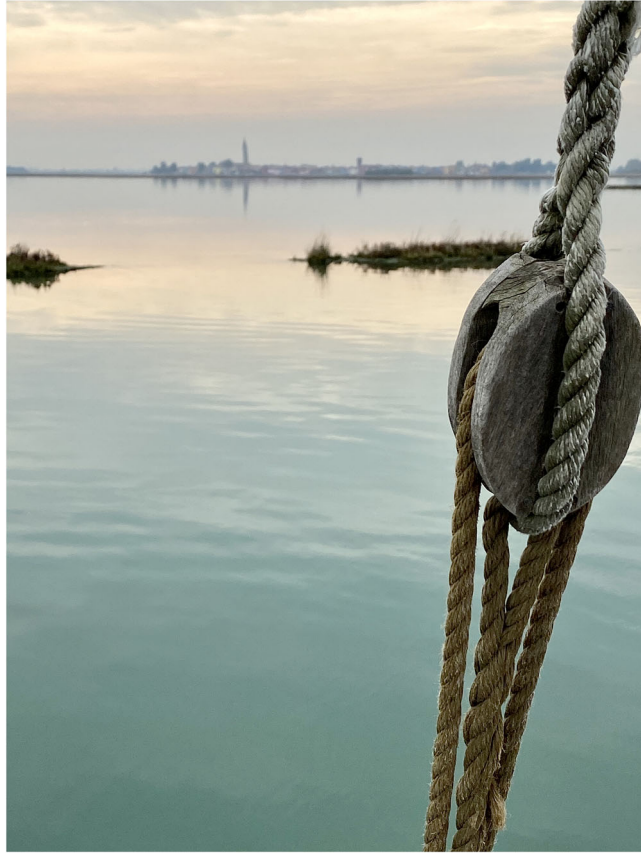


Figure 4

An island of Native Venice, Burano sits on the horizon between the northern Lagoon and Venice. Photo © Allison Zurfluh.

careful and studied I try to be. Sustainable tourism does not mean harnessing a natural environment for my economic gain; rather it means experiencing an environment with an equal objective of protecting and defending it. Branding the Venice Lagoon as sustainable for economic purposes, without carefully considering the implications of every action taken, is both reckless and disrespectful to the local population.

True sustainable tourism is both ecological and cultural, and that does include the local population's right to earn its living, but it is respectful and replenishing first and foremost. The issue then becomes whether or not we can reconcile ecological, cultural and economic sustainability, without focusing Sauron's eye on the north.

As I walk the tiny ways of Burano, shopkeepers sweep the sidewalk with a discouraged sigh. Some tourists come on the weekends, filling restaurants and bars, but most of the time the small fishing island is peaceful and empty; a paradise for some, a nightmare for those selling goods to a clientele that isn't making it to Venice this year. I recall the native trades of Burano, which are fishing and lacemaking. While the lacemaking



Figure 5

The largest wetland in the Mediterranean Basin, the Venice Lagoon is a maze of tidal canals and channels. Pictured here, the delicate and unique “*ghebi*,” or capillary canals. Photo © Allison Zurfluh.

tradition declined drastically with the decline of La Serenissima in the eighteenth century,⁶ traditional fishing techniques are still practiced by *moeccanti* catching soft shell crab (*moecche*), and those running traditional fishing valleys (Figure 4).

I unsnap my boat cover and drive out to visit Domenico Rossi, *moecante* par excellence, at his fishery on Torcello. Wooden crab boxes tied to poles float on the water, as Domenico stands with his father carefully examining the nets for holes and other damage, before folding them down for the season. They work together like clockwork, in a rhythm so flawless it could only have been perfected over generations. Father teaches son, and son teaches grandson: it is a profession learned first-hand from birth. They smile as I approach and examine the last net before pulling up a chair and serving a cold drink. Out here, hospitality is non-negotiable, no matter how busy the Rossis are, friends and guests get the red carpet.

I ask Domenico how things are going with his son’s education. Learning the trade from childhood is a requisite to living the life of a *moecante*; Domenico was in his father’s boat as early as he can remember, which is the secret to his expertise. Traditionally, a fisherman will have his father tending to smaller, lighter tasks while his son learns the ins and outs, earns his sea legs and cultivates an expert eye while honing skills. The



Figure 6

The Venice Lagoon is a mirror of extraordinary and ever-changing light. Photo © Allison Zurfluh.

three-generation team is both pleasant and efficient and speaks to a long history in the family trade. These days, sons and fathers have been prohibited from spending any time at all on the fisherman's boat. According to local law, fishing boats today are reserved for commercial use only, and may only have aboard the holder of the fishing and boat licences. Since fathers are generally retired, they are no longer licensed and must be left ashore. While this might seem like an annoying detail to outsiders, or even an intelligent safety measure, it is an obstacle that changes the entire fabric of the tradition. The risks of non-compliance include having one's boat sequestered, a heavy sanction imposed, and losing one's boat permanently. With a bleak future in sight, Domenico encouraged his son to study instead of learning the trade. He is thus the very last in a long line of Buranello *moeccanti*.

He takes out his phone and shows me an email he recently received. "What do you think, Alison?" he asks my opinion about a request to be featured in a luxury hotel's magazine on the other side of the Lagoon. Anyone who has had even the slightest contact with Domenico can testify to the utter integrity of his heart. "Will you be paid anything for the full-day photo shoot?" I ask, knowing he will miss a day of work. While the faces and traditions of these fishermen are often caught on camera and used to illustrate a tradition that brings the interest and thus business of customers worldwide, it seldom brings them any kind of

remuneration. But Domenico loves to talk about and promote the sustainability of a natural and traditional Lagoon; he does it out of a passion and dedication, in the hopes that efforts will then be made to protect it.

Something about the offer nags at me, though I keep my thoughts to myself. I wonder whether this kind of commercial greenwashing is intended to sustain Lagoon traditions or whether it is merely a foothold to selling an image that will line luxury pockets. Because if it truly were meant to sustain traditions, would not their faces be worth the value of the time it takes to photograph them? Commercialization for touristic purposes of fishermen and other locals maintaining and preserving traditions and techniques is not synonymous with sustainable tourism, unless they also are able to benefit financially from it. I squeeze my friend goodbye and drive off toward Burano, my questions pointed right back at me as my mind searches for an answer.

The strength and power of the people of The Serene Republic of Venice are alive and vibrant in the heart of both native Venetians and those who have succumbed to the City's siren call. Her beguiling ways still reach out to us in beauty and in force, with reminders which, if we heed, can save her still. The people of the Lagoon, of the heartland of Venice, are warm and generous; they are the real Italy we all dream of, a genuine oasis that yet pivots on the edge of extinction. Sustainability is cultural first and foremost, it is then environmental and economic.

In 2020, we stand on a threshold of opportunity, and we will either cross into a new era where life and environment, culture and art, simplicity and the respect of human and natural values are embraced at sacrificial levels, or we will stumble backward into the indolent and easier choice of self-serving pleasure and gain, which can only lead to the ultimate exodus of wildlife, the expulsion of a real and active community, the extinction of traditions and the end of Venice as a Venetian world (Figure 6).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. www.mosevenezia.eu
2. www.weareherevenice.org
3. Taylor-Foster, "Venice Isn't Sinking."
4. Teatini, "Hydrogeological Effects," 5628–29.
5. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sustainable>
6. "Burano Italy."

Furthur Reading

- "Burano Italy, a [Venetian] Island." Accessed August 20, 2020. <https://www.isoladiburano.it/en/>
- "Fishing Tourism Experience in Burano." Accessed August 20, 2020. www.pescaturismoburano.it/

- Airoldi, Laura, and Michael W. Beck. "Loss, Status and Trends for Coastal Marine Habitats of Europe." *Oceanography and Marine Biology: An Annual Review* 45 (2007): 345–405. doi:10.1201/9781420050943.ch7.
- "Gulls." East Sussex Wildlife Rescue & Ambulance Service. Accessed August 20, 2020. www.wildlifeambulance.org/advice/gulls/
- "Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Environmental Data Base on the Lagoon of Venice." Accessed August 20, 2020. www.istitutoveneto.org/venezia/divulgazione/pirelli/pirelli_2005_en/Banca_Dati_Ambientale/192.168.10.66/pirelli_new/divulgazione/valli/barene.html
- "MOSE Venezia." www.mosevenezia.eu. http://www.megaproject.eu/assets/exp/resources/The_MOSE_project.pdf
- Rossetto, Luca. "The Management of Fishery in the Lagoon of Venice." *IIFET 2000 Proceedings* 2000, 1–10. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9d8d/cfd30ae4b0c033ac496d5e4f7f60ed133005.pdf>
- Taylor-Foster, James. "Venice Isn't Sinking, It's Flooding—and It Needs to Learn How to Swim." *ArchDaily*, December 31, 2017.
- Teatini, Pietro, Giovanni Isotton, Stefano Nardean, Massimiliano Ferronato, Annamaria Mazzia, Cristina Da Lio, Luca Zaggia, et al. "Hydrogeological Effects of Dredging Navigable Canals through Lagoon Shallows. A Case Study in Venice." *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences Discussions* 21, no. 11 (2017): 5627–46. doi:10.5194/hess-21-5627-2017
- "Venezia: How Ships Damage the Lagoon: Expert Opinions." Accessed August 20, 2020. www.lavenessiana.com/cruise-ship-accident-in-venice-2/
- "We Are Here Venice." Accessed August 20, 2020. www.wearehere-venice.org