

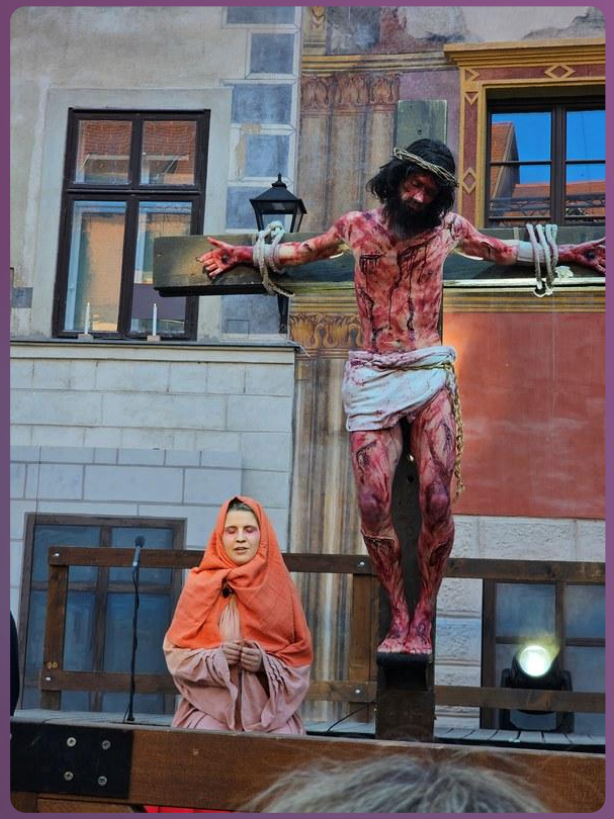
HSSS CONFERENCE · KEYNOTE ADDRESS 8.10.2026

Safeguarding living heritage through a systems approach

The Škofja Loka Passion Play as a UNESCO case

Prof. Dr. Tadeja Jere Jakulin
University of Primorska, Slovenia
Faculty of Tourism Studies – Turistica

How does a small town organise more than a thousand people, every six years, without a CEO?









And how do we safeguard something that exists only when a community performs it?

Slovenia with LOVE in the middle



2.1 m inhabitants

4 landscapes meet: Alpine, Mediterranean, Pannonian, Karst

~70% of the country is forest

THE PLACE

Škofja Loka



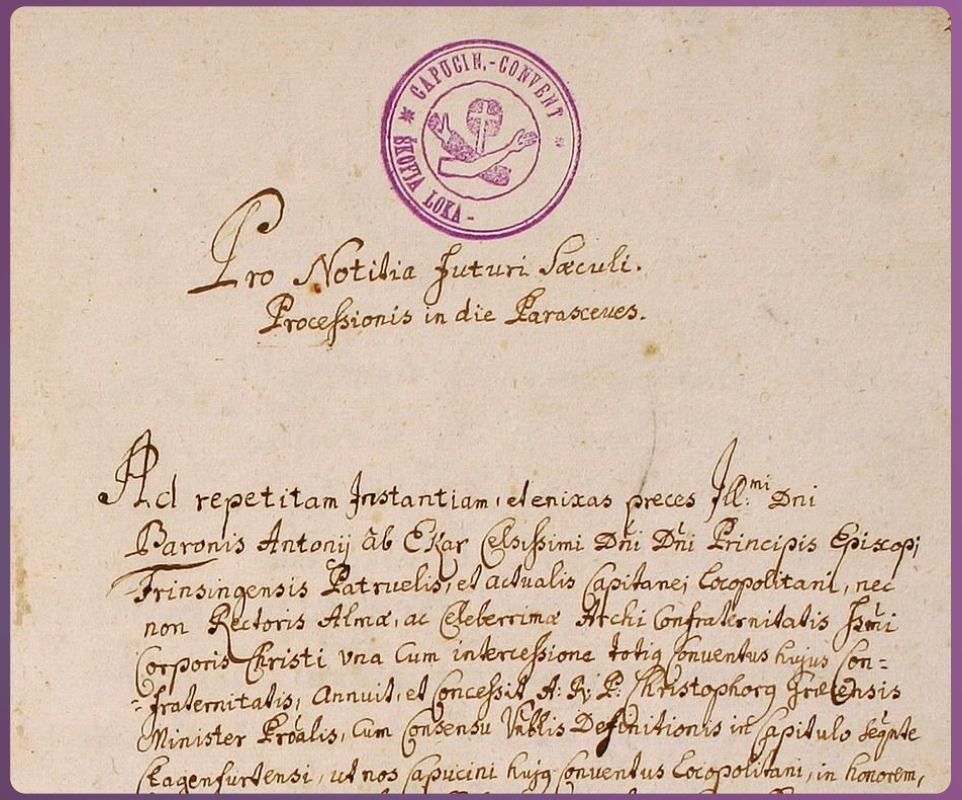
973

first recorded in a deed granting the territory to the Bishops of Freising

- One of the best-preserved medieval towns in Slovenia
- A community whose streets become the stage
- Home of the Capuchin friary where the Passion text was written

THE HERITAGE

The Škofja Loka Passion Play



1721

written by the Capuchin Father Romuald

Oldest

preserved dramatic text in the Slovene language

20

scenes performed as a procession through the town

1,500+

local performers and volunteers, many on horseback

Staged during Lent and Easter, and only once every six years.

A living practice, recognised by UNESCO

2016

The only passion play inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity



Heritage is recognised not as an object, but as a living practice carried by a community.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqFnBWBs8zg&t=65s

THREE CENTURIES

Safeguarding is a long process

1721 — Father Romuald writes the text and the stage directions

1999 — The full procession returns to the town after a long interruption

2008 — Entered in Slovenia's national register of living heritage

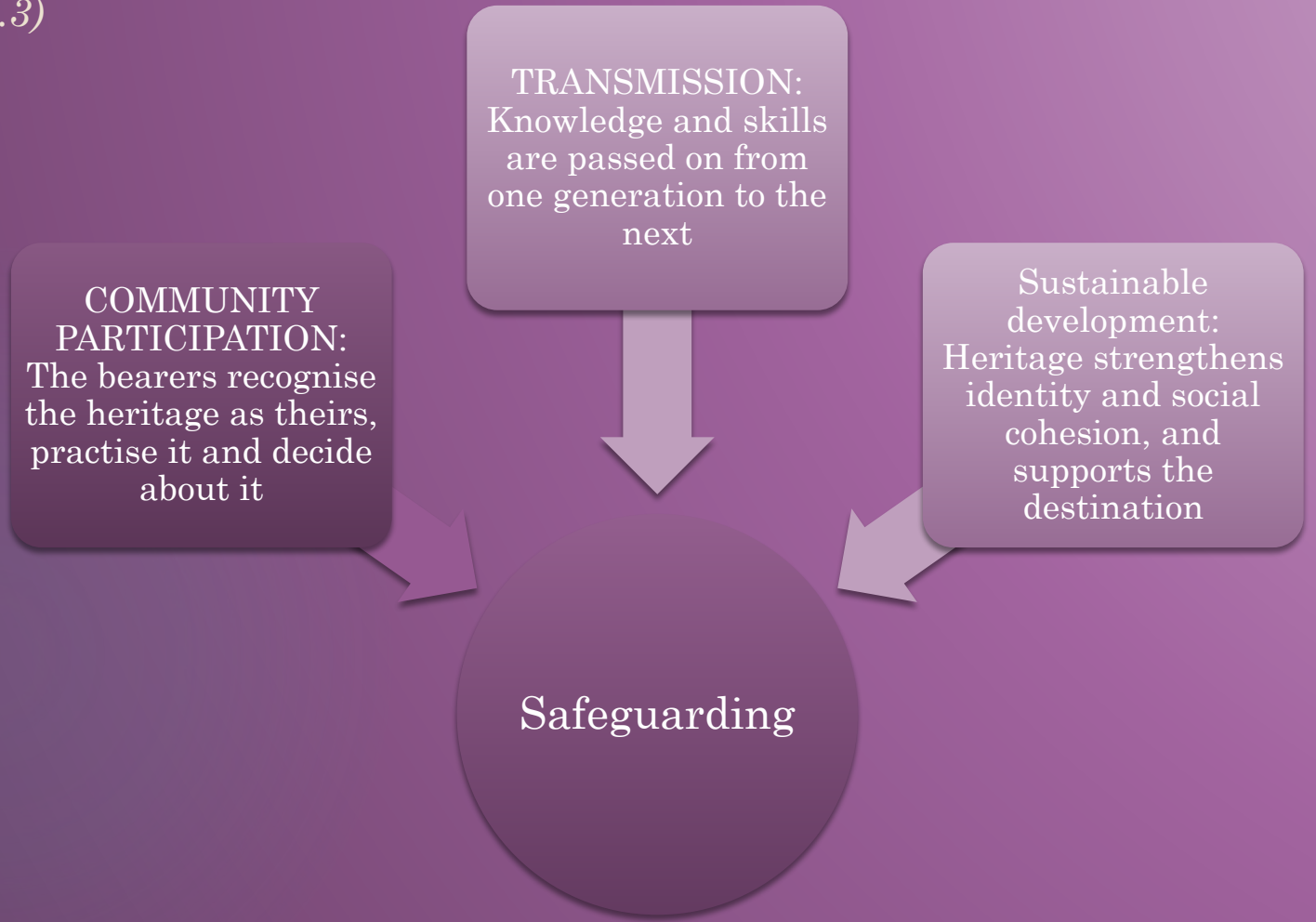
2012 — Declared living heritage of special national importance

2016 — UNESCO inscribes the play as intangible heritage of humanity

2026 — First staging since the UNESCO inscription

Not a single act of protection, but a sequence of decisions a community keeps making.

Safeguarding: Measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage (*Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 2.3)*



Viability, not conservation: the Convention's own vocabulary is systemic

Two ways of protecting heritage

Conserving an object

- Heritage is a thing to be kept unchanged
- Value lies in the object itself
- Experts decide, the community looks on
- Success: nothing changes

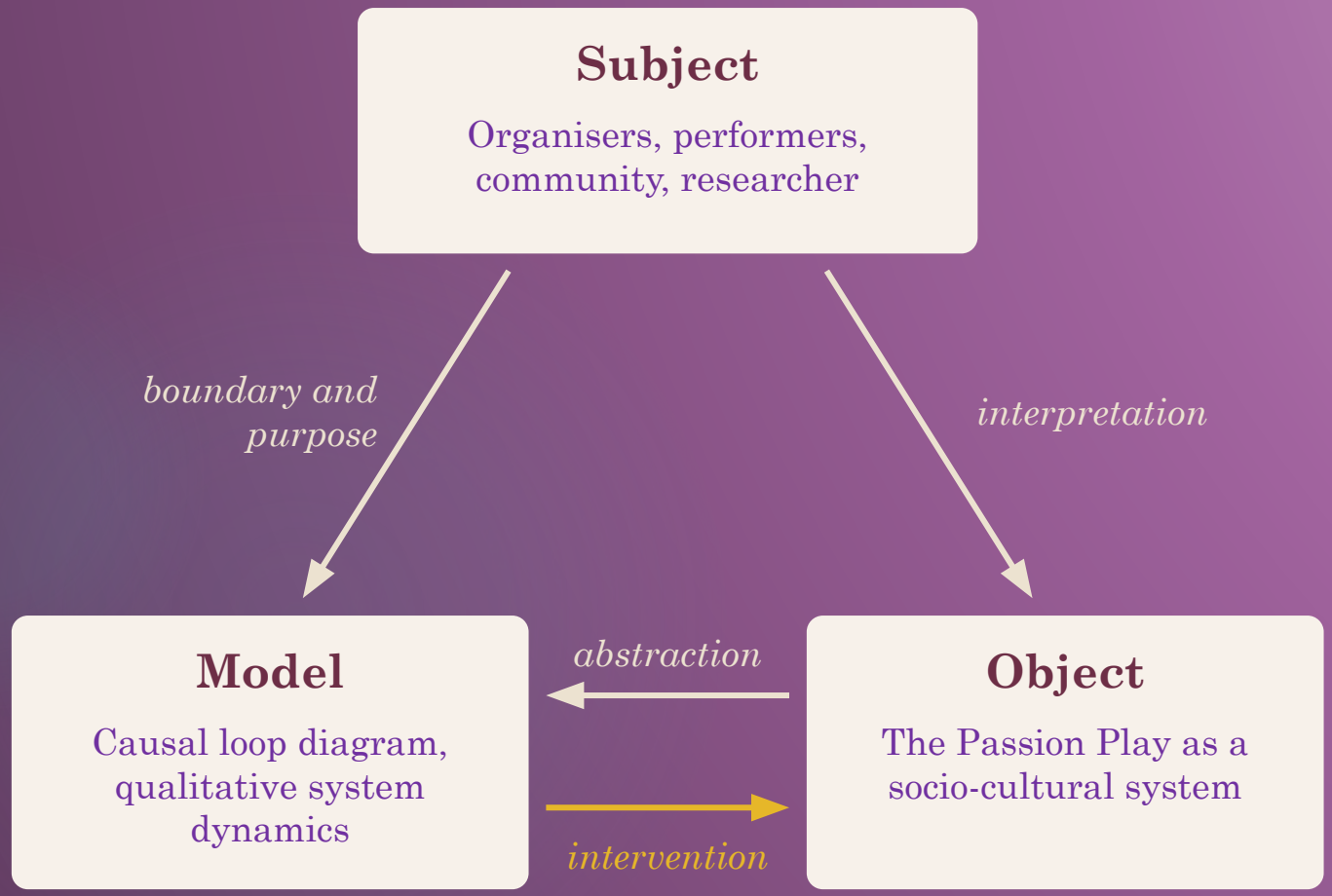
Safeguarding a living practice

- Heritage is a practice that must be performed
- Value lies in the community that carries it
- Bearers decide, experts support
- Success: it is passed on

Living heritage cannot be stored. It can only be kept alive.

SYSTEMS APPROACH

Object – Subject – Model



A living network

- The destination as relationships, not a list of separate functions
- Feedback instead of one-way cause and effect

The fourth arrow closes the loop: the object changes because it was modelled, which places the observer inside the observed system.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sources and method

1

Document analysis

- The Passion text and its stage directions
- Nomination and safeguarding documents

2

Autoethnographic observation

- Direct participation in the Passion Play
- The researcher inside the observed system

3

Semi-structured interviews

- With the directors of the performance and Slovenian Passion Plays Association
- Management, transmission and tourism seen from within

Interpreted through qualitative system dynamics: key actors, processes and feedback loops.

Safeguarding depends on five links

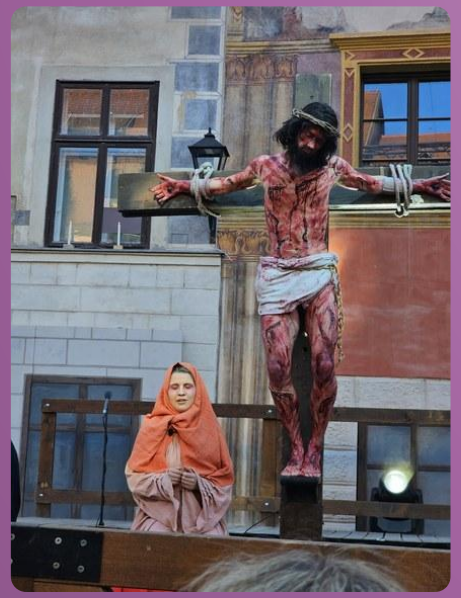


The links must be protected, not any single element.

LINK 1 · COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The scenes belong to the community







Each scene is a semi-autonomous unit with its own people, costumes and horses. Historically, guilds and confraternities each staged their own scene: autonomy within a shared whole.

LINK 2 · INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Identity is what gets passed on



Father Romuald's text, faith, and the community's sense of who it is: the attractor that holds twenty scenes and a thousand people together.

- Families hand roles and skills from older to younger generations
- The Capuchin friary as spiritual custodian
- Values shared across generations
- Craft workshops and local schools carry the knowledge

LINK 3 · MANAGEMENT

Management behind the scenes

- Production leadership allocates people, budget and time
- Rehearsal schedules and the order of the procession
- Costumes, props and horses shared across scenes
- Safety, logistics and relations with the municipality
- Shared rules make self-organisation possible







Tourism: opportunity and pressure



Opportunity

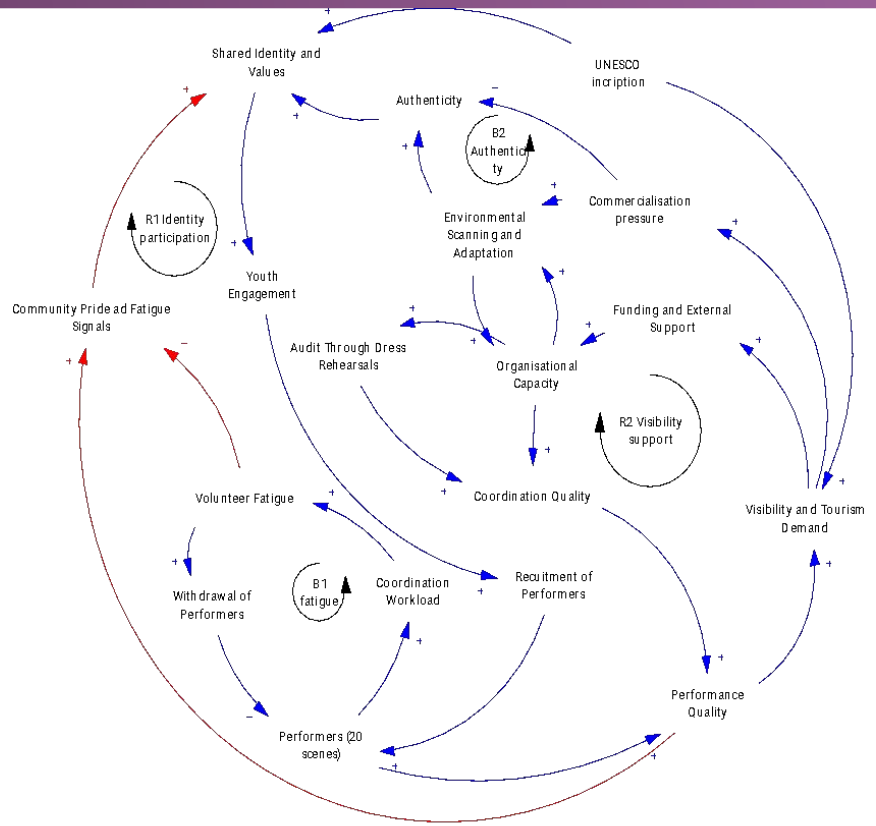
- Careful interpretation improves public understanding
- A richer experience for the visitor, new support for the play

Pressure

- Commercialisation can erode authenticity
- The community may lose control over its own heritage

QUALITATIVE SYSTEM DYNAMICS

CLD of Interdependencies among Passion Play's stakeholders



R1

Identity and participation

Shared identity increases the engagement of young people

B1

Volunteer fatigue

More performers mean more coordination work, fatigue and withdrawal

R2

Visibility and support

Performance quality raises visibility, tourism demand and outside support

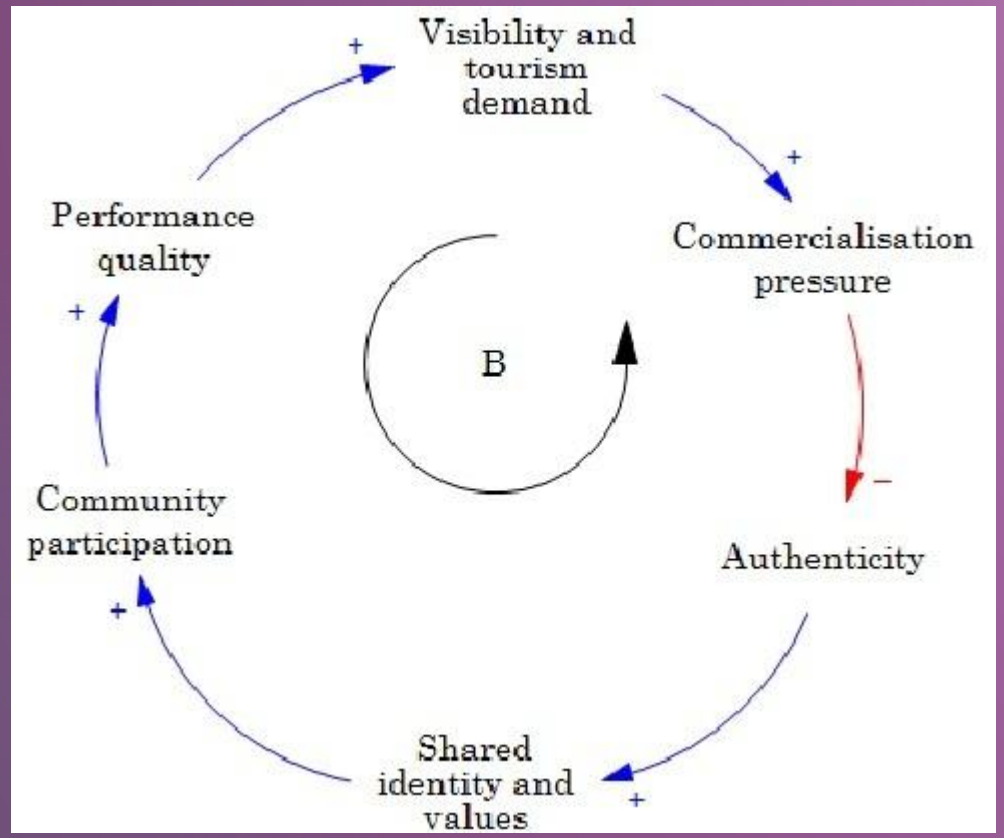
B2

Authenticity

Visibility brings commercialisation pressure, which can erode authenticity and shared identity

THE RISK

When tourism outruns safeguarding…



Left unguided

Authenticity erodes

Community control weakens

Participation falls, and the heritage with it

Success is not maximum visibility, but a balance the community can sustain.

SAFEGUARDING MEASURES

What the inscription commits to

1

Transmission

- Families hand roles and skills to the young
- Craftspeople host classes; local schools teach the play

2

Promotion and education

- Awareness raised in Slovenia and across Europe
- State support for education about the play

3

Tourism in community hands

- Measures against over-commercialisation
- Local communities involved in the measures (limited number of tickets)

Source: UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee, Decision 11.COM 10.b.29 (2016)

KEY MECHANISM

Participatory management holds the balance

Those who carry the heritage must also be those who govern it.

- Strong local involvement sustains ownership, continuity and meaning
- Tourism development is guided by conservation principles
- Heritage remains a cultural asset and a resource for development

What this means in practice

- The bearers decide on text, staging and rhythm
- Destination management supports; it does not direct
- Indicators beyond visitor numbers: participation, transmission, authenticity

CONCLUSIONS

Lessons for safeguarding living heritage

- **Autonomy with cohesion:** Scenes govern themselves within a shared order
- **Renewal in cycles:** Periodic staging regenerates the system
- **Identity as attractor:** Shared meaning outlasts leaders and budgets
- **Participation as safeguard:** Community control keeps tourism a resource

Living heritage is not safeguarded from the centre. It is lived by the whole.

Thank you for your attention