

LOCAL VALUATION OF THE NATURAL HERITAGE FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN A CROSS-BORDER RURAL TERRITORY (SIERRA DEL LAROUCO, GALICIA-NORTH OF PORTUGAL)

Elena De Uña-Álvarez¹, M^a del Carmen Cuquejo Bello² & Montserrat Villarino Pérez³
University of Vigo and University of Santiago de Compostela

1. INTRODUCTION

The interests and the values of the natural assets arise within norm, culture, and society. The understanding of those assets as elements of the common heritage depends on their scientific knowledge, the intentionality to perform actions aiming at their preservation and use, and the perception that human communities have of them. The overall objective of the present work is to explore the ideas and expectations of the local actors concerning the available resources and tourism in a cross-border mountain, the Sierra del Larouco, and its surroundings. The Sierra del Larouco is located between the South of Galicia and the North of Portugal (Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula). This mountainous area represents an inland cross-border territory that lacks protection, although it preserves important natural and related cultural assets. The first results on the perception and the valuation of the local actors, regarding those assets, are presented. These results concern only a part of two blocks of questions included in interviews. An exploratory data analysis was focused on the natural heritage in the context of a yet emerging tourist activity. The research provided a set of key remarks to carry on future studies in inland cross-border territories.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term “common heritage” denotes a collection of goods shared by human communities, acknowledged as places of memory and life (LAFUENTE, 2007). The value of those goods is rooted in the culture of a community and its territorial identity. It is on the grounds of this conceptual derivation toward the notion of a territory-integrated heritage that the perspective of its socioeconomic and cultural value emerges (ORTEGA VALCÁRCEL, 1998). According to ALONSO GONZÁLEZ (2014), the value of the assets belonging in the common heritage (nature, tradition, culture and the lifestyle of a community) rises when they are contemplated as territorial resources. This process unveils a vision of both past and future, sustained by a shared identity, and dependent of the interactions among the local and other actors in the territory governance (WEISZ y CLARK, 2011). In the local dimension, the concept of value is attached to what is perceived as of one’s own (HORLINGS, 2015) and it is attached to the perception of the territorial singularity. The understanding of heritage as the community’s own assets implies that their valuation must be approached through the consideration of the ideas and opinions of the territorial actors. The importance of these ideas and opinions is related to the current revitalization of the local identities (SILVA PÉREZ y FERNÁNDEZ SALINAS, 2008). The identification, acknowledgment, and awareness of the common heritage by the local actors are essential for its preservation and sustainable use. Its consideration as a resource is connected with ideas and expectations, so much so that human valuation creates their condition as a resource (BARRADO TIMÓN, 2011). Achieving the integration of heritage in tourism with the objective of the local development is also a strategy sustained by shared interests. In this context, the

¹Departamento de Historia, Arte y Geografía. Universidad de Vigo. E-mail: edeuna@uvigo.es

²Departamento de Historia, Arte y Geografía. Universidad de Vigo. E-mail: mcbello@xunta.edu.es

³Departamento de Geografía. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. E-mail: montserrat.villarino@usc.es

trends of inland tourism in Spain set their stakes for an alternative type of tourism (PILLET CAPDEPÓN, 2012) that is sustainable (OMT, 2013). The sustainability of tourism at different scales (CAÑIZARES RUIZ, 2013) requires the acknowledgment of the common heritage as a driver for a competitive development of the destinations. In this sense, the emergence of nature tourism in rural inland territories aims, in principle, at the sustainability and the reinforcement of territorial identity (LÓPEZ PALOMEQUE y CÀNOVES, 2014; WILLIAMS y LEW, 2015). The same trend can be seen in the case of the cross-border inland territories (HORTELANO MÍNGUEZ, 2015) trying to reconfigure their dynamics as singular tourist destinations, which requires processes of adaptation, transformation, and change in the long term (SHARPLEY y TELFER, 2015). An important variable in the local dimension is the opinion of the key actors about the value and the contribution of common heritage to the configuration of a feasible tourism destination (ÁVILA y BARRADO, 2005; VERA *et al.*, 2013; MARTÍNEZ PUCHE, 2013). This heritage includes territorial resources with the potential to become tourist attractions (SANCHO y VERA, 2008; NAVARRO, 2015) once the territorial actors promote their interest in being visited. The perception of the actors concerning tourism, and the availability of resources for the local development, has a notable effect on the emergence of new uses of the territory (TÖRN *et al.*, 2008). A detailed review of this topic can be found in the work of SHARPLEY (2014), focusing on tourism research. CARDONA *et al.*, (2015) point up the interest of an approach where culture, society, and traditional economy are determinant in the attitude towards tourism development.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the first stage of the research, we did a full itinerary of the Larouco and, at the same time, the cartographic and bibliographic resources, web sites, and statistical sources of the study area and its territorial context were consulted. In the second stage, after having identified 29 local actors, we scheduled an interview with each one of those actors. The interview was developed following the methodology described in CÀNOVES *et al.*, (2014). In the third stage, the answers were the object of an exploratory analysis. This study presents the preliminary results of the questions specifically addressing the perception and the valuation of common heritage, with regard to the possibilities for tourism: What are, to the best of your judgment, the main current values and obstacles of the territory? Could you enumerate three or four features defining this territory today? What do you think about the possibilities of tourism? Do you think that tourism, especially in nature, would improve the development of this area?

The values stated the first question represent the perception of the common heritage and territorial identity, while the identification of the obstacles represents the perceived difficulties or barriers. The territorial descriptors obtained from the second question identify the ideas and the image of the study area and its surroundings. The opinion about the possibilities for tourism provided through the third question also reflects the predisposition for the support of its impulse. The last question has been made to know the perception of the nature tourism as a sustainable strategy and its role to enhance the conditions of the territory. The analysis started with the identification of the categories and their frequencies, in terms of four groups of actors, including any comments recorded during the interviews. The database was created using the program Statgraphics. The encoding of the qualitative variables in ordinal data enabled the application of an exploratory statistical analysis.

4. TERRITORIAL CONTEXT

In the context of the European Union, the cross-border mountain areas have disparate socioeconomic conditions (DIJKSTRA y POELMAN, 2011; PAGLIACCI, 2017). Although diversification and transformation processes based on the local resources are an option for improvement, there are some structural difficulties and problems (TERRES *et al.*, 2015; LASANTA *et al.*, 2017; GÓMEZ-ARMISÉN y ÚBEDA, 2015; NUNES *et al.*, 2016). In the cross-border region of the South of Galicia-North of Portugal, the Sierra del Larouco (Pico Larouco, 1.538 m) is an area characterized by a granitic landscape. The average annual

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temperature varies with altitude from 6°C to 10°C, and the annual precipitation in the valleys is of 819 mm. An oak forest distinguishes the autochthonous vegetation, although most of the forest has been occupied by pines, introduced since the mid-20th century. The population density is very low (≤ 15 inhab.km⁻²). The occupation of the active population is concentrated in the service sector (60%), with subsidiary importance of the primary sector (25%). The local managers are focusing the promotion of the territory on the nature tourism, but this is still an incipient process.

5. ANALYSIS AND MEANING OF RESULTS

5.1 SAMPLE PROFILE

The sample of the local actors is comprised of 19 men and 10 women, with ages ranging from 25 to 70. Their profile encompasses business owners and managers (group P); local administrative managers (group A); qualified informants with liberal professions (group I); and other qualified informants residing in the study area (group R).

5.2 PERCEPTION AND VALUATION OF HERITAGE IN THE LOCAL DIMENSION

According to the number of mentions, the main assets of the territory are the nature and the landscape. Following them we find the historical assets, the local products, and the identity as a cross-border space. Among the intangible assets, the perception of a peaceful territory and the beauty of the environment, insofar as they contribute to a good quality of life, appear most significantly. Among the main obstacles of the territory appear the lack of entrepreneurship, of a good infrastructure network, and an ageing population (the latter, intimately related with depopulation). Moreover, the actors perceive the indifference by the public administration and the rigors of weather in the winter season as factors that slow down the tourist promotion of the territory. This obstacle helps to explain the lack of visibility of the study area and its surroundings, as well as the lack of incentives to attract young population. The positive traits identified by actors are mostly of an intangible character: peacefulness and beauty together with nature are the descriptors of greatest importance. With a smaller number of mentions appear a healthy environment that is defined by the natural conditions, the pure air, and the kindness of the residents. The main negative traits point to the difficult situation of human resources.

5.3 POTENTIAL OF RESOURCES AND TOURISM

The majority of the responses about tourism as a possible strategy for the revitalization of the territory incorporate a conditional action. The actors state that natural resources (nature, water, and mountain) and their recreational use are scarcely exploited. They draw attention to those resources that get already a tourist use in the Portuguese territory and to the scarce development of rural tourism. Most actors give a definite “yes” to nature tourism as an agent for the socioeconomic revitalization. The same opinion is conditioned by the need of an adequate promotion, good management, and investments. The disagreement among the groups of actors is minor. Trekking, biking, mycological tourism, hunting, and air sports are prior options. The high potential of nature tourism to the development of the territory is based on the perception of its capability to stop the abandonment of the land and the depopulation, to facilitate the creation of employment and the preservation of natural resources, to attract young population, and to enhance the socioeconomic conditions. In the identification of the main territorial obstacles, the results of the interviews display agreement in pointing to the problem of the abandonment and the depopulation of the territory. The perception of the wildfire problem is almost absent, this being an aspect that can be related with the fact that practically the totality of the fires is intentional. The acknowledgment of the main values of the territory, attached to the tangible and the intangible attributes of natural heritage is also coherent with the configuration of the territorial context.

6. FIAL REMARKS

The results of the interviews disclosed that implementing a feasible and sustainable tourism strategy to ensure the future of the study area is one of the main concerns. The mountain, sustained until recently by farming activity, is perceived as a territory with intangible values able favours the development of nature tourism. The demographic situation has been identified as the main socioeconomic weakness. A possible way to improve and contribute to the territorial balance consists of revaluing the heritage assets through joint tourism strategies. The critical condition of the human resources represents a barrier to its start-up, closely related with the lack of initiative and a low degree of innovation in socioeconomic activities. The applied methodology opens the door to explore the perception of the local community regarding the available resources, and confirms the positive valuation given to the natural resources for tourism. Most of the actors agree with the possibility of nature tourism as a driver of the environmental and economic enhancement of the territory. The perception and valuation of the actors is coherent with the character of tourism in the south of Galicia and the north of Portugal. In the second case, there is a major identity imprint and a great importance of sports tourism in a natural environment. Due to the preliminary nature of the present study, starting from a part of the questions included in the interviews, and focused on an exploratory analysis, this work has an experimental character. Future lines of research include the active integration of common heritage in tourism strategies and the proposal of new management forms aiming at the sustainability of inland territories.

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