

NATURE TOURISM IN MURCIA: THE REGION OF ONE HUNDRED WETLANDS

Aurelio Cebrián Abellán

Universidad de Murcia
aurelio@um.es

Nature tourism includes two terms, tourism and natural heritage. The first one is defined by motivations. While the second one includes wildlife and habitat, allowing the practice of sport in the natural environment at the same time as educating people about nature. This tourism involves a model of tourism related to the spatial constraints (location, displacement and distance), landscape-perceptual (not everyday scenario assessment) and environmental (resource with the concept of landscape, composed of the physical and biotic processes). These characteristics have brought favorable trends and this type of tourism is increasing in almost the whole Spain. At the same time the environmentally protected areas of high aesthetic value have been offered for this type of tourism. In the Community of Murcia nature tourism is already placed as fourth attractive element after sun, beaches and cultural tourism. The majority of people practicing this type of sport are national tourists whose main motivation is the observation of fauna and flora, and other activities, such as photography. They take advantage of 6 % of the regional surface, the protection of habitats that bring a variety of habitats some of which are of great environmental quality. This explains the abundance and diverse forms of protections: first, the community sites; second, the importance of the Community; third, a special protection birds; forth, regional priorities and others.

The organization of tourism involving the natural environment is also regulated by agreements, programs, projects, travel plans, actions to support consortium, participation in community projects, etc. It is also consider under the law through various instruments and measures. Firstly, the impact on the community is remarkable, but also for the CCAA, which are competent in this type of organization. The municipal councils have the influence on tourism too, from the Tourist Board. In addition, national legislation tourism is completed with imposition of environmental sustainability. However, despite being diverse, this multi-institutional and comprehensive legislation has not been able to solve the problem of Spanish wetlands, which has even led to the disappearance of large numbers. Some of them have been recognized as having a high environmental value. Even in Murcia the result has been lower on the coast because of the anarchic urban boom provoked by a speculation. This has worsened the current existing natural values.

Natural tourist activity grows notably in the region of Murcia because diversity of the environment is a distinctive characteristic. Remarkable variety of climates and landscapes in this region of transition is another reason for growth of tourism. They range from dry landscapes to reforestations and rare habitats. This is estimated in two thousand species of flora (nearly a third of the total mainland) and numerous endemic species. There are more than three hundred plant communities, of which three-quarters of them are covered by habitat types of European interest. These are submitted under the supervision of the Habitats Directive. Moreover, this kind of wetland is very abundant (it occupies approximately the three quarter of the whole peninsula). Its diversity is also wide: coastal lagoons, annual vegetation of muddy and sandy areas, mediterranean salt meadows, mediterranean salt steppes, calcareous waters with vegetation, natural lakes with vegetation, mediterranean temporary ponds, rivers constantly flowing, mediterranean coastal curtains, intermittently flowing mediterranean rivers, streams, forests, gallery, etc. In addition, rainfalls (both scarce and torrential) have forced the transformation of the Segura River basin into one of the most regulated of Europe, with lakes and reservoirs, which collect hydraulic transfers and extend natural wetlands. Finally, there is a varied fauna, with over four hundred species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. Specifically, birds represent three quarters, and are especially abundant in marine ecosystems. The natural habitats of the Community interest involve around 327,000 hectares (nearly a third of the regional territory), which include forty-six habitat types. About 45% of them incite community interest and the remaining priorities of the Spanish Biogeographic Mediterranean Region. There are fifty-two proposed SCI (Site of Community Importance), three of them in the marine environment (16% of the regional area), some in salt marsh and other with protected species. SPAs include twenty-two natural areas (18% of the regional area), with representative birds. The places are profuse in landscape interest and high environmental value. There are seven Regional Parks, eight Protected Landscapes, a Nature Reserve and three natural areas which are Protected Natural Areas.

The fifty-seven (58%) out of ninety-eight wetlands receive protection. The most common figure is the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), the third part of this area is included in SCI, over 40% (41) in SPAs, a similar percentage Areas Wildlife Protection (FPAs), and a quarter of this area is protected. Regional parks, protected landscapes and nature reserves are examples of that. There are three prioritized areas: the Mar Menor, the Salinas in San Pedro del Pinatar, and the wetlands of Ajauque and Rambla Salada. The interior areas are of less representative importance. In the coastal (and in some interiors) the flora is adapted to salinity, water and soil, although in this region the predominant areas of interests are of the shore and the adaptive. Invertebrates also proliferate, although the fauna of water birds hangs out, with an average of sixty-seven wintering species and non-aquatic. Another five species of amphibians, three reptiles (with the terrapin, in danger of extinction), sixteen of mammals (with the otters, in danger of extinction) and three types of fish (including fartet, which is an endangered species)

The List of Wetlands of International Importance Ramsar Convention (1994) is very specific. Eight wetlands are include in the Wetland Mar Menor (for its natural and breeding populations of waterfowl), and it is also an SPA. It includes the Specially Protected Areas of Importance for the Mediterranean Sea (high ecological value, the area of Mar Menor

and the Mediterranean Zone East Coast Region of Murcia, the Mar Menor and spaces Islands Protected Landscape and Spaces Mar Menor and the coastal strip south). The peripheral wetlands are LIC because of their habitats. It covers a 15,000 ha, and extends over three natural parks and protected landscapes. The flagship sector is the Mar Menor, the largest lagoon in the country. It has an important value in natural habitats; it has eighty-nine species of flora and four hundred fifty-nine of fauna, with a special interest of the nesting bird fauna, and others require special conservation measures. For its size the Salinas and Arenales of San Pedro del Pinatar is highlighted, and finally, the islands of Mar Menor (nesting sites). However, there are also abundant wetlands and coastal saline wetlands (nesting sites and migratory birds).

In the interior of the country the next current areas stand out: the Nature Reserve in Sotos and the Forest of Rivera in Cañaverosa, the Canyon Protected Natural Area in Los Almadenes, the Wetland Protected Landscape in Ajauque and Rambla Salada, and finally, the Protected Landscape of salt marshes in Guadalentín. It is increasing the diversity of wetlands (salt marshes and salt), natural sources, reservoirs (dam or receiving water from other basins), the rice fields of Calasparra and Salmeron (which have home communities of foreign origin), streams, ponds and ponds, irrigation ponds, water treatment and impoundment. These wetlands have a varied fauna not only because of its number but because of protected or endangered species.

Another important point related to tourism involving the wetlands is the survival of its legacy. On the coast and inland, in some wetlands survive traditional activities (agriculture, livestock, fishing and salt mining), and nowadays they are collated with other new activities (interpretation of nature, hunting, or recreation and therapeutic activities). We can highlight the importance of using cattle in the ponds; this practice is shared by springs with hunting and recreational activities. The most important feature of the coastal salines is the extraction of salt collated for medicinal and recreational uses; whereas in the interior what dominates is the extraction of salt. The entertainment activities are already dominant in the seaside forests, while fishing and shell fishing are in coexistence with recreational and therapeutic activities. Finally, in the rice field dominates agriculture. However, both types of wetlands have to cope with many types of impacts: solid waste disposal (43% of total), despite the legislation (not control), and especially the recreational pressure (23.5) is representative in coastal areas and the abandonment of traditional uses (21.5%), which are in many cases replaced by other much more modern techniques.

Thus, nature tourism has a recent and growing trend for scientists' eco-tourists, nature and land tourists in Spain and at the same time in Community of Murcia. This is because of forms of a model of quality, individualized, and with close proposals, although it suffers from the lack of supply, with the exception of Aragon and Asturias, where the model is more concentrated. In Murcia nautical and underwater activities dominate a clear derivation of the concentration and specialization in sun and beach tourism. To solve this two solutions are required: greater diversification and concentration of efforts in the diversification away from seasonal tourism, as it is doing and getting with cultural tourism. By acting in this way undeniable advantages have been brought, such as climate goodness, exceptional in the Spanish side; the diversity of the environment, very significant and attractive; and the abundant landscape and biotic supply. However, we also need to face a

few problems: firstly, the late-specific legislation on nature tourism (a real implementation is urgently needed), with the addition of interventions in social awareness, not so much on tourists as on residents and occasional visitors; and secondly, the offered nature activities. They need to implement more variety, but they have to be adjusted to the sensitivity of the wetlands.

The great advantage lies in the profusion of wetlands (highly significant) and in its wide spatial distribution (with the contrasts coastal and inland, and salt and sweet waters), which provide a considerable biological wealth. It is also the alternative of scattered enclaves, which allow covering and the visiting of more of the region. Moreover, the use must be directed to a specific tourist segment, but broader in origin, which would include: potential new tourists to the Community in surrounding regions, resulting from variations of sun and beach to the interior and religious tourism found in the Northwest. Furthermore, appropriate interventions that save the lack of connections with the knowledge of wetlands in neighboring provinces need to be established, joining the route and directing a greater number of tourists from these places to the interior of the region.