

FORGOTTEN RAILWAYS. RESTRUCTURING AND REINVENTION AS TOOLS OF LEISURE AND TOURIST REVITALIZATION: THE BAEZA – UTIEL RAILWAY IN THE PROVINCE OF ALBACETE

Francisco Cebrián Abellán

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha
Francisco.Cebrian@uclm.es

Rural areas suffer a chronic structural crisis which is associated to the primary sector but affects other activities, too. Loss of population, migration, population aging and loss of income are its main effects. Since the early nineties, there have been several strategies channeled to fight this scenario. Most of them were carried out by rural development groups and had uneven grades of success. However, they have always been interested in promoting tourism in these areas, profiting from a new social, economic and cultural context which sees the rural environment as a leisure space. Different actors with different interests have participated in its development. It all started thanks to the financial support which came from the public sector. The preferences of the demand changed too, becoming more and more conscious about the values and possibilities offered by the rural environment as a leisure space, hence contributing to its development. Businessmen have a growing importance here, especially those who understand tourism as an opportunity space. The results of these strategies have been variable, depending on the participating actors and areas. Sometimes, the impact has been beneficial, although not without conflicts which have created dysfunctions in the areas where they have been put into practice.

Within the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, it is the province of Albacete the one which has taken a bigger step towards rural tourism. More precisely, mountain areas have made the greatest effort to push it. The Alcaraz Range and Campo de Montiel region suffers the aforementioned structural crisis, but some of the resources in its territory became tourist assets decades ago. Some more have been introduced or valued recently, although not all enjoy the same attracting capacity. The presence of heritage assets, the different actions carried out by the authorities to create value out of them, the recent establishment of lodging facilities and the growing importance of a demand awareness of inland tourism in rural areas have all contributed to the development of this sector, which is producing profits. However, the current situation also shows shortcomings

and the need to promote new actions towards the organization of the existing resources, as well as other potential ones.

Among the most significant elements, the rehabilitation and transformation of a former railway into the Alcaraz Range Rail Trail stands out. There was hope for the development of the region during the construction of the railway, but it never became operational. At the end of the 20th Century, different public administrations decided to recover it for tourist and leisure use. As a result, it has been operating since 2005. The tourist offer of the area is completed with some protected sites, as well as some important heritage resources, such as sacred, military or civil architecture, or ethnographic resources. Anyhow, those associated to the landscape are the most significant.

After decades of oblivion, the Alcaraz Rail Trail is gradually recovering its role as a structuring element within the territory, which shows a clear tourist vocation, now. The existence of different resources, the demand for rural culture and nature, dedicated institutional support and the need to transform traditional production systems into new activities have all contributed to boost several strategies aimed to recover the territory and increase its value for tourist use. The landscape, real and symbolic, natural and human, is the element of reference, although it is not on its own. There is also the architecture, the leisure activities, the natural products, the gastronomy, the craftwork or the archaeological heritage. During the last few years, many of these resources have increased their value as a result of individual initiatives, especially in the most important historic centers and in protected areas, due to their singularity or fragility. Obviously, incorporating these resources into the territory is mandatory, which adds to the value of the territory itself. This is something which tourists who seek for nature and rural life are increasingly appreciating. The Alcaraz Range and Campo de Montiel particular landscape, with its strong rural culture, offers a natural and cultural heritage which is loaded with outstanding, unrepeatable elements. Protecting them, increasing their value and creating a distinct trademark image are some of the pending challenges. Others include the theming of the area, as well as the development of products which are the result of the necessary alliance between the region public and private actors.

Some other initiatives are being carried out right now in order to promote the development of tourism in the area. One of them, a project to create an ecomuseum, stands out. This project intends to set up an integrated network of resources, establishments and service businesses in order to organize tourist products under different thematic axes. Recovering the local heritage, increasing the tourist use of the existent resources and raising the number of tourists in the area, as well as the length of their stay and their average expenses, are some of its goals. The structuring element is the former Baeza – Utiel Railway, which connects the region and gathers in its immediate surroundings most of the resources with some attracting capacity. The Rail Trail is the axis which links the resources – landscape, architecture, culture, tradition... – to the lodging facilities and the proposed creation of new products.