

TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTHWEST OF THE REGION OF MURCIA (SPAIN): THE EUROPEAN LEADER PROGRAMS

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The Northwest of the Region of Murcia is an economically backward territory, has a natural physical environment unfavorable for a competitive and profitable agriculture and an inability to integrate into the circuitry of the secondary and tertiary activities. In addition, this district has a poor communications that give the feeling of isolation.

All this justifies the presence of characteristics of backward areas and a specialization in production based on traditional agriculture negatively affected by the reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy. In this situation, and according to the new tourist demands, it seems timely to use cultural and natural heritage as a tourism product.

Rural tourism, as local development activity, for almost two decades is providing additional income to people working in other main economic activity. LEADER Community Initiatives, with its integrated approach, have facilitated the generation of activities to promote rural tourism through the creation or conversion of rural accommodations, but also to improve the presentation of real estate, to revive trade, to promote the handicraft sector, to promote food processing industries with local resources, etc.

LEADER Community Initiative, in its final stages, LEADER + and LEADER 2007-2013, promotes many integrated activities, designed and implemented by active partnerships operating at local level in order to reflect on the potential of their area and to get a more global and longer-term commitment and a higher quality. The participants in these initiatives try to put in the market a quality tourism product, able to compete with consolidated tourist destinations, a task difficult to achieve without the cooperation and efforts of governments, institutions and entrepreneurs who are willing to take risks, an action that until recently has not been consolidated in the Northwest area of Murcia.

Rural tourism, in recent years, has generated significant additional revenues to those obtained in the primary sector, becoming a key activity in rural development in the region. The Northwest Murcia sector is increasing visitor flows, primarily from nearby urban areas, which contribute to its revitalization. However, tourism should only be a supplement to the traditional activity. Tourism should not be ever, exclusively, the engine of rural development.

Tourism must be integrated with other economic activities, leading to a diversification of the rural area. Public institutions and private enterprise have to activate and develop the handicraft sector to complement the tourist offer, promote agriculture and livestock, and improve communications infrastructure.

The integrated rural empowerment is possible thanks to the Community Initiative LEADER greatly, encouraging the development of actions to promote rural tourism through the creation and design of rural houses, improving the presentation of real estate, the revival of trade, promotion of handicrafts sector and the promotion of food processing industries with local resources.

The compatibility between traditional and new activities, the integration of the region in broader socio-economic systems and environmental conservation should be the strategy. In summary, the interests of rural tourism, the environment and local community should be related. And to get this relationship is essential achieve an optimal management of the territory, in which prime a sustainable use of resources and a planned and controlled development, avoiding overcrowding and the generation of irreversible impacts.