

PROPOSALS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMERCIALIZATION OF BIRDWATCHING TOURISM IN EXTREMADURA

José Manuel Hernández Mogollón

Ana María Campón Cerro

José María García Durán

Universidad de Extremadura

jmherdez@unex.es, amcampon@unex.es, jmgarciaduran@gmail.com

Birdwatching tourism is a type of tourism whose main motivation is the observation and appreciation of birds in their natural environment. It is a traditional activity in Europe, mainly United Kingdom and Central Europe, and in the United States. Spain has recently begun to realize this activity, related to the new types of market super-segmentation. This trend is promoted by the changes that are occurring in consumers, who are nowadays more experts and with different values.

The reasons that reinforce the importance of developing this type of tourism in areas with potential for this are both economic and social. It is an activity that offers an interesting profitability given the high cost of these trips. This is a dynamic factor for the territory. It is also a type of tourism that promotes diversity and complementarity of the traditional tourism supply system. It is especially seasonally adjusted and fosters sustainable use of protected natural areas. Social benefits derive from bird conservation effort that is promoted by this tourist activity this tourism typology promotes. The greater sensitivity of society toward the environment provokes that birds' knowledge and observation have become a travel motivation in itself, especially for certain sectors of foreign demand, closer to this type of practice in certain Western European countries.

The objective of this work is to demonstrate the relevance of Extremadura as an excellent and competitive birdwatching tourism destination in the national and international context, proposing strategies for its correct development and marketing from the perspective of profitability and sustainability that this type of tourism implies.

Birdwatching tourism has become in one of the biggest bets for the development of tourism in Extremadura. This region boasts a magnificent setting for the development of this type of tourism. As examples of its wealth, it may be noted that the region has got large concentrations of birds and European endangered species. 75% of its area is identified as IBAs (Important Bird Areas), it has got 69 SPAs (Special Protection Areas) and includes spaces such as the Monfragüe National Park, considered the Mecca of the world ornithology.

In Extremadura, the number of companies that focus their services on this tourist typology, although incipient, is growing. Companies of rural tourism accommodation, leisure complementary activities and tourist guides have already focused their activities on birdwatching tourism. Travel agencies include these packages in their programs. This business dynamic has been supported by an increased interest of the regional tourism administration.

There is little information about the birdwatching tourist. Few specific studies about birdwatching tourism have been developed in Spain. The only official study was developed by Koan Consulting in 2007, and commissioned by General Secretariat of Tourism in the pilot destination of Extremadura. Those data reveal that both foreign and domestic segments are interesting, although it can get a better return from the first, as they generally stay longer and spend more money. The level of satisfaction of those tourists is high in Extremadura.

With respect to potential markets, it can be estimated a national potential market associated with the 11,000 members of SEO/BirdLife (Spanish Ornithological Society), the first national scientific association dedicated to the study and conservation of birds and nature in Spain. Regarding to international markets, the main ornithological outbound tourism market is United Kingdom, followed by Germany, Netherlands and the Nordic countries. The first international market is also United Kingdom. In that country more than 10 million people are affiliated with organizations dedicated to the conservation of natural heritage. The most notably is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), which has more than one million members and more than 12,000 volunteers. Also Germany, France, Portugal and Switzerland show a potential ornithological interest in Spain. United States is a great potential market too. The National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation estimated in 47,7 million the figure of birdwatchers in that country in 2006.

There are several channels to introduce and commercialize birdwatching product. We have to highlight the associations' websites; specialized travel agencies; booking centers; specific publications and promotional materials (guides, brochures, maps, etc.); workshops, conferences and specialized trade fairs. Since 2006, in Extremadura is held the International Trade Fair of Ornithological Tourism (FIO) in the Monfragüe National Park. This specialized event aims to become one of the largest European events in the sector. The British Birdwatching Fair of United Kingdom highlights among the most important worldwide fairs.

To reach the objective of our paper, we propose several ideas for the development and commercialization of Extremadura as an excellent and competitive birdwatching tourism destination. If compared with more consolidated destinations, Extremadura needs that all the territorial agents involved join together to achieve the common goal. Therefore, this work proposes to adopt a more unified approach to develop and commercialize this tourism product in Extremadura.

An interesting option would be to create a public, private or mixed company, which would be responsible for arranging travels and tourism packages of birdwatching tourism, and attracting domestic and foreign clients, as tour operators do. Also, it would be necessary to influence in the development of the required infrastructures for birdwatching

in the region, and to elaborate the touristic product. Although the bird resource is interesting, the current problem is that there is not an established and consistent supply system, neither a unified promotion.

We propose a sequence of five steps to develop and commercialize the birdwatching product. This proposal is based on the process of developing new tourism products and marketing research. These five steps are: resource identification; creation of infrastructures, services and companies; market analysis; product design; and marketing strategy design. It is important to bear in mind the importance of adding value to the product, value that is able to motivate and retain existing and potential customers.

As final conclusions, we have to note that the bet of creating a stable and serious offer of birdwatching tourism is a reasonable and interesting option for the future. Birdwatching tourism is an activity with good growth perspectives, which generates plausible revenues and is compatible with the maintenance and conservation of natural heritage of Extremadura.

In summary, it seems clear that birdwatching tourism is a reality, and each day more people have realized their appeal as an activity in contact with the nature. The challenge will be to act, knowing that Extremadura has the bird resource and the necessary tourism services to create a serious, competitive, sustainable and perdurable offer along the time.

