

# CONFLICT OF INTERESTS IN THE PLANNING OF A MOUNTAIN AREA: RURAL TOURISM IN THE PINE TREE REGION OF SORIA

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Rural tourism is a tourism modality which emerged in Spain at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, slightly late with regard to other European countries. From that moment on, this modality has been experiencing a steady rising, due to both changes in demand and the tourist offer reorganization itself in rural areas. These factors have resulted in an increase in the public use of several spaces and, thus, a parallel rise of conflicts with rural societies.

When it comes to ways of thinking and interests, divergence is not new in Spain. As an example, this can be appreciated in the sphere of relations stated in the so-called 'reversion tourism', in other words, the modality practiced by former emigrants when returning to their villages of origin. Also well-known were disputes with the Spanish state agency '*Dirección General del Patrimonio del Estado*' because of restrictions imposed by law to the building or reform of certain homes, like hamlets with any kind of declaration. Nowadays, the relationship system has experienced both a bond strengthening and a diversification, becoming stronger as a result of new competences assumed by rural areas.

## 1. COUNTRY PROPERTY AND RURAL TOURISM

Tourism in rural spaces is a modality that stands out from many other forms of tourism such as urban or 'sun and sand' tourism, for being a highly space-consuming form. Thousands of routes and paths cross our hills, waiting to be covered by tens of thousands of hikers. Winter sports, hunting, mycological tourism, horse riding or 4x4 routes catch the attention of thousands of visitors annually. Hundreds of rural areas have turned into a physical support for touristic practice in rural areas. However, rural tourism has been characterized, in several of its modalities, by the free use of such huge spaces. People responsible for tourist management try to organize this activity, which takes place in mountain areas available for public use. Nevertheless, this task is not always possible to fulfill, being property conflicts one of the greatest source of problems regarding rural tourism activities. So much so that, the increase of public use in certain spaces led private owners to make a decision on enclosing their estate so as to prevent tourism practice.

This fact not only suggests the compatibility of property rights with a respectful use and enjoyment of nature, but also expresses the owners' right to receive compensation or securities for using their properties.

In some cases, owners, assuming responsibilities that do not belong to them, have to provide some highly tourist attraction places with infrastructures and services. This occurs without any direct financial compensation, and despite representing risks for other traditional uses, that are a profitable priority. Thus, new conflicts erupt and involve groups from a very diverse nature and interests, not always easy to reconcile.

Moreover, and becoming an increasingly frequent trend, in the huge area that rural tourism consumes converge more than one activity, each of them with its own organization system. However, the problem that comes to surface is the sum paid for the use of the previously mentioned space, which differs greatly depending on the activity. Eventually, this factor leads to a rise of conflicts.

## **2. THE EXISTING CONTRADICTION BETWEEN OWNERS AND BENEFICIARIES OF THE TOURIST ACTIVITY. THE PARTICULAR EXAMPLE OF MANCOMUNIDAD DE SORIA AND THE 150 VILLAGES BELONGING TO IT**

The province of Soria, located in the East of the Castilla y León region, has an exceptional owner: The so-called *Mancomunidad de Soria*, together with the 150 villages belonging to it. This Spanish name refers to a legally constituted entity that comprises the association of municipalities or provinces.

This association holds eight forests in the district of Pinares. This area, with a total surface of 24,280.24 hectares, represents a 20% of the existing forests that district. These forests not only stand out due to the extension of their territory, but also because of holding the most beautiful landscapes, which attract most part of tourism. This fact opens an interesting debate on the management of these spots.

The district of Pinares is located in the Northwest of the Iberian Mountain Range, next to the Sierra de la Demanda mountains, with peaks over 2,000 meters high. Both the configuration of relief and the rigours of climate hinder the agricultural activity, being reduced to a 4.7% of the agricultural area. More than two thirds of the agricultural area are occupied by forest, with a predominance of *Pinus Sylvestris*, a species of pine that gives name to this district. The selling of pine wood, which represents nearly a 90% of the income pertaining to the community, symbolizes the almost exclusive use of these forests. Only the remaining percentage, a 10%, comes from other uses such as: hunting, representing a 6.08%; tourism, with a 1.87% and pasture with a 1.2%. Revenues from tourism, relating to the awarding of bar restaurants, campsites and camps represents a nearly negligible percentage in the economy of the previously mentioned association.

The importance of preserving pine areas is justified by the own value that acquires wood exploitation. It is a well cared and preserved mass, producing revenues for the community of more than 2 million € in 2008. However, apart from wood and since late '80s, this association has generated an important increase of public use; thus, becoming the mainstay of an important tourist activity. This activity has had a direct impact on the

economy of the district but it also constitutes an increasing source of concern for owners. The most attractive landscapes are the recreational area of Playa Pita, the Natural Park of Laguna Negra and Punto de Nieve Santa Inés ski resort.

The recreational area of Playa Pita is the most well-known bathing area, pertaining to the so-called *Embalse de la Cuerda del Pozo*, a reservoir located in the Northwest of the province of Soria. Giving response to a spontaneous demand that emerged in the '70s, several infrastructures were set up so as to make it possible to have picnic. Tourist influx was progressively increasing from nearly 10,000 users in the '70s up to more than 50,000 during the first decade of the current century. The greatest concern has to do with the ten days during summertime, when the figure of vehicles in this space surpasses 500, and the number of users exceeds 1500 people gathered in a small place.

The owners have invested great sums of money in creating a public use space with maximum guarantees and quality. This led to a growing deficit and represented such a risk for their forests.

Laguna Negra is the spot which best represents the concern surrounding landowning, because it is the space that has generated the greatest growth of public use; that is, nearly 60,000 visitors only during the summer season and more than 100,000 per year. This lake has glacier origin, with rocky walls that rise up to 90 meters high. Twenty six days a year, this spot attracts large crowds, more than 1,000 visitors during the time slot that ranges from 11 to 14 hours. This situation implies a great gathering of people in a very limited space, the most frequented area has less than 2 hectares and this brings about the subsequent traffic jams in the access to car parks. Impact produced on the forest cover gave rise to the construction of a footbridge around this lagoon. In order to solve the second problem, an evacuation trail has been opened to enable a one-way exit in moments when this place receives more visitors.

Close to Laguna Negra is Punto de Nieve de Santa Inés ski resort, constituted by a small downhill ski slope (500m) and a 10 kilometre long cross-country ski slope, located at an altitude of 1750 m.

The increasing number of visitors led the community to see tourist management as a concern, observed from an owning entity outlook and not as one of their competences. As a result, several measures have been taken adapted to the circumstances but lacking a comprehensive approach. Paradoxical though it may seem, this situation encourages everybody to reflect on the future of these spaces. Their multifunctional demand and competence dilution degenerate into disorders, aggravated by the lack of profitability of tourist investments.

What should be done with these spaces? How should space management be? When it comes to guarantee a responsible, secure use without shirking responsibilities: How to distribute competences and coordination among different institutions better? How can this modality of tourism contribute to the district economy and who is to defray the costs generated by the provision and maintenance of needful services and equipment? These are some of the questions that are well worth considering and need a solution before the sudden growth of nature-based tourism.

Distribution of income coming from the several uses of the two forests that comprise these three spots shows current large imbalances. Remuneration from wood selling

represents more than a 95% of profit, whereas tourism, during the biennium 2007-2008, only contributed with a 2.32% in Pinar Grande and with a 1.52% in the forest of Santa Inés.

In order to better assess the economic significance of tourist activity for the community, expenditure and revenue accounts have been estimated in this matter for the aforementioned three spots. These have proved that, in 2008, there was a negative balance of over 30,000€, though there are some differences between the different centers. The largest deficit took place in the hydro-recreational area of Playa Pita, due to the necessity and interest for covering some basic services; one example occurred in 2008, when the debt amounted to 27,157€.

Collecting a small sum of money from visitors using these facilities could be one of the several solutions to implement in order to thwart such deficit. That possibility was included in a survey conducted in 2004; as a result, slightly more than half of users (51.6%) was willing to pay an average amount of 3€ for the whole day. In a later survey, lecturers Pablo de Frutos and Sonia Esteban estimated in 1.91€ the averaged value of a ticket a visitor would pay for and that a 58% of users would be willing to spend such sum of money.

In comparison to results obtained by owners, the district has substantially increased its reception capacity. In the period comprising seventeen years (from 1993 up to 2010), hotel accommodations multiplied by 6, moving from 9 to 59. The number of seats also experienced a rise, from 198 to 935. For their part, tourist camps moved from 1 to 5 during the previous period and so the number of seats, from 550 to 3563. There is no doubt whatsoever about the municipality that took best advantage of the profits these natural areas provide: Vinuesa. Considered the gateway of Laguna Negra and Punto de Nieve de Santa Inés, this village multiplied by more than 12 its reception capacity.

This brief analysis reflects the scenario tackled by several town halls and forest landowners as a result of the growth in tourism demand. This article expresses the need for a coordinated planning to ensure the sustainability of these areas, together with its promotion in order to attract a tourism movement impacting on rural development.