

TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS IN INLAND SPACES: A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL COMPETITORS

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The concept of inland tourism has a marked geographical character which replaces the usual productive component by another component of a territorial nature. Inland tourism is understood as any form of tourism addressed to non-coastal populations, and represents an integrating concept linking indissoluble realities which can only be understood in relation to one another (rural areas, natural milieu and medium-sized towns which contribute to articulate the territory and organise it into a hierarchy). This integrating component of inland tourism makes it necessary to deal with this type of tourism from multiple perspectives. Thus, local development, environmental sustainability and competitiveness emerge as the three cornerstones around which inland space tourism planning must revolve. Any inland tourism initiative which fails to consider these three perspectives in unison will generate important medium- and long-term dysfunctions (social rejection, environmental degradation, lack of business profitability, etc.).

Strategic planning seeks to cover a set of basic decisions which can help orient or guide a territory's development as well as its tourism policy. In this respect, the decisions made must be significant, lasting and chosen among several options. The utilization of this system must prevent the adoption of spontaneous decisions and coordinate the different interests of the socioeconomic agents involved.

The study of competitiveness in spatial tourism planning provides valuable information when it comes to know the specific capacities of a territory and determine which ones can be positioned as real competitive advantages.

The correct analysis of potential competitors requires maintaining more or less homogeneous scale criteria. Therefore, if strategic planning is being applied to a larger tourism destination or space, competitors will also have to be selected and analysed on the basis of comparable tourism destinations or spaces. Although the methodology for the analysis of competitors proposed by this paper is mainly adapted to the selection and analysis of large competing areas, it can also be implemented and adapted to more specific tourism destinations.

The methodological proposal presented and applied in this research paper consists of two specific methodologies: the calculation of tourism competitiveness; and the selection of potentially competing spaces.

The first one of them is a methodology in its own right and uses secondary sources to generate basic results for studies about spatial tourism competitiveness. This methodology is based on spatial concentration criteria which take into consideration four essential variables, namely: natural resources, historico-cultural resources, accommodation supply and tourism demand.

Among natural resources, natural areas appear as the most important appeal for the demand interested in nature tourism and the practice of active leisure (trekking, mountaineering, bird watching, environmental education, water activities, nature photography, etc.).

As for historico-cultural resources, the ensembles of special historic and monumental interest stand out among the tourism attractions most highly valued by cultural tourism (visit to historic city centres or old parts of towns, museums, interpretation centres, defensive elements, development of theatralised routes, etc.).

On the other hand, although supply concentration usually arises as a response to the frequentation by an incipient demand, the supply equally represents in itself an evident competitive positioning factor within a tourism space or destination; even more so if that supply boasts enough variety and quality. A solid and concentrated accommodation supply inherently implies a differential factor for the attraction of demand segments.

Finally, apart from some exceptional cases based on elitist or minority products in which tourists seek exclusiveness, privacy, tranquillity or contemplation, demand concentration represents another competitive value that needs to be considered. The leisure atmosphere which surrounds destinations frequented by a usual tourism demand represents a positive factor as long as the maximum carrying capacity thresholds are not exceeded. If a balance between visitor frequentation and demand satisfaction is achieved, the concentration of tourists as such performs a competitiveness function.

Applying this theory to the whole of Spain offers as a result that the most competitive autonomous regions in the context of inland tourism are: Cantabria, Principality of Asturias, Canarias and Basque Country.

In turn, the second methodology is fed from the results of the first (total tourism competitiveness) but also from the results obtained in the calculation of the competential area of influence.

On the basis of both variables, this methodological model can identify the potential competing spaces for a specific tourism area in an objective, rational way and, above all, in a way that can be extrapolated to other contexts.

In this sense, the application of the methodological model to the interior of the Alicante province identifies the following as its most important competing spaces: Castile-La Mancha and the Murcia Region, followed by Catalonia and the Madrid Region.

The results obtained from the practical application of this methodological model for the identification of potential competitors demonstrate the empirical and scientific validity of the proposal presented here. In short, this paper provides a new tool for the spatial study of tourism competitiveness and competition, additionally generating specific results about the competitive capacity of Spanish autonomous regions in the context of inland tourism and the main spaces which are potential competitors for the interior of the Alicante province.