

---

## **ARTICLES**

---



## TOURIST DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT ON MOROCCO'S NORTHERN COAST

*Eduardo Araque Jiménez*

Universidad de Jaén  
earaque@ujaen.es

Morocco's northern coast between Ceuta and the frontier with Algeria is nowadays one of the emergent tourist regions with greater importance in this extensive world destination, that it is composed of the whole of countries that surround the Mediterranean Sea. Its proximity to the powerful centre of European tourist issue is, of course, the main cause that explains the growth experimented in the number of tourists that have visited the zone during the last years. Besides, it is important to remember that important chances exists, given by the Moroccan Government to the foreign investment to create tourist facilities, circumstance that have brought about a spectacular net of lodgings places in the coast and its surrounding area. Otherwise, most of those investments in Morocco come from Mediterranean northern coast, where the governments are more and more reluctant to the maintenance of tourist development models that have caused serious environmental and landscape impacts on their areas, that nowadays are difficult to correct.

Like in the whole of the Mediterranean tourist destination, the attributes of sun and sand are in the basis of the Moroccan tourist growth. Respect the first one, we can not say more around the climatic favourable conditions of this entire region around the Mediterranean Sea for the development of a wide set of activities linked to the leisure time and recreation in the open air. As for the length of the beaches, the study area have more than 500 kilometres of coast, although the most of them have serious problems for the tourist occupation due to, on the one hand, its rough relief, origin of deep cliffs, and, in the other hand, the absence of roads that connect the coast with the interior of country.

Until now, the infrastructure and the tourist facilities are very concentrated in the western area between the Spanish frontier in Ceuta and the city of Martil. The proximity of the great seaport of Ceuta and the easy access to this zone through the road from F'nideq to Tetouan, or the auto route designed in parallel to this one between Tanger to Tetouan, which extends to the most important economic and demographic areas in the centre and the south of the country, have brought about the outstanding tourist growth that can be seen in this coastal enclave since the beginning of the Sixties, soon after, therefore, of the independence of the country. To the traditional customers of Spanish people that lived in Ceuta, a lot of European citizens and a not less outstanding Moroccan people from the

nearest great urban areas situated in the interior have joined to that ones, all of them have caused a great dynamism to this destination during the summer months.

The tourist development of this coastal area has generated several environmental problems. It is necessary to emphasize the forest fire in one of the mountainside in Black Cape in august the first of 2008, that shows the serious threat that the excessive expansion of tourism represents for the natural resources of the whole of this zone. The Tamuda Bay area is not exempt from environmental problems, specially the coastal lagoon of Smir, exposed to a pressure every day more intense that threats to denature completely this exceptional wetland of vital importance for the migratory birds that cross the Strait of Gibraltar every year, declared like Site of Biologic and Ecologic Interest by the Moroccan government.

In front of this zone, the rest of the coast has a level of tourist occupation much lower like consequence of its ancient isolation, interrupted only in the proximities of Melilla. In the last years, nevertheless, there are serious efforts to achieve an articulation more effective of these more isolated territories. The construction of a great auto route, which is being executed nowadays and cross all the Mediterranean coast between Tetouan and Oujda, through Nador, known like the «rocade méditerranéenne» or «rocade du Rif», opens some enormous perspectives to the tourist development in this area where the Rif Mountain Range embeds in the sea. So, a lot of domestic and international developers have presented a great numbers of projects in the last years to boost the infrastructures and facilities in whole of this geographic area with an enormous tourist potential.

The execution of some of those tourist projects (Saidia Mediterránea) and the beginning of the construction in other ones (Mar Chica, Cala Iris, Souani Meiterranee, etc.) are being object of a lot of criticisms by associations and all kind of local collectives, that emphasize the high power of territorial and landscape destruction caused by these tourist developments. The proximity between the Rif Mountain Range and the sea in this area of the eastern coast have been the origin of deep cliffs, whose urbanization can only made with enormous investments, and at expense of a high environmental impact.

In the case of a finished resort like Saidia Mediterránea, it has been criticized the destruction of a wide dunes landscape and the abundant shrub and wooded vegetation that grew on it to open the development to the sea. The social and environmental collectives of the zone have considered irreparable this landscape attack. The extraction of water from the Mouluya River to irrigate the golf courses of that resort have been also condemned, due to the risk of salinization in its last stretch, circumstance that it would cause the disappearance of lush riverside forests, specially the forests of tamarisks, considered the more extensive of Morocco. Finally, these collectives are opposed to the sewage water trap of the development that would dump on the bed of Mouluya River, that would end up contaminating their water and exterminating the aquatic plants.

Respect to the tourist developments that are in project phase, like Cala Iris, it has been criticized its localization in the interior of a protected area where the set of natural and cultural values that include must be preserved at all costs. Indeed, this resort is inside of Alhoceima National Park, so that a actuation of this magnitude would have been subjected to a major control by the competent authorities in this subject, above all due to the negative image that this kind of actions shows of the conservation of Nature policy and, in the

other hand, because it can cause new urban development projects in other enclaves of this protected wide coastal zone. And this circumstance is very serious due to the extreme delicacy of this territory, where the topographic conditions are impassable barriers.

Likewise the resort of Souani, located near the city of Alhoicema, has been object of a great social controversy. Several local collectives have criticized the fact of its development inside of spaces that historically owned to the inhabitants of the municipality of Ajdir, which have not been consulted over the transfer to the property developer. The lack of respect for the archeological remains that exist in the area where the resort has begun to build has been denounced. In spite that it has been described itself by the constructor company like «a tourist project integrated in the heart of Nature», there cannot be the slightest doubt that the building works have caused a considerable alteration of the dunes landscape located in the left side of the mouth of the Guis River, that drain the magnificent meadow of Alhoicema with the Nekor River. This area is a wide set of dunes that were managed during the Spanish Protectorate, with the objective that the «flying sands» did not cause damages to buildings and cultivated lands in the meadows of those two great rivers, essential to guarantee the food for the whole of inhabitants from the eastern provinces of Protectorate. The dense pine wood planted by the Spanish forestry Administration in those years has nowadays disappeared, largely like consequence of the beginning of works of levelling of resort of Souani. When the works finish, the total destruction of the rest of forest will have occurred, whose landscape value is unquestionable. In the other hand, the environmental functions that it carries out will have disappeared, and then it will be necessary to establish new systems to stop the advance of sand over the tourist facilities.

