

LANDSCAPE IMPACTS OF 'NEO-RESORTS' AND LARGE VILLA HOTELS ON THE COAST. THE CASE OF SANTA MARÍA CAY (VILLA CLARA, CUBA)

Mario Burgui Burgui

Asociación Territorios Vivos
marioburgui@yahoo.es

The paper shows how dependant is tourism of the landscape in which it develops. The natural resources will constitute the attributes of the touristic product. Besides, tourism has the peculiarity that its 'raw material' is tied to the specific biophysical space. That is, it cannot move. It is a resource consumption *in situ*.

Therefore, the operation of tourism depends on the quality and condition of the landscape. For this reason, it is essential to develop a tourism model in equilibrium with the environment. Otherwise, this activity may contribute to resource depletion, pollution and altered landscapes.

Tourism growth brings positive economic impacts, but its rapid development has also caused serious landscape changes and socioeconomic variations. Furthermore, oversupply may contribute to the degeneration of the product, making less attractive the tourist destinations, as has happened in many developing countries.

When tourism is the dominant economic activity (as in Santa María Cay), there is a form of territorial development in which this activity pattern traces the impact on the landscape and the socio-cultural environment.

To prevent degradation of the landscape and the tourism product, it is necessary to achieve sustainability of tourism.

Sustainable tourism inevitably implies proper management of natural resources and landscape, to meet the needs of both tourists and hosts regions, promoting the balance between economy, culture, society and nature; and ensuring equal opportunities for the future.

The evaluation of the relationship between tourism and the landscape is the first step towards sustainable tourism. In this case, Landscape Geography can provide the basis for the planning of the tourist activities and infrastructure that can be accepted by the receiving environment.

Since the 90's, tourism has become the engine of the Cuban economy. Today, Cuba is among the top tourist destinations in the area, because of the stunning natural beauty and landscape, the rich multicultural heritage and the tourists' interest in knowing the real

situation of the island. Moreover, the somewhat belated addition to tourism development would allow Cuba to assess the negative experiences of other countries that have suffered environmental degradation caused by this activity. Thus, the country might conveniently plan their tourism development.

Today, tourism is in a transition stage worldwide. The decline of the so-called 'Fordist Tourism' (whose development has been remarkably successful in places like the Mediterranean, Acapulco, Cancun, etc.), mainly characterized by the 'sun and sand' offer, as well as changes in the motivations of tourists, has led to the definition of two clear trends: 1) New tourism development models arising in renewed demands of post-Fordist societies; 2) Fordist model continuity represented now by the neo-resorts, also called 'large villa hotels' or 'island hotels'.

There are many examples of the emerging 'new tourism': nature tourism and ecotourism, rural tourism and agro-tourism, sports tourism and adventure tourism, cultural tourism, health tourism, archaeological tourism, etc.

As for the neo-resorts or 'large villa hotels', its main features are: occupation of large areas of territory, a large number of buildings and roads, with artificial gardens in between, services 'all-inclusive', isolation and rootlessness of the local culture ('island hotels'), need for construction of a large number of previously non-existent infrastructures, predominance of 'sun and beach' leisure (little or nothing diversified), orientation towards passive middle class tourists, etc.

The Caribbean is one of the tourist areas that has experienced this type of development in recent years. The article discusses the case study of Santa María Cay, a small and narrow island located in the Sabana-Camagüey archipelago, north of Cuba. The tourist development of the cay is a clear example of 'large villa hotels'. The aim of the study was to analyze the landscape impacts of the tourist buildings and infrastructures, and to propose actions to minimize them.

These are the main impacts that were analyzed (levels from 1 to 5):

- 1) Fragmentation. From the study of the landscape units using GIS and subsequent analysis of the increasing number of polygons due to the installation of infrastructure and tourist buildings, it was found that the fragmentation of the cay had increased 428.28% from its natural state. The western half of the cay exhibits *very high* level (5) of fragmentation, and the eastern half of the cay exhibits *high* level (4).
- 2) Loss of natural habitat. It was found that roads and buildings constructed to date have resulted in the direct loss of 18.19% of the natural habitat of the land surface of the cay. Most of this loss is in the west of the cay, where there was a *very high* level (5) of this impact.
- 3) Loss of aesthetic quality: various attributes were analyzed to see the impact on aesthetic quality (shape, background, colour, texture, scale and noise), and it was found that even though the buildings are located in the western half of the cay, practically the whole island is affected by loss of sensory and aesthetic quality, with *high* (4) and *very high* (5) levels.
- 4) Pollution: We analyzed the impact on natural landscapes of solid and liquid waste associated with the construction, gases and noise, spraying, etc. It was found that the western half of the cay has a *high* level (5) of impact.

- 5) Impacts on biodiversity. It was found that most of the island suffers impacts on wildlife species. Half west suffers a *high level* (5) of impact.
- 6) Impacts on the areas of greatest ecological importance. There are areas of special importance as a refuge or habitat for most species. It was found that the buildings and touristic facilities have caused a *very high level* (5) of impact in the western half of the cay.

