

## THOUGHTS ABOUT PROXIMITY TOURISM AS A STRATEGY FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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Have you ever received a visit of friends or relatives expecting from you to show them your town and you were the one ended up learning something about the place where you live? How come that we tend to know better further places than closer ones? Why do we need an outside look to see our environment in a new way? Tourism has traditionally been considered as the activity that allows living non-usual experiences in non-usual places. The globalization of information makes the knowledge of further places easier than usual ones; therefore what is «usual» is not related anymore to what is «close». In a context of global information where sources of knowledge are located all around the world, knowing about remote places represents today much less effort than visit those surrounding us. However, a local tourist offer is being developed in some areas in order to give a new meaning to heritage elements that lost their original sense. We could thus say that reality is dual since it is at the same time global and local. Moreover, some assumptions that used to be universally accepted need now to be redefined in order to fit in this frame. Tourism supply and demand are being deeply transformed and territories need to improve their adaptability in order to respond properly to new tourist demands.

This paper focuses on proximity tourism as a strategy to beat tourism' seasonal constraints and increase the value of usual environments, encouraging a development process. This paper introduces proximity tourism from a theoretical approach, through questioning key concepts and suggesting research tools with the aim of relating tourism and local development.

A deconstruction of «proximity tourism» concept will be made in order to justify its existence and nature. First, «proximity» will be studied from an epistemological point of view. Some researches and papers focus on this concept trying to establish a definition. Authors like Bochma, Torr , Bouba-Olga and Grossetti, for example, have searched for a definition and created ways to categorize the concept. We could conclude from these studies that there is a geographical and an organizational proximity related respectively to distance in kilometres and similarity. Then, tourism and proximity will be linked through

questioning the «usual environment». If we agree that what is «usual» is not necessarily «close», the practise of proximity tourism would be thus justified.

Afterwards, different key concepts such as «place» and «daily landscape» will be analysed from a humanistic approach. This approach places the perception in a central location in the relationship between humans and their environment. Tuan's ideas of place experience will be useful in order to understand the meaning of place for local population and tourists. The idea reflected on the European Landscape Convention (2000) about the construction of landscape from the perceptions of local communities will also be a source of inspiration. Then, the concept of «local» or «endogen development» will be examined, since this comprehensive territorial development model may give tourism a major role as an activity which can take into account the environment and local population. Finally, the paper will focus on the recent idea of «slow tourism», which is sharing principles with the proximity tourism, like the use of environmentally respectful means of transport and the socialisation with local residents in order to experience destination in a profound way.

Using the results obtained from a research carried out by the author of this paper (and directed by the co-author)<sup>1</sup>, a methodology created especially for this form of tourism will be introduced. In order to deal with this rather unstudied form of tourism, urban and cultural tourism researches will be the references used in the analysis of supply and demand, adapting their tools to proximity tourism singularities. In the case of demand, the role of excursionists and a study of motivations will be the two main aspects taken into account. The study of supply will adopt a holistic approach, hence through the idea of destination as a double-meaning place. On one hand, it is the place where tourism takes place, with all services needed and used by tourists. On the other hand, it is the place where people live, including infrastructures previous to tourist activity. This approach fits with a tourism whose demand is composed of local and regional residents.

The tools used to extract information involved basically in-depth interviews and online questionnaires. The results obtained were used to create some indicators inspired by those from the «Landscape catalogues» (created and used by the Catalan Landscape Observatory) and adapted to our subject. These indicators are explained by the results of three different indexes: knowledge, interest and participation. These three parameters explain three phases of local development: knowing the territory, being interested for what is going on in it and participating actively in local manifestations and politics. The results obtained from these indexes are willing to be used as monitoring tools and, at the same time, they can provide answers on the role of proximity tourism in local development. Hence, the attachment to the territory reached through these three phases comes from the practise of tourism as it is an activity based on discovery.

Finally, a comparison of public space's recreational uses made by locals and conventional tourists will help in order to determine similarities and differences between them. This exercise will also be useful as a monitoring tool so that land planners can be updated about conventional and local tourists' needs and use this information in a strategic way:

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1 This study, taking place in Lluçanès (Barcelona, Spain), was carried out between March and May 2011 for the Official Master in Territorial and Population Studies final research of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona's Geography Department (2010-2011): *El turisme com a estratègia de desenvolupament local: Introducció a l'estudi del turisme de proximitat*, by Inmaculada Díaz and directed by Dr. Joan Carles Lluurdés.

Do they all have the same motivations and practise tourism in the same way just because they use the same space? Would it be necessary to use different strategies? Which ones?

To sum up, this paper aims to introduce a quite new subject, at least it is new in Spanish researches –it is not that new on the French context–, related to local development and valorisation of usual environment. Future researches should complete the theoretical models, improve and complete our methodological proposal clarifying the results. Besides, this study could open the door to new researches about the perimeter of proximity, proximity tourism and identity, the compatibility between proximity tourism and other forms of tourism already existing in the same territory... At the end, the goal is to be able to answer these questions: Why do we sometimes know better remote places than our own homeland?

