

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATURAL, CULTURAL AND LANDSCAPE HERITAGE THROUGH THE DESIGN OF TOURIST ROUTES

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A tourist route is a thematic tour inside a community or geographical area that allows the knowledge of its particular values. These trails are designed to explore both natural and urban environments in order to enhance the singularities of the area and make it attractive to visitors. They allow their users to know, to appreciate and to preserve the elements present in there. Also, they try to boost the weak rural economy through the development of tourist activities, providing its resources, offering services and promoting conservation and protection habits. These tourist routes take on distinct names such as corridors, routes, tracks, paths or trails.

In 1992 the first short distance footpath (*Pequeño Recorrido*, «PR», in Spanish) was created in the Region of Murcia. Since this, the development of the network of official short and long trails has happened. In Blanca, the official trails are the GR-127 Río Segura (158 km), which is a long route (*Gran Recorrido*, «GR», in Spanish) that uses the paths located near the river allowing its visitors to walk through all its length from the Cenajo reservoir covering in Blanca 6 km; the PR MU-24 Hoya de San Roque (16 km) which is entirely inside the municipal limits; and the PR MU-73 Sierra del Águila (15 km) which goes to Sierra de la Pila from Molina de Segura for 4,5 km.

In spite of the existence of these official trails, Blanca, this town in the region of Valle de Ricote crossed by the Segura River, is still very unknown as a tourist destination. This is the main reason why this paper has been carried out, with the objective of designing five tourist routes of low level of difficulty in order to enhance the heritage, natural and cultural resources of Blanca, suggesting a group of guidelines and evaluating their implantation. This work is necessary not only for boosting the weak rural economy through the tourist activity, but also for promoting conservation habits in all private and public sectors by the knowledge of its resources.

A group of five low level of difficulty routes is designed, marking their places of interest according to their landscape and cultural values and assigning a color-code to each of them. The track is georeferenced *in situ* using GPS and is marked on the Quickbird satellite photo making a map with ARCGIS 9.1. Additionally, each route is evaluated by the MIDE method and its topographic profile is created by the GEOCONTEXT-GIS web application. The qualitative analysis is based on a SWOT analysis, a technique for qualitative diagnosis which is used to identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the proposed project, showing the acquired knowledge through the analysis, and facilitating the identification of strategies and guidelines.

These five tourist routes of low level of difficulty designed and evaluated are:

- **1st Route: Cañada de Isidro – Castillo de Blanca (3,7 km).** It allows the visitors to know the origins and history of Blanca through different historical and ethnographical elements, such as: the «Miguelico Núñez» waterwheel, the «Cañada de Isidro», the northern slope of the «Sierra del Solán» and the castle of Blanca.
- **2nd Route. Bordeando el Azud de Ojós (9 km).** This trail has a high landscape value and it gives the chance of knowing the elevated vegetal and animal biodiversity of the area, while it shows the importance of the wetlands in sub-desert climate and it raises the awareness about the water issues in the Region of Murcia. It visits the noble houses of «Don Carlos», «La Favorita» y «La Molineta», always walking along the river around the «Azud de Ojós» reservoir. It crosses the «Las Cuevas» botanical garden and it allows a visit to the museum of «El Agua y La Luz».
- **3rd Route: Ermita de San Roque – Sierra de la Navela (10,5 km).** Its main objective is to drive its visitors into a natural environment with an elevated ecological and landscape value through a short trail that begins in the chapel of «San Roque» and it runs along a forest road, part of the official short distance trail PR MU-24. This route goes around the northern slope of «Sierra de la Navela», where various viewpoints are located.
- **4th Route: Sierra del Solán (4 km).** This route goes to the mountain landscape of the «Sierra del Solán», with its ravines and gullies and dotted with orange, lemon and fruit trees. It visits the church of «San Juan Evangelista», the narrow side streets of the historical centre of Blanca, the outcrops of marine fossils of the «Sierra del Solán», the cave houses in the «Alto de Bayna» and the noble house of the «Conde de la Vallesa».
- **5th Route: Paisajes de Huerta: Blanca – Abarán (7,7 km).** This trail gives a general view about the land use in and around Blanca throughout history because a lot of ethnographical elements are found in there that indicate the human presence for centuries. It runs through typical landscapes of fruit and vegetable production dotted with remains of traditional water systems such as the main irrigation channel of Blanca, various restored waterwheels and the old public laundry of «Las Canales». It passes by the old hydroelectric plant of «Don Nicolás Gómez Tornero» and the «Cabezo de La Cobertera» or «Cabezo de Corona», where is located the fortified granary of Andarraix.

After the quantitative analysis, the amount budgeted for the implementation of the five tourist routes is 2.042,00 €. In this operation budget is included the special issue of the creation, in the town, of an environmental and heritage conservation volunteer program through which the signal installation and the cleaning of the ways were done.

In the qualitative analysis, the SWOT matrix determines that there aren't any strategic problems to take advantage of the opportunities that this network of low level of difficulty offers. With regard to threats, the problems of the lack of environmental sensitivity, the misunderstanding of the territory values, the insufficient supply of accommodation and the inaccessibility for disabled people must be eradicated. The weaknesses detected require the implantation of strategies for the following themes: to improve security on dangerous sections of road, to reverse the environmental degradation in various places, to stop the heritage loss caused by the proliferation of new building types and illegal constructions and to avoid the presence of pests and invasive species. The main strength in the system is the availability of the trails network for the general population.

Finally, the master guidelines proposed are:

- The path conditioning by removing trash, eliminating obstacles and doing a forest clearance.
- Signage of the trails with indicating arrows, wooden posts and informative panels.
- Upload of a web link where users could download GPS tracks in their mobile devices, allowing them follow the trails.
- Pests such as *Dactylopius sp.*, *Thaumetopoea pityocampa* y *Candidatus Phytoplasma pini* must be controlled.
- Adapt the roads used by the routes to improve their attractiveness and security.
- Raise the range of accommodation for the enhancement of cultural, landscape and ethnographical resources in the area.
- Establishment of a promotion program through environmental education activities.
- Set up a Volunteer Program in Blanca to include the works of fitting-out and signposting the routes.

These five tourist routes are feasible and they will become a powerful tool to know the inherent values of Blanca, allowing its users get closer to its landscape, its ethnography, its nature and its culture and promote its conservation.

