

## PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF RURAL TOURISM: CASE STUDY IN THE COMUNITAT VALENCIANA

*Javier Solsona Monzonís*

Invat-tur (Instituto Valenciano de Tecnologías Turísticas)  
Agència Valenciana del Turisme  
javier\_solsona@hotmail.com

There are many different definitions given to the term rural tourism, however, no single, satisfactory one has been adopted. There exist various definitions inspired in references that originate in countries with a long tradition in this type of tourism, serving to clarify the term for the purposes of the present research (Grolleau, 1988; Fiquet, 1992; Gilbert, 1992; Lauwereins, 1993; Lane, 1994; Fuentes, 1995; Page and Getz, 1997, Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997; Cànoves, 2004 Vera *et al.*, 2011). Thus, rural tourism will be considered as «the tourist activity located in rural areas, which generates tourist experiences related to the surrounding environment, local culture and heritage, by means of the provision of services that are integrated and identified with the local idiosyncrasy».

Since the 1980s tourism has been one of the great hopes for socio-economic development in rural areas. The activity was characterized the support offered by public administration (Clary, 1993; Roberts & Simpson, 1999; Erlich, 2001; Hoggart & Paniagua, 2001; Barke, 2004). Great expectations were created, however, rural areas faced the challenge with insufficient organization capacity and with limitations as regards infrastructure, human resources, financing, training, etc. (Bonneau, 1978; Baretje, 1986; Crosby, 1988; Hjalager, 1996).

Two decades later, rural tourism has gradually consolidated its position, defining its authentic potential, which should lead to a reflection on the true role that this economic activity can play in the rural milieu – perhaps far from the initially raised hopes. This activity must show the management options which exist that can turn tourism in rural areas into a competitive sector, respecting, at the same time, the landscape, the culture and local communities (Krippendorf, 1982, Lauwereins, 1993; Zimmermann (1997) Butler, Hall, & Jenkins, 1998; Hall, 2005; Mintel International Group, 2007; Winkler, 2007; Pulido, 2008; López, 2009).

This article make a general analysis focussed in the csase of the Comunitat Valenciana, one of 17 regions in Spain situated on the Spanish Mediterranean coast. Tourism is one of the principal economic sectors, boasting over 350,000 formal accommodation places and more than half a million second homes, with 20.8 million travellers registered in 2009, 5 million of whom were foreign tourists.

The distribution of the tourism supply at the region is concentrated principally in coastal and urban areas. In spite of this, from a quantitative viewpoint, the relative importance that the sector has in rural areas must be stressed. In fact, if the number of rural accommodation places is compared with the number of inhabitants, it can be seen that, in some rural areas, this ratio, is fairly high. Moreover, the growing gap between supply and demand must be stressed; since 2001, while rural accommodation places have tripled, the number of beds occupied has only managed to double. This has led to an increasing difference in the evolution of supply and demand. Whereas supply has not ceased to grow since that year, demand has entered a recessive phase. This puts the profitability of small businesses at risk, with increasingly lower average occupancy. It also endangers professionalism, since the type of employment that rural tourism generates is part-time, due to the small scale of the business and the low occupancy mentioned above.

European funds provided to promote rural areas as well as grants from national and regional governments aimed at boosting economic development, meant that a considerable amount of resources was allocated to the tourism industry for the purpose of rapidly generating a tourism product that was characteristic and typical of inland areas, i.e. rural tourism (Charlier, 2001; Cánoves, Villarino & Herrera, 2006).

This type of tourism is extremely common in Europe, hence the case study of the Comunitat Valenciana is very interesting, both from a general perspective, and in order to extrapolate the conclusions drawn from it to other rural spaces around Europe, especially Mediterranean locations (Grolleau, 1988; Fiquet, 1992; Frochot, 2005; OECD, 2006; Macleod & Gillespie, 2010).

The present research study seeks not only to identify the key aspects for tourism development in the rural milieu, but also to explore alternatives for its future projection.

Moreover, other specific goals of this research are to find out the actual situation of tourism in rural areas, and more specifically, in the territory of the Comunitat Valenciana, from the perspective of the different individuals and stakeholders involved in this sector; to identify trends and prospects for tourism in rural spaces, with special emphasis on tourism planning and territorial management; to attempt to anticipate a future scenario for the evolution of tourism in the rural milieu around the year 2020; to suggest possible actions and measures that can contribute to a better adaptation both of the sector in general, and of rural tourism destinations in particular, with the above-mentioned timescale in mind.

In order to conduct this research work and meet the proposed objectives, application of the Delphi method was considered the ideal methodological choice.

In short, an attempt is made to identify and understand the factors that determine the evolution of this sector and also, to anticipate changes and improve different aspects of tourism management.

As a result of this research, the main conclusions were that tourism represents an undoubted element to boost development in rural areas. However, there exist various factors which affect the competitiveness of rural destinations. Among them, it is necessary to highlight the imbalance between supply and demand, low levels of occupancy of the accommodation available and lack of professionalism.

Since the end of the 1980s, the sector has grown thanks to the support given by various levels of government, through public policies which gave priority to the creation

of accommodation. However, these policies have also generated basic problems of coordination between different levels of government, between different departments of the same government and between the public and private sectors. The result has been the creation of scarcely structured products and destinations with deficiencies in management.

On the other hand, the natural, cultural and heritage attractions, which are the principal potential for introducing tourist activity, have not been duly adapted in order to ensure that tourism has greater possibilities of positioning in a highly competitive market.

Other factors which are likely to limit development considerably, and which therefore need to be considered in the strategic planning of rural areas, include: the absence of complementary recreational and leisure activities able to stimulate demand; deficient infrastructures; the low level of competition of rural tourism with respect to other products; deficiencies in public services; or the attitude and capacity of the local population.

Consequently, after two decades of development and implantation, rural tourism is faced with the necessity of a change of cycle. Corrective measures need to be applied in order to guarantee the future of the sector.

It is essential to develop medium- and long-term actions to improve the market positioning of the rural tourism product as opposed to other destinations: initiatives such as investment in the preservation and adaptation of both natural and cultural resources, as well as in amenities and services; or, from the local population's perspective, to continue investing in training, by making it more accessible, and to encourage the population's involvement in training programmes, represent some of the key elements for the future development of tourist activity in the rural milieu.

Many more actions are seen as absolutely basic in product-related aspects. Indeed, generating better-structured products is considered fundamental, as well as tourism brands easily recognized by consumers that can be associated with rural areas (or destinations), preferably on a regional scale. Other more specific actions which are possible are: improving the signposting, image and environment of tourism attractions; increasing the availability of public services; promoting activities and the complementary recreational offer; quality improvement in the accommodation available and providing it with new ancillary services; investing in the adaptation of paths; or increasing the gastronomy offer.

It is necessary to achieve a considerable improvement in marketing systems; to professionalize management in tourism establishments, and also in the sector as a whole; to introduce new technologies both in enterprises and in managing bodies; to create promotion-oriented public-private consortia associated with rural tourism brands; to boost or enhance the effectiveness of associations; and to improve competitiveness levels by business integration.

On the other hand, it is possible to list a host of possible actions that seek to stimulate demand, among which it is worth highlighting; increased publicity, both in the internal market and in the international market, to encourage business and product specialization so that they can address more specific demand segments, and the promotion of tourism-related leisure in rural and natural areas among the population in general.

Acting along these lines, the most optimistic forecasts of the professionals and stakeholders in this sector can be met in 2020: rural tourism will be characterized as a structured product, identified around destination-brands with much more professionaliza-

tion; enterprises will have considerably improved their administration and management, incorporating new technologies and prioritizing an approach aimed at business profitability and competitiveness as opposed to the current situation, where it is a complementary business activity; all this within a scenario where conservation of the environment, the landscape and nature, will become the key elements and the main potential of rural tourism destinations.