

## THE ROLE OF NATURAL PARKS IN TOURISM DIVERSIFICATION PROCESSES: AN APPLICATION TO THE ALICANTE COASTLINE

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The Valencian coast (Alicante is one of the three provinces forming the Valencian Autonomous Region) has characteristically shown a tourism development model based on the appeal of sun and beach resources and markedly oriented towards residential tourism as far as accommodation is concerned –this being a model which strongly impacts both on the territory and on tourist activity itself. A considerable number of coastal destinations currently find themselves in a situation characterised by a high degree of saturation and a lack of quality; they are degraded spaces, particularly in environmental terms, for which such a situation may result in loss of competitiveness. This sharply contrasts with the reality of a tourism sector which is going through structural transformations derived from new production and commercialisation patterns, changes in the demand and a higher level of exigency among tourists, who request quality in products and services while simultaneously showing concern for the impacts caused by this activity.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that tourism is immersed into a global context which includes various trends that need to be taken into consideration, or that some years of strong growth have given way to a deep worldwide economic and financial crisis. It cannot be denied that its consequences do not affect all markets and destinations to the same extent, and that tourism stands out for being one of the sectors which has better adapted to this situation but, even so, this crisis is undoubtedly having strong negative effects on closely linked activities such as real estate promotion, tourist dwelling construction or the retail sector.

From this approach, numerous tourism scholars have been agreeing for decades on the convenience of suggesting a number of transformations in the aforesaid model. However, the criteria which guide tourism development have hardly changed; and, after years of even more unbridled growth, the reality of the Mediterranean coast has become even more critical –if such a thing is possible. For this reason, experts continue to insist on the need to reorient the current growth pattern on the basis of reconciling territory conservation and tourism development, the maintenance of sustainability principles, the rationalisation of supply growth processes and their adaptation to the carrying capacity of the territory

in question –and its resources– and a rethinking of tourism development according to the territorial approach. These criteria are also reflected in tourism policies as well as in territorial policies both nationally and regionally.

One of the most relevant issues which arises before such a situation is the need to know the capacity that mature destinations have to react before the aforementioned changes and, consequently, to keep their competitiveness. Reorientation formats include tourism supply diversification from the insertion of new elements and the generation of leisure and recreation products, a context where the environment represents a first-rate factor, especially in the face of the growing motivational diversification detected among the demand. Nature tourism emerges as one of the practices which have been growing to the largest extent in recent years, a reality which can be verified through the increased number of visits to protected natural spaces (hereinafter ENPs, for its Spanish initials). These spaces play an important role in the tourism dynamics, particularly for the possibilities that they offer when it comes to revaluing natural resources and structuring tourism products.

In this context, the present paper has as its aim to stress the importance of revaluing natural parks located along the Alicante province coastline as a strategy for the diversification of the tourism supply provided by mature coastal destinations. Seeking to achieve the aforesaid aim, these ENPs are presented within their reference territorial framework; a review is made about their current exploitation and that of its surroundings from a tourist-recreational point of view; and, finally, an effort is made to identify the potential activities and products which could be developed in each one of them, outlining actions oriented towards their design and promotion. The initial documentation stage consisted in checking various sources for the purpose of providing the rationale for our research work, contextualising the study objects examined therein and developing the corresponding theoretical framework. A second empirical research stage follows, which features the analysis of five case studies –this being the main method used– about the natural parks specifically located on the Alicante coast, namely:

- Montgó Natural Park;
- Penyal d'Ifac Natural Park;
- Serra Gelada Natural Park and its coastal environment;
- Salinas de Santa Pola Natural Park; and
- Lagunas de la Mata y Torrevieja Natural Park.

The empirical research is completed with a review of the results obtained from a series of interviews carried out with some agents in the reference territory and comes to an end with the final conclusions.

With regard to theoretical foundations, the present paper is based on Richard Butler's *Tourism Area Life Cycle Model*, as well as on the evolution of coastal destinations within the framework of productive restructuring theories, the principles of which were applied by Sheela Agarwal. Special significance corresponds in both cases to the responses given by destinations before the potential decline, among them the possibility of diversifying the tourism supply. Introducing new elements, making a more profitable use of clearly underused resources and creating new products are some of the ways to maintain the competitiveness level of tourism destinations. Our research pays special attention to ENPs as well as to their potential as diversification elements for many sun and beach destinations. After

all, these spaces are undoubtedly of great importance, not only from a conservationist point of view, as hugely valuable areas that need protection, but also from an economist perspective, insofar as they own resources that can prove useful for the development of both tourism and recreation.

Along these lines, a review is made about the current exploitation of natural parks located along the Alicante coastline from an approach to the characterisation of the demand profile, along with the examination of the uses carried out in those parks during the last few years. A brief classification was made in relation to the first aspect with the ultimate aim of identifying the users of these parks:

- Spontaneous visitors (Spanish or foreign tourists and/or residents) who travel to these parks in summer, at Easter, or at weekends as a complement to sun and beach, for the purpose of walking along its routes, visiting the interpretation centres or taking part in some activity.
- Groups in pre-arranged visits within the framework of environmental education programmes (schoolchildren, housewives, associations, *Imsero* [Spanish abbreviation for “Institute of Seniors and Social Services”], etc.) that are given specific attention.
- Private groups interested in carrying out specific practices.

Since this paper is more deeply focused on studying the supply linked to natural parks located within the territorial context in question, it is considered that all spaces share the three well-defined types of uses listed below:

- Public use actions: self-guided routes; annual activity programmes (excursions, night outings, interpretative visits...); and actions associated with environmental education and heritage interpretation.
- Tourism promotion by public bodies: Town councils of nearby destinations, and other provincial and regional entities.
- Tourism products supported on the natural resources owned by the territory, behind which can always be found tourism firms operating in the areas of socio-economic influence.

Moreover, because one of the important issues dealt with in the present paper is the possible participation of natural parks within tourism destination renewal processes from the exploitation of their potential and the creation of new products, different local socio-economic agents were asked about the natural and cultural values of protected spaces and about the most outstanding contributions in their territorial context. On the whole, it is perceived that natural parks located along the Alicante coastline have been underused from a tourist and recreational point of view, despite the fact that they contain numerous natural and cultural resources for the development of new products, and even more so in the context of renewal that most nearby destinations are experiencing –this all must be done seriously and developing high-quality activities, though.

## CONCLUSIONS

Consolidated destinations located along the Alicante province coastline will only be able to adapt to the new scenarios if they manage to reorient their tourism development

model and direct it towards far more sustainable patterns, while simultaneously taking advantage of some resources which have been clearly underused so far. Although there is actually a wide range of options inside and outside these ENPs, it can by no means be stated that a more or less consolidated nature tourism product exists for the time being. In fact, the current participation of natural parks in tourism destination development is seen as unimportant and indirect.

It thus becomes necessary to bet on the exploitation of these territorial resources which can lead to diversify the tourism supply as a strategy meant to renew a group of destinations where mass sun and beach tourism prevails, to help achieve a significantly improved competitiveness, and to bring other benefits to the territory.

- Deseasonalising the supply
- Consolidating other less-developed tourism formats
- Attracting a higher-purchasing-power ('upmarket') demand
- Triggering a widespread improvement in destination image
- Creating lower-impact products which can last over time
- Recovering traditional customs and uses, and rehabilitating historical and ethnographic heritage
- Setting up new companies, generating employment and improving income levels
- Increasing tourists and residents' awareness about the importance of the natural milieu both for the territory and for tourist activity.

Even though some of the products have a very specific and perhaps limited demand, the province's supply is so varied that it can welcome both a visitor interested in a specific activity and all those who travel with him.

- New tourism products
- Different sea trips and an extension of the existing ones
- Excursions and guided tours to watch flora and fauna.
- Tourism services around salt mining
- Activities based on primary resources
- Ornithological tourism packages
- New hiking and bicycle touring routes

In short, the role of these spaces in tourist activity development can be considerably more significant than the one they have played so far; and not only as containers of resources and infrastructures but also as elements contributing to the socio-economic dynamisation of the territory as a whole.