

DIVERSIFICATION OF TOURISTIC ACTIVITIES IN COASTAL TOWNS: THE CASE OF PEHUÉN CO, ARGENTINA

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The expansion of the coastal infrastructure in Argentina enhances the detriment of the coastal environments. The legislation regarding the treatment of coastal zones is meager. The scarce urban expansion planning and the infrastructure lead to serious problems for the population and for the local government due to coastal erosion processes. On the South of the country and, especially, on the South of Buenos Aires province, small localities are growing continuously. Generally, they expand their territory without planning and their economy depend on coastal touristic activities. The activity is concentrated only in summer and during weekends on autumn and spring. In winter or rainy days, the coastal towns remain inactive without possibility of generating profits, sometimes for several months. Therefore, it is necessary to find options for this type of tourism.

This is the case of Pehuen Co, a coastal town located at the Southwest of Buenos Aires province (38° 59'51" S y 61° 33'16" W). The sun and beach tourism represents the major economic activity of this village. Thus, preliminary studies are needed to know which areas are able to economically develop. The aim of this study was to analyze the basic characteristics of the Pehuen Co tourism activity to find potential areas and actions that will allow to diversify the tourism.

The Pehuen Co coastal area is low and sandy with a width of 143 m, framed with a line of dunes. In the sector located farther away from the coast, the dunes are low and covered by vegetation. On the other hand, the dunes in the proximity of the coast have a height of approximately 10 m without vegetation; some of them covered with *Tamarix gallica*, artificial reefs and coastal rocky outcrops. The climate of the village is temperate with a mean temperature of 14.3 °C. Summers and winters are well thermally differentiated. The cold months (April to August) have an average temperature of 10 °C. The summer is

warm and the average temperature is 19 °C (March to September). The region alternatively presents wet and dry periods. Normally, the rainfalls are concentrated at spring-summer and at autumn, remaining minimal at winter.

The urban development of the village is parallel to the coast, which is oriented East to West. The buildings are low-rise and all homes present parks or gardens around the residence. All the streets are unpaved and most of the streets are forested with different tree species. The commercial area is very small and wooded and there is no industrial activity. The village was founded in 1948 and nowadays has a permanent population of 900 inhabitants. During summer, more than 600,000 people visit Pehuen Co in a daily, weekend and monthly basis.

In order to determine the main tourist activities of Pehuen Co and its area of influence a survey was carried out in the village. Information from the Department of Tourism of the Municipality of the Coronel Rosales County corresponding to summer season 2005/06 to 2010/11 and homemade surveys recorded on 2010/11 were analyzed. The methodology was based on three steps: a) the analysis of the tourism supplies b) the analysis of the demand (which make use of the touristic supplies) and c) development of a tourism map based on supplies and demands.

The surveys were conducted in order to determine the characteristics and preferences of the touristic demand in Pehuen Co. In the surveys it was not distinguished between tourists (people who stay in the place at least one night) and recreationists (people who do not stay overnight in the place), both were considered visitors. The techniques allowed to evaluate the tourism demand of the village with the aim of identify and sort the visitors.

Resources conservation and competitiveness with other touristic locations were contemplated In the survey: places of recreation, sights, selection of tourist activities, perceived strengths and weaknesses, etc. were considered demands. The results are shown on a zoning map of touristic areas. The map allow to identify potential areas of diversification and therefore, in a future, it will be useful to generate development proposals.

The analysis of the touristic resources show that they are located at the Southeast of the village in specific places: Square, museum, houses with an atypical architectonic design, shops, etc. For this reason, the visitors prefer to stay in nearby areas of this sector because they find attractions and shops at day and night. Therefore a decrease in the touristic and economic value of the rest of the town is perceived. Among the resources of the area surrounding the village, it could be observed fossil footprints scattered throughout the beach. These fossil footprints belong to animals from 12.000 to 16.000 years ago and a sector of the beach was declared a State Natural Reserve Pehuen Co – Monte Hermoso. Now it is in the process of being declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. To the West of the village, a local camping area named «Bosque Encantado» is found. This camping is placed in a forest of 105 ha with different tree species (pine, eucalyptus, cypresses, etc.). Also on the beach to the west, remains of a sunken ship from the XIX Century named «La Soberana» are observed at low tide. Farms surround the village inland. Therefore, agricultural and livestock activities typical of the Pampas region are carry out. These activities generate different jobs throughout the year (planting, harvesting, farming, etc.). This is an advantage for achieving the touristic diversification of Pehuen Co. Besides, many farms have the availability to lodge families who want to have vacations in a typical scenery of the Pampas region.

Considering the analysis of the demand and the survey's results we determined that the people who visit Pehuen Co are mainly recreationists. On the other hand, the vacation time of the tourists is mainly between one to two weeks. The age of tourists ranged between 26 and 40 years old with a medium to high educational level. Families (4 to 8 people) or couples visit Pehuen Co using private vehicles.

Most of the Pehuen Co tourists are from Bahía Blanca (located 80 km to the West from Pehuen Co with a population of 300,000 people). Visitors from other cities were also found (Tornquist, Dorrego, La Plata, Buenos Aires) and even from other provinces as Mendoza and Neuquén. According to the surveys the motivation of the visitors was to find «a quiet place», «be close to nature», «far from the noises and cement».

When the tourists were consulted about the activities they performed during bad weather, the statistics show that they were staying at the place of residence waiting for better conditions (24 %) or visiting nearby cities (73 %). The main argument of this behavior was the lack of activities or places to visit in the village when the weather is not comfortable to stay on the beach. The visitor's comments showed the poor diversification of activities in the village. Also, this diversification must be performed under strict planning since the increase of recreational activities could alter the main strength of the village: peaceful place and close to nature. The knowledge of the type of the demand helps to diversify the touristic supply. Young people without children and with a medium to high educational level compose the new segment of visitors. Therefore it is feasible to diversify the sun and beach offer with another activities like scientific and sport tourism.

Three types of touristic areas were delimited according to its development: 1) *Well developed Touristic Areas*. It has a strong tourism resources and visitors decided to overnight there. 2) *Partially developed touristic areas*, the demand and the offer are coincident but some of them has unwanted features and 3) *undeveloped areas*, where the supply does not exist or is very weak so the demand is not choosing this resource.

Three sectors were identified in the well-developed touristic areas: A) The Southeast zone of Pehuen Co where the main attractions for tourist and recreationists (Casa Barco, Casa Molino, etc.) are located; B) The Bosque Encantado and Vivero Municipal zone and C) The east area of the Paleontologic Reserve where guided visits are continuously performed. Sectors A and B present the major concentration of infrastructure necessary for the tourism (hotels, camping, restaurants, shop, etc.).

The partially developed touristic area is located to the West side of the village and beaches. This zone of the village presents a weakness in the quality and quantity of the supplies. The motivation of recreationists is to go to the beach but the resource present some disadvantages: the presence of jellyfish, an erosion process that generates in the beach areas of outcrops of sand and shells under the water and finally the seasonality. Besides, the direct competition with nearby beaches as for example Monte Hermoso (located 20 km to the East) represents another important disadvantage. The third zone, the undeveloped areas, corresponds to the Paleontological Reserve and the agriculture and livestock area surrounding Pehuen Co. In the former place, even though there is an important demand during high tide it is impossible to access on it. The countryside zones can be conditioned relatively fast for receiving visitors, currently it does not present a touristic supply available.

Pehuen Co has zones with touristic potential. Important sightseen (fossil deposits) and potential attractions (nearby farms) can be used for touristic purposes. To increase the touristic attractions in Pehuen Co we suggest to promote the paleontological tourism visiting the natural reserve of fossil deposits on the beach and the rural tourism taking advantage of the farms that surround the resort town. The former will need the consensus of the Monte Hermoso city (20 km to the east) since they have in common some areas of the paleontological reserve. In addition, the Argentine Army (10 km to the West) should consider the possibility of charting a course in its territory because some fossils deposits are located there. Darwin discovered the fossils and elaborated his theory in the area.

The rural tourism is the biggest potential for the diversification. Many farmers will open their farms not only to offer horses ride, hunting, etc. but showing their important architectonic and cultural heritage that should be preserved. As in the case of the scientific tourism, the advertisements represent the major contribution to the success. Finally, the propose methodology must be applied in the whole coastal zone considering a sustainable development and management of tourism resources. Besides, the coastal integral management program requires an active participation of social actors (stakeholders, decision makers and scientific community).