

## LEVELS OF TERRITORIAL SELECTIVITY OF MEXICAN TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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The geographical location of tourist destinations in Mexico has been influenced by various social agents, including foreign and national investors, whose attendance has varied over time, has influenced the selection of territories and promoted changes in the regional orientation of the national tourism policy, generating an increase in the number of places with tourist functions. The sun-and-beach model that shaped the country's tourist image since the mid of the last century, conditioned the creation, in the 1970s, of tourist sites of world importance with the presence of international chain hotels and an influx of high purchasing power tourists. That is how a group of so-called integrally planned centers were created; up to now, these sites still are the tourist destinations with the largest number of arrivals in the country (Propin and Sánchez, 2007).

In the last decade, the geographical dimension of tourist sites in Mexico has changed and the Ministry of Tourism has directed its attention to the promotion and use of different tourist resources, endorsing the innovation of the tourist bid in order to raise the competitiveness of the sector. The aim has been to turn Mexico into an attractive destination, with particular reference to emergent segments of the market: cultural tourism, ecotourism and adventure, health, sports, business and meetings, and religious tourism (SECTUR, 2013). One of the results of this policy has been an upsurge of tourist destinations that, in the last ten years, grew from 56 to 86 (Propin and Sánchez, *op. cit.*). These places comprise a wide range of locations, from big tourist centers to minor settlements whose territorial peculiarity is related to the exclusivity of the hotels therein located and the predominance of foreigners in relation to the total number of tourists. Considering the aforesaid, this paper proposes, through a hierarchical gradation, the disclosure of the selective and heterogeneous character of contemporary tourist destinations in Mexico using indicative attributes of tourism planning and the influx of foreign visitors.

Selectivity, as an individual as well as a social action, is deeply rooted into theoretical and conceptual Geography foundations geared to understand the location of human activi-

ties. The decisions of where to develop, invest or promote an economic activity requires the selection of sites, taking into account the geographical context of the receiving area. Currently, the interests of foreign and national social partners define the capitalization of emerging locations (Propin, 2003).

The concept of territorial selectivity applied to tourism should address two interpretations: firstly, the choice of new places is conditioned by previously existing destinations since the new site can be part of the hinterland of an already successful tourist centre, and its creation is geared to diversifying and strengthening the main destination that, in due course, will increase the length of the stay and the spending of tourists. The second interpretation is associated with the creation of new tourist places that will eventually grow as important destinations per se. The idea of choice is also identified with the perceptions and decisions of tourists (Reig and Coender, 2002); the territorial preference plays a significant role in the tourists' patterns of selection and the final decisions on where they will have a holiday (Alexandros and Jafary, 2005; Propin and Sánchez, *op. cit.* Tran and Ralston, 2005).

Territorial selectivity can be analyzed chronologically through two moments. First off, the economic dimension expressed by the type of intervention of local and regional public policy makers, focused on the competitiveness of workplaces which in turn responds to the interests of investors in the tourism sector. In a second moment, selectivity is determined by the rank a place holds in the tourism market, and the attractiveness of a particular destination, perceived through its image.

In reality, these moments can be reversed. In Mexico there have been places spontaneously selected by national and foreign tourists because of their natural or cultural resources. Visitors label the place through the diffusion of its existence and recurrent visits, thus augmenting the intervention of both State and private tourist agents, detectable in both sun-and-beach destinations and cultural-patrimonial and religious tourism sites.

In Mexico, the State interest in tourism was institutionalized at the beginning of the Twentieth Century with the creation of federal agencies that administered the activity at the national level. In 1937, the country was divided into fifteen areas of tourist interest due to the presence of particular resources (DO, 1937:3). So far, there have been several official declarations and internal restructuring of tourist agencies that aim at strengthening the sector, regarding its contribution to the gross domestic product, as well as to consolidating the country's tourist image in the international market. On the subject of the territorial selectivity, the regulation of the General Law of Tourism, in 2015, confers relevant spatial guidelines for the immediate development of tourism; it sets up the basis for collaboration and coordination between different levels of Government to encourage and promote tourism; it emphasizes the strategic importance of the Tourist Atlas of Mexico and points out the need to identify the tourist regions and areas of sustainable development, both current and potential (DOF, 2015). In 2013, the Federal Government selected 44 destinations as priority to promote the growth and diversification of the sector. Less than half of these places are sun-and-beach destinations, which means that other forms of tourism are being valued as suitable options for the country bid.

Tourism statistics available in Mexico portray tangible evidence of the selectivity process of tourist destinations. Regarding the thematic-methodological dimension, these

statistics are highly restrictive because they trim the contents of indicators that characterize and classify sites; as for research purposes, this type of data render material about territorial choices settled by policies promoting the tourism economy. Official figures of the Ministry of Tourism, published in the form of annual series, were fundamental for the achievement of the main objective of our study. Based on this source and other references, information about tourist destinations between 1974 and 2013 was compiled and compared (Table 3); temporal cuts were made in relation to significant events in the recent history of tourism in Mexico such as the creation of the Ministry of Tourism (1974); the availability of statistics in digital format (1992); the milestone marked by the official party defeat in the 2000 Presidential election; and the political-governmental restructuring of the Mexican State (2010). The comparative temporal analysis regarding the amount of tourist destinations and their geographical location (coastal, interior or border) revealed specific territorial behaviors.

The analysis of tourism statistics, available in 2013 (DATATUR, 2014), allowed the identification of indicators useful to reveal different levels of territorial selectivity of tourist destinations. This process was carried out in three methodological steps:

**A. Initial exploration of the data series.** The absolute numbers of available rooms and tourist arrivals were insufficient to identify differences associated with territorial selectivity (Figure 2); the high statistical correlation between these two variables (0.9) suggested the option of proposing a ranking of destinations, a task out of the reach of this study. However, figures on arrival of foreign tourists and rooms in high category hotels, made easier to recognize a statistical dispersion of destinations which emerged as an adequate context for this research (Figure 3).

**B. Identification of indicators.** The analysis of official data created three indicators related to the concept of territorial selectivity:

Indicator 1: Exclusivity of the destination.

Indicator 2: Number of foreign tourist arrivals.

Indicator 3: Predominance of foreign tourists regarding all overnight stays.

**C. Classification of tourist destinations.** Officially there are only 86 tourist destinations in Mexico. These places are not homogeneous and we arranged them according to their levels of territorial selectivity. To achieve this, we used a method of probabilistic classification, rendering specific types of destinations (Thürmer, 1983; Propin, 2003). In this context, three steps were performed: (a) weighting of selected indicators; (b) identification of codes and typological clouds; (c) creation of a thematic map.

The ten levels of territorial selectivity, determined for the tourist destinations of contemporary Mexico, reveal different regional locations and contrasting functional behaviors (Figure 4; Table 6).

Hierarchy levels, from lowest to highest, were established in accordance with the quantitative behavior of chosen indicators; regional characteristics of each level are synthesized herein:

**I. Low exclusivity with overnight stays predominantly of domestic tourists.**

There are eighteen destinations with a low percentage of high category hotel

rooms and a small influx of foreign tourists. These sites have heterogeneous regional scenarios, from locations included in the Magical Towns Program to border destinations, centers of religious tourism and unique natural landscapes.

**II. Low exclusivity with reduced overnight stays of foreign tourists.** These 27 destinations comprise state capitals, Magical Towns, medium-sized cities, one archaeological site and one coast corridor, where the number of foreign tourists is larger than in the preceding level.

**III. Low exclusivity with significant overnight stays of foreign tourists.** Sea-side places as well as cultural destinations are included in this level (eleven locations in total), where foreign tourists comprise a considerable proportion of visitors staying overnight.

**IV. Low exclusivity with high influx of in-transit foreign tourists.** Two archaeological sites, complementary to larger sun-and-beach destinations in East Mexico, belong to this category.

**V. Intermediate exclusivity with predominant overnight stays of domestic tourists.** This group of tourist destinations includes several state capitals, Magical Towns as well as one medium city.

**VI. Intermediate exclusivity with significant overnight stays of foreign tourists.** Mexico City and various surrounding towns are part of this group, as well as some Pacific coast destinations.

**VII. High exclusivity with relatively significant overnight stays of foreign tourists.** Puerto Vallarta and San Miguel de Allende make up this group; both places are well established as preferential destinations in Mexico.

**VIII. High exclusivity with significant overnight stays of foreign tourists.** This level comprises three sea-side destinations on the Pacific coast: Riviera Nayarit, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo and Huatulco.

**IX. High exclusivity with relatively significant overnight stays of large numbers of foreign tourists.** Destinations belonging to this level are all located in the Yucatan peninsula, including Cancun.

**X. High exclusivity with significant overnight stays of large numbers of foreign tourists.** Los Cabos and the Riviera Maya, comprise this category. The tourism economy in both places has rapidly grown in recent times.

Considering the existence of these levels, the concept of territorial selectivity becomes a starting research point for the analysis of the competition between tourist destinations and facilitates the identification and evaluation of sites that, due to interests and intervention of social agents, are the recipient of major investments and tourism promotion. During the last three decades, the territorial expansion of tourism in Mexico has meant the diversification of tourist places and products, attracting different segments of the world market and pointing out to the differentiation between destinations that complement each other due to the mobility of tourists along the country.

The ten levels of territorial selectivity obtained in this study describe the current hierarchical image of the Mexican tourist destinations and identify centers of greater exclusivity, proving that the large number of destinations promoted by the Government is not a

reflection of the consolidation of tourist sites inside the country. Sea-side destinations are still at the top of the list when it comes the time to invest in order to enlarge the number of international tourists, as in the case of Los Cabos, Cancun and the Riviera Maya, or the examples of Mazatlán, Manzanillo, Ixtapa, Acapulco, Puerto Escondido and Huatulco, more oriented to the domestic market. Within Mexico, state capitals stand high in the tourist hierarchy due to the existence of top quality lodgings, as in the case of Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Tourist places located along the US-Mexico border line are few and Tijuana remains the only international destination, even if visitors stay just a few hours. On the southern border, the towns with tourist activity are virtually non-existent.

