

THE IMPACT OF MASS TOURISM IN THE CANARY ISLANDS IN THE CONTEXT OF WORLD BIOSPHERE RESERVES

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Canary Islands have experimented an unusual development in the last decades, under cover mainly of tourism. An example of this is the increase of tourism from less of 100.000 travellers in 1960 to more 13 million in 2015, implying an increasing of population of 120% among these dates. These impacts that derive from this touristic model in the Islands, are very evident (high energy consumption and water, creation of remains, increase of mobility, consumption of territory, speculation on the land, sociocultural conflict and, in general, a big landscape change in touristic areas, applicable to almost every island). Especially, this increase has been more important in some Canary Islands that have received the award of Biosphere Reserve in their totality, like Lanzarote or Fuerteventura, where the demographic rise has reached too a 120% but in a period very short, specifically the last 25 years.

Right, in Canary Islands, there are now five islands declared Biosphere Reserve in their totality, which specially the two mentioned Lanzarote and Fuerteventura exceed the two million of tourist a year. It means a theoretical pressure and permanent of 50 tourists per square kilometre in Lanzarote, from a real median stay of seven days per tourist, while the number for Fuerteventura is 23 tourists per square kilometre because of its bigger area. However, as we said, It responds to theoretical terms, because tourists tend to assemble, logically, in urbanisations built for them, and in spaces with biggest landscape interest and just with biggest vulnerability, like the National Park of Timanfaya (Lanzarote) o emblematic spaces like a lookout of the River, The Jameos del Agua, The Cave of los Verdes, etc., affecting to the quality of the touristic experience and, therefore, having a negative impact on expectations that tourists had produced about destination.

Table 1
WORLD BIOSPHERE RESERVE IN CANARY ISLANDS. 2016

Islands	Year	Navy Reserve (km ²)	Earthly Reserve (en %)			Earthly Total	
			Core	Tampón	Transition	Km ²	% Island
Lanzarote	1993	388.64	11	36	53	886.77	100.00
El Hierro	2000	90.00	4	54	42	268.71	100.00
La Palma*	2002	163.66	17	40	43	708.32	100.00
Fuerteventura	2009	1,878.36	21	56	23	1,659.74	100.00
La Gomera	2012	473.43	31	36	33	369.76	100.00
Gran Canaria	2005	348.64	7	33	60	655.95	42.00
Tenerife	2015	332.38	12	43	45	154.89	8.00

* In 1983, UNESCO had declared a World Biosphere Reserve a small area of this island (El Canal and Los Tiles). Source: *UNESCO*. Own elaboration.

With no doubt, intrinsic characteristics of Canary Islands, with a obvious biodiversity, its rich geomorphology and, in short, their assorted landscapes, have helped to the 63% of this territory had been declared Biosphere Reserve. But the most interesting is, as we have already indicated, this territory receives every year more than 13 million of tourists, by what the analysis of the impact that touristic activity causes on a space so limited, becomes in a very important question for Canary Islands, mainly because every island is “selling” the trademark World Biosphere Reserve in the different touristic markets. So, the preservation of this trademark is vital for touristic destinations, because nothing is more counter-productive for a destination than the lost of this prize, without stopping from thinking too that so high award from an international organisation like UNESCO, means a compromise with the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. The granting of this award isn’t indefinite, but it’s renewed regularly according to certain factors of accomplishment for the preservation of the heritage. This way, the oldest declarations in Canary Islands have already renewed this condition (Lanzarote, 2007; El Hierro, 2013; La Palma, 2014). In spite of that, some islands, mainly those with a bigger touristic pressure, like Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, are under risk that they can be moved away this condition in futures reviews, as it has be done in a dozen places in de European Union.

It’s a worrying situation, because Canary Islands are selling the trademark “*Biosphere Reserve*” as a touristic attractive. However, the growth so accelerated of different signs, we argue in the Table nº 2, like Consumption of Energy, oil, and water, are very over demographic growth, even though it isn’t expressed like a reduction of poverty, as a result of the arrival of more tourists, and therefore, the bigger economic activity. All of that places in danger the regular renewal of *Reserves* by *UNESCO*, especially after 2014 *UNESCO* started the procedure knew as “strategy of exit”, because that Reserve doesn’t achieves the duties, will be start “an expedient for annulling the cataloguing”.

Table 2
SOME SIGNS OF IMPACT OF TOURISM IN ISLANDS DECLARED WORLD BIOSPHERE RESERVE IN EASTERN CANARY ISLANDS

Parameters	Lanzarote		Fuerteventura		Difference % the 2 islands
	1990	2014	1990	2014	
Population	74,007	141,940	40,012	106,930	118.27
Foreign Tourists	763,936	2090,529	380,951	1870,591	245.98
Visits to the National Park	700,000	1452,365	---	---	107.48
Energy Consumption (Mw/h)	286,678	788,878	164,314	592,001	206.19
Oil Consumption (Tm)	151,431	402,343	s.d.	s.d.	165.69
Water consumption(m ³)	5627,317	12943,938	s.d.	s.d.	130.02
Population under threshold poverty (en %)*	9.40	15.60	5.70	22.10	46.36

* Data covering the years 2001 and 2013.

Source: *Instituto Canario de Estadística*. Own elaboration.

Biosphere Reserve in Canary Islands, which mean the number of 63% of their territory, are characterised by the duality between development –mainly touristic- and the preservation, which means an opportunity, and a challenge at the same time for contribute to change the unfavourable territorial process, and promoting a capable development for combine the sustainable utilization of resources with job and well-being creation, all these, without lessening of heritage values, that are their main asset.

In large part, these negative territorial procedures can be lessened with the normative and the town and country planning. Public bodies have made an effort the last 15 years with documents like the *Planes Territoriales Especiales de Ordenación Turística Insular (PTEOTI)*, which have meant an integral planning more sustainable. In spite of it, in some islands, like Fuerteventura, although Lanzarote too, the planning, is even far away of sustainable rules, because in the case of the first, the touristic beds planned, mean at present more than double of resident population. So, they are made more progress in more occidental islands to more sustainable rules that the World Biosphere Reserves demand in the parameters. However, the more eastern islands are still far away of these kind of sustainable rules, even for a close timeline like 2020-2025.

Table 3
TOURISTIC BEDS PASSED IN CANARY ISLANDS ACCORDING TO INSULAR PLANNING IN FORCE (MARCH 1, 2016)

Lanzarote	Fuerteventura	La Gomera	La Palma	El Hierro	Tenerife and Gran Canaria	Total Canary Islands
82,760	236,168	4,454	25,500	2,079	328,276	682,419

Source: *Planes Insulares de Ordenación y Planes Territoriales Especiales de Ordenación Turística Insular*. Own elaboration.

In addition, It's paradigmatic the case of the island of Lanzarote, whose big experience about territorial planning previous decades, have meant the elimination of new growths for lands assigned as touristic urbanizations with a volume or 250.000 beds.

In spite of it, the ratios of touristic beds by insular area or resident population are still high; even more than islands with a more complicated territorial and touristic system (Gran Canaria and Tenerife); besides these two islands are not entirely declared World Biosphere Reserve. The example of the island of Fuerteventura is according to us, less appropriate in control and reduction of capacity of touristic growth in connection with its condition of Biosphere Reserve, because touristic beds planned at present are near 150 by km² and more than 2.200 by thousand inhabitants, that is, four times more in comparison with the beds in service (about 58.000). In this case, we consider as a negative factor the special difficulty of regional, insular, and local Governments for come to an agreement about sustainable insular planning, and consequently, a threat for the maintenance of the future of the award of World Biosphere Reserve given to the island of Fuerteventura in 2009.