

## **PROTECTED AREAS AS TOURIST AREAS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON THE CASE OF ANDALUSIAN SIERRA MORENA NATURE PARKS**

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The article deals with a phenomenon of increasing relevance and territorial impact within the framework of the current heavily urbanized societies. This is the growing influx of visitors to quality rural/natural areas, many of them subject to a legal protection regime, being established as protected areas.

In this sense, since the central years of the 20th century, protected areas in general -and more particularly those more flexible protection categories with a vocation of multifunctionality, especially the Parks- began to be perceived as a privileged scenario for the development of new tourist modalities.

In the Spanish case it was during the eighties and nineties of last century when the strengthening of tourist functionality of many rural and natural spaces began to be clearly established. This functionality has taken two basic forms, in close relation to each other: the public use offer (relative to those facilities and services specifically offered from protected areas) together with the specifically tourist offer (relative to accommodation, catering and interpretation activities, of recurrent incidence on the protected areas but not offered from them).

On the basis of this structure, there have been many protected areas in which tourism has been perceived as an emerging economic sector with important expectations, a key factor for the revitalization of local economies. At the same time, however, a number of undesirable risks and implications, such as increasing tourist specialization and the consequent abandonment of traditional activities, or impacts resulting from excessive or poorly channeled functionalization, have started showing their effects.

Today, there is widespread conviction that the tourism model in quality rural/natural areas (particularly those subject to legal protection) must be based on the selective consideration and valuation of quality characters and differentiation of each territory. To this end, it is essential to apply a series of tourism development criteria for protected areas (particularly Parks), among which three are proposed in this paper: the need for

typological clarification -clearly defining the existing tourist possibilities as well as its essential complementarity with the offer of public use-, the adaptation of such tourism to the territorial conditions -based on the carrying capacity-, and the need of coherence in action through the definition of specific strategies in tourism and public use and the promotion of coordination between them at the scale of each protected area.

On these general premises, this contribution has focused on the model of Nature Park designed in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (Spain), of great application on the land and whose wide and multifunctional vision attributed to this figure of protection must be underlined. Nevertheless, in spite of the theoretical interest of this vision, the problems and insufficiencies registered in the effective implementation of the tourist impulse in Andalusian nature parks have been diverse and very outstanding.

In this respect, an essential aspect has been the fact that, unlike the public use, tourist activity has not had its own well-defined policy or strategy for its specific impulse in Andalusian nature parks. This is closely related to a broader dynamic: the difficult implementation of the generic objective of socio-economic development in protected areas.

On the other hand, the public use has had, unlike the tourism, its own strategy: *Management of the Public Use in the Andalusian Protected Areas Network (RENPA): Strategy of Action*. This provided general guidelines for this field of action, although with insufficient treatment of several key aspects, which has affected certain elements of conflict in terms of their practical applicability. This has become apparent in areas such as imbalances in the provision of equipment and services between protected areas, activity planning -through Public Use Programs (PUP), initially approved for certain parks but now absolutely deferred-, or the almost null connection with the more specific field of tourism.

These administrative constraints, which are generally a hindrance to tourism development in the Andalusian nature parks, have been accompanied by geographical factors, also of important effects, as it has been considered for the six nature parks located in the Andalusian Sierra Morena, specific case of study in this contribution.

Sierra Morena is characterized as a medium Mediterranean mountain, defined by the predominance of traditional and extensive agricultural uses (mainly livestock and hunting), which explains its remarkable environmental qualification and -in certain zones- exceptional ecological value.

On the basis of this geographic configuration, the limiting characteristics for the tourist development are common to the whole mountainous massif. They can be explained by factors such as its high impenetrability (according to its orographic complexity and a majority private property), the climatic conditions (particularly the summer heat), the less degree of landscape spectacularity with respect to other areas (mainly high mountains), or the low degree of anthropization and direct urbanization.

At the same time, however, there is a strong territorial disparity between Sierra Morena nature parks, in key aspects such as extension and environmental and landscape diversity. This disparity has materialized in the recognition -by the authors- of two basic and well defined models of nature parks in the Sierra Morena mountainous range. Firstly, the large parks of the western sector of the range (Sierra de Aracena and Picos de Aroche, and Sierra Norte de Sevilla), of regional scale and defined by its remarkable humanization and internal diversity. Secondly, the middle eastern parks (Cordoba parks -Sierra de

Hornachuelos and Sierra de Cardeña and Montoro- and Jaen parks -Sierra de Andújar and Despeñaperros-), of smaller extension and greater homogeneity and environmental and ecological relevance.

However, all the natural parks analyzed have shown some common features in tourism development. In this regard, it must be highlighted that very few tourist initiatives have been designed and applied to Sierra Morena as a whole. Of note in this respect are the approval of its *Sierra Morena Tourism Plan* (2006) or the recognition as a *Starlight Reserve and Destination*. Those initiatives, despite their impact on the territories of nature parks, have lacked an effective coordination -at the management level- with them. In addition, tourism initiatives specifically linked to the reality of the Nature Park have been -unlike the public use- really scarce. This can be explained by the lack of operation of the administrative instruments to promote development in Andalusian natural parks, such as it is the case of the *Sustainable Development Plans* (PDS), as well as the *European Charter for Sustainable Tourism* (CETS) and the *Nature Park Brand* (conceived -these last two- as quality seals but of very limited practical applicability).

On the basis of these common aspects, however, the more detailed analysis made it possible to show that the two territorial models of nature parks recognized in the Andalusian Sierra Morena range have had an unequal effect on tourism possibilities and development.

In the case of the two large western nature parks, a significant tourism development has become evident in quantitative terms. For this, the regional projection of both protected areas has been decisive, which explains the coincidence with the areas of action of the Rural Development Groups (GDR). These entities have become the main drivers of tourism in these territories (through the management of LEADER and FEADER community initiatives), mainly housing. However, there has been a lack of effective coordination and cooperation with nature parks, despite some recent interesting initiatives in this regard, such as the implementation -from the GDR- of certain administrative mechanisms related to protected areas (such as the CETS or the Nature Park Brand) for the certification of quality of housing and other tourist services. These initiatives, although showing limited effects, did seem at least to point to the line of a greater implication of the Nature Park reality in the tourism development. In this same sense, it must be noted the new public use projects developed in the two large nature parks of the western Sierra Morena. However, there is a lack of both a greater impetus and a territorial rebalancing in the provision of offer as well as an effective coordination with initiatives more properly tourist, within the framework of a common strategy.

These shortcomings have become even more evident in the case of the nature parks of the Sierra Morena middle-east (Cordoba and Jaen sectors of the mountainous range). The tourism weakness evident in these protected areas is explained both by their greater global ecological qualification (which determines the greater conservationist emphasis of their environmental Planning) and by the lack of territorial coincidence with the GDR's areas of action, which makes difficult the synergy of action exposed for the case of the western nature parks. Specific tourism development -without the direct drive of the GDR- has been really little, although some interesting achievements are beginning to take place, mainly in the implementation of quality tourism establishments and some active tourism services.

The shortage of this tourism offer is also explained by the very limited development of public use in general terms; it should be noted the scarcity of facilities and services, its strong territorial dispersion and, in sum, its low representation of the values of protected areas. However, some interesting projects are also starting to see the light, although in a very limited way and not in the context of a strategy well conceived for each of the nature parks.

In this sense, the conclusions of the article emphasize the need to consolidate the nature parks as true territorial-tourist referents, for which it would be essential to define a precise and realistic strategy for each one of them. This strategy should be based on the formulation of an activity management document (which in the work is said to be the CETS), which incorporates both Planning for public use and its essential coordination with tourism, taking into account those agents and initiatives with competence in those matters and with incidence on the territories protected as nature parks.