

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

APPROACH TO TOURISM RELATED TO BATHING AREAS IN EXTREMADURA: A META-ANALYSIS BASED ON UNPUBLISHED STUDENTS' WORKS

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More than a hundred academic works are presented annually in Spanish faculties with the aim of obtaining a degree in Tourism. Many of them remain unpublished, despite the usefulness of their data, either because formal aspects or the limited size of their studies. In this work, we have collected and analyzed a sort of academic works in which tourist supply and demand of bathing areas of Extremadura (reservoirs, gorges and an old quarry) have been the core of the study.

The reduction in the number of international visitors (mostly interested in sun and beach tourism) foreseen for Spain (at least in 2021) due to the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic places the bathing areas of inland regions as tourism attractions of special interest. Extremadura is the region where more water is dammed in Spain (ca. 30%) and its geomorphology allows the presence of natural gorges in its mountainous systems. In addition, it is near Madrid and Seville (≈ 300 km) where about 15% of Spanish population is concentrated and well-connected by road (public highways without tolls) to them.

Extremadura has 72 natural swimming pools (including river/reservoir beaches and gorges). Furthermore, two out of them have been awarded with the blue flag (Orellana y Cheles). In addition, most of municipalities have regular swimming pools. So, these bathing areas can be considered as strategic sites in this matter. Nevertheless, in spite of the potentiality of Extremadura few have been the studies carried out specifically on bathing areas of Extremadura so far. Most of these specific tourism studies have been focused on natural sites such as Monfragüe National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as the Old Town of Cáceres, the Roman Complex of Mérida and the Royal Monastery of Guadalupe.

For this reason, some colleagues of the University of Extremadura have gathered and analyzed a sort of unpublished student works in which some significant bathing areas of Extremadura have been studied, particularly in terms of tourism offer and demand. The selected areas have been the fluvial beaches of the Orellana (blue flag) and Zújar reservoirs, the natural gorge called in Spanish *Garganta de los Infiernos* and a former stone quarry adapted as bathing area called *Cabezos*. The most innovative of this work has been the fact of working at a site scale collecting data from surveys made in situ. It contrasts with the regular working scale (municipality, county, region, etc.) of other works based on official statistics.

This work has therefore allowed the comparison between some different bathing areas and some significant analogies and differences regarding tourism attractions, facilities and visitor profile have been reported.

Orellana and Zújar are two important reservoirs built in the 20th century on the Guadiana River and one of its tributaries aimed at irrigation agriculture and hydroelectric energy. In the 21st century a fluvial beach was designed in each site and some tourism facilities were installed. The *Garganta de los Infiernos* is a natural mountainous gorge of the Spanish Central System in which some giant kettles on granite rocks are concentrated giving place to a fantastic bathing area called *Los Pilones*. *Cabezos* is a former stone quarry used to provide materials for the construction of the nearby Alcántara reservoir on the Tagus River and near Portugal. Some years ago this enormous “hole” was converted into a bathing area.

Regarding methodology some significant information was collected from every site: [1] attractions, [2] facilities and services, and [3] demand. The main sources of these data were websites, specialized guides, tourism offices, questionnaires and key interviews involving a lot of fieldwork.

Every attraction was identified, located by using a handheld GPS, inventoried and classified in 5 different categories following consistent criteria (classification of the Organization of American States) through tools provided by the Provincial Deputation of Cáceres. Each one of them was scored and ranked according to conclusions given by a focal group formed by local people and experts in Tourism.

The tourism offer was analyzed through data collected from accommodation, food services and complementary activities provided by each site and nearby. Regarding accommodation we have distinguished between hotels, pensions, apartments, rural housed and camping sites. Restaurants, bars and beach bars were considered as food services. Most of this information was obtained by fieldwork and interviewing key actors since we have tried to avoid the use of official statistics because it is not the working scale of this study.

The tourism demand was addressed by some surveys in situ (summer time) based on short questionnaires (less than 15 questions) with multiple closed options: 150 in Zújar, 315 in Los Pilones and 216 in the stone quarry of Alcántara. The questions were aimed at knowing the profile of the visitors (sex, age, geographical origin, motivation, etc.). In the particular case of Los Pilones a comparative study with nearby bathing areas has been also carried out. In Orellana information on tourism demand was inferred from some personal communications with key actors.

Los Pilones has been the place with the highest number of natural attractions (gorges, streams, vegetation, hiking paths, etc.) followed by Orellana that includes several routes,

its beach, reservoir, pier, etc. Zújar showed a lower number of attractions because it is actually a single rural tourism complex yet and they are underestimated in Cabezos because it was not the main goal of this specific study.

The cultural attractions were considered those from the closest municipality since they can be a complement for bathing users. In Orellana 11 attractions were identified, one of them is considered as Well of Cultural Interest (Castle-Palace of the Marquis of Belgida). Also in Alcántara they were identified 11 cultural attractions being 4 out of them Wells of Cultural Interest (Convent of San Benito, Church of Santa María de Almocóvar, Peña Buraca and the Roma Bridge). Cabezueta del Valle (Los Pílonos) also has 1 Well of Cultural Interest.

The visitors of these areas are also enjoying natural protected areas by UNESCO as wetlands, biosphere reserves, by Nature Network 2000 due to their richness in birds and by the Government of Extremadura (Natural Reserve of the Garganta de los Infiernos, International Tagus River Natural Park, etc.).

In consideration to facilities and services significant differences have been observed. Zújar and Cabezos gather every facility in a single complex: 3 rural houses, 9 apartments and a hostel with 65 places in Zújar and a camping site in Cabezos. Los Pílonos and Orellana showed a higher diversity. Regarding food services the most common is to find some restaurants, bars or beach bars near the site that sometimes are managed by the same owner.

Two patterns have been identified respect to complementary activities. Those sites located near reservoirs provide an extent sort of activities while the other sites by the fact of being protected areas only offer bathing, birdwatching and hiking.

It was made an estimation of total tourists that visited each place as well as their motivation, origin place, etc. Orellana is visited by 60,000 tourists every year, Los Pílonos by 25,000 and more than 55,000 have passed by the Local Tourism Office of Alcántara in 2018. 40% of people that visited Zújar came from a distance lower than 50 km and only 10% from a (road) distance between 75 and 100 km. So, we can conclude these sites still attract mostly regional visitors (35-75%) and people from other regions emotionally linked to Extremadura.

Some conclusions can be drawn from this study: [1] student dissertations should be published on Internet since they collect valuable data regardless rigor and quality of their work, [2] bathing areas are crucial for Extremadura since they represent a sustainable tourism, and [3] further research work is still needed since this study had significant limitations.