

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# PROTECTED NATURAL SPACES, TOURISM AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE. MONFRAGÜE'S (EXTREMADURA, SPAIN) BIOSPHERE RESERVE AND NATIONAL PARK AS AN EXAMPLE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, protected natural areas have become highly demanded resources by today's societies. These resources have unquestionable social and economic values associated with them (Muñoz Flores, 2008; Corraliza *et al.*, 2002).

In this sense, economic diversification is one of the most important current strategies in rural development, especially through tourism (Trillo Santamaría and Paül i Carril, 2018; Muñoz Flores, 2008; Soto Baquero *et al.*, 2007; Delgadillo Macías, 2006; Vacas Guerrero, 2001). And, within this modality, tourism in protected natural areas stands out above the most (García Marín, 2011; Aparicio, 2004), as it contributes numerous benefits to rural territories (Hidalgo-Fernández *et al.*, 2013; Sotelo, 2006; Azqueta, 1997).

Additionally, within the typology of protected natural areas, the World Network of Biosphere Reserves have become, since the late 1970s, an opportunity to enhance the value of endogenous natural and cultural resources (Bilbao González and Díez Casero, 2010) and to mitigate the negative effects of depopulation (Jurado Almonte and Pazos-García, 2016), of the ageing and masculinisation of the rural population (Pérez Díaz *et al.*, 2012; Camarero, 2009; Barrientos Alfageme, 1979-1983; Gurría Gascón, 1981; García Zarza, 1977) or the loss of the signs of territorial identity with reference to the landscape and natural resources (Canales, Segrelles and Vera, 2012; Aparicio *et al.*, 2012; Leco *et al.*, 2012; Hernández, 2009).

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on two clearly defined research hypotheses: first, what has the declaration of World Network of Biosphere Reserve and National Park meant for the

territory of “Monfragüe” from a demographic and economic point of view, and second, have the synergies brought about by the declaration of protected natural areas managed to change the demographic and economic weaknesses of this territory?

Therefore, the main objective of this research is the diagnosis and analysis of the socio-economic situation of the World Network of Biosphere Reserve and National Park of Monfragüe (Cáceres, Spain), from its declaration in 2003 to the present.

The following statistical indicators were used for the analysis: demographic (evolution of the absolute population, natural and spatial dynamics of the population, demographic structure) and economic (evolution of the number of workers and companies by sector of activity, unemployment rates, disposable household income). Particularly, within the economic section, some indicators related to tourist activity (number of visitors, demand and supply, hotel occupancy, etc.) have been of interest.

In order to achieve the above objectives, a non-experimental qualitative methodology was applied (Kerlinger and Lee, 2002), and a descriptive and qualitative analysis of the variables used was carried out. The sources of information used were the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (<http://www.ine.es>) and the Statistical Institute of Extremadura (<https://ciudadano.gobex.es/web/ieex>), as well as the Tourism Observatory of Extremadura (<https://www.turismoextremadura.com>) and the Directorate General of Tourism of the Regional Government of Extremadura.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main results of the study indicate that, from a demographic point of view, the declaration of this territory as a World Network of Biosphere Reserve has not managed to halt depopulation in the last two decades (since 2003 the absolute population has decreased by 4.3%). Moreover, population densities are still very low and a structural problem (Molinero, 2019), with a current population density of 6.3 inhabitants / km<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, natural growth shows a negative behaviour due to depopulation and rural emigration, especially of younger (Gil *et al.*, 2020; Leco *et al.*, 2017; Santos González and Redondo Vega, 2016; Serrano Gil, 2016; Serrano Martínez and García Marín, 2013; García Marín, 2011), with mortality rates reaching 12.7‰ and birth rates of 5.5‰.

The behaviour of spatial dynamics does not offer growth prospects for this territory either, as the loss of demographic resources has been a constant since the middle of the last century.

In recent decades, migratory patterns have been even more selective in their composition and structure, as they are generally young (20 to 35 years old) and single and, in many cases, highly educated. Only in the years when there was a clear economic recession at the national level (approximately 2006-2011) was there a small increase in positive migratory balances.

Therefore, this territory has a very aged demographic structure, in which the elderly population (over 65 years of age) reaches 25% of the total population, showing a high feminization of old age.

Likewise, the ageing index reaches very high values (227% compared to a regional average of 130% in Extremadura), and the rate of over-ageing has even increased from 11.1% in 2003 to 21.7% in 2020.

At the socio-economic level, agriculture maintains a fairly significant weight, both in terms of the number of workers and companies registered with the Social Security, and both industry and construction are sectors with a low contribution to all sectors of activity.

Within the services sector, which accounts for 55.8% of Social Security affiliates, tourism stands out above all, mainly generating employment in the hotel and catering industry. However, unemployment rates have remained very high since 2007 (1067 unemployed in 2020), with unemployment among women being particularly worrying (in 2020, six out of every ten unemployed people were women).

Another socio-economic indicator analysed was the average disposable income per inhabitant. Since 2007, when “Monfragüe” was declared a National Park, the average disposable income fell from 11,044 euros to 10,880 euros in 2019.

Finally, tourism in this territory, as in all those territories with low demographic densities (Silva Pérez and Fernández Salinas, 2017; Feria, 2013; Mata, 2008) has become, in one way or another, an objective to achieve economic diversification and job creation.

However, despite the efforts of the regional administration and the Local Action Groups, the World Network of Biosphere Reserve “Monfragüe” has a relatively scarce and not very diversified accommodation offer, although in the medium term it seems sufficient to accommodate the current demand.

Current demand is highly seasonal (almost 50% of visits take place in the months of March, April and May), with an average annual occupancy rate of 19.5% in hotel and extra-hotel establishments and an average stay of 2 days.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, firstly, from a demographic point of view, since 2003 the World Network of Biosphere Reserve “Monfragüe” has experienced a negative balance and an incessant loss of population numbers; secondly, there has been a bankruptcy of natural growth; and thirdly, all this has resulted in a very aged demographic structure. In short, the behaviour of these demographic indicators has led, at the same time, to a breakdown of the social fabric that will make any model of sustainable development impossible in the short and medium term.

On the other hand, the economic indicators show an important dependence on agriculture, a structural weakness of the construction and industry sectors, and a service sector that is far from the real possibilities of the territory and the investments received in this sense.

Likewise, the labour market variables indicate a relatively high unemployment rate (14.4% in 2020), highlighting the scarce job opportunities offered by this territory in all economic sectors.

Finally, the tourism sector, despite political efforts to activate it, has not achieved the enormous potential it has, both in terms of the supply of accommodation and the increase and deseasonalisation of demand.

The results of the analysis carried out indicate, therefore, that the hopeful expectations that the Administration placed in the declaration of Monfragüe (first as a World Network of Biosphere Reserve in 2003 and, secondly, as a National Park in 2007) have not generated positive synergies in the demographic and socio-economic spheres, and show a very limited capacity to fix the population to the territory (Santos González *et al.*, 2016), as well as to generate employment or even to reaffirm the territorial identity as an asset for rural development.