

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE CASTILLA CANAL: WATER HERITAGE RESOURCE AND PROSPECTS FOR USE AND TOURISM INNOVATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Castilla Canal is the work of hydraulic engineering par excellence in Spain from the 18th-19th centuries. An infrastructure that has become, over time, a unique element of the rural landscape of Castile y León and an important territorial element. A work created for a very specific economic purpose, the transport of grain from the interior of the plains to the Cantabrian coast, but which has been converted and used for other uses since the mid-20th century. At first for agricultural irrigation, later for human consumption and, finally, as a tourist resource.

Tourist use has become increasingly relevant and is being valued to publicize the history of a key work of industrial heritage and contribute to the economic diversification of a territory that has its main economic support in agricultural activity.

The objective of this research is to analyze the role played by the Castilla Canal as an element of the industrial heritage that is capable of structuring and organizing the tourist activity, a tourism in which technologies of communication have an increasing weight when it comes to choosing and organizing trips, reaching a certain level of tourist intelligence that contrasts with the strong rural character of this territory. The role of the different policies and plans that have been put in place on the Canal de Castilla for its protection is analyzed. Secondly, a tourism analysis of the main resources associated with this infrastructure is carried out. And, thirdly, the transmission of information to tourists digitally through the web pages of different organizations involved in the tourism promotion of the Canal.

2. METHODS

The chosen method is qualitative, considered in this case the most appropriate to understand the characteristics of the analyzed industrial heritage and the circumstances

of conservation and new tourist use. The plurality and heterogeneity of the legacy of industrialization, at a global level and in each country, raises the need to address a limited narration at a local and temporal level, with a description of facts and circumstances of great relevance to the subject of study and its interpretation.

A strategy of combined use of some concepts considered fundamental has been applied, such as tourism, industrial heritage, territory, and landscape, with which explanations are created about a very peculiar context related to the heritage of industrialization and the hydraulic infrastructures. In line with the characterization that is intended to be achieved and, from a methodological point of view, an extensive review of the scientific literature and the state of the art has been carried out, with the aim of verifying the theoretical approaches present in the field of tourism, heritage protection and resource management models, as well as establishing some interpretative keys.

From the tourism point of view, a proposal for analyzing the web pages associated with certain organizations and companies whose contents appear related to the Canal is offered. Said analysis has been carried out based on various variables and the creation of a web presentation index (IPW, in Spanish).

In relation to the sources of information, the protection plans, the existing legislation in this regard and the databases of certain public organizations have been consulted to know the number of visits to the tourist facilities of the Canal, with information corresponding to the period between 2017 to 2021. Data from the tourist offices of the main towns crossed by the Canal have also been consulted.

In addition, the field work has been a technique for approaching the study area and a way of verifying in situ the situation of the heritage complex and its associated industrial elements.

3. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although the term industrial heritage is currently conventionally admitted in the general features that are exposed in the text, there may be notable differences when specifying the thematic and chronological limits. The most generalized interpretation considers that the concept of industrial heritage must refer to the productive and technical elements inherited from the period between the end of the 18th century, when industrialization began in Great Britain, and the development of automation in the second half of the 20th century. The study carried out here of the Castilla Canal is based on a pre-industrial element, that is, prior to the historical period of the Industrial Revolution, but which allowed industrialization during the 19th and 20th centuries with the installation of a significant number of factories, especially flour mills.

The bibliographic review allows verifying the existence of five large thematic groups linked to the study of the Canal from a geographical and heritage point of view: (i) Environmental and landscape perspective; (ii) Linkage with the surrounding territory and analysis of issues of a spatial nature; (iii) Recognition of the heritage value of the infrastructure; (iv) Rehabilitation and conservation proposals in relation to its interest as a cultural asset; and (v) Tourism reuse and new use challenges. All perspectives are important and complementary to each other, providing a scientific corpus of great value for the analysis of the Canal.

4. RESULTS

Since 1991, the Castilla Canal has been protected as an element of cultural interest, to which different plans have subsequently been added that regulate general and specific actions. These actions include tourism. Especially important has been the recovery and tourist reuse of some symbolic buildings that, as landmarks, are located along the Canal. This has allowed a growing influx of visitors to the different museums, interpretation centers and tourist boats arranged around this historic hydraulic infrastructure.

The influx of tourists using tourist boats is quite uneven depending on the case. The highest figures are recorded in the section corresponding to the province of Valladolid (“Antonio de Ulloa” ship), reaching a number maintained close to 40,000 annual visitors in recent years and until the COVID pandemic that began in 2020. Since the pandemic, the data has dropped dramatically due to the closure of ship activity or capacity limitation. If in 2017 the total number of visitors rose to 37,321, in 2020 it fell to 5,726. In 2021 the visitor numbers have recovered, reaching a total of 13,262, although without fully recovering the pre-pandemic volume. In the latest annual data, 55.4% come from Castilla y León, especially the province of Valladolid. Next, the Community of Madrid stands out (for reasons of demographic weight and geographical proximity), with 15.8% of the total. From the rest of Spain, mainly from the regions of the Cantabrian Coast, 28.3% of users come and the remaining 0.5% corresponds to tourists from other European countries.

Somewhat lower are the data referring to visitors in the section of the province of Palencia (“Marqués de la Ensenada” and “Juan de Homar” ships), with figures constantly between 9,000 and 14,000 travelers in the years prior to the pandemic, and geographical patterns of origin of tourists like those already mentioned for the Valladolid branch. In 2020, obviously, the figures drop considerably due to the closure of resources and the significant capacity limitations, although in 2021 the influx recovers to reach an annual total of 13,328 between both vessels. It should be noted, in relation to the tourist use of resources, that the people who travel on the “Marqués de la Ensenada” ship regularly visit the Canal Interpretation Center located in Herrera de Pisuegra.

Apart from the official records of visits to boats and interpretation centers, there is a varied set of active tourism activities around the Canal, such as canoeing, although hiking and cycling are especially noteworthy. In this sense, it is also necessary to highlight the idea that the Canal is a kind of backbone in relation to wine tourism, since the Cigales Wine Route, in the southern section, is the only route of this type that runs through the Castilla Canal. The analysis of the 30 web pages of the wineries of the Cigales Denomination of Origin reveals that no information is offered on the Canal as a tourist resource in the wine region. There is specific information about other natural or cultural resources, such as monasteries, churches, and fortresses, but not about this patrimonial axis so deeply rooted in the territory. The Canal only appears listed as a cycling and hiking route on the Cigales Wine Route page, with a description of the route, municipalities through which it runs and reference to the Canal as a link with wine and a first-rate wine tourism resource. Visits to the wineries in the area could be an added stimulus to promote tourism around this work of engineering and an example of how to complement different tourist resources on the same territory.

Beyond the available resources, the possibilities of increasing tourism necessarily go through promoting the Canal as an intelligent tourist destination in which digitization plays a fundamental role. Since 2018, the Castilla Canal has been integrated into the Spanish Network of Smart Tourist Destinations. To date, it is the only set of industrial heritage included in this network, which represents a pioneering and exceptional singularity that could serve as a reference for other tourist destinations associated with the heritage of industrialization.

The analysis of the web pages of a series of organizations selected for their interest in relation to the Canal represents a valid approximation to verify the digitization achieved. A total of 14 different variables referring to the digital information considered most useful for the traveler have been previously established. The verification and measurement of the variables referring to the contents and the information available on the web pages is carried out through the so-called Web Presentation Index (IPW). This index, which ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 being zero compliance with the variables and 1 being maximum compliance, measures the percentage of compliance with the series of selected variables that each web page had in October 2021.

The general average of the fulfilled variables is 0.46, that is, 46%, which represents an insufficient level and clearly improvable. The variable with the highest compliance is the one referring to the presentation of content of interest, followed by attractive design and good content structure and the online promotion of other representative tourist places. Next, they highlight the access to multilingual information, the integrated presence in social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube...) and access to digital brochures in PDF or 3D models from photographs. The rest of the variables present very low values. The improvement of the analysis variables in the web pages with information on the Canal de Castilla should be considered an unavoidable task, and an objective for the increase in visits and the interactive participation of tourists with multimedia content.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

The Canal is a very interesting set of industrial heritage that offers many constructions of intense cultural value in the landscape of the extensive Castilian plains. The resources are abundant and of varied tourist use, although it is necessary to promote the Canal even more as a destination. It is one more way of economically and socially invigorating a territory intensely affected by depopulation and lack of opportunities. And, in addition, a way to preserve riparian ecosystems with strips of vegetation and high environmental values.

The goal of any tourism promotion must be to convert the space through which the Canal runs into an intelligent territory, creating actions that promote information and communication technologies as an active and suggestive means of linking with tourists. In short, it is about promoting tourism intelligence, taking the following as main actions: increase digitization in tourist offices, museums and interpretation centers located along the Canal; to create mobile tourist applications, as they already exist in other tourist places of industrial heritage in Spain and Europe; to implement Wi-Fi connection access points, as well as the necessary computer and communications infrastructure; and to generate relevant and interactive tourist content, as well as virtual and augmented reality in the

form of 3D images. Another measure that should be considered would be to generate digital tools aimed at the business sector. Smart tourism must not only seek to extend digital information to tourists, but also the complicity of private entities and companies to create a dense fabric of opportunities and promotion of available resources. All this accompanied, inexcusably, by energy efficiency models.