

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND TOURISM IN THE NATURAL PARKS OF ANDALUSIA: RESULTS AND CHANGE OF ORIENTATION

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades there has been an extraordinary expansion of protected natural areas in Spain, with a strong role of the figure of Natural Park (Mulero, 2017; EUROPARC, 2021). To a large extent, this expansion has been supported by the thesis that such a figure can be an important instrument for the sustainable development of large portions of less developed rural territories, especially mountain areas. (Troitiño, 1995; Maurín, 1999; Ojeda, 2000; Plaza, 2000; Larrubia *et al.*, 2001; Garayo, 2001). At the same time, tourism has established itself as one of the basic pillars of the socio-economic promotion strategies that are being applied in the numerous and extensive parks declared in the Spanish geography. (López y Marchante, 2011; Flores y Barroso, 2012; Moral, 2012; Cobo y Aparicio, 2014; Leco *et al.*, 2015; Rivera, 2010 y 2015; Mulero y Rivera, 2018; Leco y Mateos, 2021).

In this context, Andalusia, the first Autonomous Community in terms of protected area, has been a pioneer in the commitment to link protection, sustainable development, and tourism. In this region, the autonomous law of protected natural spaces of 1989 introduced in its articles the Sustainable Development Plan (PDS in Spanish), as a necessary complement to the two planning instruments regulated by the state framework law sanctioned only a few months before: The Plan for the Management of Natural Resources (PORN in Spanish) and the Master Plan for Use and Management (PRUG). This was due to them not providing a compensation or socio-economic promotion of the territories affected by the protection.

Hence, the link between the figure of Natural Park and the Sustainable Development Plan became, from its origins, in the differential and explanatory fact of the ambitious Andalusian protective policy (Mulero, 2001; 2018). So far, two successive generations of this type of regulation have been approved, the analysis of which is essential to assess the overall effectiveness of this regional initiative and, specifically, the role played by tourism in it.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

This research aims to unravel, in the first place, the relationship between Natural Parks and socioeconomic development in Andalusia through the general analysis of the main regional instrument designed for this purpose: sustainable development plans. Secondly, it aims to establish the real scope of tourism activity in such a context, exemplifying the state of the matter in the Natural Park of the *Sierras Subbéticas of Cordoba*.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed in this research has been based on the theoretical analysis of the link between protected natural areas, sustainable development, and tourism, through the diagnoses and results achieved by the Spanish reference bibliography. The next step was to contrast these theoretical foundations with their situation in practice, through the detailed evaluation of the two existing generations of Sustainable Development Plans of Andalusia, unraveling the methodology used in their elaboration, their objectives and the results achieved. Lastly, the previous general analysis has been illustrated and contrasted through an exceptionally representative case study: The Natural Park of the *Sierras Subbéticas* of Cordoba, which has made it possible to assess the specific weight of tourism activity in this type of development strategies, both in qualitative terms and in terms of economic investment and concrete results achieved.

## 4. RESULTS

The first Andalusian law of protected natural spaces was approved in 1989, and from that date a very expansive protective stage began in this Autonomous Community, unprecedented in Spain. Three decades later, 20% of the regional extension is protected by different state and regional figures —or 30% if the *Red Natura 2000*—. However, in the Andalusian context, natural parks are the protagonists in territorial terms since they cover 83% of the protected area (approximately 15,000 square kilometers).

In general, the spaces that have been delimited as a Natural Park are of considerable extension and have been conceived with the purpose of linking the conservation of the environment with the problems of socioeconomic development that afflict large rural areas. This is the main reason why 19 of the 24 existing Natural Parks in Andalusia are in the two large mountain ranges of the region (*Sierra Morena* and the *Cordilleras Béticas*), and that many of them include dozens of municipalities in their interior, affected in recent decades by a strong economic marginality and dependence on Community aid and subsidies, in addition to a clear depopulation.

The main strategy to achieve the previous objective has been the creation of specific Sustainable Development Plans for each Natural Park, in an attempt to boost the rural socio-economy and compensate the owners of the land and other local groups for the limitations that nature conservation has imposed on traditional agricultural uses.

In the last twenty years, two successive generations of this type of regulations have been approved in the Andalusian network of Natural Parks, with a clear change of ori-

entation. Its study has made it possible to assess the general meaning of this strategy, and, specifically, the role played by tourism activity within it, through the analysis of the process that occurred in the *Sierras Subbéticas* of Cordoba.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the first generation of Sustainable Development Plans in Andalusia was slow and complex; seventeen years (1989-2006) elapsed between the approval of the autonomous law of protected areas and the moment in which most of the parks in the region could have a regulation of this type. From the analysis carried out, it is concluded that these initial documents aspired to achieve excessively numerous and heterogeneous objectives — scarcely related to protection in many cases. For this reason, in their diagnoses they recommended measures as diverse as the enhancement of productive uses and related business activities, the valuation of natural and cultural heritage, the training of human resources, research for development and innovation, the improvement of infrastructures of all kinds, etc. And all this for all the municipalities that make up the area of influence of each park.

In relation to the specific weight of tourism in the development plans — analyzed in detail in the Natural Park of the *Sierras Subbéticas* — we have been able to establish the following conclusions:

1st. In qualitative terms, studies were carried out mainly on tourism supply and demand, and investments were applied in the improvement of some infrastructures and in specific promotional actions. However, the great structural shortcomings of the tourist activity in the area were not addressed: the lack of its own and differentiated tourist image, the marked seasonality, and the lack of a general strategy for tourism development.

2nd. In quantitative or investment terms, the actions specifically aimed at the tourism sector amounted to 5.7 million euros, equivalent to 2.7% of the total expenditure computed in this I First Plan of Sustainable Development (208.4 million euros), although it is estimated that some of those applied in other sectors have also been able to generate positive effects on the tourist dynamics of the territory.

3rd. The intervention of public bodies and entities in the application and financing of measures to promote tourism was absolutely dominant, in contrast to the practical absence of the private sector and local groups in the Natural Park. Their participation should have been much more important, in accordance with the inspiring principles of the regulation.

Two years after the completion and evaluation of the first document, the drafting of the II Plan of Sustainable Development of the *Sierras Subbéticas* (2011) was officially approved, although its preparation and official ratification has been delayed eleven years (January 2022). With this second generation of regulations, the difficulty posed by the drafting and processing of this type of instrument is once again confirmed. However, the really important issue is that the new regulations radically change their orientation and are aimed — at least at the theoretical level — at strengthening a social and productive culture of local development, with the integration and participation of local agents as the backbone of it; in short, the impulse to the active participation of the business and social actors of the territory in the strategic decisions contemplated for the area.

Lastly, it is verified that the tourism sector, in the case studied, plays a nuclear role in the II Sustainable Development Plan, which it did not achieve in the first. A change that is manifested in aspects as relevant as the constitution of a specific forum for the analysis of tourism, the central position that is granted in two of the six major General Objectives that articulate the Plan, and the fact that 25% of the Priority Actions to be developed in the coming years (ten of the forty strategies) are focused on tourism promotion.