

## EVOLUTION OF THE TOURIST FEATURES IN EL HIERRO (CANARY ISLANDS)

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The island of El Hierro is the smallest (278 km<sup>2</sup>), western and young of the Canary Islands. His coasts are abrupt, high, existing very few beaches, abounding the rocky coasts, the coves and some natural swimming pools.

It contains big landscape diversity, emphasizing his high percentage of protected territory (58,1% of the insular whole). From January 2001 it is a Reservation of the Biosphere (Man and Biosphere, MAB), for his big biodiversity, for the magnificent state of conservation of his natural spaces and for the survival of the traditional works (agriculture, cattle and fishing) without harming the preservation of his natural environment.

The island of El Hierro has at present a population of 10.753 habitants and his economy until the eighties decades she had been linked exclusively to the primary sector. The agricultural and cattle activities, first of all, and the fishing ones, in the second term, have been his principal productive occupations, until at the end of the previous century they entered slope, being replaced with the service industries, at present domineeringly in his economic structure, although with a scarce participation of the tourism and with a weight emphasized from the administration and the commerce.

There are different the reasons that explain the almost void intervention of the tourism up to recent periods in the economy of El Hierro. On the one hand, the scarcity of internal and external communications; for other, a negligible offer accommodation, commercial and of tourist equipments, along with the scarce morphologic conditions of his coast to offer the product (the sun and beach) domineeringly in the sector.

But even being these important questions, the factor of decisive development was the almost absolute absence of private and public capital that he was betting for promoting the sector. A limitation that is observed by facility at the time of putting in functioning the tourist machinery and in the configuration of a few minimal infrastructures in tourist matter.

Up to the decade of the 90s of last century, it is considered to be to the tourism an economically excellent but always forthcoming activity. Those that of some or another form they appreciate, in consonance with what it happened in other islands of Canaries, the tourism as an economic alternative to the situation of insular economic delay, recognize and they are sorry about the important lacks of infrastructures, the scarce financial

resources availability for his expansion and the void institutional support to the industry, situation not satisfactory at all for the achievement of this activity.

The first attempt of revitalizing the tourism in the island is fixed in the climate of national euphoria that supposed the first Development Plan in the period of the Dictatorship of Franco (1964). This one was thinking to the tourism as a decisive sector for the balance of the state balance of payments and a factor of economic development in slowed down areas how it was the island of El Hierro. Across the public investment works of tourist infrastructure are constructed with credits proceeding from the Department of Public Works and executed by the same department. Thus there spreads the Network of Accommodations of the State throughout the country. Thus the first tourist infrastructures were realized in the Island, the hostel of tourism and the national state-run hotel, which for different circumstances did not suppose the opening of this activity in the Island.

The 80s there are years of change in the economy of the island of El Hierro. In this decade, the Island stops being definitely an agricultural and cattle society, moving most of his population to the sector services and to the public works. A phenomenon of massive abandonment of the field that turned out to be compensated with the arrival of a lot of money proceeding from the share-out of the budgets of the Regional Government, of helps and investments proceeding from the European Union and from the circumstance that for the political stability of the Regional Government supposed the vote of his two deputies in the regional parliament, which political decisions were bringing straight economic compensations and investments for the Island.

To the heat of this state investing politics in the Island, highways were constructed, the sanitary attention was extended, they constructed themselves lookouts, beaches and natural swimming pools were conditioned, the spa was built in the Pozo de La Salud (Sabinosa) and the practical totality of the island managed to have the essential services of system of illumination, running water and phone. Now then, in spite of the undoubted progress, the analysis of the situation of the island of El Hierro from this decade is that of an absolute ruin of his traditional productive sectors and the maintenance of the standard of living of his inhabitants across a subsidies politics infrastructural canalized preferably by the first insular institution called Cabildo.

In spite of this investing increase, in the middle of the decade, the tourist offer kept on being deficient and lacking in the minimal services that this activity was demanding.

In this context of productive crisis there appears the tourism raised then like a need, linked to a situation of economic instability. There is assumed then a tourist strategy, based on the complementarity of the sector with the traditional activities of agricultural and fishing base. This consideration was turning to El Hierro in a model and singular tourist product.

The year 1997 is decisive for the strategy. This year, the Cabildo approves the so called Sustainable Development Project, a document that grows so that it serves as manual of how to act on the subject of socioeconomic development. From the tourist point of view, in the Project he competes for the so called «sustainable tourism» that he chooses to promote decisively the whole series of natural and rural values as quality mark of a tourist product for an alternative market to that of masses, with punctual strategies tending

to highlight aspects as the trekking, the sport of adventure, cultural activities, the health and the beauty.

The campaigns of promotion of this tourist typology he supposed a visitors' major inflow to the Island and, with them, the appearance of companies of services that were trying to cover the demand of free time and activities in the rural environment: houses of rural tourism, services to excursionists, companies of rent of bicycles, clubs of diving, of paragliding or equestrian, between others. Of equal form, to encourage and to face the inflow, the chapter programmed a few fixed activities of diffusion, like championships of paragliding, contest of submarine photo, etc.

In spite of the appreciative speeches, the tourist activity in this period journeyed between lights and shades. The internal reproaches are numerous, especially in aspects fix, like the protectionism and the offer of low intensity. In the first one of the cases, the conflict explodes when there are opposed the conservationist emulations, of a part, and the construction of tourist and residential infrastructures without order, typology and without adequacy to the town-planning regulation, of other one.

Also there are criticized the institutional campaigns carried out from the chapter, to increase the number of tourists who visit the Island and the politics of subsidies tending to the proliferation of the so called rural tourism.

With the recent approval of the Special Territorial Plan of Insular Tourism of El Hierro (2007), the Island enters a new stage as for his tourist evolution, after there makes this document possible the construction of a maximum of 2.500 squares accommodations until the year 2012.

For the Territorial Plan, the principal support of the tourist activity will be the insular landscape. In case of El Hierro, his image of scenery original and not denatured by an obsessive tourist development and the image of place to the margin of the vital noise of the contemporary societies convert it into the only offer. In this sense, there recognizes after himself as a virtue that the Island should have stayed to the margin of the tourist policy of economic development, since this way she remained preserved from the depredation of the coastal areas and has supported a series of values of one Canaries pretourist.

Likewise he competes for this image, one admits openly that the productivity and profitability of the primary sector is every time minor, due to the competition of gigantic nutritive transnational company that use practices of maximum development and minimal expense.

Also it is considered that the small farmer of El Hierro cannot compete with the multinationals of the food either and, according to the information, already generational relief does not take place in the field. It is thought that within a period of twenty years the farms will begin remaining godforsaken. Before this situation, the Territorial Plan of Tourism bets for considering to the agriculture as «the gardening of the tourism» and that these activities previously fundamental for his economy turn into decisive support to the tourist development, on having been keys for the maintenance of a certain landscape quality. There gives in, therefore, the consideration of the tourist activity as complementary of other productive activities.

The forecasts of tourist growth, gathered in the Territorial Plan of Tourism of El Hierro and his central sectorial bet like form of insular development, suppose a significant change

to what it had been his socioeconomic model. The offer and typology of accommodations, the construction of infrastructures as the golf course and diverse constructions in coastal and rural areas, they will consolidate a few rules of economic functioning, a few labour conditions, a social dynamics and a management of the soil, absolutely different from the rides from end until now in the Island.

The Territorial Plan promotes to very few kilometres of distance between them up to four points of tourist development, designed with criteria of professional hotels of hundreds of rooms. A typology that tries to make compatible the nature and the masses, the natural and social resources of a virgin island and the model golf course.

Let's remember that we speak about an island of only 278 Km<sup>2</sup>, something that is fundamental, since the scale of the project and the concentration of the tourist offer, in which also small hotels and urban pensions appear, specific hotels in the rural environment, hotels specializing in health, establishments of rural tourism, travellers' houses in the rural environment, small accommodations of nature «echoes or bio hostels» and camps of tourism, will end up by impressing the totality of the territory, the economy and the insular social life.

It is clear that the imitation of bosses of tourist development of the central islands, which proposes the Plan to us, is not a desirable strategy. The attraction of the island of El Hierro resides in his peculiarities in social and natural terms. More that to extend and to standardize the offer, it seems interesting to make use of the difference, as it happens in a marginal way in some Canary locations.