

TOURISM IN O INVERNADÉIRO NATURAL PARK. INHERITED SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES OF CHANGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is argued in this paper that tourism in protected areas of Galicia has received limited attention. Papers examining related topics do exist but have tended to assess the natural heritage and to examine the environmental impacts of tourism. However, no specific examinations of tourism planning and management in protected areas have been reported to date. In order to address this shortcoming, this paper specifically considers tourism governance in a natural park, in an attempt at looking beyond the natural resources of the nature reserve and the impacts caused by tourism in a given protected area. In order to do so, this paper focuses on O Invernadeiro area, protected since 1989 and designated a natural park in 1997. The paper, moreover, shows that regional development plans for broader areas including O Invernadeiro fail to consider this protected area specifically, which suggests that the park is considered of little tourist value for the surrounding spaces.

2. TOURISME IN PROTECTED AREAS

Considerable debate exists regarding the definition of concepts such as *wilderness tourism*, *natural area tourism*, *ecotourism*, *green tourism*, etc. Within most of these notions, however, protected spaces appear to be central and irrevocable elements for tourism. Yet, *tourism in protected spaces* is a very clear concept when it refers specifically to those spaces that have been designated as such, while the other concepts remain vague. This is particularly true of the *cultural* construction of the notion of *nature* (or *wilderness*), although today environmentalism has become such a strong movement that often this cultural construction is forgotten, ignored and, in many instances, even denied (Ojeda, 1999, 2006). For this reason, this paper prefers the concept of *tourism in protected spaces*, leaving to one side the *natural* nuance because of this imprecision.

A *protected space* is defined here in accordance with the EUROPARC-España (2008) framework: the definitions adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature

and the Convention on Biological Diversity must apply; the space must be designated as such by the appropriate tier of government (in the case of Spain, the region); and it must be integrated within the existing network of natural spaces.

Protected spaces are primarily established as a nature conservation measure. The designation of a particular area as protected normally means valuing the area in terms of the demands of tourism, although it has not been demonstrated that tourism increases following such a designation (Wall and Fredman, 2007). However, there are cases, both internationally and in Spain, where designation has been made in order to promote tourism (see Silva et al., 2009 for Andalusia). However, the creation of a natural park or other kind of protected space does not necessarily coincide with the implementation of a specific tourist policy. On the contrary, there is considerable evidence to show that once a protected space has been created a corresponding tourist policy is rarely forthcoming.

Based on discussions in Eagles, McCool and Haynes (2003), EUROPARC-España (2005) and Pascual (2007), the tourist organisation of natural parks is centred around three main areas: park infrastructure and facilities; programs and activities; and visitor flow regulation. These areas are examined in more detail below on the understanding that the governance of tourism in protected spaces is an expanding field of study (Hanna, Clark and Slocombe, 2008).

3. O INVERNADEIRO NATURAL PARK

O Invernadeiro Natural Park occupies nearly 60 km² of what is entirely public property. There is no population within the protected area, although in the past rural settlements did exist. This implies that a human presence has shaped the current natural park and the wilderness is not entirely natural. Most of the park is covered with heather, the outcome of recurrent fires before its designation. More than one sixth of the natural park is occupied by pine trees reforested by a private company (Papelería Española), also prior to designation. Following a particularly devastating fire in 1979 and the virtual collapse of the area's silviculture, Papelería Española sought to sell off its property. The eventual purchaser, five years later, was the Galician Government. Initially the land was declared a hunting reserve, and later designated a natural park. As defined in the literature (Buckley, 2000; Eagles, McCool and Haynes, 2003), public ownership might lead to a balanced management model combining wilderness conservation with the development of tourism

The Galician Government has developed a zoning framework that restricts public access to half of the park (declared a strict nature reserve or special protected zone in 1997). In the other half, access is by the express permission of the Government only.

The area surrounding the natural park is in a critical situation (Paül, 2009), with marked levels of depopulation and ageing. Economic activity is minimal and based on state retirement pensions. Agricultural activities are mainly marginal. Tourist activities have mostly been introduced thanks to public incentives, but any complementary offer is sadly lacking. Owing to these deficiencies, rural tourism in this area is limited to accommodation with no complementary tourist products to consume during a stay in the area. This means that tourists limit their visits to short periods of time since there

is little for them to do despite the potential resources, primarily natural, which could be transformed into tourist products.

4. TOURISM ORGANISATION

4.1. Visitor flow regulation

Since 1990 it has only been possible to visit O Invernadeiro Natural Park with a permit issued by the Government. The number of visitors is restricted to 30 a day, while this is raised to 50 on public holidays and at weekends. This highly restrictive policy clearly limits tourist enjoyment of the area and tourist operators working in the areas near the natural park consider it excessively strict. Indeed, the few tourist operators that exist take it upon themselves to fill out their customers' applications for permits to the natural park so that tourists do not have to waste their time on unnecessary red tape.

An additional 50 children a day are allowed to visit the park on an education program, the infrastructure and monitors for which are supplied and maintained by the Government. Thus the park provides an environmental education facility in an activity that very much resembles a summer camp for Galician school children, albeit that they are organised during the school year – primarily in spring as winter temperatures can drop very low in the park – and are free.

Although the theoretical potential is approximately 30,000 visitors per year, figures rarely rise above 3,000. Thus, fears of excessive tourist pressure would appear unfounded, especially as one third of all visitors are enrolled on the environmental education programme, and as such are not actual tourists.

4.2. Park infrastructure and facilities

Within the natural park, infrastructure is minimal and that which does exist is mainly devoted to the environmental education program. The main facility is the 56-bed public lodge where educational camps are organised and visitors can apply to spend the night. A network of trekking routes has recently been developed in the zone where access is allowed, but it is underutilised given the paucity of visitors.

Several projects are underway to introduce new infrastructure and facilities within and around the park, but most of them are poorly defined and some of the facilities that have been built currently stand empty. Worse still, a number of these projects would appear to overlap and seek to develop the same common places.

4.3. Programs and activities

Available human resources are scarce. Monitors for the education programmes are externally subcontracted. The main, and only real, programme is the environmental education scheme, but there is no real framework for public use activities and programs.

5. FUTURE EXPECTATIONS IN VIEW OF THE DESIGNATION OF QUEIXA-SAN MAMEDE NATURAL PARK: A REFLECTION

For a number of years, the possibility has existed of a larger natural park (the Queixa-San Mamede Mountains) being designated which would include O Invernadeiro. This would have obvious implications for the management and planning model currently being implemented in O Invernadeiro. As such, O Invernadeiro could either become a strict natural reserve or, alternatively, the gateway to the rest of the new natural park. If we take a broad sustainable development perspective, the latter option would seem to be better as long as it could facilitate the social and economic appropriation of the area and the implementation of a sustainable tourist model. In this way the park could break from the strict natural conservation model implemented to date. Although protected spaces should be primarily devoted to the protection of nature, sustainability clearly means a consideration of the park's social and economic dimensions as well.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The practice of maintaining the same management model since 1990 – the conditions of which were reinforced when the area was designated a natural park in 1997 – has led to an obvious shortcoming: plans to prevent future congestion have resulted in highly restricted terms of access to the natural park. The number of visitors is extremely small and clearly well below the park's capacity. The only activity organised within the park is the schools' education program and this fails to contribute economically to the areas surrounding the park as it is an isolated activity that does not create any economic links.

New tourism strategies are required, based on environmental-friendly principles, so that the park can constitute a complementary offer for rural tourism in the wider area. These strategies should begin by relaxing access restrictions that are detrimental to visitor flows. This does not mean a lifting of all restrictions, but rather attempts should be made to find a more acceptable balance between nature conservation and tourist exploitation. This might even involve the organisation of carefully regulated activities within the strict nature reserve, which is the most attractive area in terms of the beauty of its landscape and which is currently out of bounds to visitors.

The plans for the new larger natural park of Queixa-San Mamede Mountains – reportedly to include O Invernadeiro – seem to represent a good opportunity for redefining tourism in this area. First, a clear strategy for planning and managing the natural park needs to be established as this would greatly facilitate decision making, in particular as regards the building of new facilities and infrastructure. In addition, this strategy would need to take into consideration all cultural interventions that have shaped the protected space so that the area is no longer seen solely in terms of its 'pristine wilderness'. This human presence (primarily the silviculture, seen not only in terms of the pine forests but also the area's industrial heritage) makes this natural park distinct from many of Galicia's other natural areas and, as such, represents an extremely interesting added value that has obvious consequences for tourism.

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