

RENEWAL AND RESTRUCTURING OF CONSOLIDATED COASTAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS: RECREATIONAL PRACTICES IN THE EVOLUTION OF TOURIST SPACE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The transformations occurred in the tourism market along with the actual evolution and life cycle of tourist destinations and the resulting obligation for the demand-receiving spaces to adapt to the new global demands justify the need to discuss ways to work for the renewal of those coastal tourist destinations which find themselves in a situation of consolidation. Firstly, from a theoretical and analytical perspective, it is advisable to deal with the evolution cycle of destinations as a framework to interpret their current situation together with their need for adaptation and renewal. Secondly, from an applied and propositional perspective, the aim is to analyse the renewal strategies already undertaken by destinations in the regional and local context.

Despite the clichés associated with sun-and-beach tourism and with its consolidated destinations or those in a maturity phase, these territories constitute essential pieces in the international tourism framework which is under constant and complex reshaping. The contribution made by these destinations to receiving tourism in Spain (AECIT, 2009) as

1 The present paper forms part of the research project CSO-00613 MICINN, National R&D&I Plan, about Renewal of consolidated coastal tourist destinations, which is carried out within this Institute and counts on the participation of researchers from the universities of Valencia (Geography Dept.) and Jaume I of Castellón (Tourism Planning Laboratory). The project seeks to provide a new framework of analysis for the evolution of tourist destinations from a critical assessment of the tourist area life cycle and the examination of three case studies devoted to coastal destinations in the *Comunidad Valenciana* [Valencian Autonomous Region]: Benidorm, Gandia and Benicassim.

well as to development on a local and regional scale —without forgetting the tensions that they generate on a territorial level and the uncertainty about their future— turns them into research objects of undeniable interest. But this analysis cannot be confined to an exclusive sectorial and tourism-related dimension, as the most operational ways of work must be faced from a global perspective in accordance with the paradigm of sustainability, granting special importance to social agents, both from the point of view of the perception about the destination and regarding the identification of the needs and priorities for renewal. This is an approach which connects with the concept of governance where all the agents must have benefits and responsibilities and tries to promote the application of local innovative and participative planning and management instruments.

One can make out a new scenario which goes beyond the recurrent debate upon the sun-and-beach tourism model, since consolidated coastal destinations face difficulties to adapt to the tourism scenario which define the new demand trends associated with the cultural change of postmodernism, which have their replica in the supply's theoretical evolution towards post-fordism. In this context, some theoretical approaches, such as the tourist area life cycle theory, defend a certain determinism which supposedly confirms the unavoidable decline of mature Mediterranean destinations.

New analytical and propositional frameworks adapted to the situation and specificity of Spanish consolidated destinations can make it easier to know the evolution of tourist spaces from the geography of tourism through the provision of theoretical models and empirical analyses regionally and locally.

This perspective of analysis exceeds merely descriptive approaches to become a support tool for planning that can additionally be applied on consolidated coastal destinations seeking to encourage intervention strategies and tools within the process of tourist area renewal. This need is widely recognised by public and private agents before the negative effects that would be triggered by a decrease in the financial and social profitability of the country's most important tourist destinations and its relevant consequences on a territorial and environmental scale.

Nevertheless, the preliminary analysis about the reality of destination spaces reveals that the real estate-tourism-based logic still prevails in their development, whereas the actions undertaken both from the public and from the private sector only respond partially to the reshaping process that is currently taking place in the tourism scenario and to the emergence of new destination-market relationships (Yeoman, 2008). It can equally be seen that the analytical instruments used to plan and manage tourism development show evident limitations to encourage and favour a better medium-term destination-market and, above all, to guarantee sustainable tourism development.

Among the different analysis dimensions and work scales derived from the restructuring of tourist destinations, the present paper specifically focuses on the renewal of receiving spaces taking as a reference the role performed by recreational activities.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper has been carried out within the framework of the theories about the **evolution of tourist destinations**. From the precedents with English destinations, this issue has

received attention, above all from the 1970s onwards, when this research lines emerged strongly with various contributions by authors such as L. Turner and J. Ash (1975), J.M. Thurot (1974), S. Plog (1973) or J.M. Miossec (1977), which usually had a critical orientation that sought to emphasise the predominance of mass tourism as the final stage in the evolution of destinations and the risk that this entails in order to maintain their initial appeal. Among these papers stands out for its later repercussion the article “The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: implications for the management of resources” (Butler, 1980). This is a concept which, despite its great simplicity and its relatively scarce conceptual ‘scaffolding’, has become not only a reference model to describe the evolution processes which tourist destinations go through but also the most debated and commented-upon contribution (Vera *et al.* 1997). The recent publication of two contributions dedicated to this theory (Butler 2006a; 2006b) gives evidence of the interest and controversy which it still raises, the initial proposal having been enriched and its limitations highlighted by later theoretical contributions and case studies.

We put forward situations which, from a conceptual point of view, permit to speak about declining tourist destinations, defined as those which own some tourist tradition but are characterised by following one or several negative patterns related to the decrease in the flow of visitors, the deterioration of the elements which defined the quality of the destination, the difficulties to guarantee a sustainable tourism or the influence of exogenous factors (TNO Inro, 2002). This is a broad, imprecise definition with indicators that not always reflect a structural type of decline, and it additionally fails to give a solution to the complex issue of specifying the threshold from which a decline situation starts to occur. However, the identification of decline with factors related to development sustainability, and not exclusively to sectorial aspects, represents an interesting contribution which reinforces the thesis according to which an environmental crisis can also become a tourism crisis with an unquestionable economic and social scope in destinations highly specialised in this activity. On the other hand, as is pointed out by Agarwal (2005), the signs of decline are the consequences and what matters most is to know the causes.

In short, this paper suggests the need to perform a **critical review of the different models and evolutionary theories** about the tourist space, and particularly of Butler’s tourist area life cycle theory. The aim is essentially to combine the basic tourism magnitudes (supply and demand) with the changes in the territorial and socioeconomic structure, an integrated analysis insufficiently developed in evolutionary models with a sectorial bias and, generally, with a single explanatory variable (number of tourists). It becomes especially relevant to deal with the so-called ‘stagnation’ and ‘decline’ phases, the name and meaning of which are rethought by means of a different nomenclature: ‘recessive’ and ‘structural crisis’ situations. An innovation in Spain is introduced within this context, namely the consideration of hypothetical post-tourism phases which can affect certain tourist spaces as a result of a change in their functionality and economic specialisation.

The construction of **sustainability indicators** is regarded as an essential part of this project insofar as they permit to measure the evolution of the destination from an overall perspective and assess the renewal and structuring actions from the point of view of sustainability. It is worth highlighting the importance of indicators as instruments which

facilitate tourist destination planning, management and control, always bearing in mind the precautionary principle, a key aspect within the perspective of ecological economics (Aguilera, 1994). The applying work team has been involved in the recent scientific production dedicated to tourism sustainability indicators (Vera, 2001; Vera and Ivars, 2003), a line of work which awakes the interest of different research groups in Spain (Blázquez *et al.*, 2002; Sancho *et al.*, 2001; Pulido and Rengifo, 2009) and abroad (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005; Ko, 2005), in addition to which it has given rise to recent institutional initiatives both nationally (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, 2003) and internationally (WTO, 2004). In general, consolidated destinations have intensified the real estate-tourist growth dynamics within a favourable context (Navarro, 2006) despite having had at their disposal various planning instruments supposedly committed to sustainability, such as the Agendas 21 or the Tourist Excellence Plans.

In a nutshell, the analysis of destination evolution, generally by means of descriptive models, has been **excessively** separated from intervention strategies. It is consequently necessary to move ahead towards an analytical framework, with a territorial and not merely sectorial perspective that can be used to interpret the growing complexity of consolidated destinations and establish the foundation for restructuring proposals that effectively incorporate the principles of sustainable tourism development.

III. EVOLUTION OF THE COSTA BLANCA TOURIST DESTINATION

The study analyses the interventions which have been made lately in mass tourism destinations located along the Spanish coastline, special attention being paid to tourist destination regeneration actions on the basis of the development of new recreational formulas for tourism. It is essential to know the strategies followed both by the public sector and by private enterprises which lead to the creation of new offers and tourist-recreational services. These strategies respond to the complexity and diversity of segments in the market.

An empirical analysis is incorporated into the study that focuses on recreational practices as an argument for the renewal of the tourism system in the Costa Blanca (Alicante) because it exemplifies how this region has been shaping a network of recreational infrastructures which suits the tourism model to which it is complementary. Since the initial phases of tourism development, this has been a receiving space characterised by the unceasing, continuous production of new urban-tourist areas through the construction of supply, mainly in the accommodation area. This recreational system was initially characterised by the creation of an indistinct supply which grew stronger thanks to the impulse given by tourist demand and under the control exerted over visitor arrival flows by the major tourist operators.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, and in the context of the new motivations of consumers and the resulting appearance of differentiated tourist segments during a stage of maturity as a tourist destination, business strategies and public policies have favoured and driven —to a greater or lesser extent— the development of new offers and more diversified and specialised leisure services. On the other hand, there are two aspects in this process that one cannot lose sight of, namely, the influential role played by the social and economic improvements which

affect the national market itself —a key element for the dynamics of this destination— and the way in which new groups of leisure consumers are emerging to favour the creation of a supply that is less dependent on the seasonal consumption of tourism and, therefore, with greater viability for the new leisure consumption formulas. One case of special interest is the town of Benidorm, the best known and most significant example both by its urban development and by the effects of tourism on its economic and sociodemographic structure. It represents the coastal mass tourism destination *par excellence*, with a high percentage of international demand (nearly three million tourists and 10.6 million overnight stays in 2008) and a considerable volume of formal regulated supply (39,559 hotel beds and 17,310 beds in tourist apartments). Ever since the 1960s, the town's image has been associated with a tall building typology which has shaped an urban plot where density, verticality and concentration are the most outstanding features. From the beginning of this decade, the growth of independent tourism, the commercialisation on the Internet and the effect caused by low-cost airlines, have meant remarkable changes in the traditional tourism production modes imposed by the system of tour-operators, with various consequences. Whereas the renewal operations undertaken following regional initiatives have failed to obtain the expected results, the lines implemented by some firms and hotel chains within the framework of the evolution of tourism business modalities are materialising in new orientations which seek to ensure this destination's competitiveness.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The impact caused by the new market trends on consolidated tourist destinations, along with the actual life cycle of these destinations, creates the need to propose and undertake renewal processes in these tourist concentration nuclei located along the Spanish coast, just as it is happening or has happened in many other international tourist areas. This need has been recognised from different public and private institutions as a result of the actual tourist destination evolution and is supported on analyses and reports about the situation that they are experiencing. Numerous experts have been insisting on the need to reach this stage through a set of measures oriented to the renewal of a group of destinations which have acted as receiving areas for demand flows for more than forty years now. It is a process which, on the basis of different theoretical approaches and working methodologies, highlights the complexity and variety of factors that intervene in the renewal and restructuring of mature destinations: market trends, urban development proposals, environmental aspects, business models, and destination image, amongst others. Therefore, this type of initiatives requires the use of methodologies which should be based on the new contributions of scientific-technical knowledge and not be confined to a sectorial-tourist approach.

The analysis of the tourism environment and the current change dynamics becomes a special element in order to explain the evolution of destinations and face the renewal policies. The basic information for the renewal processes must reflect both the perspective of the international markets of origin and the actual evolution of internal (domestic) tourism in Spain.

As for the working lines implemented by public administrations, they have included — for a few years and on various spatial scales — intervention policies which promote financial aids to favour the development of processes in the areas of strategic planning, management and improvement of competitiveness in these tourist destinations. However, we still miss the existence of an analysis and interpretation framework suited to the problem mentioned, as well as a global view of actions based on the complexity itself that the concept of ‘tourist destination’ has. In fact, the result of the application of the main planning instruments in consolidated coastal tourist areas shows inadequacies, dispersion and lack of coordination: municipal urban development planning, instruments used in the organisation of the territory, environmental protection plans and tools, sectorial (master, strategic, tourism excellence) plans and local Agendas 21, amongst others, highlight the need to undertake global actions from the spatial scale represented by the tourist destination.

When it comes to suggest new working tools, the focus must always be on the use which derives from the creation of indicator systems —based on the work carried out in pilot destinations— which permits to: make progress in such objectives as reinforcing the overall approach as opposed to approaches focused on environmental or sectorial-tourist aspects; identify the effects caused by the destination on its immediate and global environment (ecological footprint); integrate the social and tourism-related perception into the assessment of tourism development levels and into renewal strategies through the use of easily intelligible indicators; provide information about the destination’s evolution; and finally quantify and evaluate the effects of renewal and restructuring processes from the point of view of sustainability.

Thanks to case studies on a local scale, the empirical application is sufficiently representative of the situation that consolidated sun-and-beach destinations are going through. The theoretical and methodological approaches are thus contrasted using the case-study technique. In this way, it has been possible to check how the incorporation of the recreational side —from the destination’s initial take-off phase to the current moment of consolidation and maturity— contributes to the renewal and restructuring of an emblematic destination on the Spanish coast through the progressive integration of infrastructures and leisure and recreation services, along with the increasingly high appreciation of resources and non-conventional heritage within the model of coastal tourism.

The actions related to the regeneration/reactivation of destinations by means of recreational practices appear as just another element within the wide range of interventions which can prove helpful during this new stage, although this dimension on its own does not suffice to achieve true overall renewal strategies. This is how it becomes clear that a destination’s capacity to undertake real renewal and restructuring processes must be based on the coordinated integration of urban renewal as well as environmental and landscape management, together with actions oriented toward modernisation and changes in this type of tourism and leisure establishments and services, these being the factors which jointly shape the explanatory elements of overall renewal.

These processes have revealed inertias within the conventional tourism system which hinder changes, along with an evident lack of coordination between public initiatives and business operations. Therefore, the management of changes in consolidated coastal destinations requires, as a premise, a renewal of the government structures and systems in

the territory and the generation of a public-private collaboration framework, since advanced tourism management is one of the keys that will permit to face restructuring.

Above all, the case study highlights the persistence of dynamics that cling on to real estate production, to which different agents still attribute the role of 'tourist cycle drivers', despite the already-known negative effects and its numerous contradictions. It suffices to check how a large part of the new recreational equipment is created as an excuse to keep favouring the indistinct growth of the accommodation supply instead of adopting true strategies meant to achieve a qualified renewal.

