

RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN. STRATEGIES GUIDELINES FOR A DEVELOPING TIPOLOGY

Juan Ignacio Pulido Fernández and Pablo J. Cárdenas García

Departamento de Economía. Universidad de Jaén

Rural tourism has experienced in Spain, during the first decade of this century, a period of extraordinary growth. There are several factors which together have contributed to the development of this form of tourism: increased interest in the environment, new motivations of the tourist, and the administration's commitment to tourism as a tool to transform rural society, *inter alia*.

However, this growth process has not been characterized for following a set pattern, but rather, is configured as an anarchic process that have not previously set some basic criteria in the design process, not even by the administration, which has resulted in significant legal or environmental problems that still remain unresolved. Also during the phase of introduction and development of the product, the rural tourism has been perceived as a magic solution to the problems of rural society, which has lead to the development of projects without any prior planning and whose only *raison d'être* was the common belief that would help solve the problems of the population in these rural areas.

Experts believe passed the stage of introduction and development of rural tourism, characterized by an average occupancy reaching eighteen percent in 2010, high levels of seasonality in certain periods of the year (Easter, Summer and Christmas), a Unknown considerable and unregulated supply, mostly national demand, a peculiar and reduce cost structure and a very weak position in the traditional source markets of this demand. Currently, has started a new period in which all stakeholders perceive the need to respond with an adequate process for planning and coordinating the development of tourism.

In this context, this paper pretends on one hand to analyze the current situation of rural tourism in Spain, in quantitative and qualitative terms, on the other hand, to establish a proposal to guide action towards good governance of this type of tourism in Spain, in order to promote competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

In response to the first objective, despite the period of growth experienced by rural tourism in the last decade, it is a typology still emerging that has not consolidated its production structure, there are no land marks with sufficient strength in markets (especially international), does not have proper distribution channels to the particular characteristics of

this type of business, and is not able to maintain minimum volumes of tourist flows with specific motivations.

It also highlights the existence of an offer that is growing, although it is very fragmented, is medium small, poorly professionalized and that, with few exceptions, has still very generic products throughout the Spanish territory on the other hand. The demand for rural tourism is also growing, albeit at a slower pace, so have reduced the average stay and the occupancy rate during the last decade in Spain.

However, the development of rural tourism has not followed a uniform process throughout the Spanish territory, as there are important differences when analyzing rural tourism of each regions, which suggests that the actions of the different regional administrations has not followed a common pattern. That is why there is a different growth rate between different regions of Spanish territory.

Regarding the second objective proposed in this paper, apart from a thorough review of the literature, we have used a qualitative analysis technique, the Focus Group, which, thanks to its flexibility and versatility, has facilitated the interaction of a group of experts, allowing a holistic and strategic view about the main issues in this research.

Also, at the time of establishing guidelines or recommendations in the planning and development of the tourist activity, we have identified the strategic priorities of rural tourism in Spain, and the key elements of good governance of rural tourism in this country. The exploratory study, conducted under a structured and systematic approach, has led to capture a set of ideas put forward by different experts, which gives soundness to the final results.

Of all the strategic guidelines that are part of this agenda for action, it is worth noting the five identified by experts with a broader consensus. These are not necessarily the most important issues, but these are those for which implementation does not seem to debate, given the high agreement among all stakeholders. It is understood, therefore, they can be the pillars that support from the start moving towards a new model for the Spanish rural tourism management, based on good governance for tourism. These five key issues are the following:

- Diversifying the rural tourism product.
- Improving the skills of entrepreneurs and workers.
- Generating market intelligence.
- Adjust the supply growth of demand generation.
- Coordination of regional policy for the homogenization of the supply.

In this regard, this paper presents the strategic lines of a new governance in rural tourism for Spain, as understood by experts, based on three assumptions: i) the achievement of a sustainable development of the Spanish rural tourism which respects the signs area's identity and ensure the local use of tourism revenues, enhancing, simultaneously, the environmental values of these areas, ii) the coordination of sectorial policies that affect tourism development in rural areas, and iii) the rigorous knowledge of the various rural tourist areas, at least in regard to macroeconomic issues, the analysis of tourism supply and demand, the behavior of tourist flows and relevant figures, and relationships, synergies and differences that occur between the different actors involved in the process.

The rural tourism in European countries with the longest tradition is increasingly complex and diverse, it has gone past from a first stage starring by accommodation to a second which started giving importance to the food, and a third characterized by specialization supply in specific segments of demand, in which agriculture (especially in the territories in which it was hardly competitive) is a recreational resource (in many cases in terms of teaching) which promotes a holistic experience of tourists during their visit to rural areas. The proposals in this research will contribute to Spain follows this same process, as proposed at the beginning of this article, promoting competitiveness and long-term sustainability of this tourism typology.

