

ANALYSIS OF THE DEMAND OF THE PUBLIC USE IN THREE NATURAL PARKS OF GALICIA (SPAIN)

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This article takes its starting point the Author's Doctoral Thesis, there is realized a diagnosis of the state of the public use in the seven Protected Natural Parks in Galicia with category of both (Natural and Protected Parks) and, it also states a series of future proposals of action based on the results obtained in the diagnosis already mentioned. It has taken into account the study and the diagnosis of the demand of the visitors who come to visit these Natural Protected Parks, people who visits these places to know them and to enjoy them in direct contact with nature. The study of the demand, nevertheless, has limited itself only to three parks that will be further mentioned.

The work begins with the central concept **Public Use**. It has been taken the concept proposed by the organism EUROPARC-Spain based on the wide existing consensus between academicians and professionals agents with regard to its validity and wise move. This concept, in essence, indicates that the public use is constituted by concrete activities and services that must be supported by a few equipments that allow to offer and develop them appropriately, elements that in turn must be supported by a few specific programs that would take in advance charge of their design, following a series of criteria close related to the characteristics of the Natural Protected Park and the type of public use that wants to be implanted. At the same time, these elements (services and activities) must be provided for the Public Administration in charge of the protected space independently of whom in charge of managing them. The main purpose of the Public Use, always following this definition, would be that of approaching the visitors to their natural and cultural richness so that they could enjoy them and, at the same time, learn about the environment. This approaching must not put at risk neither the visitors nor the environment. That is why, to achieve this outcome, the information, the education and interpretation of the Patrimony must be used as extremely powerful tools.

The following section deals with the Methodology and the tools of Investigation. The bibliography used is taken as starting point, in which it has been looked for and analyzed previous study works related to the visitors of Natural protected Spaces. From it a methodology of work is extracted both qualitative and quantitative, where two basic tools are used:

- a) Collection and analysis of statistical and descriptive information data concerning the volume and origin of the visitors obtained from the Memoirs of Management and/or similar documents.
- b) Opinion polls made to the visitors of three Natural Parks selected due to their different characteristics; they are: Monte Aloia (Park of peripheral urban use), Fragas do Eume (well preserved forest ecosystem) and, Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés (Space of average mountain, deeply rural and frontier)

The information extracted from the Memoirs does not allow to know the entire volume of visits of the parks, but they do help to realize an approach to the temporary evolution of the influx of visitors as inter-annual level (if the number of visits tends to grow or to decrease) as monthly (in what months of the year do there usually are more visitors). It is so a study more quantitative than qualitative that has undoubted utility to know the general frame of the volume of visits.

For the most part, the questionnaire takes as a last function to do an approach to the current demand of public use of the Natural Protected Galician Spaces that goes beyond the simple numbers of influx gathered by the parks. It is tried to do here a quantitative study where there is stated, as far as possible, the type of visitor who comes to the Natural Parks that are object of study here, This work in synthesis investigates on the motives of the visit, the visited places, the realized activities and, the opinions and sensations that the visit leaves. Also, the habitual and necessary sociological framing (genre, age, profession, place of origin, etc.).

The questionnaire has been based on the studies that the proper Natural Protected Space usually realize and in the previous ones compiled in the bibliography, designing a final questionnaire of twenty-six questions. It was previously tested and checked to verify its good functioning. Therefore, some extra adjustments were finally made. The final poll was carried on in the pinpoint places of major influx in the parks mentioned before, to do it, it was chosen the Summer season for being the one that reaches major quantity of visits (summer of 2005, 2006 and, 2009), there were chosen also other times of the year of minor visitor's influx to detect possible changes in the type of visitor for example, (Easter 2006 in Fragas do Eume, Fall season 2005 and 2006 in Monte Aloia and Xurés). Another previous way of great importance was to establish the number of polls to carry on with. So, it was necessary to divide the number of the polled population (all the visitors registered in the three parks) and from there, to pick a significant sample. Nevertheless, an obstacle existed: the entire volume of real visitors is not known exactly. There are only references of the number of visitors who visited the Interpretation Centres and only represent an unknown portion of the whole amount. For cases like this one, experts recommend to apply non probably samplings where it is not necessary to know the entire volume of the polled population. This way, the final sample of polls reached 147 in Fragas do Eume, 127 in Monte Aloia and 95 in Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés.

Next, the text goes into a rapid and schematic vision of the three Natural Parks in which the study has been realized. In its moment, the three parks were selected for their deep marked differences, it helped to face in advance different scenarios about the demand of public use. Monte Aloia is a natural protected space of reduced proportions, it is constituted by a mount of a planned repopulation of trees in the beginnings of the XIX century, and there

are mostly pine trees. Although in certain sectors of the forest they are mixed with other species of trees. It is strategically located like a balcony on a final stretch of the river Miño and, very close to the city of Vigo, its area of influence is a space for leisure and play-time activities for the nearby inhabitants who value it for being a place for walking and recreation, a place similar to an urban park. Also, the symbolic and legendary value of Monte Aloia is very important, contributing to the cultural richness of the region. For the foreign visitors this place is a privileged viewpoint, over viewing the cities of Tui and Valença do Minho that are spread along the foot of it. Taking into consideration its target purpose, it is well provided with resting areas and snack bars.

Fragas do Eume is one of the remarked emblems of the Galician nature. It protects the average high and low valley of River Eume where there is situated one of the Atlantic forests better preserved in Europe. Its bucolic natural environment and its proximity to important tourist centres such as: A Coruña, Miño and Sada has turned it into a natural park much visited by people of the whole Spain, they come to it for its cultural richness well appreciated in the Monastery of Caaveiro which, is buried deep in a hill surrounded by a dense forest in the heart of the park and, it is another of the park's great attractions.

Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés is a relatively extensive mountainous natural park that protects a stretch of the mountain ranges of Galicia, bounded by Portugal to the west where the park continues like an extension of the Galician one. It is named Park Peneda-Gerês in the nearby country. It is enhanced by its abrupt morphology sculpted in granite, thermal waters (a spa and large puddles outdoors) and its huge historical and cultural richness also highlights the visit to the park there can be seen still Roman remains in some places like Via Nova, roman thermal baths, mile-stones and roman camps.

Next section deals with the empirical analysis of the public use demand in these natural protected spaces. In the three parks previously studied, we have started to analyze the information registered in the Memoirs of public use, for continuing to get into the study of the polls made to the visitors and it reached the following result:

1- Monte Aloia: The Memoirs of public use show some fluctuating total numbers of visitors, without marking clear tendencies of increasing or decreasing. The most relevant thing is the monthly share-out of the number of visits; the major numbers are registered in summer and Easter. During the whole year there is also a great number of visits though. The visits organized by institutions and education centres are more appreciated in the season of spring, in coincidence with the end of the current course and also, the arriving of good weather conditions. The number of visitors from the nearby places and the whole province is very high; it highlights how important the park is for their leisure activities in direct contact with nature. A highly number of visitors from the whole Spain registered there plays a great role.

The polls show us a portrait of the visitors that confirms his gregarious and idle character predicted earlier. So that, **to contemplate the landscape** reached a 23,4 per cent of the polled people, **to know better the zone**, 22,7 per cent, **to wander around and stay calmed**, 16,9 per cent, **to spend the whole day in the country**, 14,9 per cent. These are the most relevant reasons expressed by the visitors. Meanwhile, **to wander around and stay calmed** (45 %) is the captivity that liked the most to a great number of visitors. It is awesome to know that in this park, the people polled show a very good opinion about it, the majority of them did not

mention any bad outspoken critic or disappointment (57,1 %). This result shows an excellent management, as well as the service given by its different recreational facilities and, offers a general satisfaction of the visit which is the highest one compared to the other parks studied (4.6 of a maximum 5 points), the origin of the visitors is related to the official data, with a high representation of the nearby places although, there is an increasing number of people coming from other distant places of Spain.

2- *Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés*: The official information registered of this park should be taken with caution because the centre of visitors is not located in the vicinity of it, neither it is placed in the straight way to the park, that is why, the amount of visitors registered the files is not reliable. It is interesting to say that the number of visits increases during Summer and visitors from Galicia play an important role, as well as visitors coming from other areas of the country and the neighbour Portugal. The closure of one of the information bureaus in the border with Portugal decreased the average numbers of visitors. The polls were made in the surroundings of the hotel-spa named *Rio Caldo*, a well visited place. Therefore, there is nothing unusual about that after checking the item: to wander around and stay calmed, an average of 28 per cent was obtained among the other items in the poll. Taking relaxing baths in the river, as well as in the spa reached a 28 %, they are indeed the most important motives for the visit. The item that asks about: wandering around and being calmed is repeated in this location, stating that it is the heading one among the rest items, 29,4 %. It is followed by other bathing activities carried out in the river and in the spa with a 24 %. The study stated that the need for relaxing is what has liked the most, the same occurred to the questions related to nature, showing a 21,5 %, landscape 15,7 %, and calmness offers a 15 %. The study states also that a great amount of people did not show an specific dislike (42 %). The most relevant thing found in the study of this park deals with the opinions about the satisfaction of the visitors when using the diverse equipments (3,7 – 4,09 % of 5), measuring the lowest marks among the three parks. This situation was seen during the field-work where we had the chance to face civic activities performed by some visitors like: parking the vehicles out of the parking areas, the disposal of waste out of the bins, making barbecues where it is not permitted, etc. All this helps to deteriorate the environment and therefore, the good image of the natural protected space. We do think that the managers should take decisive decisions to solve these problems as soon as possible. The visitors registered here come generally from Galicia and Portugal, just a few come from other places of Spain.

3.- *Fragas do Eume*: Studying the *Memoirs of public use* it was well noticed that this park has become an icon to visit to in Galicia. It is a curiosity to see the constant increase of the number of people who visit it, people coming from different places of Spain, specially from Madrid, Crowds of visitors come in Summer and Easter, too. This panorama has been completely seen in every poll made to the visitors from the places mentioned above. On one hand, nature has a great impact in the decision of the visitors to come to this park that get to fall in love with it. That is why, the answer of the people about the item related to stare at the natural scenario, reached a 31,4 per cent, the highest among the rest of the aspects checked in the poll. There are three other aspects which answer equals a 23 per cent. They are: to enjoy looking at the landscape, to wander around and to visit any historical monument. But, one of

the things that highlights indeed the visit to the park is the Monastery of Caaveiro itself, it was built in a rocky hill in the middle of the wood and it is considered, for the majority of the visitors, the final destination of the visit. In the poll, the triangulation formed among river, forest and monastery is what the visitors enjoy the most, the results obtained show this very clear, the answers checked related to nature reached a 24,5 %, the ones related to the wood a 19,3 % and the other ones related to the river a 18,4 % but, the Monastery of Caaveiro is mentioned just by a 12 % of the people.

The natural beauty together with the breath-taking nature of this dense forest, its different shades of green etc. help this park to be better valued by the visitors, in other aspects like those related to the function of the equipments and the services given, a 4,5 per cent is obtained of top 5. But, the answers checked about the satisfaction of the visitors reached here a 4,59 per cent, just one decimal number smaller than the one obtained in Monte Aloia (4,6).

We arrive to the conclusions that in our study Monte Aloia offered the visitors better conditions, services and facilities outlining the public use, welcoming the visitors' accordance to its idiosyncrasy. It took into consideration its characteristics, limitations and fortitude and, could act consequently. Nowadays, Monte Aloia does not present any problem related to the influx of visits because it could adapt oneself to the circumstances: Natural space of urban periphery not much recognized from the point of view of the natural values, but yes as space of relax and walk. The polls made and the field-work makes very clear that Xurés natural park has an important problem of image and communication. It is very significant that the persons who come to the thermal village and to Caldo River show very little interest to visit the park. The lack of interest for visiting Xurés indicates us that this park did not happen of being an unknown distant place; it was not capable of coming to the society, of waking up the interest of the people. In this field the natural park has an intense work ahead. From the negative point of view, it calls very much the attention the discreet impressions that the natural environment wakes up, what the senses transmit the visitors. Neither the evaluation of the conservation of the Natural Protected Space, nor the stay, obtains very high values. Here two factors take control at the same time: the landscape does not approach the stereotypes of natural beauty (high mountains, leafy forests). Also, in the field-work and in the polls it was observed that there were problems with the garbage and suitable behaviours. The Xurés has a promising future beyond, any time it can handle well the powerful tools it has been provided. It will be the passing of the time that makes this into a reality. The Natural Park Fragas do Eume has turn quickly of being a natural space known only by the residents of the environment and other lovers of nature of the rest of Galicia, to a tourist emblematic icon, paradigm of the primitive Galician landscape, an example of leafy forest that in the past covered the whole Galician territory, an example of virgin and rooted nature, good provided of bucolic images of dense forests and deep rivers. This panorama of stereotyped dream can be seen with accuracy in Fragas do Eume and, one way or another, penetrated the limits of Galicia and appeared strongly in almost the whole Spain. Thus the park receives a big volume of visits and temporary shares out of its arrivals correspond to the paradigm of touristic attraction points of Spain. It also contributed its good location, not far from touristic places of huge importance like Miño, Cabanas, Sada, Pontedeume, and the cities of A Coruña and Ferrol, that welcome visitors form the whole Galicia and Spain.

