

THE NEW TOURISM USES IN THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE OF THE ISLAND OF LA PALMA (THE CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN)

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In this paper, we approach the study of the Biosphere Reserve of the island of La Palma and the new tourism uses that are being implemented in order to reflect on the development model of the island. First, we carry out a brief diagnosis about the main characteristics of territorial model of the island. In the second place, we analyze the characteristics and the aims of the Biosphere Reserve. Last, we study the tourism model that is being developed from the point of view the instruments of spatial planning in order to assess the level of sustainability and coherence with the principles of the Reserve.

The sources have been the reports of the Biosphere Reserve, different documents of territorial planning of the island, some rural development associations, the Departments of Rural Development in some City Councils and the Tourism and Agriculture Ministries of La Palma Island Government (*Cabildo Insular de La Palma*) and of The Canary Islands Government.

The Biosphere Reserves appeared in the framework of UNESCO MAB Programme (Man and Biosphere) in 1968 with the objective of favoring the conservation of the diversity of life in the World. Consequently, some areas of high natural value without or with little human occupation were declared as Biosphere Reserve in those years. To the extent that sustainable development models were spread out throughout the eighties and nineties, the concept has evolved and some sites of great natural value that also showed a moderate level of human transformation were declared. Today, Biosphere Reserves are terrestrial, coastal and marine areas in which a sustainable development model that reconciles economic and social development with conservation of natural values is implemented.

La Palma, one of the most westerly of the Canary Islands, located around the 28th parallel and the 17th meridian, with a surface of 708 km² and 2,426 meters altitude, presents important geological, geomorphological, biogeographical and cultural values. The volcanic activity, the high number of endemic species and the urban and ethnographic heritage make

the island worthy of this award from UNESCO. For this reason, 511 hectares in El Canal y Los Tiles, in the municipality of San Andrés y Sauces, were declared as Biosphere Reserve in 1983, taking account the diversity and the conservation of its laurel forests. Since then, the Reserve has increased steadily to the extent that the concept has evolved, in order to enable the implementation of a sustainable development model. Thus, in 1988, the protected surface was enlarged to 13,240 Has and, in 2002, the entire island territory was labeled as a World Biosphere Reserve. This gives the Island a seal of environmental quality, which could be used, from a sustainable perspective, for economic activity.

The production model of the island had been based until a few decades in agricultural production, mainly in export crops (bananas) and the development of subsistence agriculture. The lack of viability of this model has changed the production system with a higher presence of the service sector and the tourism since the seventies. Despite all this, the island has a regressive demographic dynamic and a severely aging of its population today, demonstrating a significant structural weakness related to the maintenance of an agricultural economy and a tourism activity which does not provide sufficient income to maintain population. The alternative might be the opening of the island to greater tourist use. In this sense, the declaration of La Palma as Biosphere Reserve entails strengthening this productive option since this kind of qualifications act as a tourist attraction, while stimulating a tourism model compatible with environmental, cultural and landscape values of the island.

In La Palma, the tourism activity has focused on formulas such as rural tourism, ecotourism or mass tourism on some coastal enclaves up to now, without the number of tourist received have jeopardized the natural values of the island. In fact, an part of the tourism activity has been linked to hiking, whose ultimate expression is the Transvulcania, a long distance race held annually and that is considered the hardest mountain ultramarathon in the Canary Islands and one of the most important in Spain, with a height of over 8,500 meters.

The approval of the law 19/2003 of 14 April, on *General Planning Guidelines and Tourism Guidelines of the Canary Islands* and the latest law 6/2009 of 6 May, on *Urgent Measures in the Territorial Management for Sectoral Revitalization and Tourism Management* have laid the foundations for an intensification of tourist use on the island ground. As a result, Territorial Special Plan for the Tourism Activity of the island of La Palma (Plan Territorial Especial de Ordenación Turística de la Palma, 2007) and subsequent Management Plan Insular de La Palma (Plan Insular de Ordenación, 2011) have been approved.

These plans pretend that the island reach 25,500 beds in 2020, representing a significant intensification of tourism. This growth of accommodation will be distributed throughout the island, mainly in some urban areas and through tourist developments of small size in the majority of the cases (less than 500 beds). Besides, the plans propose the construction of large facilities for tourists, specially the creation of five golf courses.

Well, when we are still at the beginning of what appears to be a new tourism model for La Palma, we must consider to what extent this proposal will be compatible with the principles and objectives of the Biosphere Reserve. In this sense, although the growth of new hotels will allow La Palma to get a lower number of beds than other islands such as Lanzarote, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria or Tenerife, we must consider the carrying capacity of the natural, social and cultural environment of an island that is Biosphere Reserve to assess the real dimension of the new economic model. In other words, we must consider whether the

proposed increase in tourism activity is manageable by the insular system without a drastic change. In this regard, we believe that the environmental assessment of both plans does not adequately measure the real impact of the increase of tourist accommodation.

On the other hand, regarding the strategy to the dispersion of new supply as an instrument of territorial diffusion of the impacts and benefits, we cannot ignore that some new tourist developments such as Finca Amado, St Lucia, La Tahona or Hoyo Verdugo will become authentic islands built in some rural areas of great landscape value and, in some cases, will generate a very high visual impact on authentic iconic spaces.

Finally, some aspects of the new model, such as the construction of up to five golf courses on rural land does not quite fit, in our view, with what must be the conservation and implementation of a model for sustainable socio-economic development in La Palma. Obviously, this activity is not consistent with the very principles underlying of the statement of the island like Biosphere Reserve. Besides, the impact in the landscape, the consumption of soil and water and the consequent increase in the number of tourist beds related to the creation of these new facilities will be important.

In short, the territorial model proposed might stop the process of losing of population, might favor the arrival of new habitants and rejuvenate the population. We can also assume that the proposal will imply a growth in economic activity and the income per capita. However, we believe it is a model that does not fit the characteristics of the island itself and the concept of sustainable development in which the Biosphere Reserve is based.

