

# ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS DERIVED FROM TOURIST-RESIDENTIAL URBAN DEVELOPMENT. A CASE APPLIED TO THE ALICANTE COASTLINE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

We have been already witnessing for some decades how the classical city is disappearing in favor of less and less dense and compact spaces with undefined boundaries. The disperse occupation of urban land has provoked a fragmentation of the city and the loss of its conventional image, something which encourages higher mobility of both people and means of transport, though. To which must be added that the extension of its traditional limits through the disorganized occupation of the surrounding areas means that the city *invades* its natural environments, where it causes huge environmental impacts. This materializes in an uncontrolled urban sprawl and an increased spatial mobility which quickly spread around the world. In Mediterranean Europe, and particularly in countries such as Spain, such global phenomena lead to a constant and strong increase in the number of dwellings and second homes as a result of economic growth and tourism (EEA, 2006; MMA, 2008). In fact, this last sector actually has close links with the building and real estate development sectors within the territorial area under study –in what has come to be known as *residential tourism*.

Beyond purely conceptual issues, what cannot be denied is that such a development model generates enormous environmental impacts on the first kilometers of coast and increasingly towards the inland regions too. This circumstance, together with the conservationist motivations *strictu sensu* (Delgado, 2008), has increased even more the need to protect certain territory sectors of high natural value which are seriously threatened by such a strong urban-tourist pressure. In any case, these are impacts which cannot even be minimized by the conservationist measures implemented by Public Administrations, as shown by the number of protected natural areas (hereinafter PNAs) which suffer a growing «town-development attack» (Delgado, 2008) and the boost of property speculation (Blázquez, 2007).

## II. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Seeking to delve deeper into the aforementioned issues, the present paper firstly examines the role played by residential tourism in urban growth along the Spanish Mediterranean coastline during the last few decades, in which periods of huge urban growth have been experienced, the most recent one between the mid-1990s and the outbreak of today's economic crisis.

Secondly, our study explains how the conservationist measures adopted in the *Comunidad Valenciana* [Valencian Autonomous Region] have tried to slow down the occupation of a territory which had been very deeply affected by mass tourism. The tourism sector became the most important socio-economic driving force during the 1960s, giving rise to the start of an ongoing urban and demographic growth which –through periods of greater or lesser intensity– has meant a complete transformation both from a socio-economic point of view and in territorial terms. As a consequence, most of the Southern Valencian sites of greater natural value have ever since suffered the increasingly strong effects caused by the development of the main coastal tourist resorts.

All in all, and with a view to verify our initial assumptions, the central goal of this work consists in carrying out a thorough evidence-based research study from the local scale, paying special attention to the territorial implications stemming from the complex relationship that exists between the tourist-recreational activity, the associated property development, and nature conservation. In order to achieve our aims, a decision was made to propose two case studies located along the coastline of the Alicante province as representative examples –though by no means the only ones. These case studies made it possible for us to carry out a descriptive-explanatory analysis of two specific territorial areas where a natural park and a seaside tourist destination coexist, namely:

- Montgó Natural Park, a ca. 750-meter-high coastal mountain where the flora stands out as one of the most representative elements –this being one of the reasons which justified its protection in 1987– together with the fauna, which is particularly rich from the birdlife point of view. Furthermore, the remains found in this unique location provide evidence of human settlements from about one hundred and twenty thousand years ago, and a continuous occupation of the territory has taken place ever since. According to Fernández Muñoz (2003), almost the whole perimeter of this natural park has remained in touch with consolidated urban areas or zones where building was allowed. It is the case of Dénia, the capital of its *comarca* [small region (Spanish geographical demarcation)] which receives a large volume of tourists and residents, and of Jávea, a space characterized by a remarkable chaos despite having had a town-planning scheme at an early stage; and
- Las Lagunas de la Mata y Torrevieja Natural Park, a site of high ecological value formed by a large wetland of tectonic origin made up of two water bodies which is home to several flower areas that serve as the natural habitat for a wide variety of aquatic birds –the most representative element of this environment, protected in 1996. Already occupied since Iberian times, both *lagunas* [lagoons] have been historically exploited by salt works –an activity which still remains important in Torrevieja. Nev-

ertheless, tourism and a variety of sectors associated with it have lately become the true socio-economic drivers of a town turned into the paradigm *par excellence* of residential tourism.

Therefore, after making a brief presentation of both parks and highlighting their main values, the empirical work focuses on the role that these natural spaces have played in the surrounding municipalities, particularly in those with a longer tourist tradition. After all, both Dénia and Jávea, in the first case, and Torrevieja, in the second, are destinations attached to the mass sun and beach model which has reached a high degree of consolidation in its life cycle. Within this context, emphasis has been placed upon the negative effects triggered by urban growth upon the natural milieu, even after the declaration of protected areas. For this purpose, a review was made both of the planning and management instruments available to these two natural parks and, especially, of the evolution experienced by urban planning in these tourist towns through their respective General Urban Development Plans (hereinafter GUDPs), from the advent of tourism to the present day. It is a long period of time during which special attention has been paid to the last socio-economic and property boom experienced in our country between 1996 and 2008 that, partly because of tourist activity, acquired particular relevance in some areas along the Spanish Mediterranean coastline.

### **III. CONCLUSIONS**

The arrival of mass tourism on Valencian coasts in the 1960s marks the beginning of a tourist-residential development with a first stage characterized by the absence of a suitable town planning that favored a spontaneous, speculative growth guided by private needs which prevailed over general interests, by means of –often illegal– partial actions and interventions, and with the approval of a very weak institutional and administrative framework. When the effects of this development had already become evident, the first attempts were made to structure the territory from a first generation of contradictory, permissive and inefficient GUDPs, which could do nothing but legalize already erected constructions and materialize previously approved projects. This consequently led to an even more excessive, chaotic and uncontrolled growth authorizing scattered, low-density actions in highly valuable areas from the environment and landscape point of view, which were declared building lands. This dynamics did not change to a great extent, neither with the revision of the initial approach and the subsequent approval of new GUDPs nor with the conservationist measures implemented by the Valencian regional government during the 1980s and the 1990s.

In any case, even though the attacks against the territory a few decades ago were so intense as to force urgent protection initiatives, this reality has not had a positive evolution; instead, the situation has worsened considerably. Despite the scarce possibilities to maintain the same growth pace, the last economic boom in this region had as its consequence an accused demographic and urban development –the highest ever recorded in some towns. A second generation of GUDPs simultaneously remained valid which, instead of accomplishing their mission, continue to show huge permissiveness, apart from quickly becoming obsolete, insofar as they could hardly foresee the strong impulses experienced only a few years after being approved. In other words, not only a new stage of inordinate urban growth –much

stronger than during the preceding decades– took place between 1996 and 2008, but it additionally occurred within an even more ineffective action framework than that of the early years of the so-called Spanish ‘*developmentalism*.’

In short, the magnitude of the pressure exerted upon the territory in general, and especially upon coastal PNAs, has become even more intense, and the destruction of its most important values has continued. The clashes between the various interests overlapping in this territory have generated many of the conflicts that exist in areas close to natural parks nowadays. Some of those conflicts are caused by the attempts to carry out tourist-property operations which precisely try to take advantage of the regulatory loopholes and the vagueness present in the planning. In this regard, it becomes necessary to insist on the weakness of PNA planning and management instruments which, pursuant to the current legislation, must prevail over those of urban planning. However, as shown by the examples presented here, reality tells us that those PNA instruments are actually subordinated to urban development plans. This is a faithful reflection of what has come to be known as «*paper parks*», a term used by Greenpeace (2010) to describe those PNAs with a declaration that is only made on a map, since they lack real management measures. This is a real picture that perfectly defines the current situation on the Valencian coast, where seaside natural areas are «asphyxiated by brick and concrete».

Hence that «contradictory process» mentioned by Martí and Nolasco (2011:378) through which several natural parks located next to the Valencian coastline have been enhanced, while a strong ‘artificialization’ has simultaneously occurred in the areas around those same spaces. In this sense, it is also worth highlighting the wise comments made by Santamarina (2008:39) according to whom the «efforts to protect and multiply protected areas represent a symbolic, rather than real, compensation for the brutal urban development process undergone».