

ANALYSIS AND PROSPECTS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE NATURAL PARKS OF THE NORTHERN VALENCIAN REGION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Changes in tourist demand are conditioning increasing competition in the context of a post-industrial society. Tourist demand is more individualised and therefore less gregarious, while at the same time tourists' experiences have made them more demanding of products. They are demanding not only in terms of value for money but also in general considering the options available in the destination, with aspects related to nature and culture coming to play a fundamental role (López et al. 2005). These represent a growing attraction for new types of tourism, including natural park tourism (Marchena, 1992; Weaver, 2001; Epler, 2002; Buckley, 2003; Fenell and Dowling, 2003; Pulido, 2005; Newsone et al, 2005).

This is accompanied by technological advances making it easier to find out about places via the Internet, providing up-to-date information about sites tourists want to visit (Huéscar, 2007; López and Pulido, 2007).

In this new context, the environment is one of the concerns of visitors, as many of them demand that tourism should not have a great impact on it. So, if we want to achieve customer satisfaction, we must add environmental quality to the quality of the product or tourist destination (Pulido, 2005).

The new uses of natural parks benefit the population (López, 2010; López, 2014) living in the protected area, generating employment, creating new tourism businesses and thereby diversifying the local economy (Capdepón, 2013 and 2015), although not in the terms suggested some decades ago, particularly if there is no adequate planning. In addition, poorly planned development in protected areas can have negative consequences for the population and the parks themselves in terms of the impact on plants, animals and aquifers

of noise and air pollution, CO₂ emissions, accumulations of waste and so on. The tourism development models we apply in natural parks must therefore be adapted to the physical, geographical, natural/landscape, socio-economic and cultural characteristics, allowing us to achieve balance and sustainable development while avoiding what is known as the “commercialisation of nature” (Vera, et al, 1997 and 2011) in the quest for quality of life in post-modern society.

The new situation of tourism in natural areas must correspond to the new environmental requirements, regional planning values and tourism policy based on market trends (Anton et al. 2008). We are therefore dealing with a productive and territorial restructuring that should be a useful instrument for bringing together diagnoses and achieving specific public and private actions, while establishing a coherent framework for mobilisation and cooperation between the social agents of the new governance. For this reason, a commitment is required to the integrated strategic planning of tourism activity with an approach that is both sustainable and participatory.

With these prior considerations, we have carried out this research work, applying the Delphi technique to the initial analysis and study of the prospects for the inland natural parks of the northern Valencian region: Sierra de Espadán Natural Park, Penyagolosa Natural Park and Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park.

Sierra de Espadán Natural Park was created on 29 September 1998 with Valencian regional government decree 161/1998, of 29 September (Valencian Government Gazette 3347- 08/10/1998). It lies in the south of the province of Castellón between the Mijares and Palancia river basins. With an area of 31,180 ha, it is considered the most important and largest park in the province of Castellón and it is the second largest in the Valencian region.

The protected area covers 19 municipalities with a total population of 7,898, belonging to different counties. It also includes four categories of use: the ecological protection zones represent 85% of the area, the zones for agricultural use 12%, the reserve zones 2% and urban zones 1%.

The Penyagolosa massif is in the west of the province of Castellón, between the municipalities of Vistabella del Maestrat, Xodos and Villahermosa del Río, with the park extending beyond these to Lucena del Cid and Castillo de Villamalefa. The total population of the park 2,623.

Stretching over 1,094.45 ha, it covers the massif dominated by Sant Joan de Penyagolosa, reaching a height of 1,814 m and considered the second highest peak in the Valencian region, overshadowed only by Cerro Calderón.

Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park covers an area of 4,967.548 ha in north-eastern Castellón, in the municipalities of Pobla de Benifassà, Coratxà, El Boixar, Fredes, Bell (Rossell), Vallibona and Castell de Cabres (population 1,540). Tinença de Benifassà forms part of the great massif of the Puertos de Beceite lying between Aragon, Catalonia and the Valencian region.

II. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The general aim of the research consists of laying the basis for achieving proper tourist development of natural parks, always considering the sustainability of these areas.

The application of the Delphi method has allowed us to discover the potential of the tourist system of these natural areas and their prospects and will help us put forward development strategies with an integrated approach. The fieldwork for applying the Delphi technique was carried out between October 2014 and February 2015. The aim was firstly to find out about the elements that have established current activities and, secondly, to discover the prospects by projecting the factors that could condition the future development of natural parks in the area of study over the next few years. To achieve this, the first step was to select the panel of experts. This consisted of 25 people in the first round and 23 in the second, including representatives of businesses and public authorities; experts and specialists in the natural environment; and academics and researchers. Alongside this, the questionnaire was drawn up and refined over several rounds. Finally, the tabulation and results analysis methodology was created.

In the Delphi methodology applied, a closed questionnaire was decided on for the first part, concerning the situation analysis, and a semi-closed approach was used in the study of prospects.

The questionnaire was structured so that experts took part in different rounds. The first round consisted of 15 main questions broken down into 126 sub-questions. They were divided into two blocks: the first part was devoted to the initial analysis (questions 1 to 6) and the other to prospects (questions 7 to 15), including the open questions. The questions were asked on a Likert 5 scale.

For the tabulation of results, the information provided by the different rounds of the questionnaire was coded and stored in an SPSS 22.0 file, which was the program chosen for analysing the questionnaire contributions.

The process consisted of tabulating the variables of the questionnaire to achieve the main descriptive statistics. All this was stored in files with SPSS syntax, the programming language.

For the tabulation, the syntax command CTABLES was used, along with others necessary for the data or information file.

III. MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

— Tourism resources

The members of the panel of experts rated tourism resources as very important for the development of tourism activity in the natural areas. The highest rated tourism resources were paths and forest tracks, as well as landscape and observation resources. Heritage related to history, monuments and ethnology; the traditional landscape of the population centres, and flora and fauna were also highly rated. The median and mode values (with maximum value 5) showed the interviewees were almost unanimous in considering them as basic resources for developing tourism activity in the inland natural parks of the northern Valencian region.

— Socio-economic and environmental factors.

The interviewees were virtually unanimous in their responses on whether tourism represented complementary revenue generation, an improvement in sustainability or a stimulus for creating jobs, with the average score above 4, signifying agreement. However, for some

sub-questions dealing with whether the inland natural parks of the Valencian Region have contributed to the socio-economic development of the parks, improved their socio-economic conditions or contributed to preserving traditional ways of life received an average score suggests 3 (neither agreeing or disagreeing).

— The tourism options

In this question, the panel of experts positively rated the sub-questions ranking accommodation in private houses ahead of commercial accommodation, although the quality of the commercial range (hotels, hostels, rural accommodation, etc.) is positively rated with a 4, (agreement). In addition, the positive welcome for tourists in the national parks' population centres was 4, so the people are generally well-disposed towards them.

— Tourist demand

For this question, the panel of experts gave a neutral or negative score, meaning that the product in the inland natural parks of the northern Valencian region is not highly rated in terms of demand. The high level of consensus in the top-scoring sub-question referring to attitudes to improvement of visitors to the natural parks, should be highlighted, shown by the 0.5 standard deviation.

— Infrastructures and services

In this section, we would pick out the complete consensus, on average, on the quality and treatment of wastewater. We might also highlight the acceptable ratings (average 4) concerning the solid waste collection system, the power grid and health services.

— Finance and management

The answers from the panel of experts were unanimously very critical of finance (average 4.5 and standard deviation 0.6) and, above all, the public management of these natural areas. Among very few positive parameters, rated between "agree" and "strongly agree", was the statement that "the natural parks in the study area must develop innovative finance mechanisms aimed at capturing the resources needed to boost their tourism".

— Factors that could act as a brake on tourism development

The limiting factors given a rating 4 in the results include non-existent or inadequate public investment, the loss of traditional activities, the lack of organisation and planning, the lack of relationships between public and private agents, the aging of the population and the poorly trained human resources.

— Actions to activate tourism development in natural parks

This is one of the questions where there was greatest consensus among the panellists, as can be seen in the low standard deviations. For this question, there were as many as 13 sub-questions with values ranging between 4 and 5 (almost entirely in agreement with the proposed action), as shown in the standard deviation.

— Sustainable tourism development in natural parks

The results for this question are also accompanied by great consensus in the sub-questions asked, as can be deduced from the standard deviations, above all on the highest scoring questions. We would highlight, with agreement on a score of almost 5 (4.7), the references to regional planning in the natural parks in the context of park legislation and the consensus of all agents involved; integrated tourism development in natural parks (socio-economic and environmental structure); and the accommodation and complementary services that are needed to preserve the true character of the areas.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The main results for the parks analysed are that, despite the rich natural landscapes reflecting their potential resources, they are a long way behind when it comes to development and transformation into products.

Meanwhile, the tourism options in the inland natural parks of the Valencian region are very limited, both in terms of accommodation and in leisure and services. The few businesses in the municipalities of these parks are basically accommodation companies, restaurants and bars. The current economic and financial crisis has seriously affected the sector, reflected in the loss of tourist accommodation and restaurants and the lowering of standards. Businesses specialising in active tourism are reduced to one in the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park, another in the Penyagolosa Natural Park and two in the Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park, a range that fails to meet growing demand. However, an increasing range of routes and paths can be seen, although they are not sufficiently activated as products.

The demand within the parks is growing, although it is quite seasonal. The largest numbers of visitors in the Sierra de Espadán Natural Park are concentrated above all in April, May and November; the Penyagolosa Natural Park has most visitors in August; and in the Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park most unbooked visits are in May and most booked ones are in November. However, among the demand there is widespread ignorance not only about the parks themselves but also about their products, commercial accommodation, private accommodation, and so on, demonstrating that little is being done to correct this ignorance and increase demand.

Concerning infrastructures and services, the general, basic actions carried out are positive (water supply and treatment, for example). However, there are deficiencies in the internal connectivity between their population centres and the maintenance of agricultural roads, tracks and paths. High-capacity data transfer networks are considered by the panellists to be seriously insufficient.

Concerning the level of finance and management, according to the interviews, innovative finance mechanisms aimed at capturing the resources required to boost tourism need to be developed. For this reason, it is appropriate to apply new governance approaches, with the creation of consensus among public and private agents.

Equally, the tourism development of the inland natural parks of the northern Valencian region has not been satisfactory in terms of regional planning and achieving socio-economic aims like maintaining the population.

Finally, the development of the inland natural parks of the northern Valencian region needs to be strengthened with a series of strategies and programmes promoting ecological, productive and social values. This involves promoting three basic functions: the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage; integrated socio-economic development; and boosting the public and social use of these natural areas, which, of course, includes tourism, leisure and recreational activities.

