

Learning from crises: challenges and opportunities for rural inland territories in the south-west of France after COVID-19

Aprendiendo de las crisis: retos y oportunidades para territorios rurales y de interior en el suroeste de Francia tras la COVID-19

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Abstract

The mobility restrictions characteristic of the pandemic period interrupted tourism mobilities and forced territorial actors, and specifically those connected with tourism, to adapt and rethink their tools, processes and even the ways in which they communicated. Moreover, this context placed them in front of unusual situations that they had to manage, such as the increase in the flows of local and regional visitors in outdoors and natural areas. Based on a qualitative methodology built on the analysis of documents and in-depth interviews with key informants, this paper reflects on the responses and on the perception of different actors in periods of change, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of this context in terms of opportunity and in terms of challenge in the case of a rural and inland territory in the southwest of France leads us to the conclusion that crises are scenarios that favor learning processes. The challenge lies in giving continuity to the lessons learned. This study contributes to the reflection of tourism development models consistent with the socio-ecological transition. Tourism development models that promote adequate tourism under the paradigm of degrowth.

Keywords: adaptation; perception; proximity tourism; resilience; stakeholders.

Resumen

Las restricciones de movilidad características del periodo pandémico interrumpieron la actividad turística y obligaron a los actores territoriales, y concretamente a aquellos vinculados con el sector, a adaptarse y repensar las herramientas, los procesos y las formas de relacionarse. Este contexto les puso además frente a nuevas situaciones que se vieron obligados a gestionar, como el incremento de los flujos de visitantes de proximidad en espacios naturales y abiertos. A partir de una metodología esencialmente cualitativa basada en el análisis de documentos y en entrevistas en profundidad a informantes clave, este trabajo introduce una reflexión sobre las respuestas articuladas y sobre la percepción de diferentes actores frente a periodos de cambio, como el provocado por la COVID-19. El análisis de este contexto en clave de oportunidad y desafío en el caso de un territorio rural y de interior de la zona del suroeste de Francia nos lleva a la conclusión de que las crisis son escenarios que favorecen el aprendizaje. El reto se encuentra en dar continuidad a las lecciones aprendidas. Este estudio contribuye a la reflexión de modelos de desarrollo turístico coherentes con la transición socioecológica, que promuevan un turismo adecuado bajo el paradigma del decrecimiento.

Palabras clave: actores; adaptación; percepción; resiliencia; turismo de proximidad.

1 Introduction

The restrictions on movement imposed during the pandemic period increased the pressure on natural and interior areas, some of which were unaccustomed to managing the consequences of mass tourism. The interest in visiting these areas can be interpreted as an opportunity for the local development of territories affected by structural demographic and economic crises. Within a context of climate and socio-economic crisis, this opportunity should be framed within endogenous development processes, in which the actors of the territory actively participate in its governance. In spaces with cross-border dynamics, the articulation of the endogenous actors constitutes an additional challenge.

On the other hand, the management of a destination in its reinvention and development stage enables tourism to be contemplated from new logics that are more coherent with the principles of the socio-ecological transition and better adapted to the characteristics of the destination, favouring a more efficient contribution of tourism to the resilience capacity of the territory. Proximity tourism is an example of these logics, due to its evident benefits in terms of the reduction of emissions and its potential to generate and strengthen community ties. The restrictions of the pandemic period have reinforced proximity tourist flows, adding complexity to the management of the tourism and territorial development carried out by the actors.

This study seeks to reflect on these factors and identify the response mechanisms in periods of change. To do this, we have analysed the perceptions of the actors in south-west France using a qualitative methodology based on the content analysis of documentary sources and in-depth interviews.

After being hit by the economic crisis of 2008 and throughout the last decade, inland tourism destinations had been recovering in accordance with their different resilience capacities (Cánoves et al., 2020) and no major structural changes could be identified. However, in the summer of 2020, with the interruption of international mobility and in response to the months of lockdown, the natural spaces and open-air activities acquired a new relevance. The dynamics of mobility during these months of 2020 in inland areas, in many cases gave rise to the need to manage large flows of visitors (Ibarra & Rabanaque, 2020). The time horizon is not long enough to understand whether these dynamics have been temporary (Izcarra & Cañada, 2020) or whether they correspond to more profound changes that effectively constitute an opportunity to redefine the tourism activity, principally in inland territories (Cheer, 2020; Brouder, 2020). In any event, it can be considered as an opportunity for the local actors. Thus, it has been possible to identify

aspects of improvement in management to avoid problems in the long term similar to those experienced in tourist destinations that have been victims of hyper-frequentation.

In tourism territories a high variability in the perception of the changes, their identification as a problem or challenge and the articulation of responses can be observed. In fact, the chronic misalignment between the accelerated pace of the changes and the slow pace of the responses, particularly at an institutional level, is evident. Therefore, a profound reflection on the resilience of tourist destinations is necessary, placing the spotlight on adaptation strategies proposed by the public sector, the citizens and other agents involved in a constant adaptation-readaptation process. Each destination manifests its own resilience capacity according to its internal dynamics, governance, social capital, local management capacity, internal and relational cohesion, among other factors (Cánoves et al., 2017). We should also remember that tourism connects traveller generating regions, tourist transit regions and tourist destination regions, and contributes to a global culture. Therefore, the individual traits of the different territories as tourist destinations and the characteristics of their ecosystem of actors condition the response capacity that is resilient to changes.

In the same way, tourist spaces, like any territory, are dynamic and subject to processes of permanent change. This change can be contemplated as a result of internal driving forces, such as, for example, the evolutionary approaches associated with Butler's life cycle (1980) or the adaptive cycle of the destination proposed by Holling and Gunderson (2002). There are gradual changes, slow-paced changes, medium-term changes and sudden changes that imply situations of crisis, and they can sometimes be disruptive. These changes disturb the social, economic, political, environmental or tourism balance of territories and give rise to the perception of different risks and threats. Different responses are articulated depending on the mitigation and adaptation capacity. There are many examples of changes. In terms of exogenous and endogenous factors, it is possible to differentiate between natural, anthropic or mixed changes, such as climate change, epidemics and pandemics (Olcina, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). In many cases, the effects have represented very sharp changes, altering or conditioning the dynamics of the destinations (López Palomeque, 1999) and generating crises (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2019), which have constituted turning points in the prevailing tourism destination models (Mantecón, 2020).

In general, sudden changes generate a perception of insecurity for the actors of the tourism system. Therefore, in the tourism field, work on the concept of safety has been a priority and is

considered as being fundamental for its development. The documents of different institutions and organisations refer to this idea. In 2007, the European Commission stressed the need to guarantee safety in tourism (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). In 2019, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) pointed out the need for the “organisation of a crisis cabinet in the case of a natural catastrophe or other emergency”. The safety variable has always been present, both in the planning and management instruments and in the public policies, either implicitly or explicitly. Until 2020, the tourism discourse on safety included political instability, violence, natural disasters and also health risks. COVID-19 called for a reinforcement of safety through the adaptation of spaces, a focus on hygiene and the control of massification.

For the geography of tourism, the study of strategies for adapting to change from the perspective of the actors constitutes an interesting field of study that ties in with a much longer tradition. From very early on, geography as a discipline has shown interest in the study of natural disasters and other risks (Calvo García-Tornel, 1984). There are many studies (Tervo, 2008; Olcina & Vera, 2016; Gómez et al., 2017) that, over the last few years, reflect on the incidence and repercussion of these phenomena in tourist destinations and the possible mitigation measures. From radical or critical geography, there are studies that reflect on a macro scale the changes faced by destinations associated with recent economic cycles (Eisenschitz, 2016). The impact of COVID-19 has strongly materialised in the discipline and many studies have been conducted (Marcotte et al., 2020; Lois et al., 2021; Burgueño, 2021; Couson et al., 2021). A health crisis became a tourism crisis, due to the importance of mobility and social contact in this activity (Bianchi, 2020). It reached an unprecedented scale with still incalculable effects that have become relevant topics in tourism research (Gösling et al., 2020, Jamal & Budke, 2020; Lew et al., 2020; Cousin et al., 2021).

In light of the situation, the different institutions were obliged to formulate rapid responses. In some cases, broad and multisectoral policies were implemented and applied to different sectors, including tourism. Institutions such as the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2021) and the UNWTO (2020) have published studies with tourism reactivation proposals. The different “lobbies” of the sector have also issued relevant documents focused on their interests (WTTC, 2020).

Of the many perspectives from which to study tourism destinations (Pearce, 2012), the role of the actors operating in the territory is vitally important. The research of the actors has a long tradition in territorial and tourism studies. It is a recurring theme in studies addressing territorial

development in terms of governance (Farinos, 2015; Rayssac, 2017) and reflects on social capital as a central component of local development (Pecqueur, 2000; Esparcia et al., 2016). In tourism analysis, a destination can be studied as a cluster of agents whose interaction is based on geographical proximity. In a logic of development, a tourism destination or district (Hjalager, 2000) is equivalent to a cluster (Yalçinkaya et al., 2019) or local tourism system (Lazzeretti & Capone, 2008). Special attention is paid to the analysis of networks or micro-clusters (Merinero, 2010), governance (Muñoz-Mazón & Velasco, 2015) and innovation (Bagiran, 2019). In general, these studies are empirical analyses of small destinations, particularly small cities and rural districts (Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2023a). Moreover, the stakeholders theory is also used (Simancas & Ledesma, 2017) for analysing relations based on power, legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell et al, 1997; Agle et al, 1999; Pulido, 2010). This interesting perspective enables concepts such as resilience to be introduced into the tourist destinations debate.

In tourism research, this concept has been used to understand the capacities of destinations and products to manage crisis situations, disruption and changes (Murray et al., 2017; Blanco-Romero & Blázquez-Salom, 2021). In this way, social, economic and environmental stability scenarios are established from a socio-ecological perspective of territorial resilience (Walker et al., 2004). Resilience is based on conservation, the equilibrium of the ecosystems, the quality of life of the territory, governance and access to resources and services, taking into account the degree of vulnerability to internal and external impacts (Nalau et al., 2018). It is used in territorial studies to analyse responses to occasional disasters and the capacity to face situations of decline, combining inherited and new elements. According to Lew, the problem of minimising the effects of the disruptions and converting them into opportunities for the destination can be contemplated from three perspectives: i) the state prior to the impact, ii) learning and preparation for future impacts, iii) the will to transform and better adapt to new circumstances (2013). This final perspective includes three basic dimensions, namely the potential for change, the degree of connectivity between agents and the vulnerability of the system to unexpected situations (Cánoves et al. 2020).

The discourse based on adaptation and sustainability projects a transformation of post-COVID-19 tourism (Cheer, 2020). That is, the current crisis is used as an opportunity to modify the bases and principles that sustain the sector (Brouder, 2020) so as to evolve towards a sustainable tourism. In 2020, the United Nations established five priorities for the transformation of tourism into a more sustainable and inclusive sector: managing the impacts of the crisis in the communities, promoting the competitiveness, resilience, innovation and digitalisation of the

tourism ecosystem, fostering sustainability and inclusive green growth and, finally, coordination and inter-cooperation as key tools in this process. Despite the express will to transform the sector, this proposal still includes criteria for continued growth as an objective and competitiveness as a value.

More disruptive proposals based on the discourse of degrowth underline the need to reorient tourism towards the common, the public, the local and the social (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), using new metrics (Dwyer, 2021) and prioritising the value of use over the value of the change of tourism territorial resources. Both the academic world and civil society are questioning growth as an objective (Blanco-Romero, 2019), defending the need for scenarios of development based on planned degrowth (Fletcher et al., 2019, 2020). In this questioning of the tourism growth model, the effects of the pandemic are compared to those of the climate crisis (Gössling et al., 2020) and there is a call for the urgent profound transformation of the sector. This model is interesting for studying situations of disruptive change that affect tourist destinations and to identify, analyse and evaluate the responses of the public institutions. Velasco (2005) identifies five basic instruments in tourism policies: organisational instruments, economic stimulus, communication, plans, programmes and norms. On a second level, more specific measures are identified in accordance with different criteria. Veríssimo et al. (2020) group the measures into strategies focused on infrastructures and decentralisation, local participation and collaboration, planning and regulation, *smart tourism*, degrowth and segmentation and measures that foster interactions between tourists and residents.

This complexity of principles and underlying discourses in the responses is evident in the case of inland tourist destinations. Within this context, tourism is seen as an opportunity for endogenous development in which different factors come into play without being mutually exclusive: resources and stakeholders (Rayssac, et al., 2013), *smart rural destinations*, the proximity to densely populated urban areas and other nearby tourist destinations. In light of the failure of the community policies and investments, an approach based on the diversity of the territorial agents, their perception, capacity for action and response is relevant. Their perception of the environment and dynamics in which the tourism industry is developed has been addressed by different disciplines in recent years (Hardy, 2005; Byrd, 2009; Domínguez & González, 2017). It is considered as an activity which is both sensory and cognitive and through which individuals form their inner representations, their mental image of the world and their experiences (Di Méo, 2019). The perceptions, readings and visions of the crisis situations and disruptive change adopted by these agents condition the implementation of different measures, depending on the

specific interests and their incorporation into the action agendas. The analysis of perception becomes a means, accessed through individuals, for understanding how the context is interpreted and the responses of these agents. The way in which reality is perceived and interpreted from an individual stance depends enormously on whether the actor forms part of a network or on the level of access to information, which provides a more or less neutral understanding of the experience.

One of the strategies adopted by the actors is that of clusters linked to tourism products as tools to reinforce the resilience of the territory, the destination and the product (Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2023b). The pandemic and the resulting restrictions on movement favoured tourism and leisure activities in open and nearby spaces. In this respect, inland destinations, normally in a situation of *undertourism* (Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2023b), were the first to reactivate the demand and proximity tourism became a viable tourism option. Proximity tourism is not new. It recovered in the financial crisis of 2008 and had already been associated to alternative scenarios within the framework of the energy crisis and the scarcity of fossil fuels. It appeared again as a temporary response to the pandemic. Understanding proximity in a geographical sense, this tourism favours the connection with nature and landscapes and exploits the local heritage (Panegos & Rayssac, 2022). The rural territories, which are suppliers of elements that are essential for life but affected by problems such as depopulation and the ageing of the population, seek to develop without placing their natural, cultural and strategies values at risk (Jean & Rieutort, 2018). In this respect, if correctly implemented, proximity tourism represents a suitable option (Diaz-Soria & Llurdés, 2013).

Within this context of multiples crises, our reflection is based on the hypothesis that the unique characteristics of the territory as a tourist destination and the characteristics of its ecosystem of actors and their reactions conditions the response capacity to adapt to or withstand changes. Furthermore, we consider that the pandemic has fostered the attraction of proximity visitors, particularly in natural and inland areas. Therefore, certain territories, besides the large tourist attraction poles, have increased their flows and have been surprised by the need to manage uncommon tourism practices. On the other hand, these new scenarios are seen as challenges that can be regarded as a problem, threat or opportunity. In this sense, crises can become a learning mechanism.

In order to corroborate this hypothesis, we have defined four specific objectives:

1. To learn about the characteristics of the ecosystem of the actors involved in the tourism dynamics of the destination.
2. To identify the perception of the different actors of the disruptive change of the pandemic and the new tourist flows received.
3. To identify the responses with which the actors have addressed the pandemic and the subsequent stage.
4. To make the role of the actors and their positioning visible and assess the role played by the public administration with respect to the pandemic on a local and departmental scale.

Based on these four objectives, we have designed an essentially qualitative and multi-scale methodology that we will apply to the case study of south-west France. This research forms part of a wider project, currently in progress, which addresses the adaptation strategies of different territories to contexts of change.

2 Methodology and case study

This study is based on an essentially qualitative methodology which includes, on the one hand, a documentary analysis of action plans and official statistics and on the other hand, interviews with institutional and non-institutional agents. First, we will describe the methods used and then we will present the case study.

2.1 Methods of collecting and analysing the data

For the data collection, we have identified key documents and conducted interviews with experts in order to understand their perceptions with respect to the context and the responses identified. Ten documents have been included in the qualitative documentary analysis (Table 1). They are basically strategic plans and operational plans on a departmental scale. All of their sections have been studied using thematic analysis focused on identifying perceptions and responses during and after the pandemic with the objective of determining emerging themes and the characteristics of these responses. The case analysed straddles two French departments. The number in parentheses indicates whether it is a document of Pyrénées-Atlantiques (64) or Hautes Pyrénées (65).

Table 1. Documents and data analysed

DOCUMENT	SOURCE	CODE
Tourism strategy 2017-2022 (65)	ADT65	#D1
Tourism strategy 2022 (65)	ADT65	#D2
Departmental tourism plan 2016-2020 (64)	ADT64	#D3
Departmental tourism plan 2022-2027 (64)	ADT64	#D4
2020 Action plan (64)	ADT64	#D5
2020 Action plan addendum (64)	ADT64	#D6
Hautes-Pyrénées Tourism Dashboard 2019 (65)	ADT65	#D7
Béarn & Pays Basque Key Tourism Data 2019 (64)	ADT64	#D8
Béarn & Pays Basque Key Tourism Data 2020 (64)	ADT64	#D9
Béarn & Pays Basque Key Tourism Data 2021 (64)	ADT64	#D10

Source: own elaboration

For the description of the case, we have also analysed the statistical data obtained through the Intermunicipal Tourism Office (OIT), the data observatories of both departments and the French statistical institute (INSEE). Despite the numerical nature of the data, they have been analysed from an essential qualitative perspective, as both the interviews and the documents have been the object of a thematic analysis. Only the presentation of the case study (Section 2.2) provides statistical information from a quantitative perspective, as it seeks to introduce the characteristics of the territory analysed.

In order to better understand this territory, we conducted an exploratory phase of the field work in December 2022. This immersion was carried out in order to identify the principal tourism sites and conduct two interviews, which enabled us to better understand the functioning and organisation of this territory and of its tourism, to identify the system of actors present and their types and to design our case study. In a second phase, in the spring of 2023, ten face-to-face interviews were conducted, semi-structured into four categories of actors engaged in tourism activities in the territory: politicians, tourism and heritage institutions, socio-occupational groups and the associational fabric (Table 2). The codes of the interviews reflect whether the actors belonged to the local scale (LS) or departmental scale (DS).

Table 2. Agents interviewed on a departmental scale (DS) and local scale (LS)

PROFILE	MALE/FEMALE	THEME	CODE
Entrepreneur	M	Tourism	#EL1
Expert (municipal association)	F	Tourism	#EL2
President of the local association	M	Nature	#EL3
Entrepreneurs	M	Heritage/Nature	#EL4
Expert (municipal association)	F	Heritage	#EL5
Entrepreneur	F	Recreation	#EL6
Mayor	M	Local Development	#EL7
Expert (Department)	M	Tourism	#ED8
Mayor and counsellor	M	Tourism	#EL9
Mayor and counsellor	M	Planning	#EL10
Technical director (Department)	M	Tourism	#ED11
Entrepreneur	F	Culture and crafts	#EL12

Source: own elaboration

The script designed for the interviews was structured into four sections: (i) trajectory of the participant (functions and structure); (ii) situation prior to the pandemic; (iii) situation during the pandemic; and (iv) post pandemic situation. Each participant located the three periods in time and characterised them.

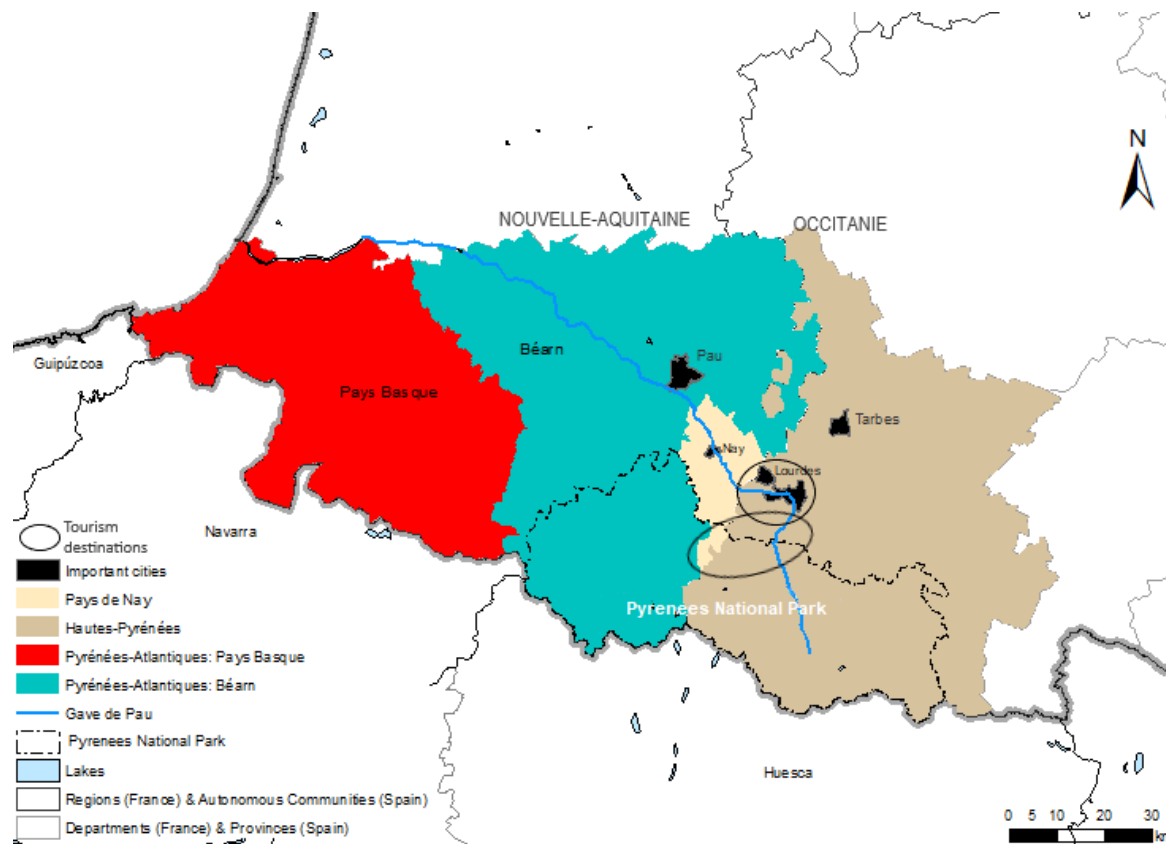
Three stages were required for processing these data: listening to the interviews, partial transcriptions and a thematic analysis in relation to the research hypotheses. The data has been analysed based on three themes: territory, the pandemic period and the post pandemic period. The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews are included in the results.

2.2 Tourism in south-west France: The Pays de Nay territory

The territory analysed covers the central Pyrenees on the northern face across two departments (Pyrénées-Atlantiques and Hautes-Pyrénées) and two regions (Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Occitanie) (Figure 1). Notorious tourist destinations can be found in this area, such as Lourdes or the Pyrenees National Park and also areas less visited by tourists such as *piémont* or the pre-Pyrenean

foothills. The Pays de Nay is located in this less touristified area. Its geographical position enables it to capture visitors, but “[...] it is not a tourist destination” (#EL2).

Figure 1. Pyrénées-Atlantiques (64) and Hautes-Pyrénées (65)



Source: own elaboration

The Pays de Nay municipal association, formerly “Vath-Vielha,” was created in January 2000. It groups together 28 municipalities and 28,847 inhabitants (INSEE, 2019) after having incorporated Arbéost and Ferrières in 2014, Assat and Narcastet in 2017 and Labatmale in 2018. It is interdepartmental and interregional as the municipalities of Arbéost and Ferrières are located in the department of Hautes-Pyrénées (65) in the region of Occitanie, while the others form part of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques (64) in Nouvelle-Aquitaine.

Pyrénées-Atlantiques is the department located in the far south-west of the French hexagon, bordering with the Gulf of Biscay, the Pyrenees and Spain to the south, to the north with the Landes region (Nouvelle-Aquitaine) and to the east with the region of Occitanie and its departments of Gers (NE) and Hautes- Pyrénées (Figure 1). It has a population of 682,621 inhabitants (INSEE, 2019) and a population density of 89.3 hab./km². In 2019, tourism represented 10% of the departmental GDP (#D8). It is structured into two differentiated territories according to notoriety and image: The Basque Country (Pays Basque) and Béarn. The Basque

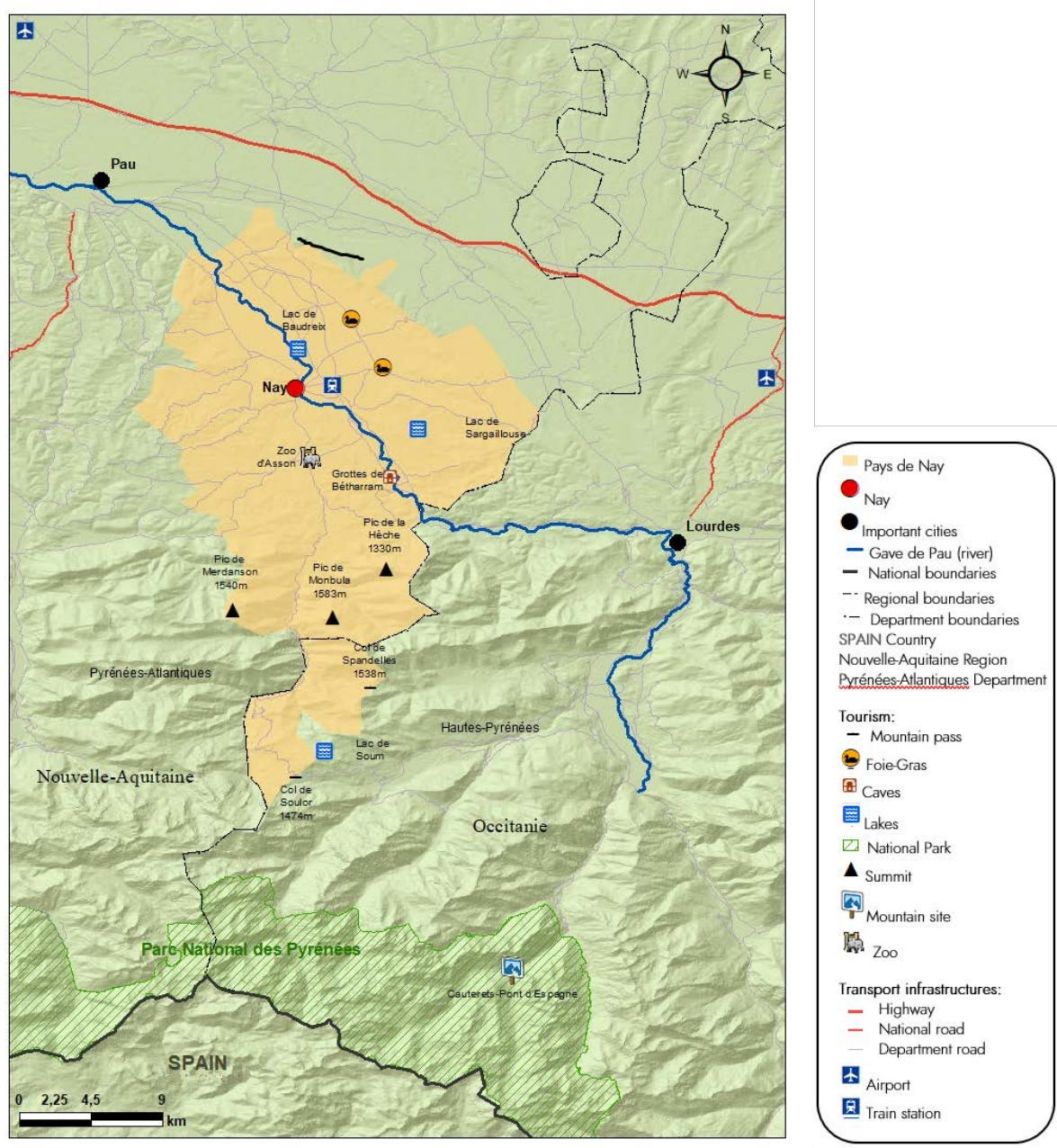
Country, with a smaller area, concentrates the majority of the tourist accommodation and frequentation. 65% of tourism is concentrated on the Basque coast, which represents just 15% of the territory of the department. Therefore, the economic dispersion of tourism is a historical challenge (#ED11). The figures also show the importance of the flows of day-trippers, with 9.8 million tourists and 20.4 million day-trippers in 2019, part of which belong to proximity tourism flows.

The Pays de Nay is located in the south-east of the department (in Béarn county), although two of its municipalities are in Hautes-Pyrénées, the neighbouring department on the east side. Hautes-Pyrénées borders with Gers to the north and Haute-Garonne on the east (both in Occitanie), while in the south it borders with Spain through the Pyrenees. In this sector, emblematic places can be found, such as Cirque de Gavarnie, Col du Tourmalet, Pic du Midi, Lourdes or Pont d'Espagne (#D7) (Figure 2). Departmental tourism agents affirm that Hautes-Pyrénées has appropriated the term "Pyrenees" (#ED8). In 2019, this essentially rural and mountainous territory had a population of 229,567 inhabitants and a population density of 51.4 hab./km².

Tourism is an important activity in Hautes-Pyrénées, as it accounts for 35% of its GDP, although this tourism is highly seasonal (60% of overnight stays between May and September and 60% of profits in winter) and is concentrated in certain parts of the territory (Lourdes and the high mountain area). Lourdes is a mature religious and cultural tourism destination and in 2019 represented 50% of the tourism of the department, concentrating 63% of the international overnight stays. In spite of these data, its tourism model has been questioned for years (Carles, Jaillet, Rayssac et al., 2016).

Hautes-Pyrénées is structured in terms of tourism into 10 sites (#D1 and #D2) which "*are not administrative divisions, but destinations with meaning for the clients*" (#ED8). The municipal association of Pays de Nay is divided between the tourism site of Argelès-Gazost and Val d'Azun in the high mountain area and Lourdes as the most influential tourism site for the Nay area.

Figure 2. Pays de Nay and main tourism attractions



Source: own elaboration

The most visited tourism area of the municipal association are Bétharram Caves, ranked among the top 10 most visited destinations in Pyrénées-Atlantiques, with 150,000 visitors in 2019 (#D8) and 153,000 in 2022 (#EL4). It is located on the border between the two departments, a few kilometres from Lourdes, and its frequentation is also analysed by Hautes-Pyrénées department (#D7).

The Pays de Nay is close to two regional airports (Pau-Pyrénées and Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées) (Figure 2) and the A64 motorway which joins Toulouse with Bayonne. Its green landscape for a

large part of the year (Figure 3) is structured into three groups: the orchard plains in the north, the foothills in the centre and the high mountain in the south. Two municipalities of Béarn have significant tourism potential: Nay and Lestelle-Bétharram with its sanctuary, both founded in the fourteenth century. Other noteworthy attractions in terms of frequentation are the Asson Zoo, founded in 1964 and the Baudreix Leisure Centre with its 8-hectare lake.

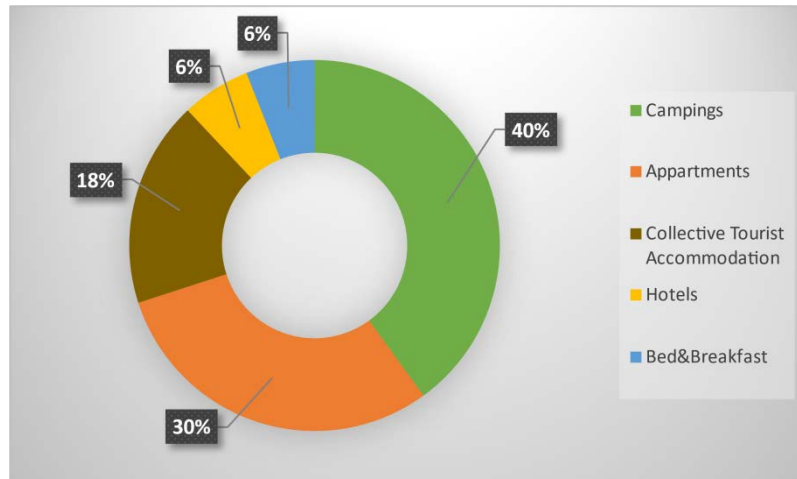
Figure 3. Bétharram Sanctuary (left) and bike path (right)



Source: own elaboration

The supply of tourist accommodation is one of the elements that has been identified in the area that is in need of improvement (#LS2), with its 1,158 tourist beds, that is 1% of the Department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques (#LS2) (Figure 4). The territory does not have holiday villas or aparthotels. Lestelle-Bétharram (close to Lourdes) and Baudreix (around its lake) account for 62% of the accommodation capacity of the supramunicipal area.

Figure 4. Number of tourist beds by type in Pays de Nay (without P2P platform beds)



Source: own elaboration based on ADT64 and INSEE (2021)

On a departmental scale, the diagnosis of the strategic tourism plan of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques 2016-2020 (#D3) indicates a lack of accommodation. From 2017, it also contemplates a series of challenges; a lack of activities and entertainment to attract families throughout the year, the adaptation of the proposed experiences to the expectations of the clients, a lack of structure and marketing of activities despite being varied, a lack of staging of the resources of the territory (landscape, nature, culture), an insufficient supply of sustainable transport and the fact that public action is sometimes not sufficiently coordinated and comprehensible (#D3).

Although it is not a transborder territory, the Pays de Nay is located very close to the National Park of the Pyrenees and the Spanish border. Its geographic location facilitates the integration of parts of its territory into European and transborder itineraries such as the Iron Route in the Pyrenees or the Camino de Santiago (GR-78 of the northern foothills), which is still undervalued in this territory. On a departmental scale, there are transborder products and projects. An example is the Pyrénées Road Trip promoted in 2017 (#ED8), or the InturPYR, created by organisations on both sides of the border (#ED11).

In short, the Pays de Nay is a rural and mountain territory with an incipient tourism until COVID-19. Now, the public and private actors are seeking to develop it responsibly, particularly after having overcome the pandemic and post pandemic periods, which we will analyse in the results.

3 Results

The results obtained are presented in accordance with the perceptions and reflections of each period that each participant -local (LS) or departmental (DS)- considers as “the pandemic” or “the post pandemic period”.

3.1 Perceptions and responses during the pandemic

On a departmental scale, both the interviews and the documentary analysis reveal that the existing strategic documents were used as a guide by the actors during the pandemic.

On the one hand, the road map of Hautes-Pyrénées (#D1), approved a decade ago and published again in 2022 (#D2), based on a territorial diagnosis that recognises the economic weight of tourism in the departmental economy (#DS8), structures ten specific strategies for each of the tourism sites and six transversal policies. The visitor flows were interrupted with the restrictions to movement in March 2020, but communication by ADT65 continued unchanged through the media and social networks: “During the COVID period, [...] it was one of the few [destinations] that continued to have a large presence in the media” (#ED8).

On the other hand, at the time of the pandemic, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques was implementing a 2016-2020 plan (#D3), which developed a differentiated strategy for its two territories, focusing on the positioning of Béarn as a tourism territory. This priority has evolved in the 2022-2027 plan (#D4), which establishes transversal challenges, although the focus is still on the territorial balance. The 2020 operational plan (#D5) promoted deseasonalisation policies, with a special emphasis on the mountain destinations and the fostering of transborder proposals. The pandemic obliged these priorities to be redirected: deseasonalisation is not a challenge within a context of restrictions on movement, the mountain area is deseasonalised for proximity visitors and the international borders were closed for part of the year. In this situation, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques published an addendum (#D6) to the 2020 plan, which explains the responses that the public administration placed at the disposal of tourism-related actors: “interpretation of state mechanisms, virtual toolbox, webinars, virtual diagnostics and web support” (#D6, p. 8). These actions provided support for accessing state aid and monitoring the situation (#DS11). The sectors most affected by the pandemic were events, actions related to foreign markets and supplier qualification projects (#D6).

On a local scale, different ideas have emerged from the readings collected regarding the pandemic period. First, the restrictions on movement favoured proximity tourism and the

rediscovery by the local population of their own territory (#LS1). Furthermore, extraordinary efforts have been made to maintain the networks of actors. In this respect the pandemic period could also be interpreted as a period of collaboration: “We have attempted [at the OIT] to ensure that ideas are shared... and, thanks to the pandemic, we have been able to break down certain barriers and create more alliances” (#LS2).

The interruption of the activity opened the door to a period that favoured creation both of products and projects. The COVID-19 period enabled products to be designed that before were unthinkable: “We have created annexed products that would be difficult to implement in normal times, such as the ‘veterinary for a day/night’ activity [or] the nocturnal activities” (#LS1). The local administrations have been able to undertake actions that had been shelved due to a lack of time: “[...] translations, the creation of content related to the Iron Route or even the yearbook of all of heritage actors” (#LS5).

On a departmental scale, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques develops exceptional programmes, such as “Le repos des héros” (The rest for heroes), aimed at health workers or the “64 at €64 operation” (Opération 64 à 64€), a prize draw of stays (#D6) with the objective of invigorating the sector (#DS11). The Hautes Pyrénées implemented a specific support programme for Lourdes with “training workshops to diversify its market and to challenge the existing model: not targeting individual grouped visitors; this should be stopped” (#DS8). Previously depending on international tourism and on groups of elderly people or those with health problems (or grouped individuals), for Lourdes, the pandemic represented the reactivation of the pre-existing reflection process on the feasibility of its tourism development model.

Returning to the Pays de Nay, the context of the pandemic obliged the local actors to acquire new competences. “During COVID, we developed social networks” (#LS12). These competences, particularly digital ones, have been applied beyond the pandemic period. The same trend can be observed on a departmental scale (#DS8).

Although the public actors have kept their functions, the private actors, who experienced more uncertainty, have displayed a great capacity of resilience. Some state that initially they had a very bad experience in this period, but subsequently became accustomed to the situation and finally converted it into an opportunity (#LS1). Others highlight the difficulties imposed by the strict health regulations (#EL6) and the enormous efforts made to comply with them. In this respect, #LS4 relates the problems derived from the capacity limitation for certain tourist visits. In the case

of Bétharram Caves, the 50% limit obliged a reformulation of the organisation of the visits to be made.

Despite these obstacles, all of the private actors highlight the essential nature of the state subsidies for maintaining their tourism businesses, identifying them as facilitating elements: “We have accepted COVID and have received subsidies” (#LS4). This help has enabled “companies to breathe a little, [...] we can say that the companies that have been weakened or disappeared are those that were already fragile before, [...] and] the actors who were already in the market, who had more of an idea, [...] have seen their development in the market accelerate. We cannot say today that COVID has transformed our socio-economic landscape” (#DS11).

The actors who have experienced this context with more difficulty are the associations, as they lost their clients and personnel, who could not initially go to their voluntary jobs. Although after COVID-19 new young people have mobilised and constituted a new boost (#EL3), many associations have lost their staff: “The presidents need to reorganise the troops. People have reorganised themselves with other things” (#LS10).

3.2 Perceptions and responses after the pandemic

After the first stages of the pandemic, new scenarios emerged. With respect to tourism employment, some activities found it difficult to find personnel (#LS4). “COVID has given rise to changes in the workers. We cannot find any. [...] They have become more demanding [...]. People want to work in a different way” (#LS6).

While the COVID-19 period represented an opportunity to implement new projects, the subsequent period gave them continuity. The most relevant example is the creation of a tiers-lieu (multifunctional space) in Bétharram, which will comprise a visitor’s centre, an eating and refreshment area and an exhibition space (#LS9). Also noteworthy is the boost given to certification processes in different areas. Musée du Béret acquired certification to be a bicycle reception point (Accueil Vélo) (#LS12). This certificate enables cyclists to identify in a simple way all of the establishments and places adapted for practising cycling. The municipal association is working on this certification (#LS9). The sustainable mobility project is noteworthy, with hiking and cycling itineraries and connections with Spain. The green routes should be finalised in 2023 (#LS10). Cycling is closely related to this territory, which is near the large Pyrenees passes of the Tour de France (#DS8). “[...] this is a territory for cycle tourism” (#LS6). The women’s Tour de France is also relevant (#LS10).

Another major project, also promoted by the municipal association and the department, is the invigoration of the Col du Soulor valley, with the reopening of a climbing rock face (#LS7). Other challenges and projects planned for the next seven to eight years are the preparation of the Gave de Pau (river) for practising white water activities and the Lestelle Bétharram base, the enhancement of the heritage as a whole, the improvement of the restaurant and accommodation supply or the organisation of a cycle festival (Fête du vélo) (#LS9).

Another challenge in this post-pandemic period, particularly for the local public actors, is maintaining the ties built between the actors during COVID-19. In this respect, the OIT organises a monthly face-to-face rotational gathering and is planning a large biannual event of the network of actors (#LS5). On an internal level, it holds multidisciplinary team meetings which commenced during COVID-19 and which have become consolidated as a work tool. These types of actions are perceived as lessons learnt during the pandemic (#LS5).

After the restrictions, the frequentation increased. In 2021, Béarn received 9.2 million visitors (7.3M day-trippers) (#D10) as opposed to the 7.7M in 2020 (5.9M day-trippers) (#D9). The figures are still below those of 2019 (11.3M visitors, 8.5M day-trippers) (#D8), although the estimated tourist revenue is higher (€713M in 2021 and €584M in 2020, as opposed to €602M in 2019) (#D10; #D9; #D8). The data has been gradually returning to normal in the main tourism sites, such as the case of Bétharram caves in 2022 (#EL4).

The interviewees identified changes in terms of activities and the public: *“The tourists have become more demanding, more aware about safety [...] and hygiene”* (#LS6). New collaborations have been established and more activities have been created with new actors, such as the recreational centres (#LS3). Different actors have noted an increase in the flows of hikers (#LS7 and #LS10) and, for some, a record in inflows was recorded in 2022, although with a different clientele: *“Today, tourists want to go further, they want to meet the population”* (#LS12).

It also indicates that there is too much demand for the accommodation (#LS7) and people are even enquiring about moving to the region, which has led to some perceiving an increase in housing prices (#LS9 and #LS10). This interest has been perceived on a departmental level, although with less importance: *“There are many urbanites who have said ‘what if we change our lifestyle and go and live in the Pyrenees?’ There is much intention but not necessarily much materialisation because there are many [...] dreamers [...]”* (#DS8). In a recent study on attractiveness, the ADT65 concluded that the strong points for tourism are obstacles to the settling

of the population (rurality, mountain, difficult access): “disconnection [‘dépagement’] is a driving force for attracting holidaymakers and an obstacle for employment” (#DS8).

On a local scale, the increase in tourist flows and the new clientele have generated different impacts. On the one hand is the waste on the mountain, which the territories are obliged to manage. While some actors refer to a huge explosion in frequentation during COVID-19 (#EL2), others highlight the inappropriate use of the mountain by people who are not accustomed to it or aware of the dangers (#EL12): “[There have been] peaks in frequentation and massification, heightened by the lack of civility or a lack of experience with these types of visitors who have come with no knowledge of the mountain or respect for it and without the proper equipment” (#DS11). These peaks of frequentation are also interpreted as a problem of perception after months of lockdown: “It’s a perception, moments. In fact, [...] we have two strong periods of frequentation [and] before we did not have this perception, it is something that [...] has been exacerbated because the local population has reappropriated its territory” (#DS8).

Different strategies have been adopted to address these problems. On the one hand, communication and raising awareness among the visitors: “we are going to concentrate our communication [...] on secondary sites in terms of frequentation [...]and] we have started an operation [...] that seeks to better raise awareness about the uses of the mountain” (#DS11). On the other hand, raising awareness among the actors: “from our point of view, raising awareness is more effective when it is aimed at the local population. [...] Raising awareness among tourists is not very effective. [...] We believe that [...] the actors, whether tourism, private or public agents, should intelligently organise the destination in order to organise the flows” (#DS8).

The strategic plans for COVID-19 previously analysed (#D1 and #D3) included the existence of flows of day-trippers and proximity markets in their diagnoses. In the case of the department of Hautes-Pyrénées, the updated version of its strategic plan of 2022 (#D2) refers to visitors from the Occitanie region and what they call the “Grand Ouest” (the Atlantic area) within the markets identified. The inhabitants appear as target clients.

In its action plan of 2020 (#D5), Pyrénées-Atlantiques contemplates specific national and proximity marketing and the objective of incorporating the inhabitants of Béarn into the attraction activities of its territory. The addendum of this plan (#D6) places an emphasis on short routes and promotes *slow tourism* and proximity tourism. During the pandemic, “Operation 64 at € 64” was aimed at the inhabitants of the Grand Sud-Ouest (from Toulouse to Bourdeaux), and the departmental magazine “64” published a special article on tourism (#D6) in which it promotes

the large open air spaces under the slogan “Great air. Great spaces. New beginnings” (Grand air. Grandes espaces. Nouveaux eparts); the three fundamental ideas that structured the Pyrénées-Atlantiques tourism narrative in 2020.

The 2022-2027 plan (#D4) outlines the strategies referring to “the local”: nature as a major component of the tourist attraction, outdoor activities related to discovering the local environment, the enhancement of local products and the promotion of local consumption, the local elevation of the heritage and the need for social consensus in tourism development. While in 2016-2020 (#D3), the inhabitants were considered as prescribers and ambassadors and proximity tourism as a tool in this strategy, in 2022-2027 (#D4) the focus is mainly on the way these flows are managed and how to address the local, departmental and regional markets.

4 Discussion and conclusions

This first approach to the case of Pays de Nay has enabled us to reflect on how certain rural and inland territories with their different types of tourism-related actors respond to the scenarios generated by crisis context, showing a certain capacity for resilience. Our study has focused on the crisis derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. After analysing the strategic documents and the perceptions of expert informers, we can make two interpretations: these scenarios are seen as a challenge or as an opportunity.

A crisis, such as the pandemic in 2020, becomes an opportunity when it tests the adaptation capacity of the different actors and their cluster (Yalçinkaya, 2019) and favours the acquisition of new competences. It is also an opportunity when the available time and capacity for action of each actor is used to make progress in projects which, while being essential, in normal circumstances are relegated to second place behind urgent tasks. It is an opportunity to invest in improvements or the reinvention (Lew, 2013) of the activity itself and to create new projects when the difficulties give rise to creativity and ingenuity. The restrictions on movement established by the pandemic have opened the door to new clients, proximity tourists. This can also be interpreted as an opportunity, particularly when the strategic plans already considered these markets.

A crisis can be interpreted as a challenge when a territory or sector such as tourism has to face unprecedented situations that they have to learn to manage. The greater flows of proximity visitors have generated a series of quantitative, qualitative or perceived impacts that have ultimately required the creation, improvement or planning of specific mechanisms for managing flows and

spaces and raising awareness among visitors and the local actors and even the adaptation of the existing plans so as to incorporate and specify greater promotion in proximity markets.

Other challenges emerging from the pandemic, although more relevant to the preceding period, are the continuity and financing of the projects identified during the crisis and those planned in the short and medium term. Another additional challenge is maintaining the high degree of activity, communication and relations among the cluster of actors in the long term. These aspects are vital for the resilience of the territory and the sector (Cánoves et al., 2017).

Our conclusions on the effects of the crisis as an opportunity or challenge allow us to interpret the situations of change as a space for learning, confirming our hypotheses. Through the responses executed at different scales and from different perspectives, we have identified adaptation mechanisms that have consolidated after the pandemic, confirming their value as tools for improvement. Within this context, we should highlight the role of public subsidies for maintaining the activity and the territorial dynamics, which have proved to be vital tools for territorial resilience. Maybe this is why, in the case analysed, it cannot be affirmed that the socio-economic landscape has transformed radically, but this crisis seems to have reinforced pre-existing processes, strengthening ideas or negatively affecting already vulnerable activities and actors (Nalau et al., 2018; Cánoves et al. 2020).

Finally, the case study of Pays de Nay enables us to see the consequences of proximity tourism in rural and natural spaces when its development has not been planned. This tourism depends on evident ecological and social values and can be considered as a lever for change towards a model framed within the degrowth paradigm (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). Our research, which is still in progress, reveals some of the contradictions of proximity tourism which can pose a challenge for management on a local scale. One of the principal lessons learnt is that planning is fundamental for a tourism development that is appropriate, endogenous and coherent with the socio-ecological transition, which represents the desired global strategic response to the context of multiple crises in which we are immersed.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the MCIN-AEI/10.13039/501100011033 under Grant PID2020-114186RB-C21.

Authorship statement: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest and share responsibility. All three authors have conceived and designed the study. The three of them have collected data in different steps of the research (all in the first phase and

Rayssac and Diaz-Soria in the second phase). The analysis and interpretation tasks have been distributed according to the participation in the different steps of the field work and the conclusions obtained are the result of a collective debate. Regarding the final manuscript, the three authors have worked collaboratively using a shared document and all have contributed to improve the proposal according to the referees' and the editor's suggestions. The information used for the cartography has been defined by Rayssac, the maps have been produced by Diaz-Soria and Blanco-Romero has prepared the graph. The photographs have been taken by Rayssac during our field work.

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