

TOURISM IN THE SPANISH PROTECTED AREAS, SOMETHING MORE THAN A NEW TREND

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I. AN APPROACH TO NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Protected areas are probably the greatest expression of wilderness in our society (Corraliza *et al.*, 2002) so they generate a big attraction on people, especially urban population. The healthy life in the countryside, the beauty of natural landscapes, the need for escaping from the stressing city life or nice reports on TV and magazines are some of the reasons for this attraction.

Nowadays nature is an important factor in new tourisms and protected areas are really tourist destinations. In example, in 2004 there were 1.517 ecotouristic businesses in Andalusian Nature Parks witch provided 6.805 jobs (Consejería de Medio Ambiente, 2006). But protected areas don't just attract nature lovers but every tourist, even when they don't realize they are in a protected area.

Anyway, experts identify a little segment from global tourist market called nature-based tourism which is the appropriate for protected areas (but not the only running). And it is growing very fast in the last decades. The World Tour Organization (WTO) defines it as any form of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature and cultural traditions. It is called green tourism or ecotourism, too, but ecotourism is really a segment from nature-based tourism which has the following characteristics (WTO, 2001):

1. All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
2. It contains educational and interpretation features.
3. It is generally, but not exclusively organised by specialised tour operators for small groups and service provider partners at the destinations tend to be small.
4. It minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment.
5. It supports the maintenance of natural areas which are used as ecotourism attractions by generating economic benefits for host communities, providing alternative

employment and income opportunities for local communities and increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.

In 2002 (the International Year of Ecotourism), the WTO prepared a report about the Spanish ecotourism market. These are some results for inland destinations:

- The market is small (60.000-100.000 users) and seasonal (77 % packs in the summertime) but grows quickly.
- Rural tourism and landscape & nature are the most important segments.
- Customers prefer mixed packs (different landscapes+outdoor recreation+local culture).
- Wildlife, trekking and visits to protected areas and traditional communities are the top activities.
- Northern destinations (Principado de Asturias, Galicia, País Vasco or Cantabria) and National Parks are the top destinations, followed by the islands and Andalucía.
- Typical profile for the Spanish ecotourist: a young urban well-off woman in 1-week trip.

II. THE ORIGINS OF TOURISM IN THE SPANISH PROTECTED AREAS

Spain created the first protected areas in 1918 (Montaña de Covadonga del Macizo de Peña Santa and Valle de Ordesa o del río Ara National Parks), two years after passing the *Ley de Parques Nacionales*, which was one of the first protected areas Laws in the World. Nature conservation and recreation have been linked from the beginning.

At the end of the 19th century the associationism had a boom in Spain, especially when linked to rambling and outdoor educational activities, so naturalists, scientists, ramblers and schoolchildren were the first “nature-based tourists” and quite often they were the main supporters for wilderness protection.

As time went by the original model of sanctuary-National Parks evolved to a new model adapted to new times: during the dictatorship of General Franco protected areas were a big attraction for outdoor recreation and tourism. Land production was by far more important than nature conservation.

Nowadays we have a more balanced situation among nature conservation and recreation (the so called “public use”). The growth of outdoor recreation since the 60’s in almost all developed countries and the higher education level in environmental issues make protected areas one of the main destinations for the recreation of urban population. The governments have strongly helped this situation since rural tourism and farm tourism seem to be the only successful exit for the social and economic crisis in the countryside.

III. SOME DATA ABOUT TOURISM IN THE SPANISH PROTECTED AREAS

Spain is a World leader for international tourism (ranking #2 in 2006 for international arrivals and incomes; *WTO Barometer*). It is a mature destination for mass tourism since

more than half a century, especially because of the beaches. But protected areas are not a key part of tourist offer but a complement for beaches and rural accommodations despite the outstanding Spanish natural heritage. They usually act as a place for recreation and nearby tourism (Muñoz, 2001). Even so they have become significant destinations in the last years.

The richness of natural and cultural heritage, the biodiversity or the conservation status are important factors for visiting protected areas, but there are other ones even more decisive, like nearness to the city, accesses, global tourist offer or tourist promotion. Thus, places with huge heritage or well known parks are not always the most visited (Muñoz, 2001).

Visitor flows in Spanish protected areas are not well known. Those studies are generally incomplete and not much accurate (there is rarely a clear distinction among visitors and tourists), so they are not helpful for exactly know how many tourists arrive to protected areas and which is its profile. But actual data shows a growth for nature-based tourism: at least 49.4 million people visit Spanish protected areas and 25% receive more than 411,693 people each year (EUROPARC-España, 2006; p. 41). National Parks are the most visited (10,979,470 visits in 2006).

IV. KIND OF VISITORS TO PROTECTED AREAS

There are lots of studies about the kind of visitors to protected areas. For Spain we can mention Múgica y De Lucio (1992) who classified the visitors to National Parks in 5 groups. Vera *et al.* (1997) completed their classification, so we can find adventurous-mountaineers, naturalists and nature lovers, campers, occasional nature-based tourists and students and elder people.

There is not only one profile for visitors to protected areas but a mix of them. Nonetheless, the best profile is for ecotourists (“naturalists and nature lovers” in Vera *et al.* classification) because of their behaviour.

V. RECREATION IN PROTECTED AREAS

Leisure activities and tourism in Spanish protected areas are extremely diverse depending on the kind of visitors and territories. We can find different groups:

- Terrestrial routes (i.e.: pedestrian, car, bus, 4x4 car, horse, camel) which use to include the main values of natural and cultural heritage and places with panoramic views. These are the most common activities.
- Enjoying the beauty of nature and landscapes, what needs facilities like viewing-points, hides, roads, tracks, paths, cable-cars or bridges.
- Visits to cultural heritage. Nevertheless, Spain has got 40 sites in the UNESCO World Heritage List and a wide and extremely diverse ancient cultural heritage. Tourists don’t know much about borders, so in fact the cultural heritage next to the parks usually takes part of the tourist offer of the protected area.
- Sports as a mix of outdoor recreation, physical exercise and risk as the main characteristics, so they are called risky sports, too. Rambling and trekking are quite usual, especially because they are heavily powered by the Governments with signals, bro-

chures and guides or guided tours. There are lots of paths for rambling (GR, PR y SL) crossing Spanish protected areas.

- Mountain biking and cycling are quite usual. Centros BTT/FCC (4.117 km in 15 centres and 203 tracks in Catalunya) and “Programa Vías Verdes” (almost 1.600 km in 65 “green ways”) are two standing out initiatives.
- Several activities which are important just in singular places or seasons, like winter activities (i.e. skiing, cross-country skiing, snowshoes), water activities (i.e. fishing, sailing, rafting, canoeing, diving, snorkelling, windsurfing) and, as less important but growing fast, wind activities (i.e. balloon, paragliding, hang gliding), climbing, canyoning, speleology, riding horses and others. They all started as minority activities related to a close contact with wilderness, but they have grown fast even getting in conflict with nature conservation, so they need high regulation.
- Environmental education for children and elder people. It is growing in the last years but in fact it is the new version of an ancient tradition that started with the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (late 19th-beginning of the 20th centuries).

VI. LOOKING FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS

The new role for protected areas as tourist destinations means that they need an extra effort to control and plan tourism, which sometimes even gets in conflict with heritage conservation. So visitors’ centres, information point, tracks, museums, botanical gardens and other leisure facilities are quite common lately.

The main tools for planning tourism and leisure in protected areas are the “Planes de Ordenación de los Recursos Naturales” and “Planes Rectores de Uso y Gestión” from *Ley 4/1989, de 27 de marzo, de conservación de los espacios naturales y de la flora y fauna silvestres*, or their equivalents in regional laws. On a lower level we meet the “plan o programa de uso público” which establish the guidelines for the public use of the protected area. But just a few are running and they are quite new, so that issue needs a better planning and regulation.

In order to arrange this situation, many areas have initiated several ways to a more sustainable and high quality tourism. Some good examples are Local 21 Agendas in Menorca and La Palma Biosphere Reserves, ISO14.001 in all Andalusian Nature Parks, the “*Q* de calidad” system for protected areas and the Plan de Impulso del Turismo de Naturaleza.

But the best tool for promoting the sustainability of tourism in protected areas is, no doubt, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST). The Charter belongs to the EUROPARC Federation, the umbrella organisation of protected areas in Europe. The Charter is a voluntary commitment among EUROPARC and protected areas managers (first section of the ECST, renewable after 5 years), the tourist enterprises (second section, renewable after 3 years) or tour operators (third section, renewable yearly) to promote sustainable tourism in those areas. The external verification process for awarding and re-awarding is a quality warranty of the whole project, as the participation and cooperation among local stakeholders are.

Actually just the first section of the ECST is in full implementation, with 45 awarded parks (15 of which are Spanish), while the second section will be developed soon. All those

areas take part of the European Network of ECST Awarded Parks, which organizes several meetings for sharing good practices and common principles for developing the Charter. There is an Iberian Network as well, for Spanish and Portuguese parks.

Awarding a park with the ECST means making a tourist diagnosis, drawing up a sustainable tourism development strategy and making and implementing a 5-years action plan which carries out the strategy and shows the commitment of the territory for a sustainable tourism. The protected area will set up a permanent forum which will be the main participation place for local community and will be in control of the ECST progress.

Spain is the country with the widest success for ECST, especially in Andalucía with 12 awarded parks (almost 70 % of their regional surface of protected areas), 3 more Andalusian nature parks being ECST candidates for 2008 and several Andalusian institutions well represented in the Working Group for implementing the second section of the ECST in Spain, so there will be an Andalusian “touch”.

VII. AS A CONCLUSION

Tourism and protected areas have been linked from the beginning, but lately we are living the boom of tourism and outdoor recreation in protected areas. This growing pressure needs to be managed by several tools (laws, quality systems, voluntary initiatives). Right now the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism is the most rising and probably the best tool among all. And Spain and especially Andalucía are both leaders in Europe for the ECST.

