

THE LANDSCAPE AS A TOURIST RESOURCE AND ITS IMPACT IN MOUNTAIN AREAS IN THE SOUTH OF CASTILLA-LA MANCHA (SPAIN)

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ABSTRACT

Interiors and middle mountain areas have experienced a growth of rural tourism since the end of the 20th Century. This increase is explained, among other things, by the commitment of entrepreneurs and local development groups, as well as changes in the preferences of travelers: they behave in a more segmented way, with greater environmental awareness and enhancing rural spaces. In the rural environment, the landscape has become a not marketed tourist commodity. Communication is inserted within a line of research that analyzes the location of rural tourism lodgings and the tourist experience in the temporal spatial consumption process of the landscape. Its growing use in tourism has led to propose a methodology based on the analysis of preferences and ratings that tourists make. The work is focused on the mountains of the Southeast of Castilla-La Mancha, where a survey that seeks to understand tourists' behavior and perception in rural destinations has been made. Results place the landscape as the main resource in the tourist experience.

Keywords: Castilla- La Mancha, landscape, local development, mountain areas, rural tourism, touristic resource.

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism participates in the paradigms of local and sustainable development. Both try to give answers to some social, economic and environmental problems in rural areas. It is therefore an innovative economic activity that appropriates and consumes territory, which highlights the close relationship between tourism and the space in which it is developed. This justifies the interest paid to these types of connections, since each tourist modality is supported in a particular group of resources. In this case attention is focused in those resources linked to the landscape, in a territory in which tourism has grown at an accelerated pace.

In the last two decades there have been changes in some elements of the tourism system of the micro-destinations in the Spanish interior area. In many of these destinations, rural tourism has become the dominant modality due to the changes in demand preferences. But also due to institutional interest or the profit-seeking business community that warns of business opportunities, under cover of the use of some unique resources. The behavior of all of them in conjunction has determined that rural tourism has become a reality in some regions of the Spanish interior mountain.

In the beginning of the nineties in the 20th Century, the first lodgings for this modality were opened in the province of Albacete, with a significant increase in the number of tourists and visitors since then. In this context, the role of the landscape fits as a resource, and it has become an element of attraction, to which little attention is paid from the different actors



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involved. This paper indirectly analyzes the role of the landscape within the tourism system, its relationship with the location of the establishments and the preferences of the tourists. The hypothesis used is that the landscape acts as the main tourist resource in this territory. The distribution of the rural lodgings has been analyzed and a survey has been made to tourists in order to identify to what extent the landscape is crucial in the process of selection and evaluation of a destination. The mountains of the Southeast of Castilla-La Mancha, in the interior Spain, have been selected as a territory of analysis. This work is part of the research project "The Landscape as a tourist resource in the Southeast of Castilla-La Mancha: utilization and revitalising". (-POII-2014-023-A-, Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deporte de la Junta de Castilla-La Mancha – España, 2015).

2 RURAL TOURISM: BETWEEN THE INTEREST OF DIFFERENT ACTORS AND CHANGES IN DEMAND PREFERENCES

Rural tourism in Spain is a recent and complex concept. There is not therefore a definition shared by the scientific community. But it is also due to the lack of precision, ambiguity and clarity of the concepts of tourism and rural space. This makes it an alternative modality in which awareness towards the Environment, values and local culture or the offer of recreational activities of leisure and free time are essential.

Its boom has been associated with changes in the preferences of tourists [1], which directed the interest towards rural areas and especially towards mountain areas. It has had social and territorial effects that justify the fact of having been assigned the role of instrument of local development by LEADER European strategies and Spanish PRODER [2] to reactivate the precarious traditional economies, preserve the environment and implement tourism, in addition to giving some multi-functionality to rural areas through the benefits (and costs) in the territories where it is developed [3]. It also helps to transfer management techniques, creating environments for the development of economic alternatives linked to the tertiary sector with offer of recreational activities, accommodations and related services, or it serves to promote conservation, quality, self-management, planning or the respect to the heritage [4].

The structure of rural tourism is associated to microenterprises, microdestinies and micro-products organized on the basis of activities in contact with the nature, local culture or the built heritage [5]. It is aimed at an audience with different motivations, high sensitivity through the hardly transformed environment, in contact with nature and local culture and the built heritage. There have been attempts at planning aimed at housing and conservation of built heritage, the responsible use of natural heritage or the recovery of landscapes, but marked by a heavy burden of improvisation and voluntarism [6].

As a balance, there are definitions which present it from the perspective of territorial support and resources, demand and their motivations, the offer of facilities or the provision of tourist services [7–11]. It is associated with vacation accommodation in the country, including endogenous tourist activities, supported by the human and natural environment aimed at the city dwellers seeking little altered landscapes, having contact with nature and the local society. We may add this condition of diffuse, eco-heritage, and in contact with the local.

Tourism resources linked to territorial and landscape heritage are the main base of the rural tourism system. All this makes the concept 'resource' possibly the most important element of the tourism system, with a high component of subjectivity and permanent adaptation to changing preferences of visitors.

Resources are tangible or intangible, material or immaterial elements which, individually or in combination with others, have the ability to attract visitors with a motivation of tourist use, leisure or recreation [12, 13] and generate sensations and satisfactory experience during

the stay. The Trade World Organization (TWO) understands them as 'goods and services that through the activity of man and the means available, enable tourism and meet the needs of demand'. But it is significant that most of them only occur where they are produced, they are not relocatable. In the case of the landscape it does not always appear a payment for use, hindering their inclusion in the chain of production and marketing. We have paid specific attention to the landscape in this paper.

3 THE LANDSCAPE: AN ELEMENT OF ATTENTION FOR RURAL TOURISM

The process of transformation of the landscape in high rural areas (low population density, low income levels, high weight of the agricultural sector, or geographical isolation) is a result of natural and anthropogenic processes (accelerated in recent decades). In this process, rural tourism participates in the use and reconstruction of landscapes and economies. New exploitation of leisure and tourism have appeared usually in natural landscapes that serve as stage and support for outdoor leisure activities. The European Landscape Convention understands it as "any part of the territory as perceived by its population, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and human factors" (instrument of ratification of the European Landscape Convention) (Council of Europe [14]). Since its adoption, the interest to identify the ways in which they take part in different activities and applications has been emphasized. In the case of tourism, it has been joined to the cycle of consumption of the territory under different forms (productive and non-productive), assuming a dimension of leisure and entertainment [15].

This change means it's entering in the circuit as a non-tradeable good, supported by the image and the ways of life, which brings together stakeholders who built them, expectations and attitudes of those who visit it and the interests of the managers of those territories. Those in which human action has been less intense have gained more value, with more presence of nature, history and traditional culture. The landscape has generated capacity of attraction and influx of tourists, which has allowed the emergence of micro-destinations supported by the environment or landscape quality, enabling the development of leisure and recreation activities.

Its importance explains why it has intangible values, linked to symbols and identities, moving sensations and emotions. They are the built-in marketing iconic elements. They are mostly natural, cultural, water or past landscapes which assume greater value, and unreproducible environmental or cultural assets. They have become elements of consumption, territorial potential and an important active for rural tourism.

In the Southeast of Castilla-La Mancha, the landscape has taken on this role and has become one of the major territorial potentials for rural tourism. Despite its importance as a resource, it is an area in which the landscape has had little attention for their management for tourist use. It is one of the autonomous regions where the advance of this modality has been more accelerated. Changes in the use of the landscape are analyzed in this case from two different perspectives, one from the presence of establishments in areas with a high landscape quality. Another, from tourists preferences, and analyzing their preferences and ratings through surveys.

4 RECENT CHANGES FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS AND THE DEMAND PREFERENCES

Rural tourism in Spain is a recent and minority modality (supposed 3% of total in 2013), but with a considerable growth capacity. It is a national tourism (84% according to the Spanish National Statistics Institute - hereinafter INE - in 2013), heterogeneous in composition and

urban origin. But the number has been doubled from 2001 to 2013, to reach 2.5 million in the last date [16]. From the point of view of the establishments it is recent, because the first lodgings appeared in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s (supported in LEADER and PRODER grants) but it has grown considerably in the last twenty years, from thousand to fifteen thousand lodgings (INE, 2014).

From 2012 they began to observe changes in the dynamics, which now presents a situation of stability, or recoil. Indeed, the period from 2003 to 2012 has left one greater increase and deep territorial imbalances. The distribution in 2013 presented as a balance, that five communities gathered more than half the number of establishments (Castilla y León, Catalonia, Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha and the Balearic Islands). In this case the focus is on the characters of the tourism system of Castilla-La Mancha, articulated mainly around the landscape resources in the Southeast of this autonomous community.

Transformations operated in recent years, coinciding with the economic crisis that began in 2008 force to consider if the recent trend is a result of the context of change of the economic model or if the sector has been set up on a structure with weaknesses that are forced to renew [17].

4.1 The structure in the offer of establishments for rural tourism in Castilla-La Mancha

The evolution in the offer of establishments for rural tourism in Castilla-La Mancha presents a dynamic similar to the national, with a constant tendency to growth in establishments and tourists up to the year 2012. These are the data collected from evolution of accommodation for the period 2004–2013 (INE). But we need to point out two facts: one is that most of them are concentrated in the province of Albacete, and another is that this is precisely the one which has accused the tendency to change from 2012 (Fig. 1).

There is a scenario of rural tourism role in the province of Albacete, which has left an uninterrupted growth since the end of the last century until 2012. This positive development has also left internal conflicts, such as the weak occupancy of accommodation (which affects both to the region and to the province of Albacete).

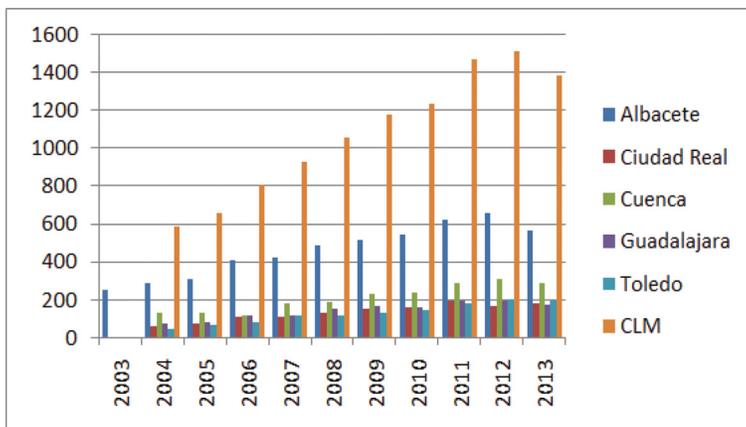


Figure 1: Evolution in the offer of establishments for rural tourism in Castilla-La Mancha and Albacete.

When analyzing the situation in the supply of rural tourism establishments attention has been paid to the data provided by the General Directorate of Tourism of the Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha (later on JCCM) for the years 2013, 2014 and 2015. As a result, 1,950 rural lodgings scattered remained in the regional geography in 2014 (Table 1).

It draws the attention the fact that there has been an increase in the number, which has been a constant for two decades in Castilla-La Mancha, which had 1,950 establishments and 15.507 places. It has also taken place in great scale in the province of Albacete, which left a total of 809 establishments, 4,925 places in 2014 according to the General Directorate of Tourism of the JCCM in 2014.

To analyze the offer of accommodation in the mountains, information has been organized in two scales: on the one hand the whole of the Sierras de Alcaraz and Segura have been considered. On the other hand the situation has been compared in two different occasions. One in 2009, when the economic crisis began to be felt, after a decade of continued and uninterrupted growth. Another date is March 2015, late registration available (General Directorate of Tourism, JCCM, 2015). Only the offer of rural lodgings has been analyzed, excluding hotel and apartments (Table 2).

The mountain regions added a total of 3,605 places and 596 rural lodgings in 2015. This means that 73% of the total supply in the province was focused on this territorial scope. From these, it was Sierra del Segura which assumed the leading role in 2015, with a 51% of provin-

Table 1: Establishments and rural tourism places in a regional and province scale.

	Establ. 2013	Estable. 2014	Evol. %	Places 2013	Places 2014	Evol. %
Albacete	793	809	2,01	4.822	4.925	2,13
Ciudad Real	223	239	7,17	1.986	2.016	1,5
Cuenca	400	405	1,25	3.333	3.416	2,49
Guadalajara	251	263	4,78	2.515	2.660	5,76
Toledo	231	234	1,29	2.285	2.490	8,97
CLM	1.898	1.950	2,74	14.941	15.507	3,78

Table 2: Rural lodgings.

	2009*		2011		2015	
	Lodgings	Places	Lodgings	Places	Lodgings	Places
Sierra de Alcaraz	125		159	789	182	958
Sierra del Segura	358		327	1.716	414	2.647
Total Sierras	483		486	2.505	596	3.605

* 2009 includes unique rural lodgings, and agro-tourism use.

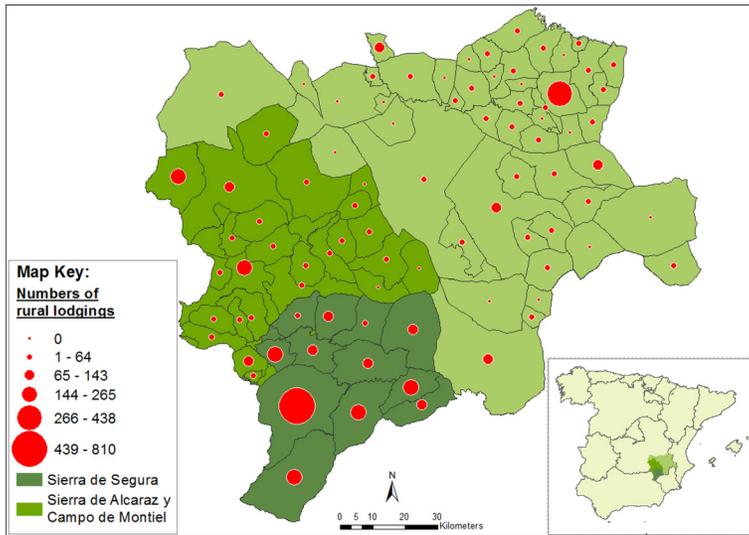


Figure 2: Rural lodgings of the Province of Albacete.

cial houses offer and 53% of the places. The most prominent in terms of the number of rural lodgings in Sierra de Alcaraz are the municipalities of Alcaraz (161), Ossa de Montiel (166) and Villaverde de Guadalimar (117). On the other hand, Sierra del Segura includes Yeste, the municipality which leads the list with 808 places (is the municipality of Spain with more rural accommodation), to which we must add Nerpio (207), Riópar (254) and Letur (219).

4.2 Tourists behavior and preferences in relation to the landscape

To check the role of the resources in general, and the landscape in particular in the mountain areas, a survey to tourists has been conducted in order to identify the most relevant features of their preferences. We must point out that these two regions of the mountains have several protected areas and a territorial frame with different landscape units [18, 19].

4.2.1 Structure of the survey

The survey that has been conducted is a pilot study, with innovative character, since works carried out nationwide in Spain using this method are very few and address this topic tangentially [20–23]. There are others who dealt with the evaluation of the landscape through other methodologies [24–26]. General and partial conclusions, which serve as a starting point for future work, can be extracted through 302 questionnaires. The object of the study focuses on known interests and assessments in relation to rural tourism and, especially, to the landscape. Below are presented the technical details of the survey (Table 3).

The survey has been organized into five blocks and twenty-four questions. The block zero determines the profile of the tourist-visitor (age, sex, educational level, professional status, nationality and province and municipality of residence). The questionnaire begins with questions about the characteristics of the journey and the stay (duration, place of accommodation, means of transport, form of travel, knowledge of the destination...).

The second block identifies the information that tourists handle in the area: reasons for the trip, how they found the area and which attractions have conditioned their choice. The block

Table 3: Technical data sheet.

Universe	Visitants and tourists of Albacete Sierra: Alcaraz and Campos de Montiel and Sierra del Segura
Geographic scope	Sierra de Alcaraz, Campos de Montiel and del Segura in the province of Albacete
Size of population	Indeterminate
Sampling	No sampling has been done
Trust level	95,5%
Sampling error	±5,6%
Size of sample	302 tourists
Allocation criteria	Has not been done
Field work data	From the 5th of August and the 20th of November 2015

three includes a unique question with multiple answer format that allows the respondent to select three reasons to explain the main motivations of the journey to this territory.

The fourth block focuses on aspects relating to the landscape: there has been an attempt to obtain information relating to general perceptions about the tourist attractions featuring the area and assigned ratings to the landscape. It includes the elements which, in the opinion of the respondent, confer identity and have the tourist/visitor appeal. From a filter question, there has been an attempt to identify the type of preferred activities and how they are organized. Issues having to do with the perception that they have of the tourists/visitors on the state of conservation of the landscape have been included. The last question refers to the considerations of the respondents regarding the accessibility to the resources.

The survey ends with questions about the assessment of the visited environment: natural landscape, inhabited landscape and countryside. It includes questions that help to understand the relationship between the pre-image and the final image.

4.2.2 Main results obtained

The Albacete mountains have a tourist profile with national origin, with a medium-high level of education, which emphasizes active workers. They cross different municipalities, which carries out overnight stays, and which range in number: from a night, a weekend or long weekend, and a minority may prolong the stay for a week or more.

Preferences in the type of accommodation are concentrated mainly in the rural environment (rural houses, hotels and rural hostels, hostels or rental housing). However another category appears, employing the family or friends' second residence. The tourists/visitors mainly travel in family, with the couple or in groups. They use the automobile as the main means of transport, and only in some occasions they use the bus. The tourist directly selects the destination without the help of associations or travel agencies. In relation to the level of knowledge of the target destination, in most cases they have previously traveled and have also done so with relative frequency.

As to the form of getting information, almost all the answers seem to place side of the own experience or information that have gained through family or friends. This means that the tourist offices, guides, brochures, books or the Internet do not act as a priority information channel.

In the assessment section of tourists resources appears a clear majority that opts for prioritizing what has been identified as natural-cultural landscape; the surveys' answers that

choose the monumental heritage and inhabited places, along with aspects such as the quiet, the novelty of the destination and even accessibility are also significant. Behind these we find the cultural events, traditional festivals and cuisine. The less chosen option have been the activities carried out in the natural environment or the sports, accommodations, services or the quality-price ratio.

In general, the survey respondents manifest that the information available in terms of signposting, information panels, books or brochures, the Internet or applications for mobile is poor. Regarding the reasons for the choice of destination, these include visits to natural areas and/or protected (countryside) and rural communities (monuments, museums...). Visits to family and friends, or the use of the second homes appear in a third place. The visit to spas, gastronomy, handicrafts or the prices are placed last in the list.

In relation to evaluation of resources, we must highlight the interest in natural landscapes, whereas the cultural heritage (architecture, art, rural habitat, landscapes cultivated...) is below. Less relevance have, on the one hand, the options related to festivals, traditions, handicrafts or gastronomy; on the other hand, the possibilities for outdoor activities or events in natural areas. Most of them, give a high prominence to the relief as a symbolic element in the identity of the landscape and as a tourist attraction. They also assigned it to water landscapes appearing immediately after. The rest of valued aspects are other elements of the landscape and vegetation (climate, environmental quality, wildlife...).

We must also emphasize the fact that they are attracted by leisure activities and that, in one way or another, they participate in them. The results obtained suggest that they organize these activities and make them on their own, and that they have not fulfilled all of their expectations in terms of activities. They miss the visit related to archaeological resources (interest in guided tours, interpretive centres...), the local culture (cuisine, traditional crafts), photographic exhibitions, or cultural heritage (museums, monuments, churches...).

Assessments on the state of conservation of the destination leave positive impressions: the state of conservation of the visited environments is presented as good or very good. However, some aspects associated with the presence of uncontrolled dumping and visual pollution are put in question. Tourists begin to warn the emergence of elements strange to the environment that lead to negative feelings. In the general assessments, we highlight the high consideration which has the environment quality and of the visited landscape (natural and cultural) and above all, the fact that there is a certain correspondence between the pre-image and the obtained after a tour, with the exception that when there is no prior knowledge the resulting image is better than the previous respondents', which encourages them to return to the destination.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The rural tourist system of the mountains in the Southeast of Castilla-La Mancha has left a fast growth in terms of accommodation, which employs a tourist of national origin, with familiar character, who collects information through friends, and who moves in his own vehicle, uses the lodgings on a priority basis and has a certain fidelity to the destination. The previous idea of the trip corresponds to that found during the visit, and for those who do visit for the first time it is especially gratifying. The degree of satisfaction with the experience is high, since all have expressed willingness to return. But the really significant thing is that the landscape becomes the most important element of attraction.

This reality presents problems that require responses from different actors, public and private. Among the most relevant we highlight the weak occupation of establishments and the

high seasonality of tourism, the lodgings are occupied mainly on weekends and in certain long weekends, calling the model into question. Also, the structure supported by weak information on supply and possibilities of use of the landscape for tourism.

Recurrent proposals include the need to increase the marketing strategies, the creation of tourist products with regional character, the improvement of information channels or the professionalization, or direct special attention to certain groups (return tourists or families). But above all, and in view of the role of the landscape as a remedy preferred by tourists, we need to pay more attention to actions aimed at improving its exploitation and use, taking into account the fragility of the resource, and the necessary regulation of activities and capacities in the most sensitive settlements from an environmental and landscape point of view.

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