

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

INITIATIVES TO GIVE VALUE TO THE HUERTA DEL BAJO SEGURA. ANALYSIS OF THE PROJECT “LA VEGA BAJA INTERIOR DE LA COSTA BLANCA” (ALICANTE)

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In the last decades, rural areas have become an object of tourism thanks to the creation and implementation of quality infrastructures – favoured, in many cases, by regional, national and international regulations brought into being in this regard – and the attractiveness of the natural environment itself. This fact has brought about a rediscovery of the interesting values that these natural treasures hold in the area, but in turn, in some cases, it has led to a negative impact, causing loss of traditional landscape, reduction of the cultivated area and the destruction of heritage elements.

In accordance with this, the region of the Bajo Segura, located south of the Province of Alicante in the Valencian Community (Spain), is a paradigmatic example of this duality. This territory has a long-standing agricultural tradition, in which tourism linked to the agricultural environment has been fostered, in certain enclaves, with an evident cultural focus. In turn this has guaranteed not only the value given to the landscape and the “Huerta” as a force for the development for its history, heritage, and culture, but has also enabled its production to keep active. In this sense, the Project “Vega Baja Interior de la Costa Blanca” (2017) was a proposal developed along these lines, of great interest, not only to advocate for the aforementioned integrative perspective, but also to be an inter-municipal initiative, thus unravelling the multiple ideas at a local level. On the other hand, in the same district, this trend in tourism has led to the transfer of the residential coastal urban model to the rural area in specific places; a fact that clearly manifests itself when observing the census of dwellings in the region.

In the area of study, tourism has become a relevant sector capable of improving the economy of destinations, sustaining long-term development, and influencing economic-territorial planning. Its growing competitiveness necessitates new management techniques, which is why the plan envisaged by the Valencian Tourism Agency was welcomed by the councillors of many municipalities in this area of Bajo Segura. Entities that saw in it the

possibility of creating a different tourism product focused exclusively on the agricultural space. The interest aroused by this initiative motivated the municipalities to present a series of proposals that, despite their differences, underlie the intention to exploit this resource of a natural-cultural character which has not been sufficiently valued to date, such as the agrarian space, and to turn it into an asset for tourism.

However, before dealing with the projects submitted, it is necessary to analyse the theoretical rationale of agriculture as a tourism resource. That is to say, to try and frame these contents within the latest trends developed in public policies which aim not only to promote tourism, both national and regional, but also to promote the rural world and good practices from an environmental point of view, with innovation and sustainability strategies that go beyond the concepts of landscape valorisation such as “holeriturism” or “benchmarking”.

Apart from rural tourism, the initial approaches on which the 1990 Commission of the European Communities are based, contemplated a broad concept that included the enjoyment of holidays and the development of leisure activities in this rural space or in the interior areas. The first regulatory regulation to be cited corresponds to the Law for the *Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment (2007)*. This promotes the recovery of this non-urban area and prevents the deterioration of the natural heritage, landscape and biodiversity, while facilitating its recovery through the integrated management of the use of the territory. In accordance with these principles, the *Rural Development Programme of the Valencian Community (2014-2020)* establishes amongst, the main lines of action, the diversification of economic activity, which entails the exercise of actions contrary to those carried out so far, and emphasises the need to achieve a balance between the economy and the population. In this context, the project “Vega Baja Interior de la Costa Blanca” was framed.

Likewise, the *Valencian Community’s Global Strategic Tourism Plan 2010-2020* aims to achieve a series of objectives, some of which form part of the Visitors Orchards initiative designed for the Bajo Segura. In this way, the implementation of a well-understood rural tourism plan becomes a determining factor in promoting the recovery and revitalisation of the agrarian areas of this region, and not the predominant residential model which has existed until now. This way forward can become a dynamic factor, which by means of a sustainable tourism model for the interior, offers a remarkable heritage potential in the area governed by Orihuela.

Finally, over a longer term, the *Valencian Territory Strategy 2010-2030*, a planning tool based on the Law of Land Planning and Landscape Protection (Generalitat Law 4/2004, of 30 June), which was in force until the adoption of the Law on Planning and Landscape Planning of the Valencian Community (Law 5/2014 of 25 July), formulated a more comprehensive approach. It proposed “the rational implementation of economic activities in the territory that are fully compatible with cultural values and environmental values”. The legal instrument itself points to twenty development opportunities, the first being the “Huerta”, to which others are expressly linked, such heritage in terms of the environment and culture, within which the hydraulic one stands out, in addition to the intangible and urban aspects.

Cultural initiatives to preserve the identity and territory of the “Huerta” form the second point of this project, identifying four different areas for the case study. In the first place, there are the “*leisure and recreational routes of the Huerta*”, marked prepared routes that run through different zones of the agricultural area allowing for the peaceful contemplation of the irrigated landscape, the different properties associated with it and time in contact with the natural world. On the other hand, “*the Museums of the Huerta*”, exists in several municipalities that have exhibitions in which the collection and value of heritage resources associated with this historical productive area are advocated, in an attempt to preserve cultural elements typical of the identity of the “Huerta”. The third proposal corresponds to the *promotion of the Huerta as an educational and tourist resource*, which through the development of different graphical material for this purpose, including: promotional booklets, informative brochures and diptychs, enables some material to be presented at International Tourism Fairs. Finally, the fourth initiative is *the creation of municipal urban orchards*, a measure that emerged as an experience to keep the affective link that the populations traditionally had with their surrounding environment alive. The “Huerta”, has its social roots in activities related to agriculture and so can raise awareness about the values of this land and its working activities.

This research concludes a third point dedicated to the analysis of the aforementioned Project “Vega Baja Interior de la Costa Blanca”, an approach aimed at creating and offering a tourist product based, fundamentally, on experience and with direct reference to the agricultural productive spaces of the region. This territory has a marked duality in its economic sector, because it has very consolidated and dynamic coastal and pre-coastal areas, which can be considered mature, against an interior in which agriculture has a prominent weight and where its municipalities, for years, have been trying to access this market, therefore being seen as areas of emerging tourism.

In this way, the different municipalities associated with the plan presented their proposals with the intention of giving the “Huerta” value as a regional tourist product. All this, through a unique image that encompasses the strengths and singularities of each of the administrative entities: Almoradí (Huerto de la Alcachofa), Bigastro (Improvements on the cultural route of the Huerta), Dolores (Route of environmental-cultural heritage through the Huerta), Guardamar del Segura (Sala de la Ñora in the Archaeological Museum), Los Montesinos (Interpretation Center, Water as a transforming element of the Territory), Orihuela ((Interpretation Center of the Huerta del Bajo Segura), Los Montesinos (Interpretation Center of the del Bajo Segura, El Agua as a transformative element of the Territory), Orihuela (Interpretation Center of the Huerta del Bajo Segura), Pilar de La Horadada (Agrotourism route), Rojales (Rehabilitation, signalling and improvement of the heritage of the Huerta), San Isidro (Urban-rural route) and Torrevieja (Enhancement and tourist use of the vineyards of La Mata).