

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE LOCAL IMPACT OF THE ST JAMES WAY: THE PERCEPTION OF RESIDENTS FROM TWO GALICIAN MUNICIPALITIES

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INTRODUCTION

With 1.200 years of history, the Saint James Way is not just the best-known image of Galicia but the symbol of the construction and the cultural identity of Europa. Declared as the first European cultural route in 1987 and as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993, the relevance of the Route goes beyond a simple touristic resource.

The Way origins were undoubtedly religious but it has evolved to become one of the main attractions of Galicia and Spain. The Saint James Way is nowadays an economic phenomenon generating income and jobs resulting in revitalization and development of the localities along the route. The number of pilgrims collecting the Compostela (the certification of the pilgrimage to Santiago according to the Church) was 327,378 in 2018 (a new absolute record), while fifteen years earlier, in 2003, there were 74,614. In order to efficiently manage the challenges arising from the growing pilgrims flow, it is essential to understand residents' perceptions and attitudes towards the Route and the pilgrims. The impact of the pilgrims' flow on local populations and how residents perceive that impact can be analyzed in terms of what the literature establishes, in general, for any tourist resource.

According to the literature, tourism activity is an element of economic revitalization for local populations, but it also generates impacts —positive and negative— in other dimensions such as the sociocultural or environmental, which influence the residents' quality of life (Brida *et al.*, 2014; Deery *et al.*, 2012; Vargas-Sánchez *et al.*, 2011; Andereck *et al.*, 2005; Easterling, 2004; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002; Tosun, 2002; Mathieson and Wall, 1982). In any case, it is confirmed that resident population' attitude and support for tourism activities

are key factors for the success and sustainability of these activities (Lee 2013; Nicholas *et al.*, 2009; Vargas-Sánchez *et al.*, 2009; Aguiló and Roselló, 2005; Jurowski and Gursoy, 2004; Andriotis and Vaughan, 2003; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002; Sheldon and Abenoja, 2001; Garrod and Fyall, 1998; Ap, 1992).

The aim of this work is to explore the perception of residents on the positive and negative impacts deriving from the existence of St James Way and the influx of pilgrims at the global level and also in the sociocultural, economic and environmental dimensions, paying special attention to the perception of saturation and the resident's attitude towards the Way.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The analysis is conducted on the basis of the quantitative information obtained from a satisfaction survey conducted of residents aged 18 year or older from Pedrafita do Cebreiro and Melide, two municipalities which are representative of the Galician section of the French Way and corresponding with a rural area which is in social and economic decline. The designed sample is proportionate stratified, taking large age groups (18-39; 40-64; >65) and parish location relative to the French Way in establishing the strata.

The designed sample for Pedrafita do Cebreiro is 258 respondents and for Melide is 359. In the case of Pedrafita do Cebreiro, 212 questionnaires were finally carried out, which accounts for 82.17% of the initial objective and implies that the maximum sampling error is 5.75%. In Melide, the number questionnaires finally conducted was 260, 72.43% of the designed sample, being the maximum sampling error 5.93%. All interviews were face-to-face and conducted during the month of August and the first week of September 2017 by trained pollsters.

The questionnaire designed to measure the residents' perception of the Way impacts, which is divided into three sections, includes the items generally considered in the literature. The final selection of question takes into account the validation with a group of experts and the preliminary results from a pilot survey. First section is the most extensive one, it includes 34 items relating to the perception of the impacts (positive and negative) in the economic, sociocultural, environmental and global dimensions. This section also includes items about the residents' attitude towards the route and the pilgrims. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1, "strongly disagree", to 5, "strongly agree"). In relation to the perceived economic impacts, both, the benefits derived from the Way for economic activity and employment and the costs (in terms of the effects on the cost of living increase and the conflict with non-tourist activities development), are analysed. Among the aspects about which residents are asked in the social dimension, the perceived demographic impact is included. Given their regressive demographic dynamic, in these municipalities this issue is very relevant. Within the social dimension residents are also asked about their general attitude towards the Way, inquiring about their satisfaction with the presence of pilgrims. Within this section, the environmental dimension block seeks to know the residents' perception of the impacts on the natural environment and the landscape, the population centres, the provision of basic infrastructures or the generation of waste and pollution. In this block, residents are also inquired about their perception of the influx of pilgrims and, in particular, whether they

consider it is excessive. In the last block of this part, a global assessment of the respondent on the perception of the aggregate impact of the Way is obtained, from the point of view of both the effects at the individual level and at the municipality level.

The second section tries to obtain information on the residents' perception on their municipality in overall terms, asking for identification of the three main problems from a list of 14, grouped into five areas: demographic (depopulation, aging); economic (lack of employment and opportunities, price of goods and services); access to services (social, health, educational, financial, telecommunications, etc.); cultural (lack of cultural and leisure activities) and other problems (influx of tourists / pilgrims, security problems, conflicts between neighbours and management of the commonly held mountain). Finally, the third section collects information about the sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, education level and household composition) as well as about other factors which, according to the literature, may influence the residents' perception; in particular, the level of contact with pilgrims, whether the personal income is related to the tourist sector and the distance from the residence location to the Way (which is inquired directly and it is also identified from the data about the parish of residence).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the vast majority of cases, residents from both municipalities perceive a positive economic impact (income, local businesses, employment, tourism, other non-tourist activities) while they do not perceive a negative impact (in terms of a detriment for the development of other economic activities or an increase in prices, with the exception of hotels and restaurants). Moreover, in both municipalities, residents consider that benefits from the Way flow to local residents, although benefits end up in a few hands. That perceptions are more prevalent in Pedrafita, where the majority perceive the St James Way as the main economic activity of the municipality.

Regarding the social impact, the perception of the majority of residents is that the supply of services (healthcare, social, transport) are not influenced, neither positively nor negatively, by the Route. Residents neither perceive that the Way contributes to the cultural and leisure activities increase. However, the perception of the majority is a positive cultural impact, particularly as regards its contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage and the opportunity for cultural interchange that the Way means. In no case, residents perceive the Way as contributing to conflicts in their communities. The perception of a demographic impact is more positive in Pedrafita than in Melide, which is consistent with the size, the demographic dynamic and the relative valuation of the Way in each municipality and, in a greater extent, by the residents with higher education level and those with incomes derived from activities related to the Way. Residents from both municipalities perceive a positive environmental impact. The majority do not perceive negative effects (for waste treatment and management or pollution) while they perceive a positive contribution, more for maintaining the landscape than for maintaining population centers.

In view of the perceived positive impacts from the Way, in particular in the economic (activity and employment) and demographic dimensions, and the identified problems of the municipalities in those same dimensions (demographic - depopulation, aging- and eco-

conomic -lack of employment and opportunities), we could conclude that residents consider the St James Way as part of the solution for the problems of the municipality, especially in the case of Pedrafita do Cebreiro (the most rural, small and aged one). In addition, the vast majority of the residents do not perceive saturation, not even during the months of major influx of pilgrims. All of that would explain the such a favorable attitude towards the Route and the presence of pilgrims showed by the results in both municipalities.

When they are inquired in overall terms, results show that residents from both municipalities consider the existence of the Way and the influx of pilgrims yield more benefits than damages, and that it had contributed to the municipalities prosperity. These results are in general independent from the residents characteristics although they tend to be more positive for those residents whose income is related to the Way.

Taking different sample segments (by age, gender, education level, proximity of the individual's residence to the Way, level of contact with pilgrims and personal income related to the Way activities), in general, for the different groups the above perception of a positive impact and no saturation, remains; as well as the favorable attitude towards the Way and the presence of pilgrims. Age influences the perception of saturation (lower for older) and the attitude (more favorable for older), while the residence location or the distance from the residence to the Way do not appear to significantly influence perceptions. The largest differences are for the frequency of contact (the higher the contact, more favorable the attitude and lower the saturation perception), and the dependence of income (residents deriving income from tourism activities have a more positive perception of global and demographic impacts, a more favorable attitude towards pilgrims and a lower saturation perception).