

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE POTENTIAL OF TOURIST RESOURCES IN THE NATURAL RESERVES OF ESPADAN MOUNTAIN RANGE (SPAIN) AND TALASSEMTANE (MOROCCO)

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In recent years there has been a significant increase in the demand for tourism in the protected natural areas, which has meant that in the latest decades the demand for natural reserves has shown a year-on-year increase of between 10 and 30 per cent, while the overall year-on-year demand for tourism worldwide is an increase of 3.4 percent. It is estimated that the demand for Spanish protected areas ranges between 26 and 36 million people per year. Out of these, almost 11 million are accounted for in national parks with a variation of 19.7% between 2007/1998, that is almost 2% of average annual growth rate (National Parks Independent Body of the Ministry for the Environment) (Organismo Autónomo de Parques Nacionales del Ministerio de Medio Ambiente). This has had a significant socio-economic impact by creating over 4,000 direct jobs and investments which in 2007 neared 24 million Euros. These growth processes are not without problems, which arise from the excess of carrying or hosting capacity along with the inappropriate use of these spaces for leisure activities and sport.

These new dynamics of production and consumption patterns in natural parks require systemic and integrated management schemes based on the territorial and socioeconomic characteristics of the different areas. These schemes contribute through their cohesion towards a sustainable whilst at the same time competitive development on the offered products.

In this regard, this paper applies a model of integrated analytical assessment to the resources of two protected natural areas in the Mediterranean: the natural park of Sierra de Espadán in the region of Valencia (Spain) and the national park of Talassemtane in the region of Tangier-Tetuan (Morocco). The results are then used for a comparative study of the two natural areas.

Therefore, in order to ascertain the degree of current and potential attraction of the resources through its classification or ranking, there is a need to make an analytical and integrated assessment. This assessment will determine the primary ranking of each resource based on the different components involved in the product that tourism is. The primary

ranking consists of five values: 1 it complements other resources; 2 stimulates local tourist flows; 3 regional appeal; 4 national appeal; 5 international appeal. The evaluation process is structured around a series of internal and external factors, formed by variables and in turn by considering a set of indicators that will enable to specify to the maximum the qualitative assessment of the resources and a maximum quantity value of 50.

Thus, the internal factors are shaped with the relative variables related to the intrinsic characteristics, the infrastructure and the planning, and the tourism and services infrastructure. With regard to the intrinsic characteristics what is assessed is the specificity and uniqueness of the resource, being the most important variable in the assessment process, which is why it has a maximum value of 20.

With regards to the infrastructure variable and the resource's planning degree, its importance lies in the quality given to the resource, and comprises two subsections: the general infrastructure and the degree of urbanization, both with a maximum value of 5 points.

As for the general infrastructure, two indicators are assessed: one the one hand the availability and quality of water resources and on the other hand the physical accessibility to the tourist resource. The degree of urbanization helps with the perpetual quality for the residence of both the local population and the visitors. This is analyzed through four indicators: urban layout, building's appearance, general condition of the buildings, and general urban planning.

The variable that comprises tourism infrastructure, the accommodation offer and the tourism services defines the tourism profiles that highlight the development characteristics, with a maximum value of 5 points. Therefore, regarding tourism infrastructure, the following are considered indicators: signs, information service and municipal tourism management. This last one responds to the existence of a political-administrative structure that eases public-private coordination, either through a Board, or a consortium of tourism, bolstered by a council of tourism as well as business associations. The variable of accommodation is of great importance since the revitalization of a tourist resort and its transformation into a product requires commercial or regulated accommodation (hotel, camping, apartments, country lodges, hostels, etc.). Both the diversification of the accommodation offer and its capacity and quality are key indicators to assess the potential of tourism products. The commercial offer is becoming more crucial since the degree of consolidation of tourism products depends on it. It is therefore that the key indicator is the degree of trade dynamics, linking the number of businesses with tourism and its diversity. Finally, sporting, cultural and leisure activities are analyzed, assessing gradually the number of facilities available and their quality. This assessment is completed with the water supply service and other services included in Agenda 21, such as the collecting and processing of solid waste, water treatments, public transport and health and care services in the destination.

With regard to external factors and taking into account the fact that tourism involves "movement between a transmitter and a receiver centre", the external access is one of the variables that will define the ranking of resources, therefore their hierarchical value can reach a maximum of 10 points. Its assessment will depend on the communications' network current state, which connects the destination being studied with the transmitter markets, be it by rail, road or air, or a combination of them. Also the assessment of the

accessibility to the destination does not depend only on the distance, but also on the physical characteristics of the transport infrastructure. This last variable takes the form of resource assessment in the tourism market and demand volume it generates. With a maximum ranking of 10 points, it is assessed by visitor's surveys. The surveys reflect the tourist's preference or degree of attraction for tourism resources for the four categories. By applying the percentage values of the categories, each resource will be assessed according to the preferences expressed by the demand.

Applying this assessment methodology to the aforementioned parks, the total number of quantified resources in the natural park of Sierra de Espadán amounts to 343, and their distribution in categories is headed by category A, i.e. natural-scenic landscapes that represent 41.98% of the total. It is followed by those resources of category B: monumental-historical, technical, ethnological and artistic with 123, representing a 35.86% of the total. Further down on the list we find category D (folklore, festivals, and programmed events) with 51 resources representing a 14.87%, and category C (craftwork and gastronomy) with 25 resources.

The national natural park of Talassemthane has a large variety of resources. Out of them, 66% belong to the natural-scenic category, 16% to the monumental-historical, 8.7% to the craftwork and gastronomy category, and the resulting 8.7% to the category made up by folklore, festivals and programmed events. Therefore from a quantitative point of view, there is a clear predominance of the natural-scenic resources.

With the compared study of the results of the analytical assessment of the parks of Espadán and Talassemthane, it becomes evident that although the end result is similar 2 ↔, this is achieved differently according to the different variables. This is relevant as there are variables whose improvement entails greater difficulty, as is the case of the intrinsic characteristics of the resource. By contrast there are other variables, such as accommodation infrastructure and tourism services, which are more simply involved in the improvement process as they largely depend on the public-private's will.

In the case of the natural park of Sierra de Espadán, the analysis has shown that there is no basic resource which holds its own capacity to generate tourism flows, since no resource was counted in the hierarchies 4 or 5. Nevertheless it is important to highlight that 24 of its resources have a regional appeal, i.e. ranking 3. So most of the resources correspond to the ranking 2, that is local appeal, which would explain the evaluation of the intrinsic characteristics within the internal factors as medium-low, representing an average of 7.2 on a maximum of 20. Secondly and within the internal factors, a low evaluation is detected on the variables of infrastructure, accommodation, services and facilities, with values which are below the mean on a maximum of 5 points. However, external access rated well, which contributes well to the overall ranking of the products, be they general or specific to the environmental touristic units.

In the national park of Talassemthane, ranking 2 (local appeal) also dominates. Nevertheless this average rating is conditioned in terms of internal factors, the accessibility to the resource, the poor state of urbanization, and more importantly by the absence or condition of the accommodation infrastructure. The external factors are heavily influenced in its negative aspects by the current tourist market, and the accessibility to the destination. These results are airbrushed by the high intrinsic value of many of its resources 12.9

on average. Said resources are gifted with a magnificent beauty, which is enhanced by the uniqueness of its landscapes and the diversity of its vegetation. The dorsal shaped limestone mountain range that lies to the south of the park represents a great attraction especially around the mountains of Lakra and Tissouka, where you can find the only two fir woods in the African continent. The uniqueness and attractiveness of this mountain range explains why the greatest potential resources are located north of the dorsal range in Talambote and south around Bab Taza.

To sum up, it appears that although the outcome of the analysis in global terms is similar in both parks, the partial assessment of its variables is rather different. It shows that while in the natural park of Sierra de Espadán, the final result is influenced by variables of infrastructure, degree of urbanization, and accessibility to the destination, in the national park of Talassemtane it is the intrinsic value of its resources which determines its final ranking. Therefore this analytical assessment highlights both the strengths and weaknesses that need addressing in both parks, noting the strategies that need developing.