

AGRITOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN A NON-COASTAL TOURIST DESTINATION. THE CASE OF «LOS GRANADICOS» COUNTRY STATE IN MORATALLA (MURCIA)

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This paper is intended to reveal the importance of the enterprising capacity to boost dynamism and territorial change. For this aim, we will show a rural tourism product, such as the country estate Los Granadicos, located in the North-west of the region of Murcia, which is an example of a responsible management that considers the culture of this area as a main resource following a multifunctional approach: productive and educational, involving the locals and diminishing environmental impact.

This model should give rise to new thoughts to other areas which, like the town we are dealing with, have not achieved their appropriate development after two decades following different schemes and public policies.

This article is divided into two parts. The first one deals with several reflexions that justify the reason for its implementation as well as the necessity that this place has for this sort of measures since they are capable of triggering local resources and therefore favouring development stages. The second part is devoted to the main core in order to describe the integral tourist product which murcian developers are betting on. The gathered information comes from the field research that has been realized by means of visiting the place and having personal interviews with both investors and developers, with the manager in charge of the product and with the architect of the project.

Regarding the first part, it is convenient to point out that this article arises from the personal commitment that the author got into during the visit to this state for the purpose of a meeting between public agents and developers promoted by Murcia University from a permanent headquarters in this town. This is a very favourable circumstance that must be reckoned as an appropriate attitude to follow with a view to constituting new development strategies for the local tourism. The interaction between different agents, gives rise to communication, dialogue and exchange of knowledge which lead increase the opportunities, to innovate. This relational style is a key factor for the competitiveness of such destination but it needs coordination which must be taken over by the local administration.

On the other hand, if the main purpose of rural development aims at favouring an improvement in the standards of living of the local community and avoiding exodus, we believe that the philosophy of this developer is interesting and suitable for a town like Moratalla which is suffering a stoppage of its population, a high rate of old age inhabitants and unfavourable forecast of improvement.

The designed product has formed a tourist place which has succeeded in preserving its environmental and local landscape. Two sets of traditional buildings known as «cortijos» or farmhouses, located among agricultural scenery with olive trees, cereals, fertile irrigated area and a vast natural surrounding constitute the basic offer of this integral tourist product.

A group of eight rural houses which are currently being used has been refurbished although the pursuit for improvements does not stop.

It is situated in an agricultural and cattle farm using ecological agriculture and with own animal species. Its management answers the current demand and makes use of modern production methods. The agricultural systems which have been preserved make, in turn, economic and public profits thus giving rise to a heritage for the benefit, use and enjoyment of a society which is increasingly aware of the value of environmental and cultural aspects. However, the most remarkable fact is that all this emerges as a powerful development factor because it makes people feel proud to belong and to live in that place.

It is an innovative product because it has fully understood the importance of keeping the morphology and functional character of the cultural heritage in this zone. This complex has been devised taking into account sustainable and quality criteria and not only is it going to complete the first stage and diversify the product, but also it is going to increase the competitiveness of the destination and the regional offer in rural products. This time, the proposed project consists of a quality hotel with a reduced capacity, for just thirty guests, with multifunctional services and infrastructure to hold even small meetings or congresses because 53 additional seats coming from the previously mentioned first stage, can be added.

The activity program offers new options as well as the typical ones in this area, among which a theme specialty stands out: the world of horse, there are also museums for the visitors to get to know the ancient ways of living in the town. The agricultural landscape is the main character again in the second farmhouse which is surrounded by a vast field of olive and almond trees and which is going to be refurbished in such a way that it will blend in with the landscape causing a low environment impact.

The bet on creating a tourist product from the recovery of the local productive systems is framed in the new measures intended to give rise to the functional diversification, to keep moving forward in the multifunctionality of rural areas with a view to achieving an integrated rural development which can help to keep rural areas alive and joined together. (Maya Frades e Hidalgo González, 2009) The future agricultural production, like in other places in Spain, is reduced and consequently also the economic effects.

However, the private initiative, in this case a local businessman from the same region who strongly believes in the future prospects and feasibility of his investment has searched for several alternatives which complement each other and besides are capable

of generating synergy. This project consists of different elements since it combines agritourism, active tourism, cultural tourism, and in addition, it becomes a training ground, a kind of laboratory for intermediate studies in this area and for further studies in the near future. Tourism must not be considered as an alternative, but it should be integrated in the area where it takes place.

