

LANDSCAPE AND TOURISM. THE BAETIC CORRIDOR IN ALCARAZ (ALBACETE, SPAIN)

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We intend to raise some considerations concerning the function played by cultural tourism within the strategies aimed at local development, based on the premise that these strategies are founded on the assessment of the willingness to produce shown by the local population of a certain place, as well as the sustainable exploitation of its natural, social and cultural resources. These resources altogether form the territorial wealth of a town or region.

The wide bibliography on cultural tourism shows how this segment of the tourist industry is clearly growing. The resources used to entertain tourists can be monuments, historic-artistic landmarks or any other expression of the human activities which are part of the cultural heritage in each place. Accordingly, the nature of cultural heritage can be very wide. It includes monuments and inert artistic expressions from past times —such as archaeological sites, architecture from different historic periods, documents, etc.— as well as living heritage, which includes expressions of the local culture, traditional craftwork and folklore, home furnishing, clothing... even shared knowledge, values, customs, traditions, or peculiarities of a group or community.

The demand of tourist products related to heritage has been revealing itself as one of the most growing components of the tourist industry. Creating tourist routes and itineraries is one of the most spread ways to make socioeconomic profit out of the cultural heritage, by integrating its natural, historic-artistic and cultural elements in a network organized around a hub or a corridor. Creating such routes in order to exploit these resources as a tourist product benefits the revitalization of local economies: it can contribute to energize them, to increase the profits of their production systems, to raise public awareness on the importance and benefits of protecting their territorial heritage, to strengthen their signs of identity and the self-esteem of their inhabitants, and finally, to increase the value of their social resources.

The emerging role of the landscape as a territorial resource is also emphasized. The importance of landscapes has been internationally stated this century. This recognition has been channeled through the European Landscape Convention, approved by the Council of

Europe — Florence, 2000-10-20. In Spain, it was assumed by the Parliament and seven years later ratified by the Head of State. Since its publication in the Official State Gazette —2008-02-05— the Public Administrations with authority on Land Planning have set up a group of measures to put into practice, within their scope, the general and particular rules of the Convention.

The regional government authorities have regulated the implementation of this set of specific measures proposed by the European Landscape Convention in order to fulfill its pledge on landscape protection, administration and planning. The Department of Land Planning of the Council of Communities of Castilla-La Mancha has been the organ in charge of it in this region. The results reached in the task of identifying and classifying the different landscape types and units present in its territory, as well as their peculiarities, can be consulted in the Atlas of Landscapes of Castilla-La Mancha.

A relevant case of this process in Castilla-La Mancha is the territory organized by the Guadalmena River, in the province of Albacete, and its immediate surroundings. According to the types established in the Atlas, this particular environment shows characteristics which belong to three different models: Mountains and Valleys of Sierra Morena; Baetic Valleys and Intermountain Corridors; and Sub-Baetic and Pre-Baetic Massifs and High Ranges.

The mosaic formed by the landscape units in the Guadalmena River headwaters is situated in the southern area of the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, where it limits with Andalusia. Despite its reduced surface, the area has an unexpected variety of environments, as it lies upon different structural units —both because of its geologic origin and its geomorphologic evolution.

The most relevant aspect of this valley is its relief, which creates its characteristic sharp lines. This relief contains several landscape units. The denudation of the Campo de Montiel sub-horizontal limestone platform, which spreads out in the southeastern end of La Meseta at the beginning of the fold structures of the Pre-Baetic and Sub-Baetic Ranges, opened in the last stages of the geologic history a wide tectonic window, where series of Paleozoic and Mesozoic materials from its base have emerged. These materials are responsible, in short, for the current formation and morphologic diversity in the Valley of Guadalmena River. Therefore, this valley covers an area where the most significant structural units of the Iberian relief collide. This circumstance leads to an easy to distinguish plurality of environments.

A cornice of Mesozoic limestones which belong to the edge of the Campo de Montiel high plateau limits the northern and western sides of the valley, enclosing its headwaters with a natural amphitheater. This provides some steep slopes where magnificent panoramic views can be enjoyed. Towards the east, the valley is flanked by the complex fold structures of La Almenara and its towering crests, as well as other fractures in the Alcaraz Range, one of the most important mountain systems in the Outer Pre-Baetic sector. Finally, in the space within all these structures, there is the Hercynian Relumbrar Range. This range, the most eastern elevation of Sierra Morena, divides the beds of Villanueva de la Fuente and Guadalmena Rivers. It has outstanding Silurian quartzites and it shows a typical Appalachian structure, of exceptional geomorphologic and landscape interest. The dominant red color in the headwaters is caused by the nature of the rocks in the slopes,

a sedimentary layer formed by iridescent loam, clay and red sandstone, typical from the Triassic period. These materials form the lower stratum of the nearby tabular cover of the plateau, which spread throughout the bottom of the valley.

The biogeographic characters of this climatologic crossroad result in a new singular element in the territory. Oak forests were, time ago, the dominant vegetal formation. By the margins of the valley, however, the holm oak grove shares the land with very different species. In the eastern side, brooms and pine forests, which come down from the Alcaraz Range, holm oaks and kermes oaks cover the red clay, sandstone and dolomite loam slopes. The situation is similar in the northern side, towards the Campo de Montiel. The colors are a bit more ochre there, and pines are less frequent, nevertheless. In the inner mountain ledge, by the Guadalmena River bed, the glaucis, made of grey quartzites and clay, forms the foothills of the Relumbrar Range. Holm oaks and gum rockroses are found in the lowest areas. In the highest parts, kermes oaks and Portuguese oaks, as well as some sporadic cork oaks, share this Mediterranean climatic environment.

On top of all of the above, there are the cultural elements of the territorial heritage, too. This territory has been an enclave not only because of its physical environment, but because of the function it has developed through history as a natural corridor, making interaction among different cultures easier. The characteristics of the current landscape come from that function and the subsequent settlements spread throughout that peculiar environment.

Today, there are twelve settlements in seven municipal territories in the Valley of Guadalmena River: Alcaraz and Villapalacios lie in the inner part of the valley; Povedilla and Villanueva de la Fuente are on the West, on the cornice of Campo de Montiel; Vianos, Salobre and Bienservida are situated on the East, where the Alcaraz Range starts to rise. The first towns, those in the bottom of the valley, have traditionally and historically had a leading role. Accordingly, they also have more relevant cultural resources, now. The prestige of Alcaraz, anyway, daunts any evaluation of the heritage of the other settlements in the Valley of Guadalmena River.

The valley is therefore dominated by a town, Alcaraz, capital of an old and vast municipal territory which was of great political and military relevance during the late Middle Ages. As a consequence, it had an active economic and social life, too. The settlements and the economic activities developed by the local inhabitants throughout the valley — particularly agriculture and stockbreeding — show the cultural affinity and social cohesion which define its population and the landscape identity.

Several fruit tree plantations — apple, pear and almond trees — cover the land of this sub-horizontal depression, as well as the confluent valleys which descend from the east side. However, there is a more and more dense and productive olive grove, which easily spreads throughout the steep clay slopes announcing the nearby Andalusian province of Jaén and the influence of its characteristic agricultural landscape.

Livestock production is another predominant activity in this region, having left its mark on the landscape, too. Stockbreeding has had a long history. During the Middle Ages, it provided raw materials for the textile industry, which acquired a great reputation — specially the carpet manufacture. Later, in the Modern Era, the Valley of Guadalmena River was one of the winter pastures visited by Castilian sheep during their seasonal

migrations. This activity is behind many of today's local place names in this area. The different settlements which occupy this natural and cultural crossroad have a rich historic-artistic heritage, which has been attracting the interest of visitors. These, for their part, have contributed to encourage restoration and lodging activities, boosting the opening of hotels and rural accommodations distributed among several of the settlements in the valley.

An interesting tourist route can be created by implementing the inventory of natural and cultural resources in the Valley of Guadalmena River. Routes are tourist products created to enjoy, in an organized manner, a set of natural and/or cultural resources in a town or a region. A tourist route consists of a series of clearly indicated landmarks, elements which create a sense of local identity, organized as a network.

However, it is important to remind that the quality and number of natural resources and the rich heritage are not enough to guarantee the success of a cultural tourist route. It is necessary for the local population to get involved in the organization and management of the project. Otherwise, if the territorial base is not supported by the indispensable social resources which are committed to its development, such a project will never come to fruition. In the region where the outstanding Valley of Guadalmena River flows, that is the challenge which the local social actors have to assume.