

## **RURAL HERITAGE AS A TOURISM RESOURCE. HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPORTANCE OF TOURISM FOR REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES (ROUTES & WAYS) IN THE MOUNTAIN AREAS OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY AND NAVARRE**

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The conceptual development experienced by the term heritage, the slow - albeit progressive - recognition of the wealth and specificity of the patrimonial assets contained within the fields and mountains, along with the growing appreciation of these spaces, allows this rural heritage to be viewed as a tourism resource. In turn, it is clear that sustained tourism centred around heritage —and developed in a responsible manner within the parameters of sustainability— can contribute to the economic launch and social, cultural and even environmental improvement in local communities, which makes it of particular interest to disadvantaged mountainous areas. This paper is based on the connection between the following three areas: *heritage, tourism and development*.

From the wide range of assets that these rural mountainous areas house, the focus in this article has been directed towards the regional infrastructure for public land which has a high patrimonial, symbolic and cultural value, as well as a marked territorial dimension and which has, traditionally, been assigned a secondary role with respect to other historic sights and outstanding landscapes. The main objective is to analyse and assess the change in functionality and, more specifically, the re-use, in terms of tourism, of permanent ways, livestock trails and historical routes, based on certain significant experiences in the Basque Country and Navarre. To achieve this end, the paper starts off within a theoretical framework which, on previous reflection, addresses the conceptual evolution of terms such as Heritage and Rural Heritage and its institutional and regulatory recognition, placing special emphasis on considering it as a tourist resource and a driving force behind sustainable development. Within this context this paper goes on to analyse the change in use, function and meaning of the rail infrastructure in rural areas, working down from a general approach, which examines the awareness of its patrimonial value, to a study of five particular cases: the Basque-Navarre Railway, the Plazaola, the Cañada Real de los Roncaleses, the Historic Route (GR 1) and the Wine and Fish Route (GR 38).

The territorial scope of application has been the mountain areas of the Basque Country and Navarre. However, due to the breadth and internal diversity characterised by these empirical cases, the focus has basically been centred around those mountain areas that are disadvantaged and/or with a strong rural character, where analysis of these tourism strategies, often covered by rural development programs, proves to be all the more interesting.

The review of institutional texts, international treaties, legislation and scientific work made in this paper reveals that there has been a conceptual enrichment of heritage, upheld by the integration of what is natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, as well as an increasing awareness of its territorial dimension and the interaction between man and the environment, visible in the countryside. This process of adopting a broad view is also evident in the formation of rural heritage being significant in this regard, for example, the acceptance by the Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning of the Council of Europe from the *European Rural Heritage Observation Guide* (2003), insofar as it implies the acceptance of its specificity and highlights the need for integrated management of such by means of spatial planning instruments. Likewise, this evolution, to some extent, can be perceived within the contents of the cultural heritage laws for the Basque Country (1990) and for Navarre (2005), given their different dates of approval. In any case, there is still a dichotomy between the theoretical advances, on the one hand, and practical achievements, on the other.

In this context, there has been a growing awareness concerning the patrimonial value of historical territorial infrastructures that provide a backbone to the countryside and mountains, often in a state of disrepair and neglect. This increased recognition becomes evident, for example, with the incorporation of the *Historic Route* as a specific category for protection under the Provincial Law 14/2005 of 22<sup>nd</sup> November for the Cultural Heritage of Navarre.

This situation has resulted in the establishment of a considerable number of different initiatives aimed at its recovery and enhancement in terms of tourism, such as the *Natural Paths-Green Routes* program promoted by the Spanish Ministry of the Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, focused on rescuing disused railway lines to facilitate public use for recreational purposes. In 1993, these lines covered 7,600 km of Spain, by 2010 1700 km had already been reconverted. The implementation of the two Green Routes analysed (Basque-Navarre Railway and Plazaola), have made it possible to identify the following effects: On the one hand, it has been confirmed that they have been instrumental in the recovery, conservation and appreciation of traditionally ignored cultural heritage, they have contributed to the promotion of healthy outdoor activities and the use of bicycles, environmental education and interpretation of heritage, they have provided contact with agricultural landscapes and outstanding natural areas, they have encouraged the deseasonalisation of tourism and have promoted rural development by means of creating local employment. However, it should be recognised that both Routes are in different situations, with that of the Plazaola showing a greater capacity as a driving force behind the development and generation of wealth and employment and as a catalyst for tourism. On the other hand, it can be seen that there has been a redefinition of the cattle trails - and a legal endorsement in this regard - based on the plurality of functions and uses, including

those for tourism. It has been verified that in the eastern portion of Navarre they are still used for livestock (especially sheep) and their use is extensive, nevertheless there are also many visitors who make use of them motivated primarily by hiking or touring on bicycles. In turn, they play an important role as ecological corridors, which are of great importance within the framework of Natura 2000 Networking Programme. La *Cañada Real de los Roncaleses* is a unique resource that forms part, together with seasonal migration and the Way of St. James, of the tourist related «Paths of History» product, included in the *Tourism Marketing Plan for the Community of Navarre*. In turn, the main strategies aimed at the leisure-sports based reorientation of routes of great historical significance, such as the *Historical Trail* or the *Wine and Fish Route*, have focused on their transformation into Grande Randonnée or short trails and/or mountain bike routes.

It can be appreciated that, due to the broad potential, the Basque Country and Navarre have opted for ecotourism and active tourism, in such a way that they are currently offering similar products focused on hiking and cycling tours. However, it was found that their state of development differs in both cases being, in general terms, more advanced in the Autonomous Community. Nevertheless it is true to say that the opposite has occurred with regard to the adaptation of the Green Routes to tourism, such that Navarre has obtained earlier and better results —at least in the cases studied—. Through these, it has been possible to observe the dynamic interaction between heritage, tourism and local development, a relationship that offers ample opportunities but which is not without difficulties and that requires, among other things, extensive inter-institutional coordination.

But throughout this paper certain contradictions that carry a degree of risk have been also highlighted, such as: the implementation of miles of Green Routes without a preceding management plan, the momentum from the public and private sector toward hiking emphasizing deficiencies in the state of preservation and signposting of many trails for public use, not complying with approved standards and conditions for their creation, conservation or management, and even trails not having been approved as Grande Randonnée (GR) by the Spanish Mountain Sports Federation; the promotion of hiking or cycling without a framework of basic tourism services in those places where the roads run, which means a loss of opportunity.

To sum up, as with other components of the countryside, in order to ensure that paths and historic routes do not definitively disappear through neglect, it is essential to provide them with functionality and undoubtedly tourism can be offered with regard to this as an interesting option. They have demonstrated their ability to generate tourist related products and, in line with this, the potential they offer to promote and publicise the mountainous areas as well as the opportunities they present to both the local population (in terms of employment, incomes and an improved quality of life) as well as visitors and tourists who travel there to satisfy their leisure needs. Nonetheless, it is necessary to be aware that, in many cases, this is not a question of merely a sufficiently developed and consolidated offer and that, often, it takes on a complementary character.

Finally, the acceptance of this patrimonial entity, its diversity and uniqueness, has highlighted the need for extreme care in its conservation, maintenance and management; given that if its abandonment linked to the decline of traditional farming methods and to the changing countryside and the disappearance of rural ways of life will obviously produce

negative results, then so will —and greatly— exceeding its capacity to accommodate unregulated and excessive recreational use. It is necessary to remember that many of these routes run through areas of high scenic, ecological and cultural value which must be preserved. As a result of this, it becomes particularly relevant in mountainous areas to attract visitors with a high degree of environmental and cultural sensitivity. Of equal relevance is the creation of integrated planning and management of heritage and tourism, considering that the permanent way infrastructures do not represent isolated elements, they do in fact form part of a structured, dynamic territorial system.