

CREATING THE «TAZA-BOUIBLANE» TOURIST ROUTE AS A MEANS FOR PROMOTING RURAL AND ECO-TOURISM IN THE NORTH-EASTERN MIDDLE ATLAS (MOROCCO)

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There is a wealth of landscapes and environmental resources in Morocco's North Eastern Middle Atlas region, but they are not well known and little has been done to promote them in eco- and rural tourism terms in order for them to be both enjoyed and exploited economically. It is only in the last ten years that the first steps have been taken to plan, manage and promote eco-tourism and rural tourism as a means for achieving the territorial development that could help improve the local population's economic situation and to create a sustainable model for exploiting the area's environmental resources and territorial heritage.

One of the most efficient tools for promoting tourism is designing, creating and institutionalising tourist routes. It is unusual to find scientifically-rigorous and institutionally-backed guidebooks that chart approved tourist routes in Morocco. The article takes an inventory of the natural and rural heritage's potential for eco-tourism activities to be developed in the Eastern Middle Atlas and proposes a tourist route that would enable the area to become better known and enjoyed from an eco-tourism perspective. The methodology used includes on-the-spot land analysis and intensive field work, interviews with local actors and the use of support techniques and instruments for inventorying and mapping.

The first step is to take an inventory of existing resources for developing and promoting rural and environmental tourism in the North Eastern Middle Atlas region and for the subsequent design of a tourist route from Taza to Bouiblane. A number of points-of-interest are marked on the route: 1. Taza: with its outstanding *medina*; 2. Ras El Ma: a karst spring or upwelling at the foot of a 1000m high rocky escarpment; 3. A panorama of Taza and the Pre-rif: a vantage point that affords a comprehensive view of the countryside and an extraordinary panoramic view of Ras El Ma, the town of Taza, the

surrounding replanted pine woods and the southern-Rif corridor and foothills of the Rif mountain range; 4. Douar Sidi Majbeur: at the entrance to Tazekka Park and classified as cultural heritage since 1949, with its impressive architecture and traditional agricultural landscape. 5. Tazekka National Park; where the following stand out: 5.1. *Park Entrance*; 5.2. *Dayat Chiker Polje*; 5.3. *Friouato cave*; 5.4. *The Bni Shane ammonites*; 5.5. *Lazrak cave*; 5.6. *Admame and Tanjra cave*; 5.7. *Bab Azhar woods*; 6. the Maghraoua: with its characteristic landscapes of mountains and woods; 7. The Tamourhout valley: an area of interesting typical Middle Atlas fold mountains; 8. The Ued El Bared springs: a complex of permanent karst springs welling up from a deep cave, 920m above sea level; 9. Tamda Lake: an originally-created natural temporary lake surrounded by a beautifully-wooded landscape of cedar trees; 10. Tamtroucht: a natural depression where the valley bottoms are inhabited by local people with close connections to their immediate environment; 11. Taffert-Bouiblanc: an area of hilltops and mountain foothills.

Finally, a diagnosis is performed of rural and environmental tourism in the North-Eastern Middle Atlas. This area possesses natural qualities and terrain that are suitable for promoting the rural and eco-tourism that make it possible for nature to be enjoyed without upsetting the environmental balance.

The region's natural and cultural assets coexist with isolation, an absence of infrastructure and a lack of employment among local people living in poverty. The location of the enclave, the poverty that characterises the area and, paradoxically, the wealth of natural and cultural resources imply that, as long as they are planned and managed coherently, environmental tourism activities might be the starting point for economic development in the area. Eco-tourism does not require major initial investments. It is compatible with other rural activities in mountain regions and can also make temporary use of available work forces. Promoting eco-tourism is an excellent way to help the area out of its present-day marginalised state, diversifying the people's income streams and reducing pressure on the natural environment.

The route that has been designed from Taza to Bouiblanc valorises the region's natural and environmental resources. This is an enclave for Morocco as far as economic development is concerned, a place where people who basically live off the land find it difficult to eke out a living. It is one of the areas of Morocco from which people emigrate.

A unique eco-tourism package should be devised for the area that differentiates it from other similar areas and which must include the proper, joint management of the territory's resources and qualities, and knowledge of customers' characteristics and market trends. Designing and valorising a tourist route and providing a range of facilities will have a direct impact on the local economy and social and spatial organisation.

Appropriate marketing of specific eco-tourism activities can create employment (guides, escorts, owners and people in charge of accommodation and overnight stays, etc.) and also serve as a link to other economic sectors, benefitting the commercialisation and promotion of local products (such as goat's cheese, honey, local foodstuffs, handicraft, etc.).

Eco-tourism should be established in a decentralised framework that favours agreements and synergies between the various agents. The aim should be agreement-based planning that accommodates operators affected by tourist development in the area. The State, local

associations, the local people, interested investors, and so on, should all work together to guarantee the success of eco-tourism planning in a joint effort to spearhead economic development in the region, create employment and supplement the local people's income sources.

The main problems facing the development of eco-tourism activities are: the poor state and sign-posting of forest tracks, an absence of tourist circuits and official (mountain) guides who know the area and its potential. In addition, the system in place to receive visitors and provide them with information is inadequate and there is a lack of accommodation on offer, *inter alia*.

