

THE CONTRIBUTION OF A SMALL SKI RESORT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITS SURROUNDING AREA: THE CASE OF VALDEZCARAY (LA RIOJA)

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1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

In 1974, Valdezcaray ski resort was built in the Sierra de la Demanda (Iberian Range, La Rioja). It is a small ski resort (22.6 Km of ski area) sponsored by the Town Hall of Ezcaray (Oja Valley) and currently owned by the Government of La Rioja. The ski resort aimed to boost tourism and break the regressive process that had been dragging on in la Demanda area for decades.

This paper examines: i) the influence of Valdezcaray in the evolution of the population as well as in the demographic structure, ii) the evolution of touristic accommodation and iii) the impact of the touristic sector development in primary activities (development of farms, agricultural livestock census and farmland) of the region.

2. METHODS

We have taken information from all the mountainous municipalities located in the Demanda in order to analyze the influence of Valdezcaray in the socioeconomic evolution of the surrounding area. There are 19 villages dispersed throughout two valleys, the Upper Oja (5 villages, included Ezcaray where the ski resort is located) and the Upper Najerilla (14 villages). Depending on to variables, proximity and accessibility to Valdezcaray, it can be considered that the Upper Oja municipalities constitute the area of influence of Valdezcaray, due to their proximity to the ski resort and to the access road (LR-111). In contrast, Najerilla Valley municipalities are really disconnected and far from Valdezcaray, as they are located to a distance of over 50 Km. and more than an hour away by car, so it can be assumed that Valdezcaray ski resort has had no influence on the socioeconomic

evolution of this valley. In short, the inclusion of the two valleys is justified as it is considered that Oja municipalities must be more or less influenced by the ski resort, while Najerilla villages reflect the evolution of a mountain valley without any ski resort. This way, we can better understand the role played by a ski resort.

We have worked with the information included in the official statistics (INE and Government of La Rioja), concerning the 19 municipalities which constitute the area of study. The information used refers to the number of inhabitants between 1950 and 2012; the composition of the population according to age in 2012; the census of cattle and the number of farms in 1972 and 2009; and the evolution of farmland between 1972 and 2009. We have also checked the information related to the surface of built land and plots in 2009; the evolution of the number of primary and secondary residences between 1970 and 2011; and the number of touristic accommodation places at present, in order to discriminate spatially the level of tourism development in the region.

3. RESULTS

The results show that the demographic evolution of the study area, reflects strong spatial discrimination between Ezcaray and its peripheral zone, which has benefited much less from the ski resort. Between 1981 and 2012, Ezcaray increases its population in 337 inhabitants, rising from 1,717 to 2,054 inhabitants. The rest of the Oja Valley shows the decline from 569 to 435 inhabitants (a population loss of 23.5% of the population). Najerilla Valley experienced bigger losses not pausing, in recent decades, this demographic hemorrhage which rocked the Spanish mountain throughout the twentieth century and especially between the sixties and eighties. Thus, the Upper Najerilla area had 3,932 inhabitants in 1970 but this figure declined to 1,823 in 2012, which means that it has lost more than half their population in four decades. Moreover, all the municipalities have lost population between these two dates.

With respect to the structure of the population, it has been acknowledged that Ezcaray had a more balanced situation than the rest of the municipalities in 2012, regarding both age as well and sex. There were more children and young population and few older people. At the same time there was a better replacement rate and lower dependency ratio, being the distribution between male and female population fairly balanced. The other villages located in the Oja Valley usually offer more positive indicators in demographic structure than the ones lying on the Najerilla Valley.

In short, the creation of Valdezcaray ski resort shows, regarding the population, a strong polarizing effect, as both demographic evolution and population structure have improved in Ezcaray since the establishment of the ski resort. Furthermore, it has also contributed to slow down population losses and even to stabilize them in the nearby municipalities of the Oja Valley in recent decades. This impact, however, is not noticeable in Najerilla municipalities which are still losing population and are experiencing an alarming demographic situation which, as a matter of fact, is common in most of the Spanish mountain.

The evolution in the primary sector also shows clear differences between the Oja and Najerilla valleys. Both areas have lost arable and livestock farming following the general trend of Spanish and European rural world, which has experienced a deep loss of primary

agricultural holdings in the transition of a rural to an industrialized society, since the mid-twentieth century. However, the losses were lower in Ezcaray, where the 48% of farms from 1972 are still kept in 2009. However, the decrease throughout the Oja Valley was bigger than in Najerilla Valley.

The evolution of livestock censuses reflects positive development in Ezcaray (866 UGM in 1972 and 1,495 UGM in 2009) and in the Oja Valley (1,751 UGM in 1972 and 2,700 UGM in 2009), whereas there was a strong decline in the Najerilla censuses: 5,167 UGM in 1972 and 1,495 in 2009. There are also important differences in the evolution of agricultural land, recording a slight increase in the cultivated area in the Oja Valley (19.5% between 1972 and 2009) and the decline in Najerilla Valley (29.5% during the same dates). Moreover, we have checked the contraction of the agricultural area in most municipalities in the Najerilla Valley and its expansion in most of the Oja Valley villages. In this area, ancient abandoned fields have been cleared to be cultivated as meadows to feed the livestock during the cold season.

The role of Valdezcaray ski resort in relation to the evolution of the primary sector should be considered as positive since it has helped keep the primary activities in its area of influence: the Oja Valley, and even promote them in Ezcaray. The increase in the censuses and the recovery of old cultivated fields not only have a positive economic impact, but also environmental and landscape-related. In this regard, it has been proved that in both the Pyrenees and the Iberian Range the abandonment of land and the decrease in livestock pressure will result in greater risks of fires, the loss of biodiversity, the homogenization of landscapes and the decrease of the amount of water reaching the river basins.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained let us conclude that there is not a negative competence between primary and tertiary sectors in the area of study, but a synergy that helps reconcile both sectors. This is not the case of other mountainous areas with bigger ski resorts where it is noticeable the competence between tourism and primary sector concerning the use of the most fertile land and the labour force. In these cases, the dispute is resolved in favour of the tertiary sector as it is able to afford to pay more money for the land and to offer more attractive conditions, especially for young people. This fact is reflected in the progressive decline of primary sector as well as in the deterioration of its infrastructure and landscape.

In this paper it has also been established that the effects of Valdezcaray diluted with distance and accessibility, affecting mainly the core of Ezcaray and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the municipalities in the Oja Valley. In this area these effects have been positive, both in demographic indicators as in traditional economic activities, in contrast to the evolution of Najerilla, which has followed a regressive trend in the population and the primary sector, too. Overall, it seems that the impact of the ski resort affects a fairly small spatial area, a situation which is also found in the Aragonese Pyrenees, with larger and more complex facilities.

In conclusion, the establishment of Valdezcaray ski resort has had positive effects on the socioeconomic evolution of its sphere of influence. Perhaps its small size and the role of local inhabitants have contributed to the fact that tourism not only does not harm

the primary sector, but it can also be incorporated into the new socio-economic dynamic trend. It can be deduced that land use policy planning should be global, that is to say, it must involve all the economic activities and it should take into account the effects of large-scale investments, as ski resorts are, on such unstable and fragile rural societies in recent times. Planners must guess the negative and positive impacts of an intervention, so they should establish, at the same time, suitable mechanisms to mitigate the most adverse effects arising from the initiative.