

ECOTOURISM IN NATURAL AREAS. A STUDY IN PARQUE REGIONAL DE LAS SALINAS Y ARENALES DE SAN PEDRO DEL PINATAR

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In recent years there have been many changes in the tourism industry, which have resulted in raising of a number of new tourism products complementing to traditional sun and beach or rural, amongst them there is also an important one called «nature tourism».

Nature tourism has triggered positive effects, such the approach to environment and ecosystems knowledge, increased environmental awareness among population and new markets rising for local and national economies, therefore protected areas are already relevant tourism scenarios.

Tourists often are not aware of being inside of an ENP (Natural Protected Area in Spanish) or that they passed by several of them before arriving to their final destination. That is the case for example, with "weekenders" who go to many recreational areas inside protected areas. Still, experts identify a global tourist market segment called nature tourism, which although not the only one present itself on protected areas, but it is the one that corresponds by definition to visit protected areas. In fact, it is one that is growing more important relative in recent decades.

The Regional Park of Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar, with an area of 856 hectares and about 6 km of coastline, has a main objective of nature conservation preserving particularly fragile areas, with presence of rare wildlife species of national scope and in some cases, unique in Murcia Region. This goal can only be achieved by encouraging sustainable development strategies, such as, promotion of nature tourism activities, sports and adventure, which served to increase diversity of dominant tourism types, as tourism of sun and beach and health tourism.

The Regional Park of Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar is an ideal spot for practicing a variety of sports, both terrestrial and aquatic developed in its exceptional marine environment.

These sport activities are being offered by a growing number of companies, located both in Murcia Region and outside, and even some of them are based in the port of San Pedro del Pinatar, within the Regional Park itself.

Land-based activities that are performed within the Regional Park are:

- **Hiking:**

In this Regional Park, DG Environment has marked two paths:

1. Path of the «Encañizadas» (PR -MU 65) and 2. Path of «The Coterillo» (SL -MU 9)

- **Cycling:**

In the park area, there are two bike renting companies; one of them is associated with a hotel. The municipality of San Pedro del Pinatar has a free bicycle loan, launched with additional support from Murcia Regional Agency for Energy Management aiming to promote bike use as an efficient and healthy transport.

Water activities are offered on this Regional Park coastal area, and they are using Port of San Pedro logistics, which include:

- **Diving:**

At the Port of San Pedro del Pinatar located inside the Regional Park, there are six diving companies offering initiation and advanced courses and diving specialties.

- **Wakeboard:**

The Wakeboarding is a sport born out of the evolution of skiing, surfing in a short board –about 145 cm long.– That incorporates some fasteners in which feet are inserted and handle the wake or table with ease.

- **Kite surfing:**

It consists of navigating in a similar surfing table with a kite traction which it is inflatable shaped glider that is handled in any direction you want regardless of the prevailing winds.

- **Navigation and sailing:**

Some of the present activities are to go on board on motor boats or small cruises, kayaking for one day or several days, for sailing. These activities might also offer whale and dolphins sightings, or just a seaside view from Mar Menor and / or the Mediterranean Sea, including the possibility to visit some islands.

Some ecotourism activities offered in this protected area are:

- **Hiking:**

As indicated in the previous section, Regional Park Authority has two marked trails with informative signs describing different natural values that can be observed during this walking tour.

• **Photographic Tourism:**

The passion for photography links nature and photographers and their respect for nature. It is a frequent activity that develops many visitors in the park, taking the access road along marked trails. This activity is also promoted from the Department of Tourism of San Pedro del Pinatar City Council, who organized since 2001, a «Photographic Journey «establishing an itinerary that covers completely» Coterillo Path «and a big part of» Las Encañizadas trail".

This is a contest, participants are grouped two to six people teams with a digital camera, and they have to follow some directions – written on a passport-guide delivered at context beginning. 12.37 Km Walking distance took them through different park ecosystems, photographing flora, fauna and landscape.

• **Ornithological tourism**

The ornithological tourism is an underdeveloped tourist product in Murcia. Out of 11 companies that advertise online itineraries ornithological in Spain, none includes Murcia Region. However, «Where to watch birds in Spain, the 100 Best Places» describes a birding route by el Mar Menor, with special reference to the Regional Park of Salinas y Arenales de San Pedro del Pinatar.

In this Park, birding tourist activity takes place on daily basis by a non evaluated number of people, and its occurs mainly along the entrance road to San Pedro del Pinatar port, at several birding observatories and trails near salt pounds and reed beds. It should be noted that 17.9% of visitors who asked for information at the Visitor's Center between 2007 and 2009, were interested in this type of tourism.

With respect to the interest that arouses this protected area amongst ornithologists Murcia, it is necessary to highlight «The Ornithological Murcia Yearbook», which started in 2002 collecting bird observations. The analysis of this yearbook from 2008 to 2010 shows that a total of 2,718 ornithological quotes of interest has been recorded, Out of which 303 came only from ornithological appointments Regional Park (11.1%). Data were published by an average of 66 people per year, of which 11 people on average annually (16.7 %) was with observations of their field trips to the Salinas de San Pedro del Pinatar. Finally, it was published an annual average of 172 bird species, of which 31 species of birds had been observed in the Salinas de San Pedro (17.8%).

• **Segway routes**

Consegway Co, SL offers Segway tours on Regional Park to enjoy landscape, flora and fauna. The Segway is a light electric vehicle gyroscopic two-wheeled, self-balancing controlled by a computer and user must lean towards a chosen direction to move (front, back, left or right). The motor is silent, and able to reach 20 km / h.

Finally, it is appropriate to point out the potential of cultural tourism within the park, such as specialized product that would help diversifies and to improve attractiveness of tourist proposal.

Inside the park, there are different cultural and historical and architectural values, two of them are abandoned mills that were used until the late 60s to lift water from the Mar Menor to the salt pounds. 15 houses of former salt workers are also abandoned and 2 houses serving traditional reed fisheries exploitation, one of which is also abandoned.

Proper rehabilitation of them, especially those with a high degree of historical, cultural and architectural values as well as the creation of the salt museum, were projected in 2002, helping to enrich and diversify present tourism activities.

Besides, a re-building project to adapt those old houses from former employees of the salt into guest houses could develop a limited but interesting range of cultural tourism, focused on salt mining and traditional fishing.

It is noteworthy that some buildings are wrapped up in salt landscape and fishing, so it could offer an interesting time to stay there outside summer season, time of year that is not possible to be there, due to weather reasons, and to enjoy the sun, beach or mud baths.