

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# **FROM REAL ESTATE TOURISM TO NATURE RELATED TOURISM. CHANGE OF MODEL OR A SHIFT IN THE DISCOURSE? THE CASE OF NOJA (CANTABRIA, SPAIN)**

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Since the mid-twentieth century, the development of tourist activities in areas of the Spanish coast has led to major urbanisation and construction processes for the purpose of building second homes and dwellings for tourist use. Coastal tourist areas in Spain have been heavily involved in the real estate-financial expansive cycle (Murray 2015). This long connection between tourism and the real estate sector has now become one of the main obstacles to renewal and diversification of mature destinations (Simancas, 2016), as regards both the integration of increasingly important environmental aspects and the recognition and development of the territorial heritage of those coastal areas.

One of the first findings of the present study is the difficulty in quantifying, at a municipal, provincial or autonomous community scale, the true number of dwellings for tourist use, which is in reality much higher than the official census classification of second homes. In 2015, the non-profit-making business association *Exceltur* carried out a study on the effects (social, economic and tax consequences, among others) of renting out short-stay holiday homes in Spain. Despite the difficulties for quantification, the estimate of beds in rented holiday homes in Spain in late 2014 came to 2.7 million and the percentage within the total tourist accommodation (52%) was higher than that of official establishments.

In connection with this general situation, the case study presented here is an interesting example as it displays aspects in common with other destinations and some particular or specific qualities, such as its location on the northern coast of Spain. Another striking feature of this case study is that, despite the town being a notorious example of specialisation within residential tourism, it is recently developing nature tourism activities (especially bird-watching tourism) as a complement to the previous forms of the real estate business.

The municipality of Noja, with a surface area of just 9.2 km<sup>2</sup>, is on the eastern coast of the Province of Cantabria, 43 km east of the provincial capital, Santander, and 75 km west of Bilbao. It is easily reached from either city along the A8 motorway. Its coastline is nearly 12 km long, of which over 50% consists of sandy beaches. At the same time, 75.4%

of the surface area of the municipality is included in the Natural Park of Santoña, Victoria and Joyel Salt-marshes, although this represents only 11% of the total area of the Park.

According to the Municipal *Padrón* or Census, at the end of 2016 the population of Noja was 2,562, although in the summer months the seasonal population of the municipality is up to thirty times larger. It is also significant that, according to the 2011 Census of Population and Dwellings, Noja is the Spanish town with the largest percentage of second homes in the total number of dwellings: 91%. This is reflected in the physical appearance of the town and in the current urban land classification. All these factors make the town a paradigmatic case in Spain.

The residential- tourism specialisation of Noja is largely explained by the proximity of Bilbao metropolitan area, from where many of the owners of second homes, or temporary residents of the town, come. Another important factor to understand how Noja's residential specialisation has developed is the framework of regulations, particularly municipal town planning. The evolution of this framework has been complex and conflictive. The law still in effect is the Type B Subsidiary Ordinances, passed in 1990, with successive modifications to make designated urban land available. The negotiation of a new General Town Plan (PGOU) has been interrupted since 2014, a circumstance that is not unusual in other Spanish towns in similar situations.

Together with this background, the process of real estate expansion and urban growth in Noja over time should be taken into account. About a quarter of the homes in the town were built at the start of the present century. Most of the construction work took place in 2002, 2003 and 2004, when 1,640 homes were built (13.8% of all the dwellings currently in the town). However, in 2005 and following years, the construction rate gradually slowed down, at the time of the most serious crisis in the building sector in Spain and because of the saturation of the real estate market in the town. Previously, the most intense periods had been from 1981 to 1990, and above all from 1991 to 2001. In those two decades, nearly 70% of the present dwellings were built, mostly to satisfy the demand of external users who are not in the municipal census.

This shows that the construction boom in Noja was comparatively more recent than in other Cantabrian towns where the phenomenon was also significant, like Laredo and Castro Urdiales, and also more concentrated in time, as it began above all in the 1980s. Despite this, in a relatively short time the process has been one of the most intense in the region and in the whole of northern Spain. Most of the buildings are blocks of flats with three, four or five floors, and the latter have contributed the largest number of dwellings.

It is now evident that with a total number of 11,800 dwellings, of which only 8.4% are the main home of the owners, the occupation of the land has become saturated and the real estate offer in town is far above the needs of the resident population and the physical capacity to continue growing. This indicates the exhaustion of the model of economic growth focused on increasing the surface area occupied by residential blocks for tourist use, in addition to such other aspects as complementary services and the development of natural and cultural heritage.

Real estate tourism and nature tourism are, a priori, regarded as opposite forms of tourism and therefore scarcely compatible. However, the presence of a protected natural area next to a well-developed tourist urban centre creates subjective relationships between the two modalities, as shown by Romagosa & Cuadrado (2008) and Capdepon (2010).

According to Blázquez-Salom (2007), natural areas are, for the market, principally new consumer products. From the capitalist productive point of view, nature tourism or tourism in protected natural spaces are not only complementary with real estate or residential tourism but can be presented as an attraction, from the perspective of perception and creation of social representations, as a modality that respects conservation and has less impact on the environment. This improves the tourist image and supports consumption even more, resulting in the feedback of a spiral of interests.

The Natural Park of Santoña, Victoria and Joyel Salt-marshes, nearly 70 km<sup>2</sup> in size, was created in 2006. Previously, in 1992, these salt-marshes were designated a Natural Reserve. During the last quarter century, the process followed for the restoration and gradual development of this natural area of great ecological value has aroused growing interest in the new opportunities for economic activities connected with environmental conservation and sustainable development. New tendencies have slowly appeared related with public use and environmental awareness. In this way, the Natural Park has become a valuable new tourist resource and even an example at a regional scale and in the whole of northern Spain for the attraction of demand.

As regards Noja, an example of the natural area's great capacity of attraction is seen in the constant increase in the number of visitors to the Mill of the Birds, in Victoria Salt-marsh, in the Helgueras district. This has been developed as a bird observation centre in order to encourage bird-watching tourism. At the same time, in the environmental axis of the town's Tourism Competitiveness Plan, actions have begun to be carried out to further develop this tourism modality, such as signposting routes, publishing a guidebook on birds, the organisation of meetings with important ornithologists and running courses for tourist agents. The Bird Centre is now open throughout the year, with different ecotourism activities, including a programme of guided routes around the different ecosystems in the town, and courses, workshops and lectures for environmental training. In addition, it has been designated a Blue Centre by the Foundation for Environmental Education, thanks to its work in that field, and it is a member of the SICTED network as a Quality Destination, recognised by the Secretary of State for Tourism and the Spanish Federation of Towns and Provinces. Furthermore, these types of ornithological activities, which are becoming increasingly common in the towns forming part of the Natural Park, allow a relative increase in tourism out of season as many of the activities are held in autumn and spring, coinciding with the times of bird migrations. They have also contributed to the creation of some small local businesses.

As a result, recent years have seen renewed interest in developing the natural resources in the town: beaches, dunes, wetlands, woodland, meadows, etc. Guided visits to see the natural heritage of Noja began in 2006, coinciding with the designation of the Park. At first they were organised through the Local Development and Environment Agency, belonging to the Town Hall. Other organisations that have successively run the guided routes have been the Community of Sustainable Municipalities, through an agreement with the Department of Rural Development, Farming, Fishing and Biodiversity, to encourage the public use of the Network of Protected Natural Areas in Cantabria, and the Naturea-Cantabria project.

In connection with these environmental routes for tourist use (Doctor, 2011), in 2010 the Government of Cantabria approved the Special Plan for Coastal Footpaths and Trails. One of its objectives is to integrate the region's coast in the project of the European Trail GRE-9

along the coast of northern Spain. In Noja, this plan includes three paths in the category of Littoral Long Distance. From east to west, the first goes from the beach of Berria (Santoña) to Helgueras, with a length of nearly 5 km; the second connects Helgueras with Ris Beach over a distance of 3.5 km, and finally the 4 km-long third footpath connects the latter beach with the village of Soano and Trasmiera Ecopark, in the town of Arnuero. Other forms of active tourism that have been chosen to change the town's image are the sports of surfing, surf kayaking and paragliding. In 2007, a municipal leisure centre with facilities for sporting activities was opened and a nine-hole golf course was built, both near Ris Beach.

In conclusion, this case-study shows that real estate-residential tourism and nature tourism are two modalities that, in practise and however contradictory it may seem at first sight, can co-exist in the same place. This co-existence connects with the growing ideological and advertising use of certain terms or tourist slogans, such as residential tourism (Mantecón, 2017), nature tourism (Blázquez-Salom, 2007) and sustainable tourism (Fletcher, 2011). This is therefore not a real situation of compatibility, but discursive (rhetorical) through slogans and clichés that unite within the same model of consumerism a series of social, economic and ideological codes imposed by dominant groups and accepted by the population as a whole, as subtle elements of alienation.

Tourism and its different modalities are now integrated within the patterns of change of capitalist society and the free market. In a serious period of socioeconomic crisis and the halt in house-building, as has occurred in Spain in recent years (Burriel, 2014), it has become imperative to search for real or imaginary alternatives to real-estate tourism, which is one of the most negative forms of mass tourism and most predatory of resources and land. Therefore tourism increasingly seeks to strengthen its image as an economic activity that respects the environment, and is capable of generating employment, well-being and alternative forms of socioeconomic development. This is not only to capture demand but also to avoid, in those areas of excessive saturation, falling out of favour with the resident population and causing chain reactions of 'tourism-phobia' (Huete and Mantecón, 2018).

It is possible in practice to make compatible, in the sense of making them co-exist, the two options of real estate-residential tourism and nature tourism, however strange the binomial seems. It has been proved by a town barely 9.2 square kilometres in size, with the highest percentage of non-main homes in the whole of Spain and where, nevertheless, three-quarters of its surface area is designated a protected natural area. Both forms of tourism, despite their apparent contrariness, are different market options, corresponding to different stages in the evolution of the same capitalist economy. In other words, they do not imply, in the way they are currently planned and carried out, a genuine change in the dominant productive model. In fact, in the case of Noja, the profits previously generated by building permissions and land reclassification are now applied, paradoxically, by the Town Hall itself and local business organisations to promote nature tourism.

On a global scale, an in-depth critique of the current model of tourist development, its different products and typologies, would involve going further than the mere promotion of nature tourism as it is envisaged today (as another consumer product). As Fletcher (2011) points out in a critical analysis of international tourism and the intrinsic contradictions of ecotourism, the alternative would be much more audacious, as it would be equivalent to challenging the capitalist productive system focused on increasing profits and constant growth.