

LOCATION FACTORS AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE RURAL SPACES OF THE VALENCIAN AUTONOMOUS REGION

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I. RURAL TOURISM IN THE *COMUNITAT VALENCIANA* [VALENCIAN AUTONOMOUS REGION]: THE SPACE WHERE THE ACTIVITY TAKES PLACE

1.1. Introduction

The importance that the geographical dimension has in tourist activity confers upon geography an outstanding prominence in its analysis. Tourism is a spatial phenomenon taking place in a territory, the tourism destination. That territorial presence may occur in different space typologies, including rural areas, where physical as well as functional changes are taking place. Those changes affect the concept of 'rurality' which moves away from agriculture and becomes associated with new functionalities.

Therefore, tourist activity develops in the rural milieu, a space influenced by physical conditioning factors such as orography, climate, water availability, soils or vegetation and others of a socioeconomic nature like population, settlement patterns, productive system, agricultural and livestock activities, non-farming activities, equipment and infrastructures, accessibility and policies with an impact on the rural milieu.

1.2. Objectives

In accordance with the previous approach, the main objective sought in this paper is to identify the location factors that exert an influence on the development of tourism destinations located in rural areas and, particularly, in the case of the Valencian Autonomous Region.

In addition to this generic objective, and related to it, it was necessary to suggest other more specific aims. Thus, an attempt has firstly been made to delimit the areas which can be

regarded as rural within the context of the Valencian Region, trying to reflect the degree of implementation achieved by tourist activity in such areas; secondly, the review of the existing literature, both from the discipline of geography and from other disciplines, served to identify the location factors which have traditionally been seen as basic to understand the territorial presence of tourist activity in general, and particularly in the case of rural destinations; and thirdly, an effort has been made to describe the perception of experts about the situation regarding rural tourism and about the importance that the aforesaid factors can acquire.

1.3. Methodology

Two working methods were essentially used in the research, in addition to a thorough analysis of the already existing studies along with the literature devoted to this topic, in order to achieve the objectives described above.

The first one of them has as its main aim to meet the need for a delimitation of rural tourism spaces and for a description of the role performed by tourist activity in those areas. It was considered essential for the analysis of tourism territorial contexts to inter-relate territorial information systems and tourism information systems so that the integration of both systems could permit to improve the analytical processes associated with tourism planning. The territorial contexts in which tourist activity takes place were differentiated for this purpose, establishing four main space typologies: large cities; coastal-precoastal; intermediate rural inland; and purely rural inland. This differentiation was followed by the analysis of the territorial presence of tourism activity in the aforementioned contexts, focusing our attention especially on the tourism supply of regulated accommodation as well as on private dwellings with a tourism-related use (second homes) and their relevance with regard to magnitudes such as territorial surface and population. This analysis seeks to describe the role played by the territory as far as tourism is concerned and prove that tourism in 'purely rural' spaces is very important for the local development of the municipalities located within those areas.

The second method basically represents an effort to identify the location factors which exert an influence on the development of rural tourism and study the perception of experts in this field about these factors through the application of the Delphi method. These were the fundamental steps followed in the application of this method: careful selection of the experts who took part in the research, design and circulation in different rounds meant to improve a structured questionnaire; and tabulation and analysis of results.

II. DELIMITATION OF THE RURAL MILIEU AND ITS TOURISM FUNCTION

2.1. Delimitation of rural spaces

The present research work is located in the Valencian Autonomous Region, a territory where three space typologies have traditionally been differentiated: coastal, urban and inland. However, it would be necessary to distinguish another two space typologies included within the typology defined as 'inland areas', namely: the dynamic and transitional 'rural intermediate' areas and the depressed or 'purely rural' areas.

The rurality of the territory is determined by variables such as the small size of nuclei, the predominance of the primary sector, the low population density and the poor, and even sometimes negative, demographic dynamism, as well as by rather qualitative values such as the low density of population, constructions, infrastructures and economic flows on the one hand, and a type of relationships between individuals and families which are linked with the small size of the settlement nucleus on the other.

The four contexts analysed respond to territorial, socio-economic and demographic criteria; the 'large cities' category was given to nuclei exceeding 100,000 inhabitants in this respect. Municipalities in the coastal/precoastal area are those where the town limits are in contact with the coast, plus the immediately bordering municipalities which, despite not having a coastline, show similar socio-economic and urban development dynamics. Inland municipalities are divided into two groups: those showing a higher degree of socio-economic development –intermediate rural– and those others which are considered 'purely rural' bearing in mind their low population density, their aged demographic structures, their low accessibility levels, their weak economic structure and their deficits in terms of equipment.

2.2. The tourism function of rural spaces in the Valencian Autonomous Region

As shown in the methodological section, the tourism function is determined by the existence of a tourism supply, the presence of demand and the relative importance of these two variables with regard to the territory where it is located and the population who live in that territory.

Among the variables which best characterise the tourism function in a territory stand out the accommodation supply, and especially the rural tourism accommodation establishments which occupy a prominent role for their higher degree of specialisation and identification with the rural milieu. Nevertheless, it is equally important to bear hotel establishments in mind because, despite their concentration along the coastline, they are also significantly present in rural areas, particularly in the municipalities with a specialisation as spa destinations. Instead, the presence of campsites in inland areas is rather scarce; and, similarly, the supply of tourist apartments inland is unimportant and scattered.

In addition to regulated accommodation, it is worth highlighting the presence of private accommodation for tourism use. This type of accommodation shows differential characteristics since it responds to tourism-residential dynamics which not always coincide with those prevailing in the context of regulated accommodation: captive demand, emotional links with the destination, low medium-term employment generation, and low level of user expenditure, amongst other features.

In any case, apart from acquiring a descriptive knowledge about the geographical distribution of the tourism supply as well as of second homes as a basic indicator of the tourism and residential supply, it is necessary to know the real effect that such a supply may have on local development. Although it has already been explained that both the regulated accommodation supply and second homes are mainly concentrated in coastal spaces, the latter have acquired great relevance in the context defined as 'purely rural.' This can be checked by carrying out an estimate of the tourism function corresponding to the territory through the calculation of indices which relate the population to the existing tourism capacity

(the supply, which has been measured in terms of accommodation beds) and, insofar as possible, to the tourist activity that is generated (the demand, which would be measured by means of an estimate of overnight stays).

This made it possible to obtain an approximation to the tourism function of municipalities in the Valencian Autonomous Region essentially based on supply data which made it clear that the areas with a greater presence of tourism coincide with the coastal spaces and with the purely rural regions.

III. LOCATION FACTORS FOR TOURIST ACTIVITY IN THE RURAL MILIEU

The development of tourist activity has become a goal for the authorities and inhabitants of most rural areas during the last few decades. However, not all areas have the same possibilities and offer the same conditions for this activity to be implemented in their territory, since numerous and varied factors can play a relevant role in this process.

Taking as a reference the analysis of the existing literature about this topic, it was possible to identify the factors which can endow a territory with qualities that make it a suitable place for the development of tourist activity. Four groups of location factors can be distinguished, namely: the constitutive physical-ecological elements of the subsystem, among them climate, soil or topography; the elements included in the socio-economic and politico-administrative subsystem that have an influence on the proximity or accessibility of natural resources to the most important consuming markets; and what could be referred to as ‘tourism subsystem,’ which will be formed by attractions or resources, accessibility, public equipment and amenities, as well as by the tourism supply.

| SUBSYSTEM | LOCATION FACTORS |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Physico-natural | Relief and landscape |
| | Climate |
| Socio-economic | Population |
| | Economic activity |
| Politico-administrative | Politico-administrative bodies |
| | Territorial development programmes |
| | Territory organisation plans |
| Tourism subsystem | Tourism resources or attractions |
| | Accessibility, public equipment and amenities |
| | Infrastructures (accessibility, transport, energy, hygiene, distribution...) |
| | Tourism equipment and amenities |
| | Image, perception and recognition of tourism spaces and landscape as a representation |

IV. PERCEPTION OF LOCAL AGENTS ABOUT THE FACTORS IMPACTING ON THE PRESENCE OF TOURISM IN A TERRITORY THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF THE DELPHI METHOD

After having succinctly defined the location factors influencing tourist activity development, it is necessary to know the situation that prevails in the rural tourism system of the Valencian Autonomous Region with regard to those factors. The approach adopted to undertake that research work was based on the Delphi method.

The main results obtained from the application of the Delphi method were grouped together through the elaboration of two tables which, based on the opinions expressed by the experts who took part in the Delphi, try to identify the aspects which are most relevant for tourist activity development, and which ones have contributed to a greater extent to the introduction of this activity into the rural milieu (potentialities and positive aspects) along with others which have had to face still unsurmounted difficulties, or which have become problems limiting development (improvement areas). Those aspects have been grouped together following the scheme of the subsystem table into which location factors are structured. This is reflected in Tables 3 (Potentialities and positive aspects which have boosted rural tourism development from the perspective of the experts participating in the Delphi) and 4 (Aspects that can be improved and difficulties that have hindered rural tourism development).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The delimitation of the rural space has traditionally been an issue of remarkable complexity. However, the nature of the tourism phenomenon, the opportunity that it offers to rural areas, along with the differential characteristics that tourism shows in the spaces where it is introduced, makes it necessary to carry out a good approximation to what can be defined as rural space in order to permit the implementation of specific policies and measures which lead to a reactivation of the sector from a sustainability perspective.

Four space typologies can be differentiated in the Valencian Autonomous Region from a tourism point of view. Among those traditionally identified, that is, coastal, urban and inland, a division is proposed for the last category with a view to distinguish the inland areas which are relatively developed, which have come to be known as 'intermediate rural,' from the underprivileged rural areas referred to as 'purely rural.'

At the same time, tourist activity development is strongly influenced by a series of territorial, socio-economic and politico-administrative factors as well as by the factors strictly associated with tourism such as attractions or resources, the supply, and the equipment and amenities. To them should be added others which acquire relevance from the perspective of the actual tourism users, that is, the demand, like the image and perception of the destination. Within the framework of the present research, a reflection was carried out on the need to analyse which of these factors have a stronger impact on rural spaces, this being the reason why the study was carried out using a Delphi method which allowed us to obtain very illuminating results:

- Natural and landscape resources appear as the most important and relevant ones in the spaces defined as purely rural within the Valencian Autonomous Region.

- The tourism supply has developed to a considerable extent during the last few decades although, from a qualitative point of view, this supply still shows significant lacks which can be especially attributed to the insufficient level of professionalism in its human resources.
- On the other hand, and taking into account the nature of the product, the infrastructures may be sufficiently developed but some deficiencies still exist in the services related to new communication technologies such as the Internet or mobile phones.
- The aspects related to territory management (training, promotion, information, incentives policy, territorial planning, territorial management systems, tourism management) emerge as key elements about which the experts participating in the Delphi were very critical.
- There is also a perception that users increasingly demand more complex and higher-quality services which can complement accommodation, a basic service that has become the central element in the holiday.
- In general, tourism is considered to have provided an impulse to the development of rural areas during the last few decades, since it has contributed to enterprise creation, employment generation, income complementation, and so on. However, that development has not completely fulfilled the expectations that had been generated for the rural milieu.