

Rural tourism: A sustainable alternative

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show and share the results of the research we made in order to improve the situation of sustainable interior rural tourism in Spain. We chose our region: Aragon and we studied the case. We had to consider the financial crisis in the hope that our results would contribute to minimize it. We knew beforehand that rural tourism had been less affected than other sectors but still it was important to reach our goal.

It had to be proved that rural interior tourism could be sustainable in Spain by means of quantitative secondary data. It is well-known that tourism is the first source and activity in Spain, but due to the increase in the international sector of new exotic destinations abroad, rural tourism could be threatened and sustainable rural interior tourism could be an alternative for present and future times. We got qualitative data through personal interviews to experts and a *SWOT analysis*, *id est*, the measure and description of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, as an instrument to measure the state of the question within a theoretical framework of sustainable tourism. The results of this research have proved it. Rural tourism is existing and viable in Aragon, with important benefits for present and future opportunities.

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1. Introduction

In a global world where “sustainability” has been used in so many and diverse fields, “it” must be defined according to the goals of our research and the theoretical model we try to implement in our study. To begin with, the paradigm of sustainability is not only known and used but actually imposed in most areas of knowledge. In fact, there are hundreds of proposals of any type for scientific forums everywhere [1]. The paradigm we decided to use is known as the *Triple Bottom Line* [2] and it works from three different points of view, *id est*: *economic*, *environmental* and *social* fields, which in fact is the accountability that any company, institution or organisation should render, as sustainability, nowadays.

Our research on sustainable tourism is based mainly on environment as per Chan and Wong [3], as an essential input for tourist industry, but paradoxically, this activity could also damage environment, unless we refer to social responsible tourists.

We had decided to begin our research with a practical sense. That means that even taking into account many of the theoretical approaches there are in the tourism literature, would give us some personal satisfaction and could be applied to some particular territory for its improvement. That was the reason for our choice.

1.1. Object of study

We chose one region: Aragon¹ as the *object of our study*, because it had multiple facets and advantages:

- (1) It is the region where we live and work,
- (2) Possibility of being researchers “in situ”, with a deep knowledge of the region and
- (3) Final results could contribute to improve the social conditions of this region and the population, in economic terms.

Spain is worldwide known by tourism, which has been, and still is, one of the main production sectors in Spain. In Aragon has also generated a great deal of wealth [4]. Our research deepens into the study of sustainable interior rural tourism in Aragon, with the aim of developing new strategies compatible with sustainable tourism, which intends to:

- Provide optimum use of environmental resources that are a basic element for developing tourism, preserving essential eco-

¹ Aragon Autonomy includes three provinces: Zaragoza, Huesca and Teruel and is located (North) in the middle of Pyrenees (France) to Cuenca (South). With no coast, is irrigated by river Ebro, which runs west–east across the entire region through the Province of Zaragoza. Area 47,719 km², over 7000 villages. The region’s terrain ranges diversely from permanent glaciers to verdant valleys, rich pasture lands and orchards, through to the arid steppe plains of the central lowlands. Inhabitants approx. 1,500,500. Half of the population living in Zaragoza, its capital city.

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logical processes as a contribution to care and preserve natural resources and biological diversity.

- Be respectful with socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, preserving their cultural, architectural, life assets and traditional values, in order to get better understanding and inter-cultural tolerance.
 - Ensure long-term, viable economic activities, providing all agents with widely distributed socio-economic benefits, where new opportunities for stable employment should arise. Social services could bring a benefit for the host communities, as a means to reduce poverty or get better life quality.
- Despite the importance of the sustainable development, some difficulties have been detected in the understanding process of this concept by tourism industry [5]. That is the reason why some environmental practices have to be adopted by the tourism enterprises [6] within the sustainable tourism.

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) has been intensely active on these issues over the latest years producing a wide list of actions and aims [7], which tackled the present day challenges for sustainable development of tourism: relieving poverty, managing natural and cultural heritage and climate change.

The results of the recent events were presented, in order to reduce and mitigate the social and environmental negative impact within the tourism sector, with illustrative cases of different countries, institutions and business that had already put into practice some steps and policies to minimize the negative impact on sustainable tourism.

2. Research goals

Our research is aimed to get three main objectives, which could bring, apart from many findings and results, many secondary social benefits for the territory studied.

Firstly, it is an attempt to get a SWOT analysis of rural tourism in Aragon (Spain), using as referential experience the seaside tourism

as and main type of tourism activity developed in Spain. A SWOT analysis on rural tourism cannot be made without considering the seaside tourist phenomenon, as said before. The 60s and 70s based its success on the apparition of the “sun cult” and its consequent massive occupation of the coastal areas [8]. This classical beach tourism has become obsolete, evidence of it is the available examples in Great Britain [9,10]; Spain [11], Croatia [12] or Italy [13]. Following Sedmak et al. [14], the emergence of new overseas destinations, increased the interest in previously neglected rural and urban destinations. The technological revolution made the competitive struggle for traditionally intra regional European tourism more severe, eroding European seaside resorts market share [15]. From an upper level, Public Administration is developing a strategic plan to develop rural tourism as a tool to reach the public policies and economic aims. From a lower level, it is the demand in itself, what requires more than a classical model based on sun and beach. Politicians reject inflexible and non-authentic products developed for mass tourism. They also show opposition to these localizations paying more interest to ethnical heritage and tradition [10]. New values and characteristics are demanded by tourism that tries to avoid an average or standard level. They look for a return to the traditional and typical values different from the new ones, they ask strongly for original values and authenticity [16,17].

Lately, new tourism products have appeared, incorporating some environmental, natural and social parameters as climate, countryside, sands, sea, landscape, infrastructure, hospitality, life quality standard, lifestyle, health and idiosyncrasy of the area [6,18]. All these attributes create a unique tourism product, absolutely different from the rest [18]. The tourism market specially started to demand more customized products and experiences within local cultures in environmentally “responsible” destinations [14,19].

Secondly, our study examines how and which is the perception towards tourism and rural tourism. To reach this aim, we have taken information given by expert people who manage tourism in the region, and we have used too secondary data.

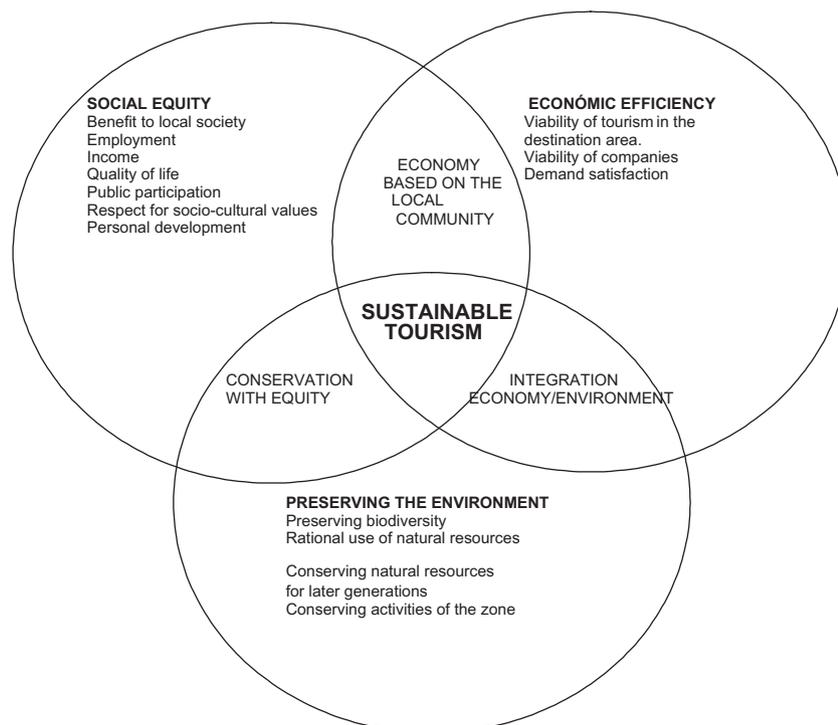


Fig. 1. Sustainable Tourism Model. Source: Drawn up from Hall (1998) [30].

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