

Assessing ecotourism potential of hiking trails: A framework to incorporate ecological and cultural features and seasonality



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ABSTRACT

Recreation and wildlife observations occur often in hiking trails. In terms of recreation planning, few studies have combined ecological and cultural features to assess ecotourism potential of hiking trails. Seasonality has been also neglected in tourism research. In order to disperse tourists over the year and alleviate the negative impacts of mass tourism events, we propose an integrated framework to assess the ecotourism potential of hiking trails that encompasses species, habitats, landscape and local heritage values, and takes into consideration their seasonal differences. By doing so, this methodology aims to contribute to local sustainable development. Our findings showed that, though some attractions may not be available during certain seasons, there are others which can bring tourists to the region all year long. We discuss some of the limitations, as well as future improvements to the use of this framework in trail development.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acceptable that ecotourism contributes to the preservation of threatened species (Buckley, Castley, Pegas, Mossaz, & Steven, 2012; Morrison, Simpkins, Castley, & Buckley, 2012; Steven, Castley, & Buckley, 2013; Steven, Pickering, & Castley, 2011) and cultural heritage worldwide (Keitumetse, 2009; Nepal, 2004). It constitutes a reliable tool to enhance local economies, especially in underdeveloped regions (Kirkby et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2012). In remote and pristine areas, ecotourism has been responsible for generating revenues to environmental management purposes (Steven et al., 2013). Other potential positive impacts include: 1) providing income and employment for local communities (McNamara & Prideaux, 2011); 2) funding of conservation initiatives (Kirkby et al., 2010, 2011; Rattan, Eagles, & Mair, 2012); 3) protecting new areas (Buckley, 2011; Kruger, 2005); and 4) being a reliable tool for environmental education (Spanou, Tseggenidi, & Georgiadis, 2012). At the local scale, visitor entrance fees, donations for wildlife preservation, and

visitor taxes can redistribute revenues among protected area stakeholders (Buckley, 2011).

Protected areas offer ideal conditions to the development of ecotourism activities (McNamara & Prideaux, 2011; Reinius & Fredman, 2007; Zhou et al., 2013). Those activities often happen in hiking trails, where tourists can contact with unique landscapes and habitats, endemic biodiversity, and local human heritage, all key components of any ecotourism experience. However, these activities can impact protected areas (Prideaux, McNamara, & Thompson, 2012), through vegetation trampling (Newsome & Davies, 2009), removal of plant species or flowers as 'souvenirs' (Kelly, Pickering, & Buckley, 2003), soil erosion (Newsome & Davies, 2009; Pickering, Hill, Newsome, & Leung, 2010) and compaction (Cole, 2004), and wildlife disturbance (Buckley, 2004, 2011). These impacts need to be urgently managed in order to assure the preservation of natural and cultural values within natural areas, particularly in mountainous systems where ecotourism has been increasing (Monz et al., 2010). There, ecotourism entails mainly recreational activities such as hiking, biking, climbing, and mountaineering. This growing visitation tendency is of utmost importance to protected area managers concerned with visitor use management issues, particularly where recreation can impact summit fragile ecosystems (Monz et al., 2010).

Hiking management has been subject of review by many recreation ecologists (Marion, Wimpey, & Park, 2012; Pickering et al.,

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2010). Most studies have been focusing on monitoring impacts of trail usage in protected areas (Marion & Leung, 2011), rather than the development of new trails. To date, little attention has been given to the integration of ecological and cultural relevant features for trail development. Research on this subject needs interdisciplinary approaches that include biological and sociological traits. In addition, seasonality has been neglected in tourism literature (Buckley, 2011; Hall, 2010), considering that seasonality may allow dispersing tourists throughout the year, thus relieving the impacts caused by mass tourism, especially in ‘hot’ seasons (‘hot’ viewed as the most crowded seasons, e.g. summer in the Mediterranean regions and winter in Scandinavian countries).

In order to disperse tourists over the year and alleviate the negative impacts of mass tourism, we developed a framework to assess ecological and cultural values of different trails, considering the seasonal differences of some criteria commonly used in ecotourism studies. We adopted a Portuguese protected area as a research model to investigate the ecotourism potential value (hereafter EPV) of different hiking trails and the seasonal differences that might derive from such assessment. We were able to provide local stakeholders a tool to examine which attractions can be explored at their maximum in each season, thus helping to disperse activities in space and time and lessening the negative impacts associated with hiking.

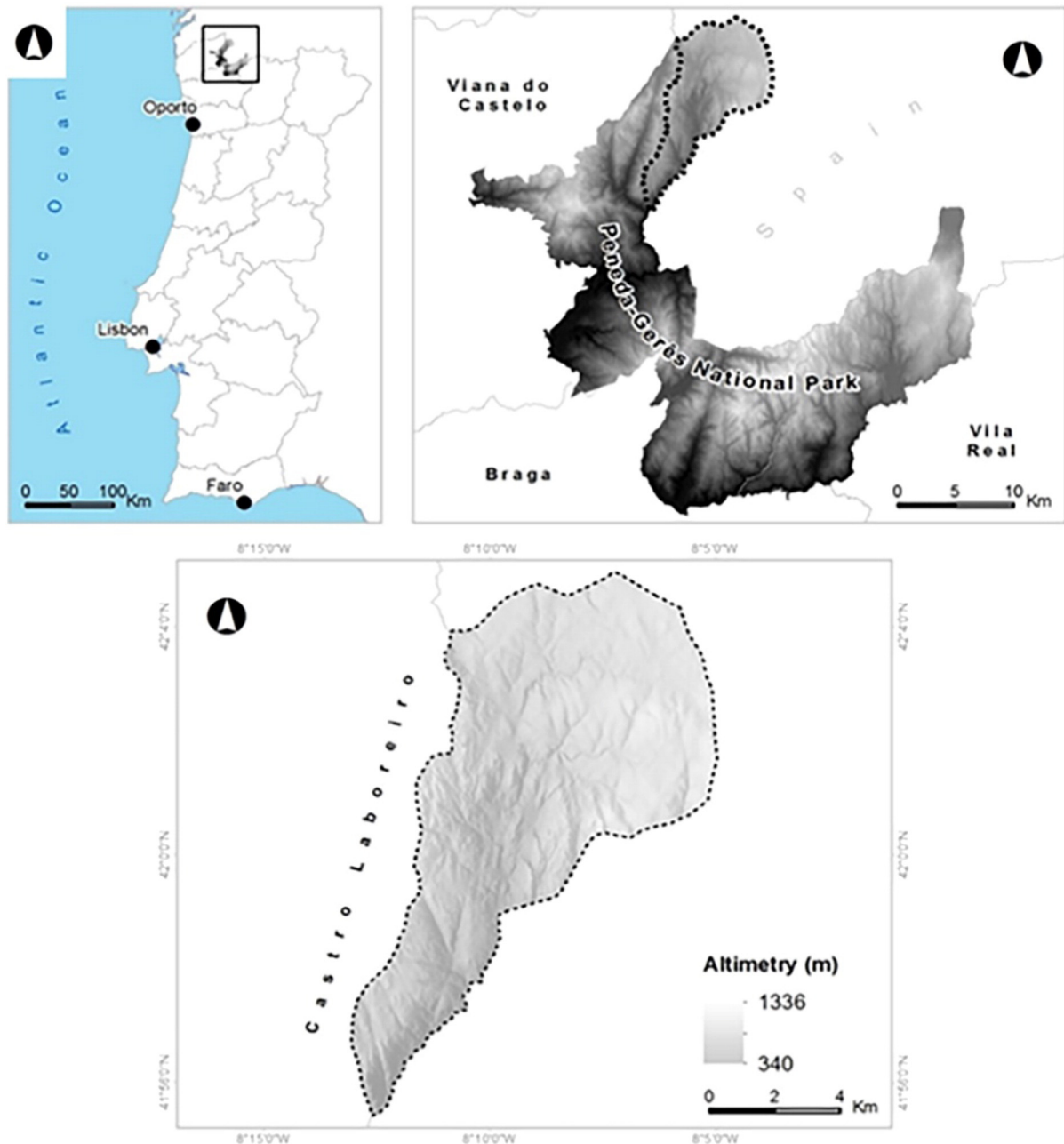


Fig. 1. Geographical framework of the study area. Location of the Peneda-Gerês National Park in the northwest Portugal (upper side) and the mountainous parish of Castro Laboreiro (bottom).

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