Rural Ecotourism for (Social) Sustainability and Well-Being of Native Populations: Some Geographical Considerations for the Research

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism has been defined flexibly, on numerous occasions ad hoc to the empirical case study. The emergence of ecotourism has usually been associated with the continuity of traditional local communities and the conservation of the socio-environmental environment. The selective nature of visitors to certain places contributes to preserving the cultural traits of the communities in their place. But this common approach can often be absent and ecotourism is associated with certain more specialized or adventure activities carried out by specialized tourism companies little connected with the local population. Location has no porosity with the socio-environmental environment. Through the analysis of the case of the Sierra Norte de Guadalajara in Spain, the contradictions of ecotourism as an activity connected with local communities and environmental services are revealed.

Keywords: Rural; ecotourism; geography; sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is an activity that is usually defined in a flexible way. In this way, his analysis constitutes more an approach to a phenomenon with a nature adapted to each environment than a stable and delimited theoretical framework. For this reason a review of academic positions is complex. In this contribution we will limit ourselves mainly to academic contributions from rural geography, with special attention to marginal and peripheral rural areas. This spatial delimitation is especially suited to the phenomenon of ecotourism. Ecotourism has been defined in contrast to mass or traditional tourism; it has also been defined in association with nature, as nature tourism or finally associated with another lifestyle or leisure such as alternative or ecological tourism. Therefore, it seems that ecotourism can be defined as a form of leisure that takes place in natural or traditional rural spaces with low transformation, with little population and that tries to respect the natural or cultural environment by being carried out in an individualized or socially selective way. Ecotourism, due to its way of implementation or design, can be: (1) superficial, if it only tries to conserve the natural environment; (2) committed, if it tries to preserve the ways of life of local populations; (3) deep, if it finally contributes to local socioeconomic sustainability by involving traditional rural populations in the generation of new activities associated with their place. In a global assessment of the ecotourism phenomenon, it is more advisable to consider that it is a new activity generated in natural or rural environments that integrates and favors the socioeconomic sustainability of traditional communities and environments. This deep socio-spatial point of view, and also restrictive, will lead the review and interpretation of the literature.

ECOTOURISM SMALL SCALE

Professors Hall and Boyd (2005) argued that although the field of study that relates tourism to nature has received special attention from researchers, the complex effects of ecotourism on the environment had not been clearly established on all due to the mastery of case studies located mostly in attractive rural-environmental settings. The dimension of ecotourism is currently essential to understand rural or natural areas, especially when they are located in remote or peripheral spaces. Its analysis must be carried out on a continuum and not on spatially disconnected experiences. This is one of the main weaknesses of the geographical analysis of (eco) tourism in general, its association with spaces or orientations (nature, fauna, physical activity…). This characteristic makes a comprehensive and global interpretation of ecotourism difficult.
Some authors point out that it is possible to speak of a spectrum of types of hard and soft ecotourism, adapted to the context in which they are generated. It would be a vision that oscillates between minimalism and comprehensive or absolute ecotourism, but that offers a remarkable spectrum in a way that facilitates a commoditization of ecotourism in relation to the elements of the ecosystem (Fennell and Weaver, 2005). In any case, it is also possible to point out that hard and soft visions can coincide in a single protected area at the level of micro spaces or as successive strategies.

The generation of ecotourism activities insert traditional communities, promote the joint benefit directly or indirectly of their members. Therefore, these types of activities are associated with the rural communities' own capacity to promote them. In this way, the very management of the natural environment, which also has a cultural dimension, benefits the local community itself. Many ecotourism experiences are associated with a diversification of agricultural activity (Fennell and Weaver, 1997). The sustainability of the environment and the rural community are associated. But, ecotourism can also constitute a means of integration of people from outside the rural community that favor its dynamism (Paniagua, 2002), without altering the social and environmental characteristics.

Nature tourism, consequently, connects recreational and leisure activities in natural spaces through the participation of local populations. Local control is a key factor in the implementation of protected areas (Hall and Boyd, 2005) and the adequate connection between protected areas, tourism and the living conditions of the local community favors environmental and cultural sustainability (Stone and Nyaupe, 2016).

Ecotourism is based on the conservation of the natural environment and environmentalism as an ideology. Consequently, the conservation of the local culture and the integration of rural communities as part of the attraction of the environment is part of it. Therefore, it is possible to interpret that ecotourism is adequately reproduced in traditional rural societies. Regarding the connection of ecotourism with the local community, there are several points of view: (1) The environment has been produced by traditional local societies and rural communities are the authentic stewardship for its conservation. (2) In another perspective, some authors (Fennell, 2008) have questioned the legitimacy of traditional societies to be ecological stewardship, due to their difficulties in managing natural heritage in a sustainable way. This calls into question the idea of indigenous ecotourism. (3) In another line of argument, some authors suggest that since ecotourism is susceptible to commoditization in different societies, indigenous communities may constitute a problem for the effective commoditization of nature in the global north (Cater, 2006: 33). The construction of nature can vary between ethnicities. But the relative position of the rural community also varies, as part of nature.

**ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES AND DECLINE OF SPACES**

One orientation of research has insisted on increasing ecotourism activities in peripheral rural areas. These types of activities would contribute to the socio-economic regeneration of remote rural areas in decline. Ecotourism has a notable utility from politics of place and local communities as tourism product. In this way, it is possible to argue that a comprehensive dimension of ecotourism should be addressed by initiative or by zone.

Ecotourism includes various activities such as hiking, observing nature, and other sports practices that respect the environment. For this reason, ecotourism prefers quieter, more natural and unique spaces to carry out its activities than conventional tourism (Kiper, 2013), which are those that are usually offered in peripheral and declining areas. Connecting the possibilities of unpopulated areas with the nature of being few in little-transformed contexts is an appropriate prism for the possibilities of ecotourism in low-density areas. But in these areas, rural communities have suffered a prolonged process of weakening and even disappearance and many initiatives are developed by ex-urban populations. Consequently, one of the foundations of ecotourism - the connection with the rural community- is not applicable to unpopulated rural spaces in Europe. Traditional rural communities have a transformed way of life with uses and customs halfway between the countryside and the city. The true belongings in many cases to the realm of heritage materiality. The local or indigenous sphere has multiple nuances. Ecotourism experiences are scattered and in many cases constitute a channel for the insertion of populations of urban origin, and, therefore, do not bring together - or condition - the fate of complete rural communities. It constitutes an alternative tourism for alternative exurban populations. In this context, it would be possible to wonder about the value of the (local)
community and the difficulty of an operational and common definition for the analysis of ecotourism. Therefore, perhaps the interpretation of ecotourism experiences in declining or marginalized areas is more appropriate.

Ecotourism has been regularly analyzed from the point of view of tourism activity and its contribution to the conservation and dynamism of the local economy. This perspective has caused the analysis of companies specialized in ecotourism to have a notable relevance as it is presumed that they brought together the respectful consumption of nature, the revitalization of the local-traditional community and the generation of new economic activities. In contrast, smaller have been the contributions from the point of view of the individual (urban) consumer of nature and attractive rural spaces.

But, a good part of the individual activities in nature are susceptible to being carried out "on their own" and can have a socioeconomic impact on local communities, through more traditional rural tourism businesses. The balance between the social/community point of view and the business/sector point of view has traditionally favored the study of ecotourism business activity. In this sense, for the Cambridge dictionary the ecotourism is "the business of organizing holidays to places of natural beauty in a way that helps local people and does not damage the environment" (Cambridge, 2020). Consequently, many academic researches analyze ecotourism in the context of tourism businesses. On the other hand, analyzing ecotourism in the spatial context of declining areas with natural and cultural values makes it possible to address the point of view of rural communities that actually live in these spaces protected by their environmental / cultural value and of the people who individually undertake ecotourism in these types of areas. Ecotourism can occur individually in regulated spaces. This ethical dimension of ecotourism centrally positions the individual in the consumption and production of nature.

**METHODOLOGY AND STUDY AREA**

The methodology is qualitative and aims to analyze the nature of the ecotourism experiences produced in the study area. Specifically, (1) integration into the local community, (2) extension (3) and contribution to the conservation of the landscapes natural values. The experiences analyzed are a total of five: El Molino, created in 1993, is located in Huermeces del Cerro and is dedicated to multi-adventure; Mas que Pájaros, located in Lugueros (Leon, nationwide) and dedicated to bird watching and hiking; Barbatona located on the Dulce river in Barbatona /Siguenza, dedicated to multi-adventure; Aventura mil dedicated also to multi-adventure and is located in Siguenza; Finally, the Sierra Norte rural tourism association, which groups together all the conventional and nature tourism accommodation in the area. All these initiatives aim at balanced (eco) tourism.

A documentary analysis, territorial recognition of the place and contact with ecotourism experiences has been carried out to verify its connection with the local community and the visions and activities of its promoters, during the summer of 2020.

Study area. As previously indicated, ecotourism is a phenomenon or activity defined in an appropriate way to the space where it occurs. Thus, the choice of area is highly relevant for the analysis of the phenomenon. Specifically, an area with environmental and cultural values and protected as a natural park has been selected in order to verify how the ecotourism phenomenon occurs (Paniagua, 2018). The Sierra Norte de Guadalajara Natural Park extends over 35 municipalities, over the area usually known as the Sierra de Ayllon, in the north of the province of Guadalajara. In this area there are three protected natural spaces, but it also has unique mountain landscapes and a significant popular architecture called ‘black architecture’, due to the color of the slate that was used ancestrally in its construction.

**ECOTOURISM IN THE NORTH OF GUADALAJARA**

According to the official ecotourism website in Spain, it is an activity committed to proper management of nature that encourages knowledge of the territory and especially of natural spaces. Ecotourism promotes this type of activity through companies that develop tourist activities based on the protection of the environment (Spain, 2020). In this way, it is suggested that ecotourism in Spain is associated with the use of protected areas through specialized companies. It is a nature tourism to a large extent controlled by the services that each space ‘offers’ and that serve to introduce the urban consumer to the area, to control the volume of visitors and to generate socioeconomic activity in the natural area.

Ecotourism activities in the S N of Guadalajara are characterized by their weakness, their
geographic concentration around the district center of Sigüenza and their scarce articulation with the local population. They are located in small nuclei and take advantage of the environment of low human density, but of high natural and cultural values for the supply and development of their activities. In any case, they are simply businesses embedded in depopulated and dismantled rural communities that range between 15 and 42 inhabitants registered in 2019. Ecotourism has qualitative effects in the small communities where the activities are located and more diffuse effects on the rural spaces where they are located.

In most cases, ecotourism experiences are micro-enterprises that have served to insert populations of urban origin in the area. There are around 4-5 companies, some of notable tradition and permanence in the north of Guadalajara. Their businesses share alternative accommodation and activities that in certain cases could not be classified as eco-sustainable, such as ‘quad’ routes, together with other more classic ecotourism activities such as water sports in canoes or hiking through cultural landscapes. In some cases there is a simply functional use of rural space, as can be seen from the slogan ‘quad routes, where the Alcarria ends’, which hardly fit in with a respectful use of the environment. Ecotourism is confused with adventure tourism and active and leisure tourism in rural areas. The rural area is the physical support for adventure sports that connect man with nature, with the motivation to conclude the activity that begins in an unknown and unusual environment.

Other ecotourism initiatives, on the other hand, are inclined towards observing nature and fauna through guided trails, a classic ecotourism activity, associated with rigorous respect and knowledge of the environment. Under the motto ‘ecotourism, observation and walking’ they combine bird watching and hiking and ‘intimate’ contact with nature in very small groups. As a whole, the activities analyzed understand ecotourism as a wide and varied offer of active tourism services and even teaching of traditional trades in the area such as beekeeping.

The discourse around nature is based on the idealization of nature, especially that which has environmental protection, and the emblematic character of rurality of a cultural nature around historic towns and popular architecture. Associated with ecotourism activities, the nature tourism argument based on the various possibilities of the territory related to geology, botany, unique landscape, bird watching, gathering wild products or climbing is used. The space is organized into hiking trails that allow immersion in nature to consume it with different degrees of intensity. It is possible to consume nature individually, on your own or in an organized way by local companies. In this way, it is possible to admit a vision of active consumption of the nature of large spaces and a vision of respectful consumption by the more traditional accommodation companies in the area. Ecotourism is usually developed individually in spaces organized for consumption by environmental and territorial administrations.

**CONCLUSION**

In the European and national environment, it would be possible to ask what is indigenous in the local community. In this sense, it constitutes an opportunity for marginal areas to develop a socio-economic strategy, nature based attractions, that includes the most marginalized or traditional population, such as pastoralists.

In the case of representative study of protected natural areas with natural, cultural and even ethnological values, it highlights the weakness of ecotourism activities in unpopulated areas. This small dimension suggests that ecotourism is developed individually, freely –not organized-, rather than through organized activities (Fennell, 2006, 1997). Thus, it is possible to consider that ecotourism is a social activity in attractive natural environments, which can be carried out individually following institutional or organizational guidelines linked to space management. Ecotourism would have an ethical dimension linked to people who put into practice individual guidelines for the conservation of the environment in protected areas. Even in the areas of greatest ecological value it is possible to carry out ecotourism individually. The remoteness or the need for continuous physical effort practically limits access to the most restricted areas. Conventional rural tourist accommodation would support this type of individual practices, free of the ecotourism, especially in its modalities of hiking and nature observation.

Ecotourism, consequently, is closely associated with educational activities or, on the contrary, with adventure activities that require specialized personnel and material.

The local dimension of ecotourism is presented in a porous and extremely weak way in the study
area due to the few initiatives. Its influence on the management of the nature of the area is very limited.

Ecotourism can be understood from the individual immersion in a landscape-natural and rural-cultural environment regulated environmentally, where most of the (local) initiatives are found in conventional tourism options such as catering and accommodation.

The marked local trails connect the accommodation offer, which generates an ethical responsibility of the consumer and produces an individual authenticity of ecotourism by the people who interpret their tourist activity in the regulated spatial context. The structures for ecotourism are materially prepared through environmental regulation and basic advice from the traditional tourism network. In this sense, they constitute a key element to rediscover the territory in declining spaces.

In short, in the Sierra Norte free or individual ecotourism is carried out, supported by the accommodation network on the organizational guidelines of the natural space. Ecotourism puts the individual consumer first and not specialized companies.

REFERENCES


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