

AN ANALYSIS OF TOURISTIC DEMAND IN MONFRAGÜE NATIONAL PARK AND BIOSPHERE RESERVE

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This piece of work aims at an exhaustive analysis of tourism in the Monfragüe National Park and Biosphere Reserve. Its results were part of those obtained by the I+D+I Research Project “Public use areas in Monfragüe Biosphere Reserve. Accessibility and carrying capacity”, ref. Orden MAM 321/2007. Exp. 024/SGTB/2007 4.1), which was carried out by the Research Group for the Analysis of Rural and Local Development in Border Areas (GEDERUL) of the University of Extremadura.

The research project was carried out in an area comprising the fourteen towns in the Monfragüe Biosphere Reserve, which was declared in July 2003 by the MaB UNESCO Program. This area contains the seven towns included in the Monfragüe National Park (Bill 1/2007, March 2nd): Casas de Miravete, Jaraicejo, Malpartida de Plasencia, Serradilla, Serrejón, Toril and Torrejón el Rubio. The area under study covers 195,502 ha. This surface is the Socioeconomic Influence Area of Monfragüe Biosphere Reserve.

In present-day society, protected natural areas are amongst the main touristic demands. These areas are normally regarded as consumer goods, mainly for urban cultures, intended for rural tourism and other leisure activities. For this reason, this study aims at analysing touristic activities in the above-mentioned territory in order to improve the management of tourism in the Socioeconomic Influence Area of Monfragüe, since tourism in protected natural areas must be one of the solid pillars for the economic diversification of demographically and economically poor rural areas.

Such is the situation of Monfragüe. One of its outstanding characteristics is its low density of population, which is a result of the depopulation of the countryside that took place in the 1970s. This brought about low levels of inhabitation (6.7 inhabitants/km²), high demographic ageing (190%) and predominance of male population. As a result, natural growth rate in the area turned negative in the late 1980s.

One of the reasons for this demographic downfall was the extensive nature of agricultural activity, traditionally based on *dehesa*-related activities¹. These activities have traditionally been accompanied by low population rates. Besides, in spite of the prevailing extensive agricultural exploitations, the economic activity of none of the towns under study has become independent from agriculture yet, their agrarian assets being around 23%.

On the other hand, however, this territory possesses a number of exceptional touristic assets: the special configuration of its terrain relief (the Synform of Monfragüe is an outstanding example of Appalachian relief); its uneven, inaccessible land; the way rivers and rivulets fit in, sometimes originating the so-called *portillas*, the most famous of which is “Salto del Gitano”; its fauna, singular and particularly rich, which includes more than 280 different varieties of vertebrates; the many ecosystems it contains and its spectacular landscapes (rocky areas, river banks, water bodies, *dehesas*, forests and dense Mediterranean shrubland); and the fact that the whole area has been populated for centuries without a break.

For the analysis of tourism in the Monfragüe area we have taken into account the three dimensions of sustainable tourism: economy, society and environment. From an economic point of view, we did so because rural tourism usually has a positive impact on the towns where it exists. From a social point of view, because local communities must participate in the management processes of the protected area. From an environmental point of view, because tourism must not alter the preservation mechanisms of the area in any way.

The idea of preservation has sometimes been contrary to the interests of rural societies. However, those very rural societies later developed and transformed the protected spaces into a social product. In this sense, then, preservation and development must not be regarded as antagonistic or contradictory concepts, but as fully compatible ideas.

In order to objectively analyse these aspects, we chose a quantitative, non-experimental method, which is at the same time descriptive and qualitative-analytical. The chosen technique was that of social surveys, carried out with a finite sample of population, using a previously designed questionnaire which aimed at guaranteeing the representativeness of the sample over a given period of time.

The survey contained 32 questions and was designed following the EUROPARC model. The questions were about the protected natural area (public use model), the visitors' profile (behaviour, customs and knowledge) and their opinion about facilities and public use areas. The purpose of it all was to quantify, classify and assess both the results and their implications.

1,829 polls were completed along a full year (from August 2008 to August 2009) for an estimate of 300,374 potential visitors, with a 95% confidence level and a 2.2% sampling error. The highest number of polls were completed during the months with a higher rate of visitors (March 17.6%; April 23.5%; May 11%; August 12.6%) and in the most often visited locations (Salto del gitano 413; Villarreal de San Carlos 369; Castillo de Monfragüe 357; Tajadilla 237; Portilla del Tiétar 153, among others).

The main results were as follows. First of all, regarding the profile of the surveyed visitors, we should point out that the yearly tendency seems to have become stable around

1 *Dehesa* is a local word for “pasture”.

65,000 visitors (the number of visits registered at the Visitors' Centre in Villarreal de San Carlos). However, samplings carried out by the Park's office offered much higher numbers, the highest being the 317,590 visits received in 2007, the year Monfragüe was declared a National Park.

As far as the origin of visitors is concerned, the survey proved that over 90% of visitors were Spaniards, which indicates an obvious lack of international visitors. If we classify national visitors depending on what region they came from, there was a clear predominance of tourists from Extremadura (26.8%) and Madrid (25.9%). In the case of the latter, its urban nature and its geographic closeness to Monfragüe are obvious reasons explaining the influx of visitors.

Another important result shown by the surveys was the marked seasonal character of tourism in Monfragüe. The fact that more than half the visits take place in the spring (50.2%) is not only due to the special beauty of its flora and fauna in this period of the year, but also to the Easter holidays and the extended weekend in early May, which make it possible for tourists to visit Monfragüe and stay for a longer period.

As for the socio-professional profile of visitors, the results showed that one-third of them belonged to the service sector. Approximately one-fourth were related to education (24.4%) and over one-sixth worked in the administration (17.9%).

One important item in the survey was related to visitors' fidelity. According to results, more than 43% of visitors return to Monfragüe at least once again, which shows the consolidation of the relationship between visitors and the visited area.

The number of persons travelling with each visitor is still another important bit of information related to their profile. In this sense, the results showed that 77.2% visitors travelled in small groups (less than 5 people). This certainly favours the sustainable development and management actions that both the administration and the Park's office will need to carry out concerning visitors. In this sense, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas (2007-2010) insists that one of the premises for the improvement of the level of satisfaction of visitors is the promotion of small-group touristic activities and events. This, then, together with the results of the survey, makes it recommendable for the Park's office and for touristic companies to make efforts along that line.

The last item about the profile of visitors is related to visitors' previous knowledge about Monfragüe National Park and Biosphere Reserve. According to results, 66% of those who took the survey knew about the nature of national parks. This reinforces the theory that visitors to protected areas are in recent years increasing their knowledge about those areas.

We will now turn to the items in the survey related to accommodation. The first thing that strikes our attention is that more than 65% of visitors do not spend the night in any of the towns inside the Park nor in any located in its socioeconomic influence area. There are several reasons to explain this, but lack of accommodation places is certainly not one of them. There are 7 rural apartments, 17 rural homes, 7 rural hotels, 1 inn, 1 camping site and 2 hostels in the area which, all in all, offer 650 beds.

One of the abovementioned reasons is the large amount of visitors coming from Extremadura (26.84%). Together with this, we must also take into account that such attractive urban centres as Trujillo, Plasencia and Cáceres are really close to the area. The wide range of hotel accommodation they offer practically monopolizes the Park's demand for tourists.

Only 35% of the total visitors to Monfragüe stayed in any of the towns in the area. In this regard, it comes as no surprise to find the category “permanent address” as the most frequently chosen one by visitors (24.8%), since over 27% of the total amount of visitors came from Extremadura itself. The next most frequent ones were hotels (17.3%), rural houses (15.3%), the homes of relatives (14.4%) and camping sites (9.9%). However, it must be noted that, in general terms, most visitors chose to stay away from the Park and its area of socioeconomic influence, no matter what kind of accommodation they selected.

Regarding the duration of stay, 43.9% of the visitors to Monfragüe remained in the area for 2-5 nights, which is quite close to the average 2.28 nights per stay in rural touristic accommodation-related businesses in all of Extremadura. These numbers indicate that rural tourism in the area yields rather similar results to those obtained for rural tourism in the whole of Extremadura or in the province of Cáceres (2.32 overnight stays). They are, however, rather far from the results obtained in the leading touristic Spanish regions, such as Andalusia and the Balearic Islands (3.45 and 4.46 overnight stays, respectively). In fact, the differences with those regions are big and numerous. Many of the possibilities for local development based on the complementarity of touristic resources end up leaving the area due to local inaction or inability to absorb touristic demand, or because visitors choose other, more attractive destinations for their stay.

One logical consequence of the abovementioned majority of visitors from the region is that 31% of the tourists visit Monfragüe for one single day. It should be noted, on the other hand, that 17.1% of those who did the survey affirmed they were staying in the area for more than 5 nights. This rather important fact indicates that, in the last few years, rural tourism in Spain and in Extremadura has experienced a considerable increase. However, it is still far from becoming a solid, long-lasting alternative in terms of income for those working in the sector.

As far as the amount of visits received by the towns in the area, Villarreal de San Carlos stands out above the rest, since it receives practically one-third (32.7%) of the total visits. This is far from surprising since it is the only town located within the Natural Park and houses both the Information and Interpretation Centres. Additionally, after visiting the National Park many tourists also decided to travel to such nearby towns as Plasencia (34.7%), Cáceres (29%) and Trujillo (29%), and many of them also decided to stay there for the night.

Monfragüe National Park obtained the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism in Protected Natural Areas (CETS) in September 2011, which guarantees touristic quality. It is precisely that quality stamp that made 69.2% of visitors willing to pay more for items bought in the protected natural area or for accommodation in that area (56.6%).

Finally, we shall turn our attention to the activities carried out by visitors to Monfragüe. Thus, 50% of those who did the survey visited the area in order to know about the National Park, whereas only 6.7% were interested in visiting the Biosphere Reserve, which is obviously the least popular section of the whole set. The public use areas most often visited by tourists were the Information Centre at Villarreal de San Carlos (32.3%), the Monfragüe castle (32.1%) and the Interpretation Centre at Villarreal de San Carlos (29.4%). Visitors to the best-known public-use areas –such as the Monfragüe castle, Salto del Gitano, Tajadilla or Portilla del Tiétar– were mostly interested in general touristic

motifs (38.7%), with ornithological tourism as an increasingly closer second (26%). There can be little doubt that the International Ornithological Fair held annually in Villarreal de San Carlos has largely contributed to this increase in recent years.

A vital aspect for tourism in general is the availability of varied information sources, so that prospective tourists can gather information about the protected area prior to the visit. In this sense, it becomes clear from the data obtained from the surveys that the contribution of the Information Centre at Villarreal de San Carlos is utterly essential: 72% of those who did the survey pointed out that all –or most of– the previous information they had about the protected area came from the Information Centre.

The negative side of this is that a surprisingly small portion of visitors affirmed to have obtained any information from the internet and tourist guides (just 17.5% and 3.3%, respectively), even though these are precisely the most usual information mechanisms nowadays. This clearly proves the poor touristic promoting of both the Park and the Reserve in two absolutely basic, far-reaching media.

Finally, as far as the quality and usefulness of the information about routes and itineraries, the data from the survey show that, in general, visitors regarded the information they received as correct and sufficient. The Green and Yellow Itineraries were perhaps the ones that, in the visitors' opinion, offered the least useful practical information.

By way of conclusion, it can be stated that the relatively recent declaration of Monfragüe as a National Park brought about unquestionable environmental advantages, together with numerous socioeconomic benefits, regardless of their subjective assessment. Together with this, the declaration meant a large number of opportunities for the towns located in this protected area. The added value generated by natural, environmental and landscape-related resources in this area encourages economic diversification in it, and also provides positive hopes for its socioeconomic evolution in the near future.

Taking into account the results of the present analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Monfragüe National Park is a natural heritage benchmark in the Mediterranean area.
- Visitors to Monfragüe possess high levels of personal and emotional attachment to the Park.
- Likewise, visitors usually show a positive attitude towards the Monfragüe trade mark found in products and services, which leads them to repeat their visit (fidelity).
- The local community at Monfragüe presented high levels of trust in their institutions and in the capacities of their fellow citizens. The results of the surveys showed that this community had the utmost confidence in the future of its territory.
- Improving the spreading of information about the Park is a first-rate need. This should be done in two levels: territorial (increasing the amount of visits, especially of foreign tourists, and paying special attention to touristic marketing techniques based on new information and communication technologies) and social (diversifying the touristic offer, aiming at such population sectors as retired workers, people with functional disabilities, etc., usually with higher purchasing power and, more importantly, larger amounts of leisure time).

- A more incisive policy, both in the public and the private spheres, of touristic marketing is to be encouraged, together with the creation of companies and businesses offering tourism-related activities complementary to those offered by the Park itself. The purpose of this is to strengthen the offer of accommodation and tourism-related activities in order to prevent tourists from choosing other nearby Extremaduran towns.
- In the interest of each and all of the towns in the area, it is also necessary to enlarge, diversify and distribute the offer of public use areas in the whole of the socioeconomic influence area.