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# **ARTICLES**

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# TOURISM, OUTDOOR RECREATION AND PUBLIC USE AT NATURAL PARKS. A PROPOSAL FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The foreseen declaration of the Prades mountain range as a Natural Park, on the basis of the current area included in the Plan for Areas of Natural Interest in Catalonia (PEIN for the Prades mountain range) can be used, for the purposes of this article, as the basis for an analytical, interpretative approach including territorial action that seeks to combine the challenge of protecting the environmental values of protected natural areas with (increasing) visits for recreational and tourism purposes.

It is understood that the application of product design techniques more in keeping with destination management to the planning of the recreational use of a natural park may enable conserving its resources, exploiting its attributes and, at the same time, position the natural area in terms of territorial competitiveness (see Godde, Price and Zimmermann, 2000 and Knafou, 1997). It is with regard to these targets that this paper first takes into account the following premises:

1. The environmental values of an area of natural interest may be interpreted on the basis of an operative reading of the territory that guides the activities to be carried out.
2. The diversity of the natural values being protected enables delimiting distinguished levels of recreational exploitation.
3. The existence of unique resources and elements may generate symbolic utilities that warrant the location of structure, facilities and services of public use that are coherent with their territorial identity.

In the first place, some theoretical matters are dealt with concerning the planning of tourist and recreational functions in natural parks and concerning the implications that the adoption of criteria of public use as a strategy for tourism management have on the exploitation of the

area. Secondly, we present the principles of the methodology adopted for the solution to the challenge of integrating conservation and development for the specific case of the planning of tourism in the Prades mountain range. Third, we present the territory subject to planning highlighting the critical aspects to be taken into account when interpreting their potential and capacity for public use. Fourth and finally, we offer a concrete proposal for territorial design which includes the recognition of the symbolic values of the territory, the delimitation of capacities for recreational use and tourism and a detailed proposal of the location of attractions, facilities and support structure.

## I. THEORY

In the current context of the dematerialisation of the economy, the cultural and natural heritage, including their intangibles, have become a key element for the promotion of regional and local development (Ray, 1999). To this end, it is interesting to point out, as the European Territorial Strategy (1999) itself admits, that the planning of the territory is not merely the zoning of uses and the location of infrastructures but is especially the creation of consensual development models that are the result of negotiations which, in addition to their strategic condition, are integral in nature.

From this standpoint, tourism in natural parks can be dealt with as an instrument for the planning, management and development of the territory. In this context, it is important to consider the concept of the product as a cornerstone to make the most of the opportunities. A tourism product is anything that is sold which tends to facilitate or improve, from the point of view of its perception, the quality of free time available to tourists. To facilitate and promote visits by the public by means of creating products that enable disseminating the environmental values of the protected area (Gómez-Limón et al., 2000) is the essence of the function of the public use of protected natural areas and one of the main ways in which to advance in terms of territorial development. Now, the possibilities for their development are conditioned by the fragility of the natural system and by its potential capacity to receive visitors, among others.

The attractions, facilities and support structures constitute a tool of great strategic value for the planning and regulation of public use of protected natural areas. Among their utilities, specific uses can be identified such as those of protection, supervision, harnessing flows, reception and information, flow retention and flow redirection. And symbolic values of existence, communication, confluence, historical values, aesthetic values, values of sociability and education can be identified. In any case, it should be considered that as tourist products, they are always reinventing and giving new opportunities to areas and places and, in any case, the territorial identity of the product will depend on the existence or not of a deliberate strategy of the semantic manipulation of the reality through the interpretation made of it.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied for the analysis and the proposal for territorial action presented in this article is oriented towards determining the elements that highlight the symbolic values

of the area for planning and that should facilitate its recreational use. This is a standpoint that, as Ortega Valcárcel (2000) maintains, gives «a new role to the material, physical environment, as a subjective landscape». This appreciation is in line with the fact that the value of the territory for recreational and tourist uses must highlight the identity and, let us say symbolic values of the areas. And it should do so through communication and interpretation. Inversely, that also involves the idea that the deterioration of the heritage or its improper preservation not only implies failure in the upkeep of the values that give identity to individuals and territories but also in fact affects the very stocks of its «cultural capital». On the basis of these considerations, three guiding principles are established for the methodology to be used:

- The study of the ecological conditions of the area, which must be ascertained and evaluated in the sense that the protection and revitalization of the elements of the natural environment must be the goal of the intervention strategy.
- The definition of a strategic proposal that must, among others, consider establishing priorities, the participation of all of the agents involved, the search for systems of funding, the establishment of a system of voluntary work and especially the development of a model of public use that will optimise its beneficial economic effects on the society and on the resources themselves.
- The interpretative recreation of the available «cultural capital», in the sense that the public use of the resources of a protected area requires systems of exploitation that take into account the design and communication procedures that are present on the market.

### **III. THE AREA FOR PLANNING**

The area of study for this paper is the sector of the Pre-littoral Catalan Cordillera by the name of the Prades mountain range, which will constitute a part of the future natural park of the same name and which, in all, includes the 20 municipal districts whose surface area is affected by the future declaration of the natural park plus Albiol and Selva del Camp. This represents a surface area of 760 km<sup>2</sup>. The location of the Prades mountain range between the Mediterranean coast and the central basin, together with its altitude, bring about a mixture of influences leading to a mosaic of habitats, flora and fauna. Given the importance of its environmental values, a considerable part of the area included in the draft plan of the park is currently already subject to protection laws. Hence, the area considered within the Plan for Areas of Natural Interest in Catalonia partially encompasses up to 18 municipal areas, with a total of approximately 22,000 hectares. The Poblet Valley Area of Natural Interest enjoys a more specific degree of protection.

Although all of the municipalities included in the study all together contain some 26,000 inhabitants, only just over 1,200 have their habitual place of residence within the zone that will be effectively environmentally protected. The mountainous nature of the sector dictates many basic aspects regarding the use of the territory. As a brief summary, it is first observed that connectivity with and access to the interior of the area is quite deficient. It is also noticed that the central area of the massif is clearly forest. From a regional point of view, the Prades mountain

range constitutes a natural system of importance in terms of its quality in the framework of developed coastal Catalonia, both from an ecological and from a landscape and a human point of view. From this standpoint, apart from its specific values of a biological nature, the future Prades mountain range natural park may contribute, like other protected areas in regions of strong economic dynamism, to setting limits to development and to fostering alternative systems of benefiting from the resources based on non-consumptive use of the land.

#### IV. THE DESIGN OF THE PROPOSAL

Turning a natural area into a destination which, in addition to conservation, facilitates another type of use, particularly symbolic and experiential/emotional uses providing the area itself with uniqueness, requires establishing a specific development model. To do so, first an operative reading of the territory was carried out in order to establish a tourism model based on the identity of the area, its environmental values and cultural content; secondly, a distinguished model of the use of an area of public use is proposed in the context of the needs for protection and thirdly, a system of the development of a network of attractions and facilities is structured as a strategy to bring about the exploitation of the points of attraction by means of the creation of contents and the communication of singularities.

Based on the review of the tourism resources available in the area and the consideration of the conditioning factors that affect their use both from the point of view of the characteristics of the territory and the needs and expectations of the potentially interested demand for them, a proposal is made of the interpretation of the territorial arguments that might convey a sense and an identity to the future Prades mountain range natural park as a destination. For this, two basic symbolic contents have been identified and located for the strategy of the design and communication of the destination. They are:

- **The settlement system:** the cultural content resulting from historical settlement which is expressed in the domestication of the nature of the mountains, the development of productive activities and the creation of population nuclei.
- **The forest:** the natural value, which has also been humanised by the secular presence of communities that make it an exploited area, which is maintained and singularised as a legacy for future generations and the biodiversity.

Also, for each municipality, we determine the preferable potential means of approach to each of the basic arguments set out, and therefore, to the natural and cultural resources of the protected natural area as well as three associated symbolic specialisations: the natural environment, the cultural, historical and monumental heritage and the agrarian function. With the data resulting from the delimitation of arguments, means of approach and singularities, the set of maps of the Axes of Territorial Relation of Singular Resources have been drawn up which briefly explain the possible territorial relations between the different resources on a municipal level. This is the basic differentiation that must enable the justification, in the section on the proposal, of the location of attractions and support structures, services and facilities that allow the distribution of potential visitors' uses, the channelling of flows and their concentration in certain places.

Based on the results of impact/aptitude evaluation, a generic delimitation is established of the compatibility of recreational activities with the environmental values in 16 areas of special interest and protection needs. The following categories were taken into account with regard to the recreational uses to be regulated: Unsuitable, Compatible, Conditioned, Incompatible. Of all of them, two activities stand out that require a general ruling which does not currently exist: mushrooming and environmental education activities. In addition, a series of areas has been delimited which could be established as areas of special protection of flora and fauna. They have been given the name of nature sanctuaries in the sense that they are usually considered by the zonings of the Natural Resources Management Plan (PORN), that is to say, areas to which visitors cannot get access as their frequentation is restricted.

Finally, the study carried out deals with the conditions of execution, location and characterisation of a total of 24 attractions and facilities that provide the future park with recreational, educational, scientific and social contents. Two groups of action have been identified:

- The first group includes the basic facilities of the future park so as to allow its running and they respond to its main needs of management, information, investigation, environmental education, control and follow-up of the environment, dissemination and management of leisure inside the park.
- The second group includes the support structure and facilities, that is to say, structure and facilities which, despite not being promoted by the park or of its competency, can contribute significantly to the dissemination of the natural and cultural values of the park that are coherent with the arguments and finalities mentioned in this paper.

In the article, we outline the relationship of each facility with each of the two basic arguments (settlement and forest) and its suitability to each of the three symbolic specialisations established. The proposal of intervention establishes, furthermore, policy guidelines regarding the provision of recreational services, structure and facilities, and indications concerning their relationship with the main territorial arguments and singularities of the future Park. In short, the proposal seeks to increase the chances of success of the actions in benefit of the development of the whole, benefiting from those elements of singularity that exist in each municipal district and turning them into distinguishing elements and thus facilitating the opportunities for collective tourist development. The end result is an interrelated network of nodes according to themes which is activated by the actions proposed. On the other hand the proposal for actions based on a few arguments and singularities facilitates the definition of the role of each municipality in the whole of the Natural Park as well as the design of products and the overall communications strategy.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

Harvey (1990) links leisure with consumption. To do so, he develops the concept of «symbolic» or «cultural» capital, which were originally introduced by Bourdieu (2000) as a factor to explain the appearance of leisure as an activity of reference in contemporary society. According to this viewpoint, leisure, and especially consumed leisure products, emphasise

individual differentiation and generate distinction. This consideration is relevant from the point of view of the development of tourism and recreational activities as an instrument of productive dynamisation at a local or regional level.

In this context, this paper deals with the definition of territory-based arguments as an instrument that should facilitate the design of recreational, cultural and interpretational facilities and services; enable the proper location of the activities and facilities of public use; provide the aspects that grant territorial identity to the whole, within a highly homogeneous area, with distinction; generate a structure of facilities in a network which enables the development of activities and, in short, improve the social, economic and environmental conditions of the residents in the scope of a protected natural area. It is understood that if well managed and regulated, tourism and the pursuit of recreational activities can contribute to the creation of new business and employment opportunities, to dynamising the socioeconomic life of the territory and consequently to facilitating the conservation of the resources themselves. However, for this there is a need to equip the area with contents associated with current trends of recreational consumption and its pertinent formats.

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