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CAN BICYCLE TOURISM STRENGTH RURAL AREAS?

Helena Albuquerque^a, Celeste Eusébio^b and Celeste Varum^c

^aSchool of Education, Institute Polytechnic of Viseu, CESAM – Centre for Environmental and Marine Studies, University of Aveiro; helena.albuquerque@ua.pt

^bUniversity of Aveiro, GOVCOPP - Research Unit in Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies, University of Aveiro; celeste.eusebio@ua.pt

^cUniversity of Aveiro, GOVCOPP - Research Unit in Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies, University of Aveiro; camorim@ua.pt

Tourism sector is considered as one of the most growing economic sectors nowadays (Eusébio, Anselmo de Castro, & Costa, 2013; Eusébio, Carneiro, Kastenholz, & Alvelos, 2013; Matias, Nijkamp, & Sarmento, 2011; Sinclair, 1998; Wall & Mathieson, 2006), and thus, as a “strategic vehicle for gaining prosperity” (Matias et al., 2011: 1). Rural areas, highly valued for their biodiversity, attractive landscapes, distinctive ways of life and cultural diversity, have become important tourism destinations worldwide. At the same time, tourism has become increasingly important as a potential source of income and employment for rural areas. Consequently, many rural communities view tourism as a major vehicle for addressing rural economic decline. However, some empirical evidences suggest that when tourism is not developed based on principles of sustainability its growth can bring various negative impacts (e.g. environmental, social and cultural) (Smith & Krannich, 1998). In order to maximize the benefits of tourism for rural areas and minimize the costs it is of utmost relevance to develop tourism products that simultaneously use the endogenous resources of these areas and contribute to the enhancement of residents’ quality of life (Eusébio, Kastenholz & Breda, 2014).

One of the emergent niche markets that can benefit rural areas is bicycle tourism. Bicycling is fashionable nowadays. From a simple mean of transportation it has been transformed in an important physical and leisure activity, promoting wellness and improving quality of life. Tourism is a dynamic sector that has always to know the motivations and the preferences of tourists, though it has always to follow the fashionable tendencies. Thus, bicycle tourism is emerging in the last few decades as an important niche tourism market. Lee, Chen, & Huang (2014: 291) mention that “*the rapidly of growth makes it particularly important to develop a guiding framework to assist industry and government sectors to maximize destination attractiveness and achieve long-term sustainability*”. Therefore, rural areas should take advantage from the rapid growth of bicycle tourism since “*bicycling has the potential to generate economic, social, and personal benefits and contribute to enhanced community identity*” (Bowles, Fleming, Fuller, Lankford, & Printz, 2011: 3).

Stating that, it seems important to understand the relevance of this niche tourism market in the development process of rural areas. Literature in this field is still scarce and normally, segmented. Since bicycle tourism has a huge variety of aspects to be analysed, it is not possible to set a conduct line of research under this theme. Nevertheless, there are two main thematic that should be analysed in order to understand how bicycle tourism can benefit rural areas: the attractiveness of a bicycle tourism destination; and the economic impact of bicycle tourism in local and regional economies.

However, it is important first to understand bicycle tourism definition. Several researchers and institutions have tried to define it and whereas some of them define bicycle tourism as spending leisure time cycling, other embrace a larger definition, considering not only the tourists that use bicycle but also the tourists that spend leisure time observing cycling events. Lamont (2009) considers to be important to find a common definition for bicycle tourism to “*accurately measure the size, economic value, and benefits and impacts of the bicycle tourism market*” (Lamont, 2009: 5). Thus, he presented a definition of bicycle tourism as “*trips away from an individual’s home region, of which active or passive participation in cycling are considered the main purpose for that trip*” (Lamont, 2009: 31).

Concerning the attractiveness of a bicycle tourism destination, Pratte (2006) referred that this niche market can promote sustainable tourism by the integration of different types of resources, including heritage and adventure and, by this way, it has a very high potential of grow. More recently, Lee & Huang (2014) used an analytic hierarchy process method to identify the determinants of attractiveness of a bicycle tourism destination. They realized this

study in Taiwan, in a way to find out the attractiveness of this destination for bicycle tourism. They concluded that local and central governments should cooperate to reinforce the image of bicycle tourism destinations and to promote bicycle routes for different seasons and for different cycle segments, such as mountain routes, seaside routes and heritage routes.

With regard to economic impact of bicycle tourism, the literature review noted that there is a lack of research about this topic. In the late nineties, Cope, Doxford, & Hill (1998) and Ritchie & Hall (1999) analysed this issue considering two empirical studies: the C2C route in United Kingdom and the South Island of New Zealand. Fix & Loomis (1998) also presented a study about the economic value of mountain biking in Utah, having in account revealed and stated preferences of users.

Concerning this paper issue, it is important to refer the analysis developed by Ritchie & Hall (1999). In their study, they used a questionnaire in order to understand travel pattern movements, expenditure patterns, and infrastructure use of independent bicycle tourist in the South Island of New Zealand. Their main focus was to evaluate the “*output, value-added and employment generated through cycle tourism expenditures*” (Ritchie & Hall, 1999: 103). From this analysis they concluded that bicycle tourism can provide economic benefits to regional areas, since “*due to their pace of travel and length of stay, bicycle tourists spend considerable amount of time and money in regional areas*” (Ritchie & Hall, 1999: 89). However, they had also noted that an integrated and balanced of the demand and supply side of the bicycle tourism system is needed, in order to ensure the requirements of tourists and local communities.

Given the few research carried out regarding the role of bicycling tourism in the sustainable development of rural areas, this paper intends to identify the potential of rural areas for the development of this product and the potential benefits, especially economic, that this type of tourism can provide for rural areas. To achieve this objective a content analysis of conceptual and empirical articles and reports published in the last decades was carried out. From this analysis, it seems that bicycle tourism is a niche tourism market that can strength rural areas, by promoting new forms of exploring these areas. Nevertheless, research should be conducted in order to find how this product can be develop and promoted in an integrated way to maximize the benefits for all stakeholders and minimize the costs. .

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