

Ecotourism as a Pathway to the Renewal of Coastal Destinations

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Abstract

Coastal zones have always been considered as preferential areas for tourist activities. Moreover, tourism has been noted as a development sector, especially in regions and countries where the economy and the productivity sectors are less competitive. Tourism is thus targeted as a key sector for the development in Portugal (REA, 1999).

However, this sector has increased environmental problems in coastal zones because of the excessive use of sun and sea products by tourists. In addition, tourists nowadays do not just look for these products, they are also interested in looking for areas where they can find other products, with environmental and cultural quality.

The awareness of these conflicts between the tourism sector and coastal zones was the beginning to board the required renew of tourism in coastal destinations. For this purpose, it was analysed the municipal coastal zone of Mira in central Portugal. According to the objectives of Agenda 21 for the Tourism Sector, which is being prepared by European Union until 2007, it was developed a programme of sustainable tourism that applies sustainable criteria to the tourism of this area, which needs to be renewed. This programme identified the potential of Mira region to turn the tourism sector more sustainable. It is expected to alert population and entities that it is possible and suitable to promote alternative models of tourism development, in balance with the environment, turning advantageous the existing natural and cultural resources and also increasing the value of region singularities. The proposed strategies include: diversifying the tourist product offer in the region; providing new and renewed conditions to visitors; conserving and improving the natural and cultural resources of the region; and generating benefits and opportunities to the local community.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, ecotourism, sand beaches, Portuguese coastal area

Introduction

Through the multiple effects and fluxes that tourism produce on the economy, it is considered as one of the most important economic activities in Coastal Zones. Since earlier times, these areas are considered as preferential and assumed as having a natural vocation for the practice of tourist activities. However, it is verified that those activities present a seasonal and massif character with evident negative effects on the environment and in the quality of tourism. In this way, tourism sector has double face in what concerns with the resources of each territory. It can assume a resources valorisation role or a degradation role. Exploring alternative forms of tourism and changing population behaviours and

attitudes, allied to a progressive conscience to nature conservation importance can be the principal keys to promote and enhance life quality of local and regional communities.

Sustainable tourism expresses, in practice, the adoption of sustainable development concept through tourist activity. In this way, it is seen as the one that "envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (WTO, 1993). However, it is necessary to manage tourism

sector with respect for territories carrying capacity. In order to promote economic development, the relations between inhabitants and visitors and the nature and biodiversity conservation are considered as priority aspects in the development process that is wished to be sustainable.

It is urgent and necessary to face coastal zones tourism sector on a sustainable perspective, determining tourist offer more to qualitative than quantitative values. Sustainable development of tourism requires the economic valorisation of environment and the recognition of the need to promote a better approach to the environmental system carrying capacity as well as to its uses thresholds. In the coastal zones it is more over evident a tourist demand that is not only resumed to forms of sun and sea tourism, but that provide other offers in new areas of interest, such as nature and cultural tourism and tourism associated to nautical sports. From natural and cultural point of view it is urgent to reach the new tendency of sustainable tourism ensuring a correct planning and use of natural places and, in another way, to collide with international and national recommendations that are related to tourism and environment. For that reason, considering the protection and conservation of environment in a way to avoid urban pressure in coastal ecosystems should be a primary concern in each process of planning and management of tourist activity.

It is intended with the proposed programme to send the message to local authorities, local and central administrations and local populations and visitors that it is opportune and possible to develop alternative tourist practices, in a balance with natural environment, taking advantage of the existent resources and valorising the singularities of each place, without underestimate the economic dimension of this activity.

This perspective has always-present three concerns:

- Valorisation of local natural and cultural inheritance with strong incidence in the preservation and protection of natural systems
- People sensitization and information, linked to people environmental education
- Development of places turning them attractive in an environmental and business-related perspective with strong economic incidence (to offer alternative products, generating higher income and inducing more investments)

The first perspective expresses the need to have always-present the maximum respect for the balance between the diverse systems, specially natural and human systems, and the carrying capacity; the second one aims to educate and sensitize visitors and residents for the importance of resources, its

meaning, history and the importance of preservation and conservation; and finally, the third one aims to strength the role of tourism sector on the local economic basis, attracting more and new tourist markets, offering alternative tourist products, generating more receipts because it will naturally and parallelly induce new investments in various areas, stimulating in this way the local economy.

Mira municipality: with which purpose?

Mira municipality (Figure 1), a coastal area from central Portugal, is a paradigmatic case concerning urban and tourist pressure in areas with this feature: excellent and diversify natural resources sights, massif and seasonal sun and sea tourism and threat symptoms of natural resources rupture. For these reasons, it is understandable and perceptible the lost of tourist interest, confirmed with the gradual reduction of tourist entrance in last years (Table 1).

Mira	1999	2000	2001
TOTAL	10 532	9462	8 888
PORTUGAL	6 841	6891	6 646
OTHER COUNTRIES	3 691	2571	2 242

Table 1: Tourists entrances between 1999 and 2001 in Mira

It is not surprising the results presented by tourist activities in areas like this, in one hand a deficient quality of existent tourist infrastructures, and in the other hand, the existence of only one product: the sun and sea product. Both reasons contribute for the statement of strongly massif and seasonal tourism forms. Tourists that were looking before for this area to recreation and leisure, are starting to find other areas with better climate and environmental and tourist quality conditions.

It is now urgent and opportune to think to invert this situation, taking advantage of the excellent existent resources set: coastal lagoons and hydric system, forests, sand dunes, cultural and built heritage (watermills, forest houses, gandareza houses, etc.). It is also possible to take benefit of some interesting equipments, such as nautical club, fish-rearing pond, camping, ethnographic museum. There are other projected equipments, like the ecomuseum, botanical garden, sand dunes garden, scout camp school and handicraft house. Beyond these two important factors, this area has a structure that establishes connection all the resources and equipments, the cyclic and pedonal track (at enlargement phase). There are also in this municipality some local associations that promote activities connected with nature sports (BTT, Orienteering) and occasionally

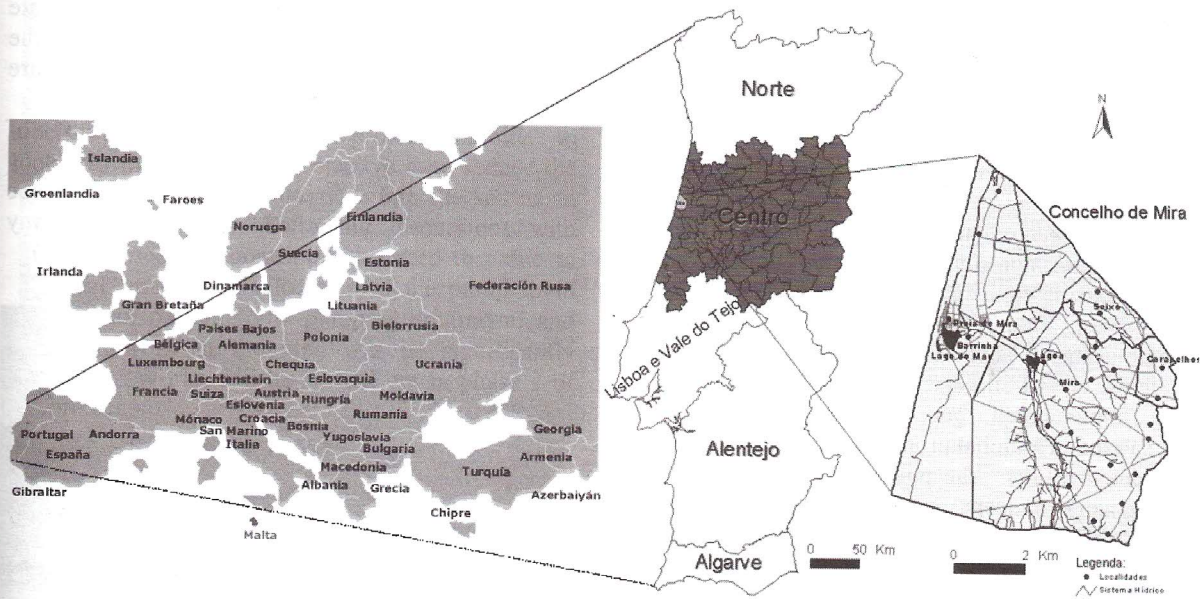


Figure 1: Location of Mira Municipality

some actions connected to environmental sensitizing, guided essentially for local population. Referring to political local administrations, the existence of a program proposal, the EcoMira, carried out in partnership with CCDR-C (Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento da Região Centro), and financed by POA (Environmental Operational Program), reflects the desire to materialize the bet on nature tourism.

The combination of local features mentioned above, with new and alternative recreation and leisure practices and tendencies, offer a unique opportunity to apply a Sustainable Tourism Program at Mira municipality (Figure 2). This Program has as principal aim to contribute for the development of local economic basis, increasing environmental heritage and recognizing the necessity to promote a better approach to region carrying capacity, as well

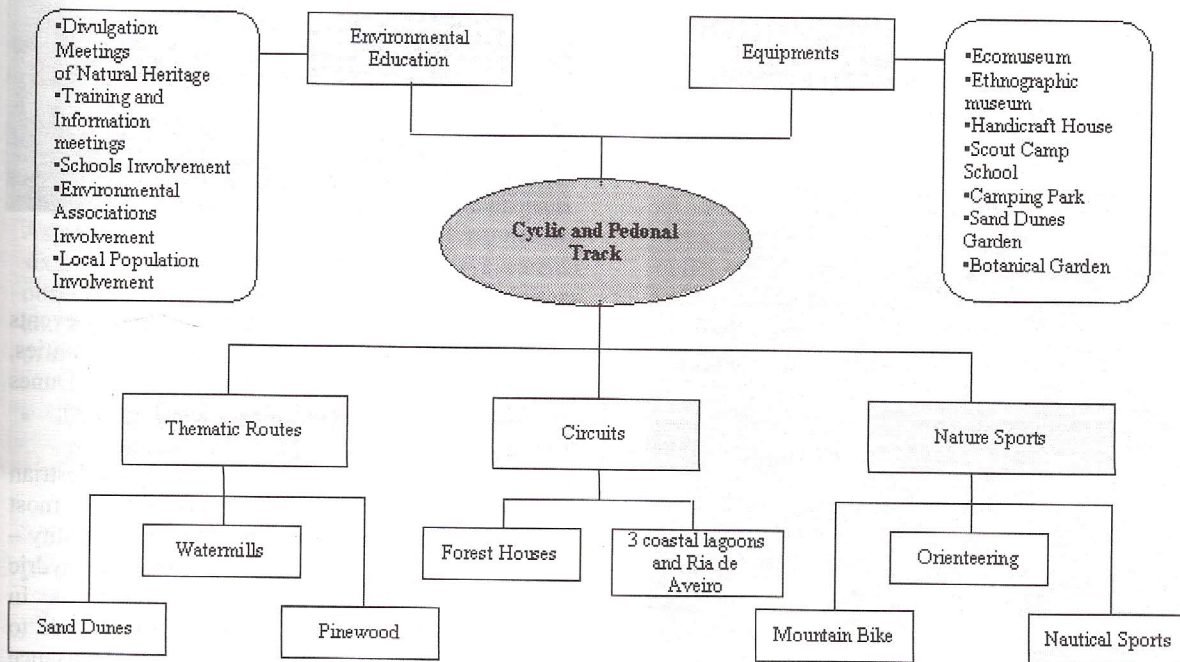


Figure 2: Diagram of Sustainable Tourism Program in Mira

as to its uses thresholds, turning possible the establishment of a sustained and balanced relationship between development and nature conservation. The program intends to be coherent, attractive and structured, betting in innovative tourist practices. From the implementation of the proposed measures and actions, it is expected the coastal area tourist renew, enhancing, in this way, the environmental and tourist quality and improving, also, the quality of life of its population.

The program is supported in the formulation of simple ideas and strategies, some of them that are being implemented, but that, if assembled and schematized in a global product can, in fact, produce unexpected results: "the power of small things...". The network concept is the central idea of the program. This proposes a cyclic and pedonal track as a physical element that links the diverse actions of the program and that guide the visitors.

Tourists that arrive to this area have the possibility of, through the exploration of a cyclic and pedonal track, with almost 30 km, construct their puzzle to find out local and regional knowledge, since flora and fauna, history and culture, passing through gastronomy and other small events and local curiosities. Moreover, it offers the possibility of contact with natural environment, through the practice of a significant diversity of nature and adventure sports.

The definition of the program has 6 key areas:

- Cyclic and Pedonal track is a physical element that already exists and that assumes the role of structuring element because it gives a physical link between the different components of the program (Figure 3).



Figure 3: View of the Cyclic and Pedonal Track

- Circuits associated to the cyclic track, informing about the possibilities of crossing over all forest houses (it should be negotiated with the General

Forestry Direction the possibility to rehabilitate this heritage for cultural activities) or visit the three coastal lagoons and Ria de Aveiro (Figure 4).

- Nature Sports – that action integrate a set of activities nowadays sporadically carried out by diverse local associations, but that need to be programmed and scheduled annually in a way that constitute an attractive product (Figure 5);



Figure 4: Forest House



Figure 5: Nautical Sports

- Equipments – that aggregate interesting events to whom intends to enjoy leisure activities, since the Ethnographic Museum, Sand Dunes Garden, or the Botanical Garden (Figure 6);
- Thematic Routes – constituted by pedestrian routes allowing the discovery of the most important natural elements of the municipality – sand dunes system, forest, system and hydric system where can be seen the watermills. In these routes it should be possible to accede to multiple local information (e.g. the importance of watermills, the process and techniques used in the forestation of the sand dune system between Mira and Quiaios).



Figure 6: Ethnographic Museum

- Environmental Education Actions – transversal to all activities and permanent presence in every phases of the program. It combines the whole available information of the territory, or even the activities of all associations (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Birds Watch (activity organized by one environment local association)

As an example, we will analyse in detail one of these six key areas – the thematic routes that allows the observation and knowledge of the natural, cultural and built diversity heritage. We suggest three kinds of routes:

- Routes in Mira Pinewoods – allows the realization of pathways to observe the biodiversity of humid areas and fauna and flora of coastal lagoons (Figures 8 and 9);
- Dunes pathway – allows the visitors to observe this ecosystem as well as to be sensitized for the importance of maintaining these areas as coastal defense for populations, as well as the species that exist there (Figures 10 and 11).

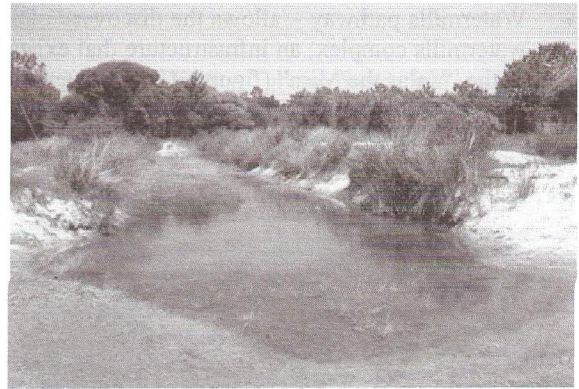


Figure 8: Mira Pinewoods



Figure 9: Mira Pinewoods



Figure 10: Sand Dunes Ecosystem



Figure 11: Sand Dunes Ecosystem

- Watermills pathway – allows the discovery of a watermills complex, an infrastructure that exists in the “Valas de Mira” (figures 12 and 13).

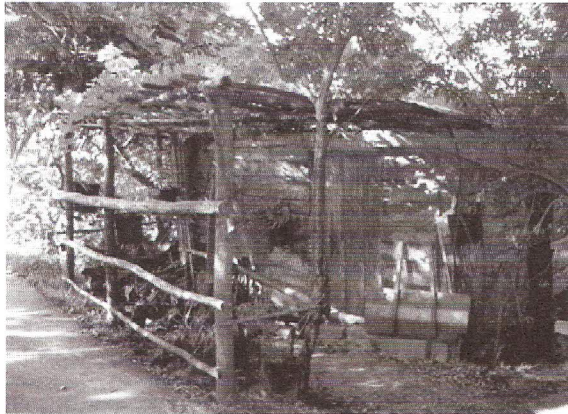


Figure 12: “Valas de Mira” Watermills



Figure 13: “Valas de Mira” Watermills

However, for the development and exploration of these pathways, it would be necessary, among other actions, to limit the pathways guiding visitors and avoiding degradation of surrounding zones and also the watermills rehabilitation, turning some of them in museums.

Implementing an Environmental Tourism or Ecotourism in Mira municipality is far away of being a utopia. Contacts with the city hall demonstrate that one of the strategic challenges for municipality development process is precisely Ecotourism. Some of the proposals described here are at project or implementing stage, there’s still a long way to go but the bases are already launched.

Discussion:

The existing proposal of sustainable tourism program does not mean that it will be rejected traditional tourism forms (sun and sea). On the contrary, it is expected that this program help to

maintain Mira municipality as an attractive local destination. However, through a diversification offer of tourist products, it is expected to demonstrate that is possible the existing environmental friendly tourism forms, without meaning to forget or underestimate the economic dimension, showing that one region can be much more attractive as bigger are its singularities. In this complementary perspective, the program’s implementation can be assumed as a motivating factor for a better qualification of traditional forms of tourism.

The development of a sustainable tourism program, with activities to be carried out during all the year keeps in view: to diversify the region’s tourist products, to offer of new and renewed conditions to its inhabitants, to conserve and promote municipalities natural and cultural resources. At the end it promotes the use of local products, bringing benefits and opportunities to its population and promoting a healthy relationship between tourists and inhabitants. The development of new tourist products could be designated as active and animation tourism, which includes nautical and adventure sports, cyclotourism, pedestrian routes, historic and cultural tourism, among others. Those are attractive forms of tourism that are complementary to the sun and sea tourism. These measures, when being implemented, will create a chance to increase tourists’ sensitivity for the importance of maintaining biodiversity in sensible areas, which should be protected in terms of nature conservation.

As program principal goal we can refer the challenge to create a new tourist product with structured and coherent dimension capable to offer a set of articulated events and planned activities through all year, in a way that the seasonal character disappear.

The implementation of this kind of program of needs the existence of an operational structure responsible for the programme, its divulgation and acting as “meeting point” of all partners. A “Sustainable Tourism Agency”, which should be composed by the city hall, CCDR-C, Nature Conservation Institute (ICN), other entities linked to the environment and tourism, local associations and private entities, should be on this structure. The main goal of this structure should be the definition and consolidation of a tourist product, the articulation with enterprises and local associations and, obviously, the definition of a marketing and divulgation strategy. For the settlement of this program in tourism market it will be crucial to define a marketing strategy that fascinates visitors and potential investors, having always present the environmental sustainable principles. Marketing strategy should enhance the new tourist product

offer in a market that still is focussed for sun and sea product, and divulgation strategy should attract visitors offering them an educational and knowledge value of the local environmental reality.

It is also essential population involvement, in this way, it should be done divulgation and discussion meetings to explain the main objectives and the opportunities that this program will bring to them. It is also essential the promotion of conditions to change the actual municipal social-economic state, promoting training in tourism area and trying, by this way to reduce unemployment.

It is evident, as any idea to be implemented needs financial resources. In a first stage, the city hall role should be determinant, but the main goal is that should be progressively the operational structure proposed (Sustainable Tourism Agency) to assume the responsibility not only of the program and its management, but also its financial sustainability. For that reason, it is essential to have admission to national and European financial and incentive programs.

Conclusion

It is intended with this proposal to show that is possible to turn coastal tourism more sustainable. Through the ideas developed in this program to Mira municipality we think that should be possible to confirm that a natural and cultural resource valorisation can turn the tourist activity more attractive and attenuate its seasonality, without disturb the development of the local economy basis process.

In a general way, we can affirm that coastal municipalities that have tourism as an important sector in the local economic basis and that revealed nowadays a decline phenomenon of that activity, associated to the degradation of natural environment, can think in a renewed tourism based on a sustainability perspective, linked with natural existent assets and singularity of these locals. The challenge is in the development of innovative and "environment friendly" ideas, that can contrast with the imported instituted models that have guide to seasonal and massif tourism.

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