

Chapter 1

Fostering Ecocultural Resources, Identity, and Tourism in Inland Territories (Galicia, NW Spain)

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ABSTRACT

Inland territories hold a great diversity of ecocultural resources, increasingly constituted in tourist products for local development. Their role in improving the socioeconomic conditions and wellness of local communities, as well as in promoting tourism and sustainability, depends on the involvement of public and private actors. The relationships and the collaboration of local actors are essential in that regard. The study of aforementioned processes takes place in the inland territory of Galicia (NW Spain). The methodology of research relied on in-depth interviews. Due to the key role of the local actors, the interviews focused on their professional and life experiences. The analysis of the answers establishes the definition and the appraisal of the main resources, attached to territorial identity, and highlights the engagement and involvement of the actors in the territorial dynamics that foster the promotion of the ecocultural resources for tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Inland territories hold a great diversity of ecocultural resources, increasingly constituted in tourist products. They are often rural and mountainous areas with sparse and ageing population. Regarding their surface area (the 80% of the EU territory), the important meaning of their identities, and the challenges that they face, the European agenda (European Parliament, 2018; European Committee of the Regions,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7339-6.ch001

2020) highlights the need to foster local development through more holistic, proactive, and place-based strategies, defining the crucial role that tourism is expected to play. As it is the case with other European areas, inland Spanish territories are today less developed areas, sparsely populated, and in demographic decline. They face big challenges in order to reverse or at least minimize the hindrances that this situation brings about (Serra et al., 2014; Nieto Masot et al., 2020). Tourism provides an opportunity to set into motion their ecocultural resources and improve their socioeconomic conditions as well as the wellness of local communities. In this context, the boost to carry out new arguments and initiatives -promoting tourism and sustainability- depends on the involvement of both public and private actors. Such processes are framed in the inland territory of Galicia (NW Spain) focusing on strategies put forward in the Sacred Riverside rural area (in the Galician language, “Ribeira Sacra”, hereinafter RS) and the Courel Mountains UNESCO Global Geopark (hereinafter CMGG).

The chapter concerns in particular the mobilization of ecocultural resources, considering new economic and sociocultural initiatives that emphasize their enhancement, the reaffirmation of territorial identity, the consolidation of territorial cohesion, and the generation of conditions for sustainable development. Inland territories have always supplied goods and services in addition to those of the agricultural type, stemming from their environmental and cultural features (geodiversity, biodiversity, and lifestyle). They identify the main components in resources-oriented strategies (Féret et al., 2020) through territorial trajectories of diversification, restructuring, innovation, and branding (e.g. Ilbery, 2014; Camarero & Oliva, 2016; Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020). The narratives provided by local actors reflect the relationship between nature and culture rooted in specific places and times (Buttimer & Seamon, 1980). They also highlight their appraisal of the material and the immaterial resources that belong in a territorial project (Colletis-Wahl & Pecqueur, 2001), bring into light -based on personal and collective experiences- the role that local identity and social cohesion play in attracting exogenous development opportunities (Pike et al. 2006). Furthermore, they account for the configuration of alliances (Byrd, 2007; Sharpley, 2014) especially aimed at creating tourist products (Williams & Lew, 2015; Richards, 2020). In order to gain insight into these processes, the methodology of research was qualitative, relying on in-depth interviews conducted in the years 2011, 2012, and 2019.

Driven by the acknowledgment of the importance of their function, 17 local actors were selected because of their engagement with territorial actions that affect the discovery, the preservation, and the activation (or the creation) of ecocultural resources. The analysis of in-depth interviews outlines different ideas, experiences, and practices interwoven through adaptation, adjustment, and innovation processes. Strongly attached to territorial identity, such processes make up the ecocultural values for tourism. They distinguish those Galician inland territories that enjoy increasing capacities and collective self-esteem, related to the expectations, the participation, and the organization of local actors, all of them coalescing into a synergetic current flowing among the latter. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the narratives of the local actors involved in the territorial dynamics pinpoint the difficulties to achieve socioeconomic advantages and visibility without performing actions that encompass both bottom-up and top-down processes.

The main objective of this chapter is to describe and analyze the role played by local resources, territorial identity, and tourism in the evolution of adaptive or new dynamics that arise from times of crisis (in the first decade of the 21st century). These dynamics strengthens the importance of ecocultural resources, incorporates a wide range of intangible values, broadens the spectrum of the tourist offer to encompass multifaceted perspectives, and spreads the image of the territory as a tourist destination. Three specific objectives are of particular concern: to explain the role of local actors in territorial dynamics; to

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