Sustainable Tourism at «El Hondo» Natural Park, Spain

Turismo sustentable en el Parque Natural «El Hondo», España

Naú Silverio NIÑO Gutiérrez 1

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1. Introduction

Among the most threatened natural ecosystems in the world are wetlands, as a result of human economic activities on the one hand and climate change, which affects size, structure, hydrology and biota. It is in the Spanish southeast where the most important semi-arid regions are located, because it is home to a large number of wetlands that allow the accumulation of water and formation of important lake systems that have received attention in various publications (Niño-Segrelles-Niño-Niño, 2015; García-Pagani, 2016 y García 2017). Where the natural landscapes decreed as protected natural areas under the jurisdiction of National Parks protects terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna of interest, with a high diversity of species, in this case it also corresponds to an important route of bird migration between Africa and Europe.

The goal of this research was the critical analysis of the physical, geographical and touristic conditions which make the use and management of "El Hondo" Natural Park possible. The elements of the methodology which supported the study were the ecological, geographical and economical approaches enriched with statistical and cartographic technics, as well as participant observation. Thus, the natural landscape is represented by a wetland area, located in Alicante, which has a total area of 2,387.2 hectares, surrounded by the Crevillente, Callosa and Orihuela sierras.

The natural scenic beauty of "El Hondo" Natural Park is related to the great ecological and economical interest about the water which comes from the Segura river’s reservoirs. Almost 40,000 hectares located in the area between San Juan and Orihuela are irrigated by them. The park’s extreme geographical coordinates are: 38° 10' 00’’ to 38° 13' 00’’ north latitude and 0° 44' 00’’ to 0° 47' 30’’ west longitude of Greenwich. Tourism is the most important activity in that spot. That is why the park’s administration has specifically set observatories among reeds and "in situ" observation worthy of a Site of Community Importance (LIC: Localidad de Importancia Comunitaria), which is regarded a Special Bird Protection Area (ZEPA: Zona de Especial Protección para las Aves) by the European Community (García & Pagani, 2016).

The urban, residential and commercial land use is gaining territorial extension regarding the dynamic relationship that has to do with urban and economical activities carried out by man in peri-urban areas. That is not the case of land use related to agriculture, stockbreeding, hunting, fishing and nature tourism, which are supported on the presence of sui generis landscapes, increasingly scarce.

In light of these problems, leisure and recreation activities for the inhabitants must excel, so they amuse themselves in some Natural Protected Areas (ENP: Espacios Naturales Protegidos), where Natural Parks such as "El Hondo" play an important role. It was decreed a Natural Protected Area on April 2, 1979 as a Bird Protection Special Area (ZEPA: Zona Especial de Protección para las Aves). Even the Generalitat Valenciana decreed "Hondo" a Natural Area in 1988 in order to promote the tourist use of the spot in the Levante and Poniente reservoirs, besides keeping the traditional farming, stockbreeding, hunting and fishing use in the surrounding area.

On the other hand, changes in precipitation from the Spanish Mediterranean, along with the population expansion in Orihuela and Crevillente, make the existence of reservoirs more difficult every time. The extension of the body of water that comes from Segura river decreases year by year to a greater or lesser degree causing pollution where bird observation takes place by visitors from Europe and Spain. Wet areas have traditionally been mistreated; "their loss of water, pollution and degradation have led them to a gloomy and irreversible state" (Natural Resources Consulting Office, 2012). Then, wetland tourism becomes an economic activity defined by the presence of water, since it is a natural refuge for local, migratory and endemic birds such as the White-headed Duck (Oxyura leucocephala), nowadays endangered, the Ruddy Duck (Oxyura jamaicensis) and "Focha cornuda" (Fulia cristata), currently in danger of extinction (Figure 1).

Figure 1
"Focha cornuda"
Main goal. Showing the economic activities which make sustainability at “El Hondo” Natural Park possible.

Research question. What are the activities that make sustainability at “El Hondo” Natural Park possible?

The method. Based on the principle of Landscape Geography, the method that was applied on this occasion covered the area explicitly referred to “El Hondo” Natural Park.

During its development, the method implicitly had the following global activities: I) Office work. It largely comprised the consultation of specialized printed literature on certain topics such as natural parks, protected natural areas, environmental legislation, tourism, digital material about natural parks and the Generalitat Valenciana’s cartography. In order to carry it out, some libraries of Alicante University and the Information Center of “El Hondo” park were consulted. That information was processed at the Human Geography.

Department of Alicante university, where the following activities were realized: a) design and provisional construction of a base map and thematic cartography; b) statistical data processing and its concentrated representation on charts and graphs; c) definitive design and construction of thematic maps; d) explanatory text and e) final writing of the text.

II) Field work. It included eight exploratory and verification tours, three of them were carried out from September to November, 2015 and five of them from January to May, 2016. The main tasks included the geographic update of recreational routes and sites for bird observation. A total of 65 people were interviewed, two professors from Alicante who are frequent visitors, three park employees and 60 visitors. 46 were occasional visitors and 14 frequent visitors. Besides, i) taking pictures of several aspects of the park; ii) video recording which captured the biophysical and human characteristics in the park; iii) four lectures were given to students of the Master’s Degree in Geography and land-use Planning at Alicante University. They were about multifunctionality and the tourism practiced in the Natural Parks of the Valencian Community, in particular “Carrizales” and “El Hondo”.

2. Methodology

Field work was carried out in three phases: the first one included the compilation, reading and analysis of the published material, printed and digital, about “El Hondo” Natural Park. The second phase was the cartographic processing, which was carried out in order to show a physical and geographic survey of the area of study based on the thematic mapping whose methodology has been applied in Mexican latitudes (Melo and Niño, 2003; Melo and Castillo, 2008).

The third phase involved the processing of tourist information, which included a sample of 65 visitors, 46 of them occasional visitors and 14 frequent visitors during the eighteen tours that took place from September to November, 2015 and from January to May, 2016 in order to confirm the high arrival of visitors in those periods of time, as well as the origin and motive of the visitors interested in the park’s public use, where it was necessary to gather information such as the favorite places and areas where visitors practice intensive-active recreation. The technics that supported this phase was participant observation (Babbie; 2000). The information gathered is very similar to the profile of the tourist who visits “El Hondo” Natural Park. It was elaborated by Alicante University’s academics from 2009 to 2011, but the visitor’s profile is still valid today (Generalitat Valenciana, 2011).

3. Results

It is located southeast of Spain. It borders Teruel to the north, Tarragona to the northeast, Cuenca to the northwest, the Mediterranean Sea to the south and southeast and Albacete and Murcia to the southwest. In order to comply Council rule 92/43/CEE set on May 21, 1992 related to the conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, the Valencian legislation allowed to favor the maintaining of biodiversity. At the same time it takes into account the actual economic, social, cultural and regional demands in a favorable state of conservation known as European Ecological Net “Red Natura 2000” in which each country in Europe designated wildlife places and areas which are important for the world conservation in order to: a) build a representative net of the main natural ecosystems and regions and b) protect natural areas and elements that offer a particular interest from the scientific, cultural, educational, aesthetic, scenic and recreational point of view (De La Vega, 2010).

In that sense, the Generalitat Valenciana decreed (187/1988) “El Hondo” a Natural Area according to article 96 of the Constitution and article first of the Civil Code, and its inclusion, by the Spanish government on the list of international-concern wetland areas established in RAMSAR covenant, has the character of wet area for the purposes provided in article 103 of the Water Law and article 3 of Law 5/1988 (June 24) of Natural Areas of the Valencian Community and Law 11/1994 of Natural Spaces of the Valencian Community. “El Hondo” is also a Bird Protection Special Area (ZEPA: Zona Especial de Protección para las Aves), according to council rule 79/409/CEE, April 2, 1979, concerning the conservation of wild birds (Ibídem, 2010, p. 30).
It is located in the municipality of Alicante, it has a total area of 2,378.2 hectares. It is surrounded by the Crevillente, Callosa and Orihuela sierras, in a tectonic depression called Elche plain located south of Baix Vinalopó, district of Alicante. It is near Santa Paola salt marshes, with which it has a common origin (Andarías, 1996).

This wet-land spot holds a major ecological and economic interest. Nearly 40,000 hectares in the area located between San Juan and Orihuela are irrigated by the water from the reservoirs which comes from Segura river (Generalitat Valenciana, 2011).

Segura river (Tader, in Latin) starts at Segura Sierra, near Fuente Segura (Jaén), a small village. It flows into the Mediterranean Sea, in Guardamar de Segura (Alicante), after running 325 kilometers. It is one of the rivers with the highest hydraulic exploitation, also known for its irregularity, since it has caused great flooding alternated with long dry spells (Crespi and Planells, 2011, p. 24).

It is multifunctional, since activities such as environmental education and monitoring and research, scientific monitoring, bird observation, farming,
hunting and fishing are carried out in a series of interesting wet spots linked to the reservoirs, besides the salt marshes that surround it. The park's extreme geographical coordinates are: 38° 10' 00" to 38° 13' 00" north latitude and 0° 44' 00" to 0° 47' 30" west longitude of Greenwich. "El Hondo" is a very important place, since it keeps a symbiotic balance as well as agricultural development, environment preservation and biodiversity in the boundaries of Pedanías de San Felipe Neri and Crevillente where there are other Valencian Community natural parks called Mata-Torrevieja and Las Salinas de Santa Pola.

Apart from the fact that it is necessary for the agricultural, livestock and forestry spaces to join the urban and rural territory creating a coherent balance between productive activities and nature as well as seeking modernization and the improvement of family production units' feasibility, a park's management must impel a fair trade of farm products so farmers can benefit and be included in the evaluation their products go through when passing from one link of the production chain to another.

Natural Parks always show appropriate characteristics for the sustainable use of landscape. Their exploitation must be carried out through tourist units which guarantee conservation. In such units, soil, water and forest are exploited. More pieces of land of any kind even become part of those units. Also, the use of agricultural land for the achievement of the optimal balance between productive activities and nature as well as seeking modernization or recovery of the natural environment so the bases for the permanent use and sustainable management in those natural spaces can be set (Niño and Saldaña, 2012, p. 100).

Tourism is the activity which combines constant information, actions and performance of the travel industry, government, tourist resources, inputs and parameters aimed in the form of products and services for a market in order to make a demand of the people who reinforce the cycles of such activities possible (Guerrero and Ramos, 2011, p. 33).

Visitors are the ones who have different motivations and necessities which make possible their going to the place where the supply of services is, in order to come out recreation and leisure activities when they travel and stay at one place for a period longer than one day and shorter than one year (Ibidem, 2011, p. 33).

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the term visitor is divided in two categories. The first one is: a tourist, a person who visits a place different from his place of origin, where he spends the night. The second one refers to a day visitor, i.e. an excursionist who doesn't spend the night in the place he's visiting (Castillo and Panosso, 2010).

Regarding the natural park's personnel. The highest number of visitors arrive in the park in spring time (March 21 through June 21) and in autumn-winter time (September 21 through February 20). These are the times of the year which are mild from the weather point of view, which corresponds to the resolution of the tourist season (Ibidem, 2011, p. 96).

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By 2010, the Department of Psychology of Alicante University had established a visit typology in "El Hondo", which is expressed in the park's management report. It consists of four types of visits: the first type is a brief visit, in which some type of information is given; the second type is an authorized visit, in which the visitor has previously asked for the visit; the third type is an estimated visit, in which an approximate number of visitors is calculated outside the Information Center that is not an appointed or estimated visit and the fourth type is an authorized visit, in which authorization is required from the Master Use and Management Plan (PRUG: Plan Rector de Uso y Gestión) is required (Ibidem, 2011, p. 95).

Therefore, in 2010 on an average day, having 55 visitors, the following results were obtained: briefed visitors (47.3%), appointed visitors (32.1%), authorized visitors (1.0%) and estimated visitors (19.6%). It should be noted that on weekdays visitors from England are the most, whereas on weekends the visitors come from the natural park's surrounding areas (Ibidem, 2011, p. 96).

Practicing tourism at "El Hondo" shows the following qualities: a) environmental competitiveness is nowadays an important modality for the global competitiveness on avifauna observation (García, 2017); b) migratory and local endangered birds stay in the park; c) it is the third most significant place in Spain for bird observation; d) fish fauna such as el, Flathead grey mullet, and above all, Spanish tooth carp (Aphanius iberus), an endemic bird from the Spanish Mediterranean Sea, can be found in the park; e) it is ranked as a Site of Community Interest (LIC: Localidad de Importancia Comunitaria); f) it is an international importance wetland; g) it is included in the Ramsar convention for protection of wetlands; h) it is regarded as a Bird-spa Special Protection Area (ZEPA: Zona de Especial Protección para las Aves) of the European Union, i) the tour guides are satisfied and j) national and foreign tourists are satisfied (Niño-Segrelles-Niño & Niño, 2015).

The public-use program, as well as each and every subprogram, takes in objectives, standards and functions similar to the ones practiced in Mexican Protected Natural Areas (ANP: Areas Naturales Protegidas), as it can be seen in the work of Niño and González (2013).

The origin of visitors in organized groups comes mainly from the nearby inhabitants from the pedanías (Alicanty's towns) of Elche, Santa Pola, San Felipe Neri, San Fulgencio, Catral, Alicante and Dolores. Foreign visitors from countries of the European Union such as England, Russia and Norway arrive in the park in fewer numbers. Regarding the natural park's human capital, the quality of those three candidates who were chosen corresponds one hundred percent to their positions according to their individual competencies, which is very important to take into account in the development of a functional and sustainable program (Niño, 2014, p. 83).
4. Conclusions

The results obtained through this research show that tourism and leisure activities, along with agriculture, stockbreeding, hunting and fishing, are threatened by the presence of the reservoirs of Levante and Poniente. This evidently answers the leading research question at first stated. According to the main stated objective, as well the results obtained, it can be concluded that the environmental resources and the biological diversity promote the exploitation of all the opportunities the surrounding area of “El Hondo” Natural Park offers, as well as the development of several tourism modalities: agricultural, rural, ornithological, photographic, nature, sport, hiking, cultural tourism in addition this landscape is important given that it maintains the biological structure, enables environmental services among which are the recharge of aquifers, filters and pollutant degraders, greenhouse gas sink, as well as relevance in the local economy of the residents.

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1. Department of Investigation. Autonomous University of Guerrero. Master of Science: Sustainable Tourism Management. nausilverio@yahoo.com.mx

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