

Executive summary

Interest and objectives of the work

Catalonia is one of the leading tourist regions at a world scale, both from the point of view of the offer and in number of visitors, as it is the main tourist destination in the Spanish State and one of the most important ones in Europe. The importance of tourism in Catalan economy is remarkable since it represents more than 12% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country but also because of the fact that it generates a strong impact on the territory as a result of a poor model in terms of sustainability.

Furthermore, Catalonia has a rich natural and cultural heritage, high landscape diversity and quality rural and mountain environments that, together with the climate, gastronomy and traditions, contribute to make it attractive for a type of tourism based on quality.

Thus, from the CADS and the Department of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise –through its General Direction of Tourism and the Observatory of Tourism of Catalonia– a process was initiated in order to evaluate and debate about the tourist model of our country, targeted on the natural heritage and landscape, in a moment of re-conversion of many sectors of economy and, particularly, the tourism sector. This debate had in mind the objective of avoiding seasonality or excessive concentration of the economical gains and the number of tourists, which peak in certain periods of the year.

In this process of change that opens new opportunities, ecotourism, a modality still in its infancy and with a great potential of growth, is seen as an important part of a new model of tourism in our country; this is a modality able to generate more added value for natural reserves and the landscape, strengthen conservation and benefit local people, which usually enjoy few work opportunities and in declining numbers in rural areas.

The objectives of this work are to clarify the conceptual bases of ecotourism, make a profile of its level of development in Catalonia, diagnose the current situation from the visions of the main agents involved and design strategies and measures that can be used as a route map to develop ecotourism in the future in our country.

The compilation of this work has meant a deep and comprehensive documental research and has involved the participation of a great number of public and private agents related to ecotourism in Catalonia through two debate sessions that took place during the first quarter of 2009.

What is ecotourism?

The term ecotourism has only recently started to be used, especially by the academic world and some conservation organizations. On the contrary, public administrations don't use it very often. In spite of it being a concept that seems to follow the green trend of terms preceded by the prefix eco-, it actually has a background with theoretical and practical foundations developed by many studies and investigations. Moreover, public institutions, non-governmental agencies and private companies in many countries of the world support the use of this term.

The definition that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) describes ecotourism as

Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.

The main motivation of the ecotourist, different from that of other type of tourists that also visit natural areas, is to see, enjoy and learn about the

diverse manifestations of nature and the landscape; animal or plant species which are remarkable or difficult to watch, rare ecosystems or with a particular interesting aspect, pristine, singular or colorful landscapes, spectacular or unusual geological forms, and so forth.

In spite that ecotourism can be practiced in any natural area or landscape with a certain degree of interest, it takes place more often in legally protected natural areas, such as national and natural parks.

At the international scale, a series of basic principles have been agreed upon that must be fulfilled in order that a tourist activity can be considered as belonging to this modality. These principles turn ecotourism into a way of sustainable tourism, since it:

- Contributes to preserve natural and cultural heritage of the places that are visited.
- Contributes to improve the quality of life of the local populations, including them in the processes of planning of ecotourism and promotes that small and locally owned companies are those that benefit from the resulting income.
- Reduces as much as possible the negative impact on the natural environment and respects the local culture and traditions.
- Includes interpretative and educational elements to inform and bring visitor's attention towards the need to preserve nature, biodiversity and the associated cultural heritage.

One could think that in Catalonia it is not appropriate to use the term *ecotourism* (some tourist agents think so) and that it might be more convenient to use the term *tourism of nature* or equivalent. In this issue, there are three main reasons that justify the fact that this work has chosen the term *ecotourism*:

- 1) The concept is known internationally and the activities included in this modality are easy to identify both inside and outside our borders.
- 2) The term *tourism of nature*, which could be the alternative, usually refers to a set of modalities of tourism that also take place in the natural environment and include ecotourism but also other modalities with motivations and requirements clearly different from those of ecotourism.
- 3) Ecotourism –if it is correctly developed and applied– guarantees the integration of a number of principles of sustainability and of conservation of natural resources which are not often observed by other tourism modalities.

Nevertheless, beyond the exact denomination that is finally chosen, the most important issue is to guarantee that the ecotourism activities that will be promoted in Catalonia in the future will integrate the sustainability principles that have been mentioned.

Ecotourism as a complement of other modalities of tourism related to nature

In Catalonia, there is often confusion between ecotourism, rural tourism and active tourism, in spite of them being different tourist modalities. This confusion is understandable to certain extent since they all share the scenario where they take place (the natural and rural environment). In fact, different tourist modalities that are practiced in the natural environment have been grouped in some studies under the concept *tourism of nature*.

The main difference between ecotourism and other touristic modalities is what motivates the ecotourist to travel. The ecotourist wants to visit natural areas and watch the natural elements that are part of them but in the case of active tourism (or adventure tourism) it is to do different kinds of sports of a certain physical intensity, which, in some cases, involve some risk. The same can be said about rural tourism, which is mainly intended to come into contact with rural environments and activities.

On the other hand, ecotourism is often confused with sustainable tourism but while the former is a tourism modality like any other the latter entails a collection of requisites of sustainability that can be –and should be– applied to any other segment of the tourist market; in this sense, we could talk about sustainable rural tourism, sustainable urban tourism, sustainable cultural tourism, sustainable active tourism and so forth.

In spite of this need of conceptual differentiation in front of other tourist modalities that take place in the natural and rural environment, the relationship between ecotourism and other modalities must be stressed. This is easily explained by the fact that in a highly man-modified environment such as ours a tourist package can include a collection of ecotourist activities coupled with other activities that are more likely to belong to rural, cultural or gastronomic tourism among others.

In some of the most sparsely populated counties and places of Catalonia, ecotourism becomes a good alternative of local sustainable development able to supply people with new income. In the most consolidated tourist destination –like, for example, the mountain areas with an important offer of snow tourism- ecotourism could be further promoted with a strategy to restructure or complement other existing tourist activities (such as skiing).

Existing ecotourism activities in Catalonia

To spot the properly defined ecotourist activities from the big choice of tourist experiences that are offered and practiced in the natural environment is a difficult task. However, this work makes an effort to clarify the concept and identifies those existing tourist activities in Catalonia that could be considered as pertaining to ecotourism.

The activities that have been identified here have the potential to fulfill the basic principles that define ecotourism, however, it should be evaluated in each case (that is, each particular activity) to what

extend the activity integrates this principles when it is planned and executed.

Given this wide range of activities that are potentially part of ecotourism but with a variable development and consolidation, it would be appropriate to group them in one single tourist modality (ecotourism), which would allow to create a more differentiated offer and separate it from other activities that do not have the guarantees of sustainability that ecotourism has.

The ecotourist potential of Catalonia

One of the most important strong points of Catalonia as far as ecotourism is concerned, is the enormous diversity of its natural heritage and, interestingly, its concentration in quite a small territory. One given tourist can enjoy, without having to travel large distances, a diverse natural environment, great biodiversity, many nature reserves and an important geological and paleontological richness. However, Catalonia is not yet a known country in the international scale regarding its natural

Scope	Activity
Ecotourism with the target of observing particular elements of the natural environment or a combination of all of them (landscapes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of terrestrial mammals. • Birdwatching (ornithological tourism). • Whale and dolphin watching. • Observation of butterflies and insects. • Observation of flora and walks through singular woods. • Walks in areas of geological, geomorphologic and paleontological interest. • Visits to caves and caverns. • Signaled trails in nature reserves and scenic landscapes. • Mountain hiking. • Bicycle tourism in which scenery observation prevails. • Walks and excursions on horse in areas of natural interest. • Observation of scenic landscapes with motorized transport integrated in the natural environment. • Kayaking or sailing in non-motorized transport in rivers and seas. • Routes in rivers and seas with motorized transport (ship or other kind of boat). • Exploration of the sea bottom. • Diving in reservoirs and mountain lakes. • Travels and photosafaris. • Astronomic observation.
Ecotourism with educational purposes or to support the conservation of nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities organized by the management bodies or the interpretation centers of the nature reserves or other centers of environmental education. • Volunteer stays in nature reserves to cooperate in activities of conservation of the natural environment. • Scientific ecotourism.

Existing tourist activities in Catalonia that can be associated to ecotourism

areas and, from the ecotourism point of view, it must compete with other destinations that are considered more *exotic*.

From the ecotourist resources related to wildlife, birds are those that are most attractive in Catalonia. The possibility of watching a large variety of them in a very accessible way, their distribution in the Catalan territory and the presence of rare or endangered species, are the main points that turn birdwatching into a good resource to take advantage of. But there are other ecotourist resources, such as land mammals and whales and dolphins (with different degrees of observation difficulty), alpine flora and orchids, butterflies, geological heritage, wet woods (high mountain woods, beech woods, wet oak woods) and Mediterranean dry woods (holm and cork oak woods), among others.

The conservation and good management of natural resources are key factors when an appropriate development of ecotourism must be guaranteed, since anywhere in the world and also in Catalonia, many negative effects have been documented about the practice of tourism in natural areas. As a result, we need to dedicate all the necessary resources and tools to avoid the degradation of our natural resources and to guarantee that ecotourism contributes to their preservation.

On the other hand, Catalonia, since it is a consolidated destination, has a powerful tourist infrastructure that allows (with adaptations and improvements) an adequate development of ecotourism. This infrastructure can be seen, for example, in a large accommodation offer –mainly linked to rural tourism– and in a great capacity of tourist promotion thanks to the task of many public organisms (via web pages, tourist information offices, advertisement campaigns, trade shows and so forth). To this elements it must be added a wide trail network (still underused) that in part has its origin in the traditional activities of rural areas that were common in the past.

The agents related to ecotourism

From the institutional point of view, the country has a whole set of social agents related to tourism and the environment that would boost a better promotion of ecotourism. These agents are organi-

zations and entities, both public and private, which by themselves or because of their capacity of influence, can have a strong impact in the development of ecotourism.

In the area of the natural environment, the organisms responsible for the conservation of nature and the landscape have an obvious leading role. These organisms include the management bodies of protected nature reserves, nature protection and land stewardship organizations –that promote the knowledge of our country-, hiking clubs –that signal and maintain routes and trails- and the universities –that contribute with knowledge and research.

In the area of tourism, the leading role is for the organisms that are responsible of tourist planning, rural development, the numerous organisms that help promote tourism and the private agents that carry out their tourist activity (or can potentially do it in the future) in the area of ecotourism, guiding and specialized hiking companies, providers of active tourism, operators and travel agencies of specialized travel activities, non governmental organizations, small hotels and guesthouses in rural areas, etc.

Throughout this work a lack of coordination and of joint strategy between the agents involved in ecotourism has come to light. This shortage is clearly seen, for example, in the poor communication between the administrations with competence on tourism and those with competence on nature conservation or in the conflicts that sometimes arise between tourist companies, local population and the administrations that manage protected areas. Therefore, in order to successfully promote and develop ecotourism, a good communication and cooperation will be required among all of the mentioned agents.

The institutional promotion of ecotourism

In spite that in Catalonia there are some initiatives and products that could be labeled as ecotourist, this is a modality which has not been extensively promoted in comparison to some more consolidated ones. However, in the last few years, administrations have started to promote ecotourism and, in a more general way, tourism in natural areas.

The *Strategic tourism plan for Catalonia 2005-2010*, which recognizes the opportunity to take advantage of the richness and diversity of the natural resources of Catalonia for the development of tourism, will allow to open the Catalan tourist offer to new segments, diversify products and smooth the seasonal concentration that is currently taking place. For these reasons, one of the objectives of the Plan is to “develop the tourist potential of natural areas respecting the conservation of their biodiversity” and it proposes to create a *Director plan for the tourist use of landscapes, resources and natural areas*. The current work could be a first step towards the production of this director plan.

The Catalan public administrations have also boosted technical studies related directly or indirectly to ecotourism in Catalonia. A recent study is the *Atlas of the tourism in Catalonia*, promoted by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise. Some protected natural reserves have produced specific studies about the ecotourist potential of their particular areas; it can be highlighted, for example, the *Inventory of naturalistic resources (wildlife) for the ecotourism in the Natural Park of the Alt Pirineu*.

Another very interesting institutional initiative is the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) in the protected natural areas. The Charter will help develop and promote ecotourist products and related activities. It is a European level accreditation that the Europarc Federation grants to the protected natural reserves that have demonstrated their compromise with the sustainable tourism by means of team working, planning and executing tourist strategies and action plans adapted to the characteristics of the territory, with the objective in mind to improve the environmental, social and economical viability of

tourism. Two Catalan protected parks that have received the ECST accreditation as of today are the Natural Park of the Volcanic Area of La Garrotxa and the Natural Park of the Ebro Delta. Also, the natural parks of Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac and El Montseny are likely to obtain it in the near future. Among the activities that have been scheduled in the action plans of each space, a number of activities related to the promotion of ecotourism products have been included.

The presence of ecotourist products in the web portals of the tourist brands has also been considered a good indicator of the degree of institutional promotion of this modality. The promotion of ecotourism by means of such portals can be rated as average in a qualitative scale of low-average-high. The tourist brand Terres de l'Ebre is the only one that uses the term *ecotourism*.

Finally, a number of initiatives from the administration to promote some of the most known tourist activities must be highlighted. Hiking and bike tourism, coupled with birdwatching and river tourism are some of the activities that enjoy a specific boost by the Catalan organisms of tourist promotion.

Strategies to develop ecotourism in the future

As a guideline, this work suggests a number of strategies and measures that the agents and the administrations involved in the promotion of ecotourism and the conservation of nature can take into account when establishing and applying policies, laws, programs and actions that can be related to it.

Scope	Strategies and measures
Natural resources: conservation and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To set mechanisms that will be useful to guarantee that ecotourism contributes directly to the conservation of protected natural areas. • To increase the financial resources that are granted to management organisms of the protected areas and that have to be devoted to preserve our natural heritage and contribute to improve the management of public use and ecotourist activities. • To guarantee the application of regulations scheduled in the management plans of the protected areas related to the control of touristic activities and the minimization of the impacts that cause on the natural environment. • To study the possibility to set big areas where no hunting or fishing are allowed, in order to help the increase of wildlife and make its observation easier, as well as setting small forest preserves, in singular woods, accessible only with special license.
Institutional coordination and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To clear up the debate around the term <i>ecotourism</i> and set a concept where all agents agree upon. • To set mechanisms of coordination between those public and private agents that are related to ecotourism in order to promote its appropriate development. • To take advantage of the <i>Director plan for the tourist use of landscapes, resources and natural areas</i> so that a program for the development of ecotourism is included.
Creation, support and improvement of ecotourist products and of the associated equipments and services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish mechanisms of institutional support to local companies and administrations to create and promote ecotourist activities. • Since a basis of ecotourism is the integration of sustainability principles, to evaluate the creation of a label or brand associated to ecotourist activities that integrate these principles. • To take advantage of the European Charters of sustainable tourism in protected natural reserves to create new ecotourist products or support the existing ones. • To create a network of shelters and hides for wildlife observation. • To promote routes and circuits that combine products of different tourist modalities and that include ecotourist proposals. • To improve public transport access to natural reserves and nearby villages and towns. • To standardize signals in trails and itineraries for all the natural reserves of Catalonia. • To guarantee the on-going maintenance of the equipments and infrastructures that are associated to ecotourist activities.
Promotion, marketing, and communication of ecotourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop and apply a marketing plan of ecotourism in Catalonia. • To carry out a large scale publicity campaign to let people know ecotourism and its associated benefits. • To promote informative campaigns at the local or county scale to give publicity to the private agents that carry out tourist activities and the natural and cultural attractions of each area. • To increase the effort and resources dedicated to environmental education for the general public.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To guarantee that tourist guides related to ecotourist activities have the required knowledge of both the tourist business and the natural environment. • To integrate ecotourism in the curricula of the different education specialties related to nature and tourism.
Follow-up and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To establish procedures and indicators to evaluate in an on-going basis the impacts that ecotourism can generate on natural and cultural values, as well as the associated economical benefits. • To undertake studies that give a better knowledge of the ecotourist demand and, consequently, the profile of the tourists that visit Catalonia with the objective (or potential objective) to know the natural areas of the country.