

## **TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON THE WEST COAST OF PORTUGAL**

Lúcio Cunha  
Fernanda Delgado Cravidão  
Centro de Estudos Geográficos 3000 - Coimbra  
Fax: (039) 36773

### **Abstract**

Tourism today is a cultural phenomenon that forms part of the behavioural pattern of developed countries. Yet although modernity induces us to look at and understand the spaces of other customs, tourist activity in its more massified sectors very often continues to voraciously consume resources, causing environmental degradation. This communication considers the impact of tourist pressure on some small communities on the coast of central Portugal.

**Keywords:** Environmental impact; Portuguese Coast; Tourism and Development.

### **Introduction**

The predominant pattern in the 1970s and the early 1980s, was development first, take care of the environment later. This led to irreversible deterioration in both the urban and rural worlds.

The progressive emergence of the consumer society transformed, sometimes rapidly, at other times more slowly, the mentalities, behavioural patterns, ways of looking at spaces ... New patterns of consumption and new concepts of work developed; leisure pursuits were reinvented, and other ways of occupying time, space and resources were "discovered". The urban world, in terms of both characteristics and growth, was and continues to be the domain of major environmental upheaval — easily perceptible in spaces in daily individual use as well those used on a temporary and collective basis.

Portugal has been no stranger to this process which has browbeaten those societies said to be developed, and increasingly sedentary. Although the "take-off" for this kind of link between society and territory may have been more sluggish than in other countries, it still (maybe even because of this) led to disastrous consequences in various regions. Frequently, in the name of development and quality of life, it brought about:

- 1- Deterioration of environmental conditions
- 2- Territorial elimination
- 3- Reduced quality of life of local communities

One thing is certain: the steadily growing awareness on the part of citizens has also encouraged a new look at the territory. This communication has been written with this in mind. In other words, it is important to call attention to the many problems caused by the improper use of space, but it is equally important to play down some situations which could be minimized, once appropriate studies are carried out, without any kind of pressure, if the proposed measures are implemented.

### **The Case of the West Coast of Portugal**

:

Many examples can be found in Portugal to illustrate how growth, almost always accompanied by the absence of development, certainly poorly backed up, created and still creates a negative impact; it has destroyed and is still destroying non-renewable resources, continuing to threaten the delicate environment existing in many spaces.

Because of its climatic features, with its vast shoreline, and as it has been part of the acclaimed European leisure front since the 1970s, the Portuguese coast has provided the backdrop for a permanent conflict between tourist activities and the essential management of the territory.

We will try to use some examples from the coast of central Portugal to show how tourist activity, one of the phenomena that best characterizes the consumer society in which we live, has provoked profound environmental changes in urban and rural spaces.

The selected examples are: Costa Nova/Barra, Praia de Mira, Praia de Quiaios, Praia de Vieira de Leiria, and S. Pedro de Muel.

Today, all of these communities are an important summer holiday resort associated basically with the tourism of sun and sea. They may not share identical histories and routes, yet there are certain features common to all:

- 1- they are situated in areas that are physically and ecologically fragile (CUNHA 1991), although with differing risk indices;
- 2- until the 1960s they were all small, traditional fishing communities, of certain significance;
  - they subsequently suffered increasing tourist pressure, particularly in the 1970s, which left its undisputed mark on the natural, social and economic spheres. That is to say, in environmental terms, profound changes were at work — some beneficial, others undesirable.

Some demographic indicators whose dynamic illustrates the growing demand on these coastal spaces may be mentioned at this point.

In 1991, in S. Pedro de Muel, the number of permanent residents was a mere 267 individuals, but in August the figure rose to 15 000. In the same year, Praia de Vieira de Leiria had only 834 inhabitants. A study carried out in 1993 by Graça M. SANTOS revealed that during the summer months the local population reached 25 000, a figure that could "double or treble at the weekends".

Praia de Quiaios, virtually deserted during most of the year (24 people were counted as resident in 1991), welcomes around 4 000 people in August. This figure, too, may double from time to time (D. CAÇÃO 1996).

Praia de Mira also sees an influx of visitors, mostly in August, swelling the normally resident population of around 3 000 to up to 30 000.

In Costa Nova and Barra, further north, the pattern is the same. It is worth noting that the urban centre of Barra has undergone some functional alterations during the last few years. A great many second homes entered the housing market and these are now the permanent homes of people who work in Aveiro.

In all the above-mentioned examples, the consequences of tourism make their effects felt in different sectors, and take the form of diverse repercussions on the environment. These may be of greater or lesser intensity, severity and level of irreversibility.

From a list of such consequences, inevitably incomplete, the following may be noted:

- The substantial growth in the building industry, often utilizing spaces without any infrastructure. If we compare, for instance, the built up areas on Ordnance Survey maps (1/25000) from the 1940s/50s with those from the 1970s/80s we can see that in virtually every case analysed, the built up area has doubled, or even trebled. If we look at more recent data (gathered from aerial photographs, for example) then many of these villages are seen to have expanded by a much higher factor.

- The reduction in National Agricultural and Ecological Land Reserves. The increase in built up areas has had two main orientations:

- a) Towards the interior, that is, perpendicular to the coast, along the principal highway giving access to the village. In this case the growth in built up land has been achieved essentially at the expense of farmland or the pine forests which comprise the large swathe of green that still follows the coastline in Central Portugal.
- b) Parallel to the coastline, often along the line of the main dune ridge, which is thus progressively destroyed and rendered unable to fulfill its function of regulating coastal ecological systems.

- The increase in built up areas (almost always as a result of clandestine or semi clandestine building) and its disorganized expansion, embracing totally unsuitable zones — primary dunes, and even, in extreme cases, higher reaches of the beaches) has not only brought about a considerable growth in the cost of infrastructure,

but has also frequently curtailed endeavors at coastal protection. Apart from the elevated costs, the effects on the delicate balance of the dynamic on the west coast have been very serious (see, for example, Carvalho 1991; Carvalho and Granja 1991; Moreira 1991).

- Besides pollution of hydric resources and urban spaces resulting from the discrepancy between infrastructure and the enormous concentration of people occurring during the summer months, various situations involving the disappearance of buildings of historical importance, as well as rural and urban landscapes, have been noted. The vanishing *palheiros* [traditional wooden dwellings, built on the beach and used by fishermen] are just one instance of this.

- The powerful economic pressure on the utilization of space has several consequences. The most visible, or sensitive, is perhaps the rapid rise in prices seen in the property market. Local people thus find it difficult, if not impossible, to afford to buy houses.

- Other situations of discrepancy, sometimes even of conflict, occur as the result of a clash of interests, customs and behaviour between the local people and those who move to, or spend the summer in these villages.

- If we add to all these effects the deficient cover or rapid congestion of health services, telecommunications, garbage collection, sewage disposal and water supply, it is easy to get an idea of the fragility and scant "sustainability" with which this economic sector is being developed, with a view to economic growth and spatial and territorial reconstruction in the coastal region of Central Portugal.

### **Conclusion - Strategies**

Despite the many structural problems raised by tourist activity in Portugal, especially its more massified component, the tourism of Sun, Sea and Sand, and its varied impact on the environment and territory as witnessed on the west coast, we feel that this activity should be supported, nurtured and even used to drive development and regional and national level. In addition, it should function to instigate Territorial Planning policies, as well as those aimed at Conservation of Environmental Quality.

At least in terms of comparison with other activities that compete with the economic utilization of the coastal territory, such as traditional fishing, mining, heavy industry (cement, wood pulp products, chemical industries) or the port, seems to offer a cost balance (environmental) — much more favourable in economic and social Terms.

This is why we believe that it is important to outline certain strategic courses of action to control the future development of tourist activities on the west coast of Portugal, if not within a truly "sustainable development" framework (Cravidão and Cunha 1986) then at least in the context of "stable development", operating in conjunction with good environmental conditions. Among such course of action we would highlight the following:

- Linking environmental policies with territorial planning policies determined at national and/or regional level and their implementation in accordance with local development and conservation needs. This should be done strictly and involve active participation (with input from local authorities, development agencies and local communities):

- Implementing policies to promote complementary relations between the beaches and spaces immediately adjacent to them, especially forests, river basins and spas with a view to making tourist and leisure activities viable and more "stable" in the already perceptible decadence of a sector so strongly focused on the tourism of Sun and Sea.

- Promoting diversification of tourist activities (Sun and Sea tourism, but also embracing rural and ecological tourism, happenings, spas and cultural tourism). This would encourage de-concentration of tourism, both spatially and temporally, and so reduce its impact on the environment.

## **References**

- Carvalho, G. Soares 1991. A Zona costeira e os problemas ambientais, Aveiro, "Cooperação interdisciplinar, uma necessidade para o futuro da zona costeira e dos seus recursos naturais". Actas do Seminário: A zona costeira e os problem. p. 18-28.
- Carvalho e Granja, M. H. 1991. "Uma síntese das investigações geomorfológicas na zona costeira do noroeste de Portugal". Conferência sobre as potencialidades e problemas do litoral português, A. P. G.; Lisboa, p. 89-95.
- Cavaco, Carminda 1969. "Geografia e turismo no Algarve: aspectos contemporâneos". Finisterra, vol. IV, 8, Lisboa.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1980. "O turismo em Portugal: aspectos evolutivos e espaciais". Estudos Italianos em Portugal, p. 40-52.
- Cravidão, F. Delgado e Cunha, Lúcio .1991. "Turismo, Investimento e Impacto ambiental". Cadernos de Geografia, IEG, nº 10, Coimbra, p. 199-22.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1996. "Tourism and Sustainability. The Example of Coastal Portugal". In TAUSSIK, J. e MITCHEL, J. - Partnership in Coastal Zone Management, p. 235-242
- FERNANDES, José Manuel . 1982. "Turismo do Litoral - as malfeitorias da galinha dos ovos de ouro". Cadernos Municipais, nº 19, Lisboa, p. 10-14.
- Huescar, Augusto 1993 - "Nuevo Marco Conceptual del Turismo". Estudios Turisticos, nº 117, p. 23-48.
- Lozato - Giotart, Jean Pierre 1990. Géographie du tourisme. Ed. Masson, Paris.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1993 - "Tourisme et loisirs: quelles problématiques géographiques?". L'information Géographique, nº 57, p. 48-58.
- Moreira Maria Eugénia 1991. "Impactes da elevação recente do nível do mar no ordenamento do litoral". Conferência sobre as potencialidades e problemas do litoral português, A. P. G., Lisboa, p. 83-87.
- Sirgado, J. Rafael .1991. A Expressão Geográfica do turismo em Portugal. Dissert. de Mestrado, CEG., Lisboa.