

Nature sports in natural places: a contribution to the management of protected areas

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Protected areas are territories that have a great ecological value and are consequently very appealing to the practice of different activities in contact with nature. The genesis of these generally emerges from primary purposes concerning the preservation of nature. However, others like leisure and recreational purposes have been considered, but it is essential to assure the suited framing of the activities in order for them to contribute to the main purposes of conservation and so that the environmental impact is minimised.

The conservation of nature in this aspect is a reality, if the natural areas where the activities are performed have the correct planning and management. The decisions concerning this planning are based mainly on the proper regulation of these activities in order to minimise the possible impacts they cause.

For that purpose, the management models used are frequently based on two guidelines: i) an environmental component, associated to the practice of nature sports, or better to say, associated to the environmental impacts caused by these activities; ii) a social component, related to social factors (in what participants are concerned) that conditions the sports activity. These factors limit the organisation of the territory management plans in protected areas.

In the specific case of Portugal, the elaboration of the Nature Sports Letters was a first attempt to make a sustainable management of the practice places in protected areas. Furthermore the emission of legal documents, for example, the National Strategy for the Conservation of Nature and the Decreto-lei 108/2009 (Portuguese Legal Decree) dated the 15th May, announced a series of goals and obligations that control the usage of the national protected areas. One of the most emphasised aspects in these objectives was the effective control of recreational activities, especially the Nature Sports.

However, the management techniques used in the regulation of visits, specially in the practice of nature sports in the Portuguese protected areas, are insufficient and incomplete. The lack of specific information about the relevant qualities and types of sport activities in a natural environment becomes a serious problem in the investigation and creation of efficient methodologies.

In this sense and according to the existing recreational and sport interests in the Portuguese protected areas, the definition of objectives for the specific usage of each one of them as well as the exponential increase in the demand of leisure activities in natural areas has implications. It becomes necessary to proceed explicitly in the sports practice management of those areas so that the quality of the experience is assured alongside the purposes of conservation.

This work aims at contributing to the territory usage management, in particular of the protected areas and in the ambit of the nature sports activities practice, and at proposing a methodology that involves the state/quality of the visitor's experience as well as the ecological state of the visited place. It is intended that this work may be replicated and implemented in other places besides the study area.

The present study is taking place in the Natural Park of Serras de Aire e Candeeiros (NPSAC) (V category, IUCN). This area was classified as a Natural Park by the Portuguese Decreto-Lei

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118/79. The number of people visiting this area is one of the highest in Portugal with a total of 510.875 visitors during the last 10 years. In the year 2009, the NPSAC has registered the highest amount of visitors, compared to other national protected areas. 206 were guided visits, where 13.304 people participated and this means an average of 1108 visitors a month. This data is based on the number of users/visitors to the nature houses managed by the ICNB, the guided tours in the protected area, the registered information requests and the sales number of pamphlets and publications.

To develop this study, a methodological qualitative approach is considered that is divided according to the following steps: 1) Making a profound revision of the specific literature so that it is possible to establish patterns that enable a critical and comparative analysis of the information about the relation between usage and impact levels, indicators, methods and value patterns related to the social and environmental impacts witnessed in other work studies, with the purpose of establishing an adequate methodological matrix for the reality of the Portuguese protected areas; 2) Making a systematised study of the acts related to the protection of the national territory, specifically what the usage of the space and its limitations are concerned; 3) building up inquiries and making interviews to all main intervenient of the protected areas, namely: The managers of the protected area which is the object of study (NPSAC); local associations; sport federations, and the private sector with the aim of establishing and analyzing their expectations and needs in this problematic; 4) application of the consequent elaborated methodology based on the comparative analysis in order to be tested.

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